HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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Mr Speaker: I call Mr Gerald Jones. Where is the feller? He is not here.

**Self-employment**

2. Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of self-employment. [908056]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): The Government support those who aspire to be their own boss. The number of self-employed people in the UK labour market has increased by nearly 800,000 since 2010 and by 129,000 in the last year alone. We continue to monitor and review the impact of self-employment on the wider labour market and benefits system.

Peter Dowd: A Citizens Advice report in August 2015 said that there were as many as 460,000 people in bogus self-employment, with a cost of hundreds of millions of pounds in lost revenue. Is it not about time that the Secretary of State, rather than hounding disabled people, started tackling exploitative companies, many of which have lucrative public sector contracts, that are forcing people down the self-employment route?

Damian Green: The hon. Gentleman is right that there should be no exploitation of workers, particularly through forced self-employment, but he will have noticed that the Government are on the case, having set up the Matthew Taylor review specifically to explore alternative employment structures and to consider how employment rules need to be altered to keep pace with changes in how people work in the modern economy. If, however, he is characterising the growth of self-employment as harmful to the jobs market, I would disagree. The new enterprise allowance is proving very successful at making sure that people who want to can work for themselves. I am sure that he, like me, welcomes the fact that in his own constituency self-employment is up by 7% since 2015, and that the claimant count in the last year has fallen by 12%.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that rather than denigrating people who become self-employed, we ought to be celebrating the fact that they are prepared to take a risk that many others are not? Will he make it as easy as possible for them to take on new employees and become employers themselves?

Damian Green: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I have already mentioned the new enterprise allowance, which is designed specifically to help people to stop claiming benefits, set up their own businesses, and then carry on and employ others in a way that I hope everyone on both sides of the House would welcome. This scheme is proving extremely successful. A survey published last year showed that 80% of businesses that started with the new enterprise allowance were still trading, which makes it more than twice as effective as the old jobseeker’s allowance in terms of keeping people off benefits, so it is doing good work.
Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

Will the Secretary of State ensure that there is much closer co-operation between the single fraud investigation service and local authorities on the prosecution of abuse, including on self-employment status, so that councils can be confident that when they report possible scams, including by employers, they are properly followed up?

Damian Green: I am happy to pass on the right hon. Lady’s message to the relevant bodies—councils and the fraud investigation service. Of course, while self-employment is a good thing, fraud involving any kind of employment is wrong, so clearly we must get ever more effective at combatting it.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State agrees that online opportunities are giving many people the chance to set up a microbusiness. Does he agree that schemes such as the pop-up shop initiative that Torbay Council ran to help internet micro-retailers to take their first step on to the high street are the kind of thing we should be looking at in terms of self-employment, rather than some of the negative impressions we hear from the Opposition?

Damian Green: I very much agree, and I particularly welcome Torbay’s pop-up shop experiment. I had such a scheme in my constituency a couple of years ago, and it did indeed prove successful in allowing microbusinesses to start and to develop into larger businesses, thereby creating more employment and wealth, so I am delighted to hear what is happening in Torbay.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

Many self-employed people do not earn a great deal of money and will be losing out from cuts to tax credits and the introduction of universal credit. Should not the Government be supporting those who become self-employed?

Damian Green: I am sorry, Mr Speaker, that I have not yet wished you happy new year publicly—I have done so only privately—as clearly that is becoming a compulsory part of this question session. I now wish you happy new year publicly.

I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman’s characterisation of self-employed earners and universal credit. Universal credit reduces poverty by making work pay. It supports claimants to enter work, and then to be able to keep some of their benefits while they are at work if they are not receiving or earning very much money. Universal credit actually does the opposite of what the hon. Gentleman says—it helps people who are getting into work for the first time.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): But is not the biggest trend in self-employment the massive increase in women who are self-employed, with 70% of those newly self-employed in 2014 being women? Yet self-employment is the area where the wage gap is biggest. According to the OECD, self-employed men earn an average of £17,000 a year, but average earnings for self-employed women stand at £9,800. We know from the Department’s figures that women are less likely to access loans and so forth for self-employment. What is the Secretary of State doing to deal with gender inequality in self-employment?

Damian Green: I agree with right hon. Lady that gender inequality and pay generally are issues that we need to do more about, and self-employment is one part of that. That is why we have introduced measures such as the new enterprise allowance—

Fiona Mactaggart: Only men take it up.

Damian Green: The right hon. Lady says that only men take it up, but that is patently not true.

Fiona Mactaggart: It is disproportionately men.

Damian Green: If the right hon. Lady is saying that it is disproportionately men who take the allowance up, I would urge more potential women entrepreneurs to take it up. We are improving the new enterprise allowance later this year to make sure that the mentoring and advice goes on for longer so that more people—men and women—will be able to benefit from the freedom of being able to start, set up and run their own business, which millions of people want to do.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): A happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to everyone.

Resolution Foundation data show that self-employment accounts for 81% of the net change in employment since 2008. The Government’s plans to abolish class 2 national insurance contributions could leave low-income, self-employed women paying five times as much to access maternity allowance. Given that nearly 2 million self-employed workers earn less than the national living wage, why have the Government decided to make social security support harder to access for so many of Britain’s entrepreneurs?

Damian Green: They have not. Let me update the hon. Lady’s figures, which I know she has quoted before. Since 2010, 29% of the increase has been in self-employment, and in the last 12 months—


Damian Green: I know about 2008; I am giving more up-to-date figures, as I said.

Over the past year, 38% of the increase in employment has been in self-employment, so the figures are not as the hon. Lady suggests. As I said in answer to the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), the whole point of universal credit is that people, whether it be through self-employment or employment, are able to keep their income. We have reduced the taper so that less of their income is lost when they go up the earnings scale and get into work. I am afraid that the hon. Lady simply misunderstands what is happening in the welfare system.

Disabled and Terminally Ill Children

3. Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): What welfare support the Government are providing for disabled and terminally ill children.
The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): This year we are due to spend nearly £1.9 billion on supporting ill and disabled children through disability living allowance. We have special rules in place to grant immediate access to the benefit for those who are terminally ill.

Amanda Milling: May I also wish you a happy new year, Mr Speaker?

I thank my hon. Friend for her answer. The DWP family resources survey that was published last year showed that there were nearly 1 million disabled children—a 20% increase over the past 10 years. Will she outline what measures the Government are implementing to take account of that increase so that these children can access the support and the specialist equipment that they require?

Penny Mordaunt: Local authorities and clinical commissioning groups have a requirement to meet the needs of children with a special educational need or disability, including by providing specialist equipment. In the past few months, my Department has set up a children and young person’s forum so that we can better understand the unmet need that is out there. My hon. Friend will know from the work that I have done with one of the organisations with which she is involved that we are looking to support charities, social enterprises and businesses that are providing these much-needed services.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Many of us who liked some of the elements of the big society when we first heard about it now quite like some of the utterances about the shared society. However, if the programme is to work for children, and not just for those who are terminally ill but people with disabilities—some disabilities are abilities; I am thinking here of those who are terminally ill. I am keen to improve their effectiveness in that regard, and I also take my hon. Friend in respect of this specific policy. Does he agree, however, that as the consultants—as it were—to whom patients are referred will be work coaches, it is critical that those people receive training that will enable them to deal with the hardest cases among those who are unemployed, particularly those with pressing mental health problems?

Penny Mordaunt: Absolutely. The measures announced by the Prime Minister today will be accompanied by additional funding, and every age range in society will be taken into account. There will, for instance, be measures to help children and young people—I have just described what my Department is doing to ensure that their needs are considered—as well as new provision for those in the workplace.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Some children with disabilities receive disabled students allowances. Given that a number of them are not eligible for personal independence payments or disability living allowance, why are the Government cutting DSA?

Penny Mordaunt: We are very conscious of the needs of children and young people in particular, which is why we have set up an additional forum. Obviously we are concerned about people in the workplace, but if we get this right for children and young people, including students, we will avoid problems for future ministerial teams. I shall be happy to look into any particular case that the hon. Gentleman wishes to raise.
mental health conditions. Obviously, work coaches will need specific skills to handle the many issues that will arise from such conditions.

22. [908077] Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The benefits of an autistic constituent of mine were taken away by a DWP caseworker after my constituent told that person that he enjoyed his hobby of being a disc jockey. He received a bill showing a fictional figure, invented by the DWP, representing the amount of income that the Department needed to recover. A work coach should be assisting individuals, not penalising them, so will the Secretary of State please do better?

Damian Green: Obviously I do not know the details of the individual case, but if the hon. Gentleman writes to me or the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, we will look at it. I can assure him, however, that in the vast majority of cases, work coaches do their best and work very hard to help people to make the most of their lives, and to get into employment. That is at the heart of what we do.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): After the big cut in employment and support allowance takes place in April and the new Work and Health programme is established, will the Department be spending more or less on employment support for ESA claimants than is currently the case under the Work programme and Work Choice?

Damian Green: I am happy to assure the right hon. Gentleman that as part of the changes there is an extra £330 million support programme for those in that group. We will target support more effectively to ensure that as many of them as possible can get back into work.

Ex-offenders

5. Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What steps is he taking to help ex-offenders into work.

[908059]

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): There is a huge premium on helping ex-offenders into work for them, their families and their children’s life chances, and for reducing costs to society. Jobcentre Plus now has a dedicated resource of 150 prison work coaches who are helping to support prisoners nationwide.

Robert Neill: I am grateful to the Minister for his response. He will know from his own experience, and from the excellent report on supporting offenders by the Work and Pensions Committee, which my own Select Committee would endorse, that getting a job is one of the best means of preventing reoffending. As well as the work that is being done, will he consider what can be done jointly with the Ministry of Justice to ensure there is better collaboration between job centres and community rehabilitation companies so that they are joined up, given that people currently risk the cliff edge to which the report refers?

Damian Hinds: We work closely with the Ministry of Justice on numerous joint initiatives locally and nationally, and we are supporting the development of the MOJ’s new offender employment strategy, but I recognise that we need to improve opportunities for ex-offenders, so I welcome the continued attention of my hon. Friend and his Committee, as well as the Work and Pensions Committee report, to which we will respond in due course.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Her Majesty’s inspectorates of prisons and probation found that not a single prisoner had been helped into employment by the Through the Gate provision, which is the Government’s flagship programme for achieving a step change in rehabilitation. Did that surprise the Minister, and what is his response?

Damian Hinds: First of all, my response is that this has been a challenge for successive Governments for many years. We do need to do better, but there is good work going on. Ultimately, to improve the situation, we need more prisoners to be work-ready, and we need more employers to be willing to take the plunge and take on a prisoner. Having governors controlling skills provision in prisons will have a beneficial effect on work-readiness, but we all need to encourage more employers to step forward. Initiatives such as the See Potential programme can play an important part in that, as can Ban the Box and the Employers’ Forum for Reducing Re-offending, but of course we need to do more.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The Minister will be aware that people on the autistic spectrum are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system and that people with autism have great difficulty in finding jobs. Can he reassure me that when he looks at the consultation on the health and disability Green Paper, he will look specifically at people with autism and ex-offenders with autism, as only 16% of people with autism are currently in employment?

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend highlights an important point. I know my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work will be looking very closely at the issue of people with autism. This also highlights that one of the key determinants for post-release employment is what happened with the individual before they were convicted, and it highlights again the importance of making sure nobody is left behind. In our work, we pay particular attention to all these groups who face particularly difficult barriers in getting into work.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Our Work and Pensions Committee report found that reoffending costs £15 billion to the public purse, yet fewer than one in four ex-offenders goes on to find work. Alarmingly, Westminster Council’s report on rough sleeping that was published before Christmas found that one in three of its rough sleepers had come directly from prison. Why is the Department unable to provide proper transitional support for people leaving prison to make sure that they are not on the streets and that they are assisted into employment?

Damian Hinds: It is vital that ex-offenders and people on release from prison have help with finances, employment and housing. Among the things we have done to help on housing is to ensure that there are no waiting days in relation to universal credit and to keep the housing element in universal credit open for 26 weeks rather than 13 for certain types of prisoner in order to ensure that we can enhance their support.
Pension Investments

6. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that people have the information they need to make informed decisions about how they use their pension investments. [908060]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): Mr Speaker, were I allowed to wish you a happy new year, you can be assured that I would do so.

Pension Wise provides guidance to people aged 50 and over with a defined contribution pension pot on their options under the pension flexibilities. We are consulting on a single financial guidance body to provide debt advice and guidance on money and pensions.

Henry Smith: In thanking the Minister for his reply, I cannot resist wishing him, and indeed the whole House, a happy new year. Can he tell me what information the Government are providing to let people know about their entitlement to the state pension?

Richard Harrington: I thank my hon. Friend for his salutations and for his question. The Department for Work and Pensions continues to run a multi-channel communication campaign that includes radio, press and social media to raise awareness of the new state pension. As well as directing people to information on gov.uk and working with stakeholders to deliver key information, our priority has been to provide personalised information to individuals so that they know how much state pension they are likely to get, and from when. Since February 2016, the online Check your State Pension service has had more than 2.1 million views.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Minister’s warm words will do nothing to reassure the women in my constituency for whom the Government’s advice on pensions has a terrible reputation because of the injustices highlighted by the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign. The one thing the Government could do to persuade the public to believe their pronouncements on pension entitlements would be to give justice to the WASPI women by looking again at the 2011 changes.

Richard Harrington: The hon. Lady will be aware, because the WASPI women have been discussed in the House and I have discussed this matter personally with her on many occasions, that the changes affecting them were in the Pensions Act 1995, and that a lot of time and resources were devoted to informing them of the situation, including millions of letters being sent out from 2011.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): A happy new year to you and everyone in the House, Mr Speaker, and particularly to the WASPI women. I hope that they have a better year this year.

The leaflet entitled “Ways to save in 2017” recently published by the Treasury mentioned the junior ISA, the help to buy ISA, premium bonds, cash and stocks and shares ISAs and the new lifetime ISA, but it completely omitted to mention pensions. That is an absolute disgrace, and it confirms my fears that the Government have downgraded the role of pensions and are using the gimmick of ISAs to distract attention from pensionable savings. Does the Minister agree that pensionable saving is the best form of saving for retirement? Will he establish a pensions and savings commission to ensure that dignity in retirement is promoted and protected?

Richard Harrington: I must totally disagree with the hon. Gentleman’s analysis of the importance that the Government place on pensions. A lot of effort goes into communicating with people, on television and elsewhere, about auto-enrolment. The auto-enrolment of so many people has been one of the great successes of this Government and of the coalition, and I hope that that continues.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I know that the Minister agrees with me on the need for greater transparency in the pensions world, particularly around costs. He will therefore be keen to address the widespread criticism of the Government’s failing to act to ensure that people get the best possible returns. The Financial Conduct Authority’s interim report in November highlighted a number of failures in the asset management industry relating to the transparency of costs and charges applied to pension investments, stating that “weak price competition” was having a “material impact” on investment returns. Labour is committed to implementing all the FCA’s recommendations. Are the Government?

Richard Harrington: Yes.

Children in Relative Poverty

7. Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): What recent estimate his Department has made of the number of children living in relative poverty in the UK. [908061]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): There are 100,000 fewer children in relative poverty than in 2010 and 557,000 fewer children living in workless households. The forthcoming Green Paper on social justice will identify and address the root causes of poverty, building on the two statutory indicators set out in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016—namely, worklessness and educational attainment.

Stella Creasy: I note that the Minister uses the figures for relative poverty, and I am a little surprised. We know that absolute poverty in this country has been in decline for the past 10 years, except among children. We know that 500,000 more children in this country are living in absolute poverty than was the case in 2010. What responsibility does he think this Government and the previous Government have for that?

Damian Green: The Government have a responsibility to make sure that as many households as possible have work, particularly households with children. Working-age adults in non-working families are almost four times more likely to be living on a low income. The “Child Poverty Transitions” report of June 2015 found that 74% of poor children in workless families who moved into full employment exited poverty. That is what we can do, and are doing, for children who have been in poverty.
The hon. Lady neglected to say it, but there are now 500,000 fewer people living in absolute poverty than in 2010. The key point is about getting people into work. As a reasonable Opposition Member, I hope she would acknowledge that achieving historically low levels of unemployment is actually the best thing we can do for children—it is the best way to get children and the households they live in out of poverty. I am happy to tell her that, in her constituency, the claimant count is down by 47% since 2010 and the youth claimant count has fallen by 2% in the past year.

Mr Speaker: All of us in the Chamber can learn about the merits of brevity from the right hon. Member for New Forest West, who will not disappoint me.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): However the problem presents in my surgeries, scratch the surface and, nine times out of 10, the sworn cause of poverty is family breakdown, which will be a much harder nut to crack.

Damian Green: Absolutely. That is precisely why this Government, and previously the coalition Government, have decided that having a simple income-based measure and target is not the right way. We need to look at the root causes of child poverty, and having a range of indicators and targets—one of which is on family breakdown—is the best way to make sure that we have as few children as possible living in poverty and that more and more children are able to emerge from it.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): A good new year to you, Mr Speaker.

The Secretary of State has focused so far on the value of work in tackling child poverty, but the reality is that the average working family in receipt of universal credit will be more than £1,000 a year worse off by 2020. According to the Resolution Foundation, some working parents will be more than £2,500 a year worse off by 2020. With child poverty projected to rise dramatically over the next three years, why do the Government continue to downplay the role of income poverty in determining children’s future health, job prospects and even life expectancy, in spite of all the evidence?

Damian Green: I am not downplaying the role. I am talking about the underlying causes and about making sure that we take a range of measures across the board that help to eradicate child poverty. That is the only sensible way to do it. Simply focusing on individual incomes or, indeed, individual benefits does not represent the whole realistic picture. We need to be much more wide-ranging in our approach.

Dr Whiteford: The Prime Minister has been talking over the weekend about the pressures faced by people who are just getting by on low and average incomes and about our shared responsibilities to them. Those are fine sentiments, but does the Secretary of State not accept that they sound utterly hollow when the Government’s planned cuts to work allowances will slash the incomes of exactly those families who are just getting by? Does he accept that the Government have a responsibility to support parents who are working hard in average and low-paid jobs, rather than cutting their already stretched, precarious incomes?

Damian Green: No. Indeed, I would point out to the hon. Lady that this Government’s introduction of the national living wage last year gave the lowest earners their biggest pay rise in 20 years—an increase of 6%. That is an example of a Government measure introduced by employers. I cannot think of a better early example of the shared society.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): What assessment have the Government made of how many more children will be pushed into poverty given the cuts to the work allowance under universal credit?

Damian Green: As I have said to a number of hon. Members on both sides of the House, the solution lies in a wider range of issues, and that is what we are introducing. We have the social justice Green Paper, about which I am sure we will have many discussions in this House and elsewhere. The root is making sure that as many people as possible can earn a salary and work. I am sure that the hon. Lady, like me, will welcome the fact that unemployment has come down by 53% in her constituency since 2010. That means thousands of families who are able to work and control their own lives, possibly working their way out of poverty. She ought to welcome that.

Margaret Greenwood: It is a poor Government who fail to understand the value of the nation’s children. In addition to the universal credit work allowance cuts, this Government have abolished the child poverty unit and frozen social security payments, and are removing tax credits from third and subsequent children. Does the Minister think child poverty will go up or down as a result of those measures?

Damian Green: I have already given the hon. Lady a number of figures relating both to adult poverty and child poverty—

Alex Cunningham: Up or down?

Damian Green: Well, the fact is that since 2010 there are 100,000 fewer children in relative poverty. I would hope that the hon. Lady would welcome that and the fact that the child poverty unit is now covering a much wider range of policies and is based inside the Department for Work and Pensions.

Self-employment

8. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support self-employed people.

[908062]

14. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support self-employed people.

[908069]

21. David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support self-employed people.

[908076]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): This Government are committed to supporting new enterprises. We are building on the success of the new enterprise allowance, which has already supported
96,000 claimants to start a new business. From this year, eligibility for NEA support will be extended to include universal credit claimants who are already self-employed.

Sir David Amess: Will my right hon. Friend look again at the regulations requiring small businesses and the self-employed to use online systems for their tax affairs? Does he recognise that these people often do not have the equipment, knowledge or broadband capacity to download the complex forms, and that the process often costs time and money?

Damian Green: I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that tax affairs are not my direct responsibility, but the Treasury will have heard what he had to say. What I can say is that Jobcentre Plus is always keen to help small businesses with individual problems they may have, such as with the use of online forms, and I hope that businesses in his constituency would find the jobcentre a helpful place to consult.

Scott Mann: In Cornwall, unemployment has continued to fall year on year to record low levels, and the county now has 61,000 self-employed people. Does my right hon. Friend agree that only under a Conservative Government can we continue to increase employment in Cornwall and further improve the creation of small businesses in those communities?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I know that in his constituency self-employment has increased by 7.6% since 2010. As I said in answer to previous questions, the UK labour market is in its strongest position for years. Clearly, the best way to promote new growth in jobs is to promote growth in small businesses, and I am delighted to hear it is going so well in Cornwall.

David Morris: Does my right hon. Friend agree that universal credit can help the self-employed, along with the other forms of benefit the Government are putting forward for them, because it can help people who are working as well as trying to set up on their own?

Damian Green: One difference between universal credit and the previous benefits it is replacing is that people can and do continue to receive it when they are still in work. It is particularly good at coping with people who may have fluctuating earnings, as many self-employed people do, because it can be flexible enough to adjust to that. The introduction of universal credit is another brick of the edifice of helping people to set up their own businesses.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): What is the Secretary of State going to do about people who are classified as self-employed because of their contract of employment? They are classified as such not because they have set up their own small business, but because their employer requires them to sign a contract saying that they are self-employed, which means that they get no sick pay and no annual leave. How is he going to help them?

Damian Green: I agree that that is an issue, which is precisely why we have set up the Matthew Taylor review. It is investigating precisely the new types of employment structures that have been set up in recent years and making sure that employment laws keep up with new types of employment.

National Living Wage

9. Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the increase in the national living wage announced in the autumn statement 2016 on levels of employment in the north of England.

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): The number of people in employment in the north of England has increased by 112,000 over the past year. The national living wage has already given 1 million people a pay rise, helping to build an economy that works for all.

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the Minister for his reply, but has he considered the implications of the national living wage coming in so quickly for small and medium-sized businesses, particularly those in the manufacturing sector? What would he say to those businesses that will not be able to adjust in time, or that simply will not be profitable because the national living wage is being introduced so quickly?

Damian Hinds: Everybody should benefit from a strong economy, but as well as introducing the national living wage the Government have announced plans to reduce corporation tax further to 17% and to increase the employment allowance, which could be worth up to £3,000 a year.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Is it not perverse of the Government to have reduced work allowances and universal credit at the same time as we have seen increases in the national living wage, meaning that the overall benefit to individuals in work is actually reduced?

Damian Hinds: The Government have done a range of things. Universal credit is completely different from the legacy benefits it replaced, so it does not make sense to make a direct comparison with tax credits. We have to see it in the context of greater help with childcare and the introduction of the national living wage. Of course, the increased income tax personal allowance also means that people get to keep more of what they earn.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): When my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) introduced the national living wage, the Office for Budget Responsibility said that it would cost 60,000 jobs. Does the Minister think that that is a price worth paying, or is that another forecast from expert economists that we should ignore?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is entirely correct about the OBR’s projection at that time, but he will have noticed that that came in the context of considerably larger projected employment growth.

Mental Health

10. Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that people with mental health conditions are supported into work.
The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): We are investing significant resources, including increasing coverage of Talking Therapy services by 600,000 people a year by 2020. Mental health is a key feature of our Green Paper “Improving Lives”, on which we are currently consulting. I thank Members on both sides of the House who came to our drop-in event on the Green Paper and who are helping with the consultation.

Huw Merriman: I welcome the Minister’s response and the Prime Minister’s intervention today on mental health. Does the Minister agree that in order better to support those with mental health conditions into the workplace, we need to transform the way we deliver mental health services for young people before they reach working age?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with my hon. Friend absolutely. When I ask healthcare professionals who work in Department for Work and Pensions services what the single most significant transformative healthcare intervention would be, they say mental health support services for young people. The Prime Minister’s announcement on that was very welcome.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The “Five Year Forward View for Mental Health”, which was published a year ago, contained two specific recommendations for the Department for Work and Pensions, one of which was on employment support. Will the Minister update the House on the progress on that specific recommendation?

Penny Mordaunt: There were two targets, but the Department has set out a range of initiatives. Good progress has been made on all fronts, including the development of specific mental health support for the services we run, such as Access to Work. Considerable work has been going on, as the Prime Minister referred to earlier today, but she also said that we need to pick up the pace on this issue, and I agree with her absolutely.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Prime Minister made her announcements today, but when will the Government take responsibility for the impact of their policies on mental health and ensure that timely, evidence-based support from trained mental health professionals is available for claimants with mental health conditions? Will the Secretary of State commit to scrapping the work capability assessment and punitive sanctions, as Labour has?

Penny Mordaunt: I refer the hon. Lady to three things: the Secretary of State’s reform speech in which he announced that his focus was on the particular issue of sanctions for people with mental health conditions; obviously, the Prime Minister’s statement today; and the Green Paper, a major tenet of which is that we are consulting on the work capability assessment—a Labour policy that is not delivering. I am very pleased that enormous numbers of Labour MPs came to our drop-in on this and will be helping us with the consultation. This is an important issue, and we should get it right.

Contracted-out Health Assessments

11. Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the (a) accuracy and (b) efficiency of contracted-out health assessments for employment and support allowance and personal independence payments.

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11. Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the (a) accuracy and (b) efficiency of contracted-out health assessments for employment and support allowance and personal independence payments.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): Over 93.5% of assessments for personal independence payment and over 90% of work capability assessments for ESA are deemed of acceptable quality through independent audit. Those that are not deemed acceptable are returned to the provider to be reworked. The Department closely monitors all elements of providers’ performance and holds those providers to account through their contracts.

Christina Rees: Will the Minister consider introducing and funding the mandatory use of body-worn cameras by all contracted-out assessment providers, which will improve the accuracy and efficiency of the much-disputed health assessment reports and safeguard claimants and assessors, and which is proving to be very successful when used by emergency services across the UK?

Penny Mordaunt: There are detailed improvement plans for both PIP and ESA. Another thing that is being considered is how assessments are recorded. If the hon. Lady wants to write to me with any specific suggestions, I will be very happy to look at them.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): The vast majority of successful appeals are due to additional late submitted evidence. What more can be done to access and share medical evidence between health professionals and assessors ahead of the appeals decision?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He will know that the Department has carried out a number of pilots to look at being more lenient at the early stages of assessment to give people time to get that health care information in front of assessors. That move is paying dividends, and we hope that it will be rolled out.
Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. On this question, I would call on the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) if she were standing, but as she is not, I cannot.

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: As she is standing now, I will call her.

23. [908078] Corri Wilson: I am afraid that many of my constituents have been refused home assessments for personal independence payments, and others have been unable to have their assessments recorded at home with the DWP. Given that it was recently reported that 61% of 90,000 claimants who appealed against a PIP decision at the tribunal period up to September 2016 won their case, will the Minister today commit to a root-and-branch review of the assessment process?

Penny Mordaunt: Although we are consulting on ESA, the Green Paper consultation affords us the ability to look at PIP assessments in the round and at a person’s whole journey. I have previously said that we are looking at what more we can do in recording assessments. If the hon. Lady knows of cases where people need home assessments and they are not getting them, I urge her to flag them up with me.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): In my own constituency of Rossendale and Darwen, those who are waiting for their PIP appeal to go through are having to wait three, six or, in some cases, nine months to have that appeal heard. Given that they receive no benefit during this period and can lose their vital Motability car, will the Minister tell us what efforts the Department will make to speed up the appeal process?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear that that is happening in my hon. Friend’s constituency. That is a very unusual length of time to be waiting for an appeal. If he would like to give me the details of those cases, I would be happy to look at them.

Motability

13. Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Whether his Department plans to publish data on the number of people who have lost their Motability scheme vehicle following their reassessment for personal independence payments.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): Motability is an independent charity responsible for its own management information, including what data it publishes. There are 70,000 more people with a Motability car than there were in 2010.

Ms Eagle: My constituent Evelyn Campbell had her Motability car removed on 20 December following a PIP assessment, leaving her housebound and distressed over Christmas. It will take months for her appeal to be heard. In the meantime, her car has been sold. Is this not another cruel policy from this Government?

Given that 60% of PIP appeals are successful and that the cars have to be reprovided, is it not also a totally false economy?

Penny Mordaunt: Those who lose their vehicle receive transitional support through Motability, including the right to buy the vehicle and a £2,000 lump sum. Although only a small proportion of PIP decisions are appealed and overturned—

Ms Eagle: It is 60%.

Penny Mordaunt: That is of those going to appeal, not the case load. I am exploring a range of options to support claimants pending appeal, and I will be working closely with Motability on this.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am encouraged by what the excellent Minister has just said. The key point is that I do not think the car should be withdrawn until the appeal process has finished. As it is only a small number, as the Minister has said, could she be encouraged to look at that route?

Penny Mordaunt: We are looking at this issue. We are also looking at those who might wish to travel overseas, for whatever reason, whether for work or a travel option, and we are working very closely with Motability to see what can be done in those instances.

Topical Questions

T1. [908095] Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): As part of the comprehensive package of reforms to improve mental health support announced by the Prime Minister this morning, my Department will be undertaking an expert-led review on how best to ensure that employees with mental health problems can be supported. That will involve practical help, including promoting best practice among employers and making available free tools to businesses to assist with employee wellbeing. We will also be conducting an internal review of discrimination in the workplace against people with mental health conditions. Those reviews will build on our Green Paper consultation to help to establish the evidence base around mental health and employment.

Scott Mann: I welcome the news that 95,000 businesses have been helped by the new enterprise allowance. Can the Minister tell me how many of those are in North Cornwall, or in Cornwall as a whole?

Damian Green: I too welcome those figures. I can tell my hon. Friend that the new enterprise allowance has helped to create nearly 100 new businesses in North Cornwall since it began. We are moving to a second phase, beginning this April, with an improved NEA. Since it began, over one in five businesses supported by the NEA have been started by disabled entrepreneurs, which is an extremely encouraging development.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It was great to hear earlier that there is consensus on the need to implement in full the Financial Conduct Authority’s recommendations on transparency in pension scheme costs. We hope that that will be soon, and we will hold the Government and the Minister to account on that.
Let us try another subject. Labour is committed to the state pension triple lock. Are the Government?

Damian Green: The Government are committed to the triple lock for the whole of this Parliament.

T.3. [908098] Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Waveney District Council has been working proactively with the Department for Work and Pensions to support the roll-out of full-service universal credit. Although the council has committed considerable resources to the work, local people are still facing challenges. Can the Secretary of State assure me that his Department will urgently seek to resolve those issues that have been raised constructively by the council and other authorities through the national steering group?

Damian Green: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. He and I have exchanged correspondence on this—he may not yet have received a letter from me offering a meeting with my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment. We absolutely want to work through any teething issues with local councils.

T.2. [908096] Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Motor Neurone Disease Association and Parkinson’s UK have welcomed Government proposals to scrap reassessment of ESA for people with severe lifelong conditions. The Secretary of State has described that reassessment as pointless, bureaucratic nonsense. Will the Government therefore now agree also to scrap reassessments in the same circumstances for people with lifelong conditions for PIP and continuing healthcare?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): PIP is slightly different. For example, someone’s needs might increase and they need a reassessment to receive more support under PIP. The Green Paper affords us the opportunity to look at all these things together. I think there are opportunities for PIP perhaps to have a lighter assessment, but we need to get the whole process right.

T.7. [908102] Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I wrote to the Pensions Minister on 16 December about my constituent, Ruth Saunders, who drew to my attention the fact that there are certain defined-benefit pension schemes where increases are not being paid for amounts paid in before April 1997. He very kindly responded on 5 January. The point is that there is discrimination because only 10% to 15% of companies are not paying these increases. The issue is whether the amount can be corrected going forward. I would suggest that this is one of the burning injustices that the Prime Minister was talking about, and I would like a meeting with the Minister and my constituent to discuss the issue further.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): I would be delighted to have a meeting with my right hon. Friend and her constituent.

Richard Harrington: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the Government have given £1.1 billion of transitional relief for WASPI women. The issue has been discussed in this House very many times and the Government have no plans to do anything further in that respect.

T.9. [908104] Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Will the Minister reassure Leonard Cheshire Disability, which has a base in my constituency, that the welcome move to the Work and Health programme will not result in a large reduction in funding to help disabled people get back into work?

Penny Mordaunt: I can give my hon. Friend those reassurances. We are absolutely committed to closing the disability employment gap. We are picking up the pace on the programmes we are running, and asking businesses and employers to do more.

T.5. [908100] Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Government have pledged to halve that disability employment gap by 2020. However, I would like to know what the Government have been doing recently to look at the impact of job cuts on the public sector. A third of the redundancies at the Equality and Human Rights Commission involve people with disabilities.

Penny Mordaunt: The right hon. Gentleman will know that the disability employment gap has been closing under both this Government and the coalition Government. We recognise that we need to do more, and I think the public sector can do more. Part of that is identifying particular roles that individuals can take up. The Government are picking up the pace on the issue and we are in a much better situation than the one that existed under the previous Labour Government.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I welcome the fact that more than 1 million more women are in employment now than in 2010, but will the Minister confirm what the Government are doing to support women with children who might find it difficult to return to work because of childcare responsibilities?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): Our aim is to help parents to get into a job that fits around their caring responsibilities, which is why we are doubling the amount of free childcare offered to working parents to 30 hours a week. Last year, we spent a record £5 billion supporting parents with the costs of childcare and the figure will rise to more than £6 billion by 2020.

T.6. [908101] Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Finland has become the first country in Europe to pay its unemployed citizens unconditional monthly sums with the aim of boosting employment and reducing poverty. When will the UK Government fund research into similar schemes such as a universal basic income?

Damian Green: As I understand it, the Finnish scheme is a small pilot in a local area. I have read a lot of the literature—it is clearly an interesting idea—all of which suggests that that kind of scheme is fantastically expensive and that some of the losers from it are those who are on the lowest incomes at the moment. The polite response is that I am unconvinced by the proposal.
Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Seasonal agricultural workers have benefited from auto-enrolment into pensions, but many accrue only very small pension pots. What can the Government do to ensure that the bureaucratic burden does not fall disproportionately on the employers of these vital workers?

Richard Harrington: My hon. Friend brings up a very good point. The Government have to find a balance between wanting as many people as possible to have pensions, and economic sense when there is an impact on employers. My officials have discussed the issue with the National Farmers Union. We understand it and it will be looked into in the course of the 2017 review.

Penny Mordaunt: I think the hon. Gentleman is confused: we are actually putting more resources into these initiatives, and also asking others to do more. Obviously, we are consulting in the Green Paper, but even some of the announcements the Prime Minister made today included additional resource. We very much want to meet that target, and we are putting the resources and the policies in place to do that.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): Last month, I asked the Government to introduce mandatory video recording of all DWP employment and support allowance assessments because a constituent of mine in Twickenham was treated with less respect than the character in the fictional film “I, Daniel Blake”. When will mandatory video recording commence?

Penny Mordaunt: We are looking at a range of issues to improve the assessment process for PIP and ESA and the person’s experience of it. The recording of assessments is one of those things, so we are looking at that issue.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): For many young people, staying in the family home is not an option, so housing benefit is a lifeline not a lifestyle choice. When will the Government finally clarify how their scheme will not see these people lose vital support?

Caroline Nokes: The regulations regarding the removal of housing benefit from 18 to 21-year-olds have yet to be published. We will provide full details, particularly of the exemptions that will be involved, in March.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I would like to say thank you to the scores of businesses in Corby and east Northamptonshire that provide important work experience opportunities for our young people. These introductions to the world of work are crucial, so will Ministers continue to make sure they remain at the forefront of cross-departmental discussions?

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): We know that one of the most important things in being able to get a job is to have had a job and to have demonstrated employability skills. Specifically on the work experience placements we do through Jobcentre Plus, people spend 49 days longer on average in employment as a result of having done one, so the answer to my hon. Friend’s question is yes.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): May I urge the Secretary of State personally to review what is happening to the Motability scheme? Some 41,000 people have had their cars taken away as a result of PIP assessments, including a severely disabled Castleford constituent who now cannot get to work and may be about to lose her job, and a Pontefract constituent with metal rods in her joints who now cannot get out of the house and is at risk of slipping into depression as a result. On the day when the Prime Minister rightly raised the issue of mental health injustice, will he take seriously the serious impact on people’s mental health of being isolated in this way?

Damian Green: I am happy to assure the right hon. Lady that we are looking very closely at the whole Motability scheme, which, as she knows, is an independent charity. We have formed a working group to look at the various issues that gave rise to it, so we are looking at this very carefully.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Following on from the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), my constituent Ms Brookes, who has limited mobility because of a stroke, received a Motability car last year, and that car was a lifeline. Last week, the car was removed from her, and she is now struggling to get her children to school and then to get to work. She is appealing the decision, and I hope she will win, but in the meantime she is finding it incredibly hard to manage her disability as well as her responsibilities as an employee and, more importantly, a mother. Will the Minister look at this case as a matter of urgency to ensure that my constituent gets the help and support she needs?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be happy to look at the particular case the hon. Lady raises. We are looking at that issue in the Motability scheme, but also at other issues that mean that people are perhaps not able to take up work or travel opportunities. We recently met Motability on these issues and have formed a working group with it to work through them. We hope to be able to make some announcements very soon.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Indicators of child poverty are important, as the Secretary of State said earlier, but so are targets. Will he therefore agree to adopt the provisions in the Bill presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), which would establish statutory targets for the reduction of child poverty?

Damian Green: That old-fashioned approach is not necessarily the best way forward. Having the whole range of issues that can give rise to child poverty addressed by Government policy is the best way to do it. I look forward to the hon. Gentleman’s response to the social justice Green Paper that we will publish in the coming months.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): In the London borough of Wandsworth that houses my constituency, last year there was a 25% increase in food bank use. Shockingly, almost 50% of these users are children.
Do the Government agree that this is an absolute disgrace, and what will they do to assure us in this House today that the children and adults of Tooting shall no longer have to rely on food bank use?

**Damian Green:** As I said in response to previous questions, the best route out of poverty is work, and one of the great successes of the economic policy of this Government has been that more people are in work, more women are in work, and fewer children are growing up in workless households than ever before. I just wish that Labour Members would accept that getting more people into work and reducing unemployment is the best attack on poverty that any Government can make.

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): There are 13,000 children in my constituency living in poverty—almost a third of the total poverty figure for the whole district—so will the Minister explain to my constituents his decision to close the child poverty unit?

**Damian Green:** The main function of the child poverty unit was to support Ministers in meeting the Child Poverty Act 2010, which has now been superseded by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, whereby the response specifically to poverty is being led by my Department, so the unit is now working inside the Department for Work and Pensions. That is the straightforward answer to the hon. Gentleman's question.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State have any new year's resolutions? If not, perhaps I can help him out: he could resolve to make sure that no one is sanctioned at Christmas. Will he review the operations of his Department, as I asked him before Christmas, to make sure that nobody goes without over the festive period?

**Damian Green:** My new year's resolution is, as ever, to make sure that my Department continues its successful work in getting ever more people into work, and to make sure that we have a benefits system that helps people to get into work and a pensions system that provides security and dignity in old age.
Domestic Violence Victims:
Cross-Examination

3.38 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice to make a statement on the emergency review to determine how to ban perpetrators of domestic violence from directly cross-examining their victims within the family court.

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald):
I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for the chance to update the House on an important issue. To put this in context, the issues at stake in family proceedings are always sensitive and often complex, and the decisions of the court can have far-reaching implications for the individuals involved. The presence of domestic abuse only exacerbates an already traumatic situation, so the Government have already taken steps to make sure that victims in the family justice system have support and protection. We have protected legal aid for individuals seeking protection from abusers. We continue to invest in the court estate to improve the physical security of family courts and the emotional support available for users. We have placed particular emphasis on training for those who work in the family justice system, making sure they understand the nature and impact of domestic abuse and that they act appropriately when they come across it.

However, we know that there is more to do. As the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), made clear when this was debated in Parliament on 15 September, the Government are determined to improve the family justice response to domestic abuse, and we have worked closely with judges and others to consider what additional protections may be necessary. We are particularly concerned about the fact that unrepresented perpetrators of abuse can directly cross-examine their victims in family proceedings. I want to make family court processes safer for victims so they can themselves advocate effectively and for the safety of their children. This cannot happen while a quarter of domestic violence victims face cross-examination by their abusers.

The Lord Chancellor has requested urgent advice on how to put an end to this practice. This sort of cross-examination is illegal in the criminal courts, and I am determined to see it banned in family courts, too. We are considering the most effective and efficient way of making that happen. That will help family courts to concentrate on the key concerns for the family and always to put the children’s interests first, which is what they are supposed to do. This work, which is being fast-tracked within the Department, is looking in particular at the provisions in the criminal law that prevent alleged perpetrators from cross-examining their alleged victims in criminal proceedings, and we are considering how we might apply similar provisions in the slightly different circumstances of family proceedings.

Members will appreciate that such a proposal requires thought, but we want to resolve the matter as soon as possible. We will make further details available shortly, once the work is complete. I want to thank the president of the family division, Sir James Munby, who has argued passionately that this practice should be outlawed for good.

Peter Kyle: This issue has been wreaking untold devastation on victims of domestic violence. I have now spoken to numerous survivors of abuse whose accounts of torment under cross-examination in the family court—often by convicted rapists—are devastating to hear, but impossible for most of us even to imagine.

I have spoken to a woman who was cross-examined by the man who was in jail for numerous counts of rape and abuse that had left her unconscious and hospitalised. As a result of the family court process, this extremely vulnerable woman needed weeks of medication and months of counselling to recover. She has now suffered such an ordeal three times. I have spoken to the sister of a woman who was abused so grievously that the abuse resulted in her death. The convicted murderer then sued for custody of their child from the prison where he was serving a life sentence for murder. He directly cross-examined the sister of the woman he murdered, even having the grotesque nerve to ask, “What makes you think you can be a parent to my child?” Abuse is being continued and perpetuated right under the noses of judges and the police, the very institutions that should be protecting the vulnerable with every sinew of state power.

On 15 September 2016, in response to speeches by Members on both sides of the House in a Back-Bench debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), said that this is a “scourge, which blights our society.”—[Official Report, 15 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 1119.]

Yet he made no commitment to review or to change policy. Sadly, it took the excellent coverage in The Guardian during the Christmas break for such a commitment to emerge from the Ministry of Justice.

The source was anonymous, so will the Minister provide clarity in these areas? Lord Justice Munby, the president of the family division, supports measures to outlaw the cross-examination of victims by perpetrators, and he has said that this will require primary legislation. Does the Minister agree with that assessment, and if so, will he make the drafting and introduction of any such legislation a priority? The anonymous source told The Guardian that this was a matter of urgency for the Secretary of State. Will the Minister tell the House when she started the review, and more importantly, precisely when it will be completed? Victims of abuse need to have precision and clarity at this moment of great importance for them. Speed is of the essence, but so is consultation—we need to get this right—so will the Minister tell us what process is in place to enable victims, campaigners and support organisations to feed in their essential experiences and views so that the review is at all times carried out with, not done to, survivors of domestic abuse?

Finally, as I told the House back in September, it is a source of shame to me personally that I got to the age I am today without being aware that such barbarism is being practised within our own legal system. In addition to my lack of inquisitiveness, which I regret profoundly, the secrecy imposed by law on the family court process allowed this to continue without journalistic oversight. Will the Minister consider longer term assessment of
the wider operational activity in the family court system? Such assessment should look, in a considered and detailed way, at the overall operation of family courts with a view to ensuring, where appropriate, greater transparency and oversight of the family court process is introduced.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed, let me just say this. The hon. Gentleman has raised an extremely serious matter on the back of very considerable knowledge and research, and he has aired it in this House with great sensitivity. I did not wish to interrupt him—not least for that obvious reason—but perhaps I can announce to the House a new year’s resolution: from now on we must, without fail, stick to the established time limits for urgent questions. The hon. Gentleman was notified of the two-minute limit and he took over three minutes. That is the first point. A lot of more experienced Members will be well aware of my second point, but perhaps I can just underline it. The briefest preamble of description is fine, but an urgent question is supposed to be just that: neither a speech nor a contribution to debate, but a series of questions. I know the hon. Gentleman was notified of the two-minute limit and he will not, I am sure, take offence. He has raised very important matters. In future, however, doing so must be done in accordance with the proper form and time.

Sir Oliver Heald: I agree with many of the hon. Gentleman’s points. Judges have always had wide discretion on family proceedings to try to get to the truth of matters, and to protect the interests of the family and so on. Judges have discretion to ask the questions themselves to try to avoid situations arising that are against the interests of justice. In recent years, judges have become more concerned—as the hon. Gentleman has—about situations where abuse is being perpetrated through the proceedings. That is why Sir James Munby has spoken out, why I have made the comments I have made today, and why the Department is treating this as something that should be dealt with as a matter of urgency.

Is it necessary to change the law? The answer is yes it is. Primary legislation would be necessary to ban cross-examination. I also think there are related ancillary matters that would require primary legislation. Clauses, therefore, are required. Is work being done? Yes, work is being done at a great pace to ensure that all these matters are dealt with in a comprehensive and effective way—the urgency is there. I became the Minister responsible for these matters in October, and I have chaired the Family Justice Board, which has become very concerned about this issue over that period. The Lord Chancellor shares that concern, which is why we are moving at speed to try to tackle it.

The extent to which consultation is necessary is something I will consider in the light of the hon. Gentleman’s comments, and perhaps discuss with him privately if he wishes. My feeling is that what is required is pretty straightforward: a ban, and then the necessary ancillary measures to allow cross-examination without the perpetrator doing it. I would question, therefore, the extent to which a wide consultation is needed, but I will discuss that with him.

On transparency in the courts, journalists are now able to attend court and report the proceedings, although there are obvious restrictions to protect children and so on.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Minister of State and the Lord Chancellor are to be congratulated on moving promptly on this matter. The president of the family division is also to be congratulated on his frankness in relation to the deficiencies he finds within the family jurisdiction. Does my right hon. and learned Friend accept that the simple solution is to adopt, more or less lock, stock and barrel, the criminal procedures under the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999; to use the forthcoming courts and prison reform Bill to put that into primary law; and accept that the very modest public expenditure of a court-appointed advocate to do the cross-examination where justice so requires would be a drop in the ocean compared with the benefits, in the interests of justice, to individuals who are the victims of abuse?

Sir Oliver Heald: I am grateful to the Chair of the Justice Committee for those comments and agree with a good many of them. There are some differences from criminal proceedings, for example in a case in which an injunction is sought and there is no charge, or a case in which money is being considered but there is a background of abuse. There is a range of issues. For legal aid in cases of domestic abuse in family proceedings, there is a wider list than is available for criminal proceedings, but his basic point is right.

I am not able to give a commitment on the Bill. It depends on how quickly the work is concluded, and I am working on it very quickly.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for asking the urgent question and the Minister for his response. I recognise that this issue unites the House.

The practice of unrepresented parties against whom domestic violence is either proved or alleged questioning victims in court has been raised repeatedly in the House and in the media. Many Members on both sides of the House have constituents who have been left devastated by the experience. That the Government are doing something to end that practice is welcome, but there is a clear admission that their legal aid cuts have caused this situation. The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 removed much family law from eligibility. Victims of domestic violence struggle to provide evidence of their abuse because they are frequently not believed, and in some cases because medical evidence is difficult to obtain. Their experience is made worse still because their abuser, who is also unable to get representation, is allowed to question them, even when they would be prevented from contacting the person in any other situation. The abuse therefore continues.

It need not be that way. In the criminal courts, cross-examination by an unrepresented party accused of domestic violence is not allowed. Is the Ministry of Justice counting the number of litigants in person in the family courts? How many of those are victims of domestic violence? How many are convicted or alleged to have committed domestic violence? Will the Minister look at the practice in criminal courts? Along with prohibiting
cross-examination, will he introduce the greater use of more sensitive procedures? When will the LASPO review finally begin?

**Sir Oliver Heald:** On the hon. Lady’s final point, as she knows, the LASPO review has to be concluded by April 2018. It is not overdue, but it is something that the Government have very much in mind, and that we will have to start fairly shortly.

On the hon. Lady’s other points, legal aid is available in cases of domestic abuse. That is why the Government concentrated efforts in legal aid on situations where life or liberty are at stake, and on domestic abuse and housing when homes are at risk. That is not an issue, but I accept that the evidence criteria are important. That is why the Government have allowed a longer period and a wider range of evidence to be used, which has been welcomed.

Cross-examination by litigants in person takes place too much. The hon. Lady asked what the exact number is. It is not clear, but it is certainly a considerable number, which is why the Government consider this to be an important issue to tackle.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister and welcome everything he said on the Government’s attitude to this long-standing problem. May I urge him please to look at the rules on legal aid? There is certainly strong anecdotal evidence from former colleagues of mine at the family bar and the judiciary that there is a direct consequence and link between the rise in litigants in person and the changes to legal aid, which was begun under the Labour Government. That link between litigants in person and legal aid is causing so much of the problem. If he at least looks at it, he could provide some of the solution.

**Sir Oliver Heald:** As my right hon. Friend rightly says, this is a long-standing issue but one that has now become urgent—the cries for help from judges and others have become more urgent—and that is why the Government are tackling it. It is necessary to find a way to prevent litigants in person from using proceedings to continue the abuse, and that is what we aim to do.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): May I welcome the Justice Secretary’s emergency review and stress how important it is that we all focus, across the UK, on how to prevent the perpetrators of domestic abuse from using the processes of the justice system to re-victimise the survivors of domestic abuse? In Scotland, the Government are engaged in a significant overhaul of the justice system, ahead of the introduction of new legislation on an all-encompassing offence of domestic abuse that will include all forms of coercive behaviour, but in Scotland legal aid is widely available in both criminal and civil cases. In England and Wales, cuts to legal aid mean that 80% of family cases now see at least one party without a lawyer, while in 60% of cases in the family courts neither party has one. In addition, victims of domestic abuse can only access legal aid in England and Wales if they cross a threshold test that has already been found to be too restrictive in a judicial review case. In addition to this important review, we therefore need a review of the criteria for access to legal aid for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. When will the Government commit to such a review?

**Mr Speaker:** Splendid! The hon. and learned Lady elided into a question just in time.

**Sir Oliver Heald:** I thank the hon. and learned Lady for that and for her news from Scotland. On legal aid in England and Wales, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) deliberately decided to concentrate the effort on cases involving people’s life, liberty, home or, as in this case, domestic abuse. Given that it was a period of austerity and decisions had to be made, I believe he got that judgment right. On the criteria for legal aid and the evidence that needs to be provided, it is not as though the Government have said, “This is set in stone”; where criticisms have been made, we have changed the rules to tackle those criticisms. My overall point is that the Government are responding when we should be.

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend’s announcements today and his work with the Lord Chancellor, but may I draw his attention to a report published last April by the all-party group on domestic violence, chaired by myself and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), that not only picked up on this issue of cross-examination but considered special measures in courts to make it easier for some of the most vulnerable victims to give evidence without feeling intimidated?

**Sir Oliver Heald:** I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend’s work in this area and for the important work of the all-party group, of which the Government and the ministerial committee on violence against women and girls take particular note. On special measures, the family courts have always had available to them a wider set of tools than the criminal courts and their judges have a wide discretion. Such measures as cross-examination by video, which in the criminal courts is provided for under section 28 of the 1999 Act, can be taken in family cases. Family courts can take evidence in a wide variety of ways, so there is a lot of protection. As I said in response to the urgent question, however, we are going further. Measures to do with the court estate, such as ensuring separate waiting rooms, screens and so on, as well as new rules on special measures, are being introduced.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for highlighting the discretion already available, but given that primary legislation might take some time, what steps is he taking now to remind the judiciary of the discretion they have and how they can apply it?

**Sir Oliver Heald:** The hon. Lady makes an important point. As she will know, there are practice directions in the family division, and one is being prepared at the moment, so I will make sure that her comments are taken well on board. We do not make the practice directions, but we can certainly pass on her comments.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): I and my staff have been struck by my constituency surgeries by the clear feedback on this anomaly around cross-examination. One of my constituents who complained about it was a former police officer. May I urge the Minister to take every step and use every tool possible to get the matter resolved as soon as possible?
Sir Oliver Heald: We all have examples—I am glad that my hon. Friend was able to get her example on the record—of cases where some form of abuse has occurred in the courts. That is unacceptable and it needs to stop. We are going to tackle this issue very urgently.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): On who should be involved and consulted in the review, will the Minister bear in mind that party litigants cross-examining their victims is just one species of the controlling behaviour that lies at the heart of domestic abuse and that, for that reason, there is a real and important role for organisations such as Women’s Aid to have their voices heard in this process?

Sir Oliver Heald: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and the Department does, of course, listen to what is said by Women’s Aid. It does seem to me that this is a fairly discrete issue—an issue about banning cross-examination by alleged perpetrators and making arrangements to ensure that cross-examination can take place in a suitable way. I would not want to sacrifice speed in tackling that for anything.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Last week, the country was shocked and saddened by the death of my constituent, Jill Saward, who campaigned tirelessly on behalf of victims of rape and sexual violence, following her own horrific personal ordeal. Jill was instrumental in the campaign to change the law, so that accused rapists are barred from cross-examining victims. Will my right hon. and learned Friend join me in paying tribute to Jill and expressing our sincere condolences to her family, and does he agree that it is absolutely right to extend this law to the victims of domestic violence?

Sir Oliver Heald: I certainly believe it important to pay tribute to Jill Saward, who suffered the most vile ordeal, yet showed through the rest of her life what a wonderful person she was, by campaigning for others and doing a tremendous amount of charity work. She was a model, and someone who set an example of being good. Yes, I would like to pass on the law that applies to criminal cases into family cases, so that we can tackle the sort of abuse that has been described.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I declare my interest as a member of the Wilberforce barrister chambers in Hull, although I am not currently practising. I welcome the Justice Secretary’s position to bring forward a review on this important issue, but the Minister will know that this was created as a result of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. The truth is that the vast majority of people today are refused legal representation in family proceedings unless they can prove domestic violence, which is virtually impossible to prove. The Government should bring forward a review of LASPO, which is not working. They should do something about it.

Sir Oliver Heald: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman, but there will be a review of LASPO. It is something that we have promised, and the date by which it has to be completed is April 2018. We are committed to that. As for family proceedings, I think it right that families can come together in many cases and reach agreements, so we do not have the problem that the hon. Gentleman outlined. Where abuse is present for a significant number of individuals, it is important that in those cases the individual who is the victim should not be cross-examined by the alleged perpetrator. That is what we want to solve.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Last week, my constituent, Jill Saward, who campaigned tirelessly on behalf of victims of rape and sexual violence, following her own horrific personal ordeal. Jill was instrumental in the campaign to change the law, so that accused rapists are barred from cross-examining victims. Will the Minister refer to the problem as urgent and said that it has the utmost priority. When the review is complete, will he commit to bring this forward as emergency legislation? I think that would gain support from both sides of the House, and we could pass the legislation in one day, ensuring that we can bring about the change as quickly as possible.

Sir Oliver Heald: I think that the importance of that issue is accepted throughout the House. Whether or not my hon. Friend’s suggestion is an appropriate way to deal with it, one thing is clear: it should be dealt with as a matter of urgency, and that is what I am committed to doing.

Perhaps I should have said earlier that there were instances in which this problem arose before LASPO. It is not a new problem, and many people were refused legal aid representation under the Labour Government.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The Minister has said seven times that he is “dealing with it urgently”. When will we see the result?

Sir Oliver Heald: The answer that Members receive from the Dispatch Box is, of course, “shortly”, and that is what I have said, but it does mean shortly.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Government’s reforms of the family courts were designed to keep some of these antagonistic cases out of court altogether, but the legal aid changes have undoubtedly led to the involvement of more litigants in person in very sensitive cases. Does my right hon. and learned Friend acknowledge the problems that litigants in person are causing in relation to court resources? They often spin out the time that cases take, with judges themselves requiring constant advice on legal procedures. We really need to do something about that, because it is messing up the family courts.

Sir Oliver Heald: I fully accept that how litigants in person are helped with court proceedings is important, and the Government are spending £3.5 million on helping them. Let me make another point with which my hon. Friend may agree. Not every case needs to be decided in court; I am a strong supporter of mediation, and I should like to see more of that.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The emergency review is welcome, but cross-examination is not the only way in which perpetrators exploit family court processes to perpetuate their abuse. Will the review
consider the ways in which abusers can, for example, string out judicial process in the family courts to continue to abuse former partners and their children?

Sir Oliver Heald: I should be happy to discuss the issue with the hon. Lady, and to look into it in due course. This, however, is a discrete matter and an important one. I should like it to be tackled swiftly, and I do not intend to widen what we are doing at present, because I want to get on with that.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Women’s Aid has raised this issue on a number of occasions, most recently in its important and hard-hitting report “Nineteen Child Homicides”, which revealed that 25% of women interviewed had been cross-examined and that one woman who had been raped, beaten and abused for six years was cross-examined for three hours. Notwithstanding the need to get it right in the review, will my right hon. and learned Friend introduce legislation as soon as possible to ensure that that can never happen again?

Sir Oliver Heald: My hon. Friend has highlighted an important case, as well as the work done by Women’s Aid. He is right to say that that issue needs to be tackled urgently.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The need for training of the judiciary goes beyond the family courts. A constituent came to see me because her ex-partner had taken a case about the management of family property to the civil court, and the judge had said it was irrelevant that he had been imprisoned for raping her daughter. That cannot be right. Judges need to be trained as well.

Sir Oliver Heald: It would not, of course, have been a family justice case; it would have been a civil case. I agree with the hon. Lady that that is an important consideration, and I will look into it.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I welcome what the Minister has said today and his commitment to legislation, but in the meantime will he ensure that the best support is available to vulnerable victims before, during and after the proceedings?

Sir Oliver Heald: As I said in my initial response, a great deal of effort has gone into training both CAFCASS and court staff to provide the emotional support that is needed.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I think that we all welcome the tone of what the Minister has said today, but this is supposed to be an urgent review, and many women are going through cases of this kind right now. Will the Minister make it clear that the review will be concluded by Easter at the latest and that we can then hope to see improvements in our courts?

Sir Oliver Heald: Yes.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the tone of the Minister’s remarks so far. Does he agree that the point about legal aid misses the fact that some of these perpetrators are almost certainly using the ability to cross-examine their victims as a tactic in the courts?

Sir Oliver Heald: I can certainly give the assurance I have already given, which is that we are tackling this as a matter of urgency. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there is a busy legislative timetable with all sorts of matters to do with Europe and the like, and we will have to see what exactly can be achieved in terms of the legislative timetable, but I want to tackle this urgently.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): On behalf of my constituent Claire Throssell, whose two children were murdered by her ex-husband, I welcome this review, but in the debate in September that I co-sponsored, the Under-Secretary at the Minister’s side, the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), made a clear commitment to overhauling the culture of the family courts and in particular to a review of practice direction 12. Are the Government still committed to that broader set of changes, which we so urgently need?

Sir Oliver Heald: I pay tribute to the work that the hon. Lady has done on this issue. I chair the Family Justice Board with the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families. We are committed to improving the overall way in which the courts work and are in the process of introducing a new practice direction in the area of victims. This is certainly a point we are very much alive to.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Everyone who has spoken today, including the Minister, has said the situation is urgent. In view of that and the fact that he said primary legislation will be needed, is there any reason why he cannot commit to the Government presenting that within three or four months?

Sir Oliver Heald: As I have said, we are keen to complete this review as a matter of urgency. The legislative programme is a complex matter at the moment for reasons I have hinted at, so we will have to see what is possible, but we would like to tackle this urgently.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The focus of questions has understandably been on domestic violence, but can the Minister confirm he is also seeking to implement this protection for victims of
emotional and financial control and other forms of non-violent abuse, which the Government have, to their great credit, sought to criminalise in recent months?

Sir Oliver Heald: As the hon. Gentleman will know, there is a cross-governmental approach to abuse that has its own definitions and so on, but the areas of abuse covered in terms of applications for legal aid are far wider than just physical violence and include sex abuse cases and the like, and we are alive to the need to cover a wider area than simply domestic violence.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): While I appreciate the urgency and scope of the investigation, will the Minister give consideration to cases where the Department for Work and Pensions is sharing domestic abuse victims’ information with the perpetrators of the crime when making decisions about benefits claimants? The anonymity of a constituent of mine was taken away from her and the information was passed on by the DWP.

Sir Oliver Heald: I am sure that the hon. Lady is making an important point. If she wants to write to me or speak to me about it, I would be more than happy to discuss it with her, but I do not think that this is a complicated matter. It is a simple one that needs urgent action.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Survivors of domestic abuse tell us that they feel re-victimised and re-traumatised by their experiences in the family courts. Will the Minister please give us more clarity on how the voices and views of survivors of domestic abuse will be considered in this emergency review?

Sir Oliver Heald: My view is that this is a narrow issue involving banning perpetrators or alleged perpetrators from cross-examining victims, as we do in criminal cases. That is a narrow issue on which I think we all agree. The sort of arrangements that will need to be put in place have already been tried in the criminal courts. If the hon. Lady has any particular ideas or concerns, I would obviously be happy to discuss them with her, but I do not think that this is a complicated matter. It is a simple one that needs urgent action.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I am aware that this focuses on the adult victims of domestic abuse, but research from SafeLives has shown that an estimated 130,000 children in the UK live in households with a high risk of domestic abuse and a significant risk of harm or death. Thousands more live with other levels of domestic abuse every day. Will the Minister please clarify that, as recommended by Women’s Aid, there should not be an assumption of shared parenting in child contact cases where domestic abuse is a feature?

Sir Oliver Heald: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and the courts are clearly alive to this matter. We have to give some discretion, however, because family cases involve a wide range of factors. I think that the judges do a good job. I want to put on record that these are not easy cases and that our judges have to have an element of discretion. I would like to ensure that that remains the case, although I acknowledge that she makes a good point.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): A constituent who came to see me was extremely distressed because her husband was repeatedly taking her back to the family court over access issues. She was not only undergoing cross-examination but being driven into financial poverty through constantly having to fund her own defence. Will the Minister look at how the courts can deal with the vexatious, repeated requests relating to access that are behind a lot of coercive behaviour and at the financial poverty that families find themselves in as a result?

Sir Oliver Heald: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and I should like to pay tribute to the work that she does in this area. I am more than happy to raise that point in the Family Justice Board and to look at the matter, but it is not part of the important work that we are doing to deal urgently with the question of cross-examination. Her point bears on that work, but it is not the focus of what we are doing at the moment. We will, however, look into it.
Mental Health and NHS Performance

4.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on mental health and NHS performance. This Government are committed to a shared society in which public services work to the highest standards for everyone. This includes plans announced by the Prime Minister this morning on mental health. I am proud that, under this Government, 1,400 more people are accessing mental health services every day compared with in 2010 and that we are investing more in mental health than ever before, with plans for 1 million more people with mental health conditions to access services by 2020.

But we recognise that there is more to do, so we will proceed with plans to further improve mental health provision, including: formally accepting the recommendations of the independent taskforce on mental health, which will see mental health spend increase by £1 billion a year by the end of the Parliament; a Green Paper on children and young people’s mental health to be published before the end of the year; enabling every secondary school to train someone in mental health first aid; a new partnership with employers to support mental health in the workplace; up to £15 million extra invested in places of safety for those in crisis, following the highly successful start to the programme in the last Parliament; an ambitious expansion of digital mental health provision; and an updated and more comprehensive suicide prevention strategy. Further details of these plans are contained in the written ministerial statement laid before the House this morning.

I turn now to the winter. As our most precious public service, the NHS has been under sustained pressure for a number of years. In just six years the number of people aged over 80 has risen by 340,000, and life expectancy has risen by 12 months. As a result, demand is unprecedented. The Tuesday after Christmas was the busiest day in the history of the NHS, and some hospitals are reporting that A&E attendances are up to 30% higher than last year. I therefore want to set out how we intend to protect the service through an extremely challenging period and sustain it for the future.

First, I pay tribute to staff on the frontline. The 1.3 million NHS staff, alongside another 1.4 million in the social care system, do an incredible job, which is frankly humbling for all of us in this House. An estimated 150,000 medical staff, and many more non-medical staff, worked on Christmas day and new year’s day. They have never worked harder to keep patients safe, and the whole country is in their debt.

This winter, the NHS has made more extensive preparations than ever before. We started the run-up to the winter period with over 1,600 more doctors and 3,000 more nurses than just a year ago, bringing the total increase since 2010 to 11,400 more doctors and 11,200 more hospital nurses. The NHS allocated £400 million to local health systems for winter preparedness; notably, it assured the winter plans of every trust; it launched the largest ever flu vaccination programme, with more than 13 million people already vaccinated; and it bolstered support outside A&E, with 12,000 additional GP sessions offered over the festive period.

The result has been that this winter has already seen days when A&Es have treated a record number of people within four hours, and there have been fewer serious incidents declared than many expected. As Chris Hopson, head of NHS Providers, said, although there have been serious problems at some trusts, the system as a whole is doing slightly better than last year.

However, there are indeed a number of trusts where the situation has been extremely fragile. All of last week’s A&E diverts happened in 19 trusts, of which four are in special measures. The most recent statistics show that nearly three quarters of trolley waits occurred in just two trusts. In Worcestershire, in particular, there have been a number of unacceptably long trolley waits, and the media have reported two deaths of patients in A&E. We are also aware of ongoing problems in North Midlands, with extremely high numbers of 12-hour trolley waits. Nationally, the NHS has taken urgent action to support those trusts, including working intensively with leadership and brokering conversations with social care partners to generate a joined-up approach across systems of concern.

As of this weekend, there are some signs that pressure is easing both in the most distressed trusts and across the system. However, with further cold weather on the way this weekend, a spike in respiratory infections and a rise in flu, there will be further challenges ahead. NHS England and NHS Improvement will also consider a series of further measures that may be taken in particular distressed systems on a temporary basis at the discretion of local clinical leaders. These may include: temporarily releasing time for GPs to support urgent care work; clinically triaging non-urgent calls to the ambulance service for residents of nursing and residential homes before they are taken to hospital; continuing to suspend elective care, including, where appropriate, suspension of non-urgent outpatient appointments; working with the Care Quality Commission on rapid re-inspection where this has the potential to re-open community health and social care bed capacity; and working with community trusts and community nursing teams to speed up discharge. Taken together, these actions will give the NHS the flexibility to take further measures as and when appropriate at a local level.

However, looking to the future, it is clear we need to have an honest discussion with the public about the purpose of A&E departments. Nowhere outside the UK commits to all patients to sort out any urgent health need within four hours. Only four other countries—New Zealand, Sweden, Australia and Canada—have similar national standards, which are generally less stringent than ours. This Government are committed to maintaining and delivering that vital four-hour commitment to patients, but since it was announced in 2000, there are nearly 9 million more visits to our A&E, up to 30% of which NHS England estimates do not need to be made, and the tide is continuing to rise. If we are going to protect our four-hour standard, we need to be clear that it is a promise to sort out all urgent health problems within four hours, but not all health problems, however minor. As Professor Keith Willett, NHS England’s medical director for acute care, has said, no country in the world has a standard for all health problems, however small, and if we are to protect services for the most vulnerable, nor can we.
NHS England and NHS Improvement will continue to explore ways to ensure that at least some of the patients who do not need to be in our A&Es can be given good, alternative options, building on progress under way with a streaming policy in the NHS England A&E plan. In this way, we will be able to improve the patient experience for those with more minor conditions who are currently not seen within four hours, as well as protect the four-hour promise for those who actually need it.

Taken together, what I have announced today are plans to support the NHS in a difficult period; and plans for a Government who are ambitious for our NHS, quite simply, to offer the safest, highest-quality care available anywhere, for both mental and physical health. But they will take time to come to fruition, and in the meantime all our thoughts are with NHS and social care staff who are working extremely hard over the winter, and throughout the year, both inside and outside our hospitals. I commend this statement to the House.

4.27 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for an advance copy of his statement. I, too, begin by paying tribute to all the NHS staff who are working day in, day out to provide the best possible care to patients during this busy period. Of course we welcome measures to improve mental health services in this country, as indeed we welcomed such announcements exactly 12 months ago, when the then Prime Minister made similar promises. But does the Secretary of State not agree that if this Prime Minister wants to shine a light on mental health provision, she should aim her torch at the Government’s record: 6,600 fewer nurses working in mental health; a reduction in mental health beds; 400 fewer doctors working in mental health; and, perhaps most disgracefully of all, the raiding of children’s local mental health budgets in order to plug funding gaps in the wider NHS? Could he therefore tell us why the Prime Minister was unable to confirm this morning that money for mental health would be ring-fenced to prevent this raiding of budgets from happening in the future? We welcome measures to improve mental health support in schools. Will the Government offer more resources to local authority education psychologists? What provision will be in place to give teachers suitable training for doing this work?

On the winter crisis, this morning the Secretary of State said that things have only been “falling over in a couple of places”. Let us look at the facts: a third of hospitals declared last month that they needed urgent help to deal with the number of patients coming through the doors; A&E departments have turned patients away more than 140 times; 15 hospitals ran out of beds in one day in December; several hospitals have warned that they cannot offer comprehensive care; and elderly patients have been left languishing on hospital trolleys in corridors, sometimes for more than 24 hours. And he says that care is only falling over in a couple of places! I know that “La La Land” did well at the Golden Globes last night, but I did not realise the Secretary of State was living there—perhaps that is where he has been all weekend. Will he confirm that the NHS is facing a winter crisis, and that the blame lies at the doors of No. 10 Downing Street?

Does the Secretary of State agree that it was a monumental error to ignore the pleas for extra support for social care to be included in the autumn statement only weeks ago? Will he support calls to bring forward now the extra £700 million that is allocated for 2019, to help social care? Will he urge the Chancellor and the Prime Minister to announce a new funding settlement for the NHS and social care in the March Budget so that a crisis like this year’s never happens again?

I press the Secretary of State further on the announcement he has just made on the four-hour A&E target. Is he really telling patients that rather than trying to hit that four-hour target, the Government are now in fact rewriting and downgrading it? If so, does NHS England support that move? What guidance has he had from the Royal College of Emergency Medicine to say that that is an appropriate change to the waiting-time standard?

The Secretary of State has made patient safety an absolute priority; in that, he has our unswerving support. I am sure he will agree that one of the most upsetting reports to come out of hospitals last week was that on the death of two patients at Worcestershire Royal hospital who had been waiting on trolleys. Will he commit to personally lead an inquiry into those deaths? Does he know whether they were isolated incidents? When does he say that that is an appropriate change to the waiting-time standard?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to respond to the hon. Gentleman’s comments and, indeed, to the comments of all Members, but I shall first say this about the tone of what he said. He speaks as if the NHS never had any problems over winters when Labour was in power. The one thing NHS staff do not want right now is for any party to start weaponising the NHS for party political purposes. I remind him that when his party runs the NHS, the number of people on waiting lists for treatments doubles, A&E performance is 10% lower and people wait twice as long to have their hips replaced. Whatever the problems are in the NHS, Labour is not the solution.

The hon. Gentleman talked about mental health, so let me tell him what is happening on that. Thanks to the efforts of this Government and the Conservative-led coalition, we now have some of the highest dementia diagnosis rates in the world. Our talking therapies programme—one of the most popular programmes for the treatment of depression and anxiety—is treating 750,000 more people every year and is being copied in Sweden. Every day, we are treating 1,400 more people with mental health conditions and we have record numbers of psychiatrists. The hon. Gentleman mentioned mental health nurses: in this Parliament we are training 8,000 more, which is a 22% increase.

All that is backed up by what we are confirming today, which has not been done before: the Government are accepting the report of the independent taskforce
review—led by Paul Farmer, the chief executive of Mind—which commits us to spending £1 billion more a year on mental health by the end of the Parliament. That would not be possible without the spending commitments that Labour was prepared to make for the NHS in the previous Parliament. It is because of this Government’s funding that we are able to make such commitments on mental health.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the NHS and gave completely the wrong impression of what I said this morning. I was completely clear that all NHS hospitals are operating under greater pressure than they ever have. He should listen to independent voices, such as that of Chris Hopson—no friend of the Government when it comes to NHS policy—who is clear that in the vast majority of trusts people are actually coping slightly better than last year. However, we have some very serious problems in a few trusts, including in Worcestershire and a number of others. I can commit to him that we will follow closely the investigations into the two reported deaths at Worcestershire and keep the House updated.

The hon. Gentleman talked about social care, which is where, I think, his politicising goes wrong. Last year, spending on social care went up by around £600 million. At the last election, he stood on a platform of not a penny more to local authorities for social care, so to stand here as a defender of social care is, frankly, an insult to vulnerable people up and down the country, particularly to those living under Labour councils such as Hounslow, Merton and Ealing, which are refusing to raise the social care precept, but complaining about social care funding.

The hon. Gentleman talked more generally about NHS funding, but in the last Parliament it was not the Conservatives who wanted to cut funding for the NHS—it was his party. It was not the Conservatives who said that funding the five-year forward view was impossible—it was his party. Labour said that the cheque would bounce. Well, it has not bounced, and we are putting in that money.

In conclusion, it is tough on the NHS frontline. The hon. Gentleman was right to raise this issue in this House, but wrong to raise it in the way that he did. Under this Government, the NHS has record numbers of doctors and nurses and record funding. Despite the pressures of winter, care is safer, of higher quality and reaching more people than ever before. It is time to support those on the frontline, and not try to use them for party political points.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and the Prime Minister’s focus on mental health in her speech today. She spoke of holding the NHS leadership to account for the extra £1 billion that we will be investing in mental health. Will the Secretary of State set out in further detail how clinical commissioning groups will be held to account for ensuring that that money gets to the frontline so that we can deliver progress on parity of esteem?

Mr Hunt: Yes, I can do that. It is a very important point. We have had a patchy record in the NHS of ensuring that money promised for mental health actually reaches the frontline. The way that we intend to address this is by creating independently compiled Ofsted-style ratings for every CCG in the country that highlight where mental health provision is inadequate. Those ratings are decided by an independent committee chaired by Paul Farmer, who is responsible for the independent taskforce report, so he is able to check up on progress towards his recommendations. I am confident that, by doing that, we will be able to shine a light on those areas that are not delivering on the promises that this Government have made to the country.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): After the Health Committee’s recent inquiry into suicide, I absolutely welcome the extra funding for mental health. I am sure we will in future.

Mr Speaker: I hope that the hon. Lady will not take that as an attack.

Dr Whitford: No, it is a very important point. The president of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine estimates that in areas of England the figure is between 50% and 60%. That difference is down to how it is organised. It is the fragmentation and the lack of integration. There are things that can be done. We can use community pharmacies and GPs, and try to bring the NHS back together.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): You were handy at that.

Mr Speaker: Yes, but that was then, and this is now. That was when I was a badly behaved Back Bencher like the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Hunt: I will try to interpret the questions in what the hon. Lady said. If she was asking whether the problems in England are similar to those in Scotland, I think that we share problems, particularly across the busy winter period. She has observed that Scotland is
also failing to meet the target. She is right to say that bed capacity is absolutely critical, and that is something we have not always got right in England. There have been times when beds have been decommissioned and the alternative provision that was promised has not been made, which has big knock-on effects. When it comes to what happens in Scotland and England, I think that Scotland has gone further than England in the use of community pharmacy, which is to be commended, but England has gone further in our plans to reform and increase investment into general practice. That was what the president of the Royal College of General Practitioners was talking about over Christmas when she said that she was keen for Scotland to match the package that we have in England.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend’s statement. Of course, we all know the work that is done in our local areas by all those working in the NHS at such a difficult time. In relation to mental health, will he confirm that the Prime Minister’s very welcome speech this morning also emphasised the importance of perinatal mental health, and that some of the extra resource will continue the great work on that? Will he also emphasise the point about transparency, because knowing what CCGs are doing assists Members of Parliament not only in calling for extra resource, but in ensuring that our areas do the best they can compared with others, rather than simply making a general point about resources, which is always the easiest point to make?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend did a huge amount of good work on mental health when he was a colleague in the Department of Health. On perinatal mental health, we know that 20% of mothers suffer some form of pre or post-natal depression, which has a huge impact on the child, with lifetime costs of around £10,000 for every birth in this country, caused by lack of proper mental health provision. The plan announced today means that we will be able to treat an extra 30,000 women better—we think that is the number who need to be treated. He makes an important point about transparency. I would put it like this: funding matters, and we have got it right under both parties, but I think that he is right to say that when there are changes in provision in community hospitals, we need to ensure that we have good alternative plans.

Mr Speaker: In wishing the hon. Members for Morley and Outwood and for Filton and Bradley Stoke all the best in the weeks and months ahead, I call Andrea Jenkyns.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. First, I echo some of the points made by the Secretary of State regarding mental health support for expectant mothers. As one myself, I have to say that the midwives have been fantastic. Right from the very first appointments at grassroots level, they mention mental health, so we are feeling the support on the ground.

I welcome today’s statement, which shows the Government’s commitment to mental health by making it a centrepiece of the agenda. One in 50 young people in Yorkshire receive care for mental health. How will the new approach address the concerns of the young people and their parents, and what measures are in place to reduce the waiting list for child and adolescent mental health services?

Mr Hunt: I add to Mr Speaker’s comments my very good wishes and confidence that my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) will get superb care from the NHS. I thank her for campaigning on patient safety. I am sure she will be pleased to hear that our principal safety campaign this year is on maternity safety.

In bold numbers, the plan will mean that we will treat 1 million more people with mental health conditions a year by the end of this Parliament. Of course, many of those will be in Yorkshire. An additional 70,000 young people will get treatment every single year and I hope that will bring down the CAMHS waiting times. We also want to do work in schools to prevent people from getting on the CAMHS waiting list in the first place.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The YoungMinds survey published before Christmas showed a failure in 50% of clinical commissioning group areas to spend the full amount of extra investment allocated to children and young people’s mental health. That is scandalous. I note the Secretary of State’s point about Ofsted-style ratings, but does he not need to introduce a system that guarantees that the money the Government promised for children’s mental health is actually spent as intended?

Mr Hunt: The right hon. Gentleman is right to want to ensure that we live up to those promises. He was a Minister when some of those promises were made and they are very important. I would say that we are delivering what he wants. We are on track this year to spend around £1 billion more, compared with two years ago when he was Minister for mental health. It has taken time for the NHS to get the message on mental health, but it is getting through loud and clear.
Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): As a frequent user and admirer of the Red Cross, I regard its claims as being grossly over the top. I join the Secretary of State in his tribute to the wonderful work of the frontline staff of the NHS at a very difficult time. Does he agree that the pressures are not going to go away, and that there must be a continuing drive for reform and to do these things better? What exactly are the impediments in the NHS to the sharing of best practice, and what steps is he taking to create a more experienced and better trained leadership who are more prepared for the exceptional medical and management challenges that the NHS now faces?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend speaks extremely wisely. I, too, think that we have to be very careful about the language we use in these situations because many vulnerable people can be frightened if we get the tone wrong. The vast majority of NHS services are performing extremely well under a great deal of pressure. His point about leadership is extremely important and one to which I have given a lot of thought. At the heart of the problem is that we do not have enough hospitals being run by doctors and nurses. Around 56% of our managers have a clinical background, compared with 76% in Canada and 96% in Sweden. To put it bluntly, doctors like to be given instructions by other doctors. Exceptional people from a non-clinical background can do it, but it is hard because doctors have many years of training and are highly experienced people. I have put in place measures to try to make it easier for more clinicians to become our managers of the future.

Mr Speaker: In wishing the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree all the best in the period ahead, I call Luciana Berger.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): In her speech today, the Prime Minister made a number of hard-hitting observations. She said:

“there is no escaping the fact that people with mental health problems are still not treated the same as if they have a physical ailment”.

She reported on the increase in self-harm among young people, and she told us about the shocking reality that, on average, 13 people take their life every single day in England. Given that the Conservative party has been in government for almost seven years, and that the Secretary of State has been Health Secretary for almost four of those years, who does he think is responsible for the terrible failures highlighted by the Prime Minister today?

Mr Hunt: I just think that is a totally inappropriate question. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Hunt: With great respect to the hon. Lady—she campaigns tirelessly on mental health, and she deserves great credit for that—that is the same as saying that the last Labour Government should have sorted out every single problem in mental health by 2010, and I am not standing here saying that. The truth is that we have made good progress; if she thinks that it is trivial that we are treating 1,400 more people every day for mental health conditions, she should go and talk to some of her own constituents who are getting access to mental health provision, who would not have been getting that access under the policies of the last Labour Government. We have made big strides in our mental health provision, but there is much more to do, and we are determined to do what it takes.

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): Recognising that the supply of extra resources for the NHS will be a vital and continuing issue, is my right hon. Friend not exactly right when he says that equal attention has to be given to controlling demand so that people do not simply instinctively make calls on GPs’ surgeries and A&E departments, which doctors themselves believe are avoidable and which could be dealt with in other ways?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend speaks extremely wisely. At the heart of it, we have a good commitment—the four-hour commitment, which was introduced by a Labour Government. I think it is one of the best things the NHS does: the promise that if someone is ill and needs urgent help, we will do something about it and get them under proper medical care within four hours. However, if we have the situation that NHS England now describes, where up to 30% of the people in A&E departments do not actually need to be there, we risk not being able to deliver that promise for the people who really do need it. That is why looking at how we can control demand from the people who do not need to be in A&Es, such as through the significant increase in investment in general practice and other measures, is going to be vital if we are going to crack this.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Secretary of State seems to be blaming the public for overwhelming A&E departments, when he well knows that the reason they go to A&E is that they cannot get to see their GP and social care is in crisis. Will he confirm that he has just announced another significant watering-down of the four-hour A&E target, following the watering-down by the coalition in their first year in office back in 2010? What is he personally doing to address the chronic long-term underperformance of hospitals, such as that at Worcester, where two people died on trolleys, and Plymouth, which is one of the hospitals that had to call in the Red Cross over the Christmas period?

Mr Hunt: I think—probably because of the forum we are in now—the right hon. Gentleman is misinterpreting what I have said, and it needs to be put right. Far from watering down the four-hour target, I have today recommitted the Government to that four-hour target. In just the answer before he spoke—maybe he was not listening—I actually said I thought it was one of the best things about the NHS that we have this four-hour promise. But the public will go to the place where it is easiest to get in front of a doctor quickly, and if we do not recognise that there is an issue with the fact that a number of people who do not need to go to A&Es are using them, and we do not try to address that problem, we will not make A&Es better for his constituents and mine. If he asks what we are doing to turn around the hospitals in difficulty, we have introduced the new Care Quality Commission inspection regime and a chief inspector of hospitals—the most rigorous inspection regime in the world, which the Labour party tried to vote down.
Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s announcement and the Secretary of State’s confirmation of extra support for mental health. I particularly welcome the review to be led by Lord Stevenson and Paul Farmer. As they carry out that review on improving businesses’ ability to support people with mental health problems, will they particularly look at how we can help smaller businesses—those that perhaps do not have the human resource expertise that larger businesses may have—to make sure that people with mental health problems stay in work and are able to get back into work when they fall out of it? They are the biggest single category of disabled people not currently working, and we could make a huge difference.

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend will of course know that from his distinguished time as a Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions. He is right. The central problem we are trying to address is that if someone, for example, stops going to work and is signed off work because of severe depression, that is bad for the individual and also bad for the business. Too often, what happens at the moment is that it then becomes entirely the NHS’s responsibility to get that person back to work; the business says, “Well, it’s not our responsibility anymore because they’re not turning up.” With a little bit of help from the business, we could get the person back to work much more quickly, meaning that they recovered more quickly and the business would not lose someone important. That is what Dennis Stevenson and Paul Farmer will be looking into.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): We will never solve the challenges facing the NHS and social care until there is a long-term settlement for funding both. Does the Secretary of State understand that the social care precept is completely inadequate to fill the gap and will increase inequality, because the areas that most need publicly funded care will be least able to raise that money? Will he speak to the Chancellor and the Communities and Local Government Secretary to look again at this issue and get the funding that social care desperately needs?

Mr Hunt: I agree with the hon. Lady that there are serious funding pressures in social care. We need a long-term solution to this, and we are doing important work on that. The precept is part of the solution. The local government settlement has been adjusted to take account of the different spending powers, or revenue-raising powers, of wealthier counties and wealthier local authority areas compared with other areas. We have to take into account the equality issue, and she is absolutely right to do that. However, if she is saying, “Have we solved the whole problem?” the answer is no—there is more work to do.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I welcome the statement by my right hon. Friend. May I pay huge tribute to everybody working at Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, especially in A&E, and especially over the nine days between Christmas and 2 January? Admissions almost doubled. At one point in the Queen’s medical nine days between Christmas and 2 January? Admissions more than doubled. At one point in the Queen’s medical issue of why she has had to wait for so long. The hon. Lady wrote eloquently, and we owe a huge debt to such people.

I am more than happy to meet Mrs Hardy, or arrange for her to meet somebody who works in the NHS so I understand the strains the person back to work much more quickly, meaning that they recovered more quickly and the business would not lose someone important. That is what Dennis Stevenson and Paul Farmer will be looking into.

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Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I welcome the statement by my right hon. Friend. May I pay huge tribute to everybody working at Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, especially in A&E, and especially over the nine days between Christmas and 2 January? Admissions almost doubled. At one point in the Queen’s medical centre A&E department there were 180 people seeking treatment—that is a record. There were 395 more admissions than discharges in that nine-day period. I pay huge tribute to everybody who is working in our NHS. Can my right hon. Friend give me an assurance that he will continue to work with our hospital trusts, like NUHT, as they bring forward plans to change schemes—it is not just simply about money—and do everything that he can to support them in these unprecedented times?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that. I echo my right hon. Friend’s praise for the staff at NUHT, which was particularly pressured over Christmas. They have made particular efforts to improve patient safety and quality of care over recent years. She is absolutely right, and of course I will continue to work closely with her trust and others.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): At 9.30 am today I received an email from a constituent in Coventry who asked me to bring it to the Secretary of State’s attention; I am delighted to do so. She writes as follows:

“I am a nurse with 26 years’ experience who has always worked full time and has paid my tax and national insurance without ever having to burden the government, social services or the NHS in my lifetime but have gladly served and given 100%.”

I am really sad to say—this comes from a nurse of 23 years’ experience—“that the care she has been given has been dreadful. I am somebody who works in the NHS so I understand the strain the service is under but I also expect that as a family who give so much to society that when it is our time of need that we can expect a service that meets our needs.”

I ask the Secretary of State whether he will kindly agree to meet Mrs Hardy and me—Sarah Hardy is the lady’s name—or arrange for her to meet somebody who can give her some sort of reassurance. She continues that she has been waiting six months without any mental health assessment or support from the NHS—six months for a daughter of 18 years of age. Will he agree to do that so that it is not just a case of more hollow words?

Mr Hunt: I am more than happy to meet Mrs Hardy, but ahead of that I would like to look at the particular issue of why she has had to wait for so long. The hon. Gentleman put it very eloquently, and she put it very eloquently, and we owe a huge debt to such people. What she has described with her 19-year-old daughter’s treatment is just not satisfactory: it is not good enough.

I am a nurse with 26 years’ experience who has always worked full time and has paid my tax and national insurance without ever having to burden the government, social services or the NHS in my lifetime but have gladly served and given 100%.”

I am more than happy to meet Mrs Hardy, or arrange for her to meet somebody who works in the NHS so I understand the strains the service is under but I also expect that as a family who give so much to society that when it is our time of need that we can expect a service that meets our needs.”

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Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): The House of Commons Library has calculated that the real-terms increase in health-related spending between 2010 and 2016 was 9.4% in England, yet it was zero in Wales. Not only are A&E waiting times consistently longer in Wales than in England, but waiting times for routine procedures can be as much as two and a half times longer in Wales. I regularly see constituents in tears who are waiting well in excess of a year for hip operations. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Labour party must start to acknowledge the challenges facing the NHS in Wales and accept responsibility for them? [Interruption.]
Mr Hunt: I think my hon. Friend’s constituents in Wales would be appalled by the reaction we have just had. Labour Members stand on their high horse in complaining about NHS care in England, but when he brings up poor NHS care in Wales, they tut and make noises as though they do not want to hear about it. If they care about NHS patients, they should care about them throughout the whole of the United Kingdom. I am afraid that that just shows the party political agenda.

Yes, my hon. Friend is right: NHS care in Wales is worse, and Labour needs to do something about it.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I have been contacted by several constituents who have spent 14 hours in A&E waiting for a bed. As well as by social care cuts, we have been hampered by a shortage of A&E doctors. The Department of Health was warned that that would become a growing problem over five years ago, and the Health Committee warned about it again last year. When will this shortage of A&E doctors be ended by the Government—by the summer, by next year, by the following year? The Secretary of State has had seven years. When will he deal with the shortage of A&E doctors?

Mr Hunt: Let me tell the right hon. Lady what we have done about A&E doctors. Their number has gone up by 1,200 since 2010, which is an increase of over 50%. The number of A&E consultants has gone up by 500, which is an increase of over 20%. At the same time, we have recruited 2,000 more paramedics. As a result of those changes, our emergency departments are seeing—within the four-hour target—2,500 more people every single day compared with 2010. That is not to minimise the pressures in the NHS we have had over the winter or to say that there is not more that needs to be done, which is why I outlined a number of things in my statement.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The Secretary of State kindly came to see the plans for the emergency room at Worthing hospital and came back six years later to see how it is working and to admire it in operation. I hope that the next time he comes he can look at the Zachary Merton community hospital and the Swandeian mental health services as well.

On child mental health care, may I put it to him that a quarter of the 700,000 teenagers going through each stage each year will have bumps and need resilience, and that their parents and teachers need help? Will he make sure that the Green Paper covers advice to parents and teachers so that they know what is in the normal range of behaviours and what is outside that range?

Mr Hunt: I commend my hon. Friend for his one-man campaign, which I continue to admire on many occasions, against the misinformation put out by 38 Degrees. I thank the staff at Worthing hospital for their fantastic work over the busy Christmas period. As usual, he puts his finger on a very important issue, which is that as we seek to raise the profile of mental health treatment for children and young people, we must not medicalise every single moment of stress. For example, worries before exams are not cause to talk to an NHS psychiatrist. A lot of work on the Green Paper will be looking at how we can promote self-help and at how we can help schools to support people through difficult patches, but we will also look at how we can make sure people get NHS care quickly when it is needed.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It is great to see the Secretary of State here today in the Chamber after enjoying his Christmas recess. While he was away, the London ambulance service computer system crashed and we found out that the Red Cross needed to be drafted into our hospitals. Will the Secretary of State tell us which hospitals he visited during the Christmas recess?

Mr Hunt: I was in touch with what was happening in the NHS every single day throughout the Christmas recess. As someone who has worked in a hospital, the hon. Lady might question whether it is particularly helpful for NHS hospitals to have visits by high-profile politicians right at their busiest periods. I have been very closely in touch. She talks about the problem at London ambulance service. That was a problem staff have been trained to deal with. The staff of her own hospital worked extremely well, but they do not welcome attempts—she is making one this afternoon—to politicise the problems the NHS faces.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): On the changes to the four-hour standard that the Secretary of State heralded, what can be done to incentivise and upskill GPs who may wish to take a closer interest in minor and moderate illnesses, including the use of nurse-led minor injury units?

Mr Hunt: They have a very important role. Some of the most successful and best-performing trusts, such as Luton and Dunstable, have a very good streaming process at the A&E front door, with good alternatives when it is not appropriate for people to go to an A&E department. We need to learn from that. Nurse-led units can be very important. GP-led units can make a big difference, too. It will not be the same everywhere, for reasons of space if nothing else, but there is a solution that everywhere can adopt.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): In the past few weeks, we have seen pressures in the NHS that, to a certain extent, the Secretary of State has acknowledged. Given that we are not yet in the midst of a very desperate cold spell, and given that we are not in the throes of a flu epidemic, how can he come here today and complacently suggest he has a grip on our NHS services? Why was he not on top of those trusts he knew were weak? He knew they would be under threat if there was any pressure. What is he going to do when we hit a cold snap and people are suffering from flu in large numbers?

Mr Hunt: I am afraid that I reject that suggestion. The right hon. Lady wants to know what we have been doing over the course of the year. As I said in the statement, we have 1,600 more doctors than we had just a year ago, over 3,000 more nurses, the biggest flu vaccination programme in our history and 12,000 additional GP sessions booked over the festive period. A huge amount of work has been done, with a particular focus on distressed areas. Many of those distressed areas coped extremely well—not all of them, which is why there is more work to do.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): When the Health Committee in the previous Parliament looked at children and adolescent mental health services, one of the main
concerns was the distance travelled by patients—sometimes halfway across the country—to get treatment. Will the Secretary of State expand on his plans to reduce attendance at A&E? Does he envisage a new form of gatekeeper and does he intend to try to keep drunks out of A&E?

Mr Hunt: I would probably use the word “streaming”, rather than gatekeeper, to ensure that we have good, alternative offers for people who do not need to be in A&E. Frankly, it is not safe for an A&E department to have people there for six, seven or eight hours with a minor injury and no urgent health need. It is distracting for staff and can make it more difficult for them to deal with people who have more immediate needs.

On distances travelled, as the Prime Minister said this morning it is completely unacceptable for people to have to go 400 miles for a mental health bed. What is the solution? We are commissioning more beds, but the actual solution is to intervene earlier so that people do not get to that stage in treatment where they need in-patient care. We know that if we intervene earlier we can in many cases head off that need and help people to get better more quickly.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): This afternoon, patients at Nottingham’s Queen’s Medical Centre emergency department are waiting on average for more than four hours. In the last month for which figures are available, 3,500 people had to wait for more than four hours in the emergency department. We cannot go on like this, so will the Secretary of State agree to fast-track the capital we need to increase capacity at Nottingham’s emergency department?

Mr Hunt: I will happily take a look at that. Obviously, when it comes to the allocation of capital, we prioritise any projects that will help us to improve the situation in A&E departments and reduce the stresses.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Secretary of State has acknowledged that there is a shortage of acute mental health beds. That arises from the decision by many health trusts to close beds in favour of putting resources into services in the community. One effect is that people approaching a mental health crisis find it harder to know where to turn for help. Will he explain more about the crisis provision in which we are investing the extra £15 million? Is there a common way of knowing how one can easily access those vital services?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to supply more details. The £15 million is for places of safety—it is very specifically focused on support for the police service so that we can ensure that we live up to our legal commitment from this year not to send young people into police cells when it comes to the allocation of capital, we prioritise any projects that will help us to improve the situation in A&E departments and reduce the stresses.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Does the Secretary of State accept that the deepening crisis in the NHS is not solely down to an ageing society, and that failure to provide sufficient funding is the key to the crisis, and therefore that it is possible to address it? What will he do about it?

Mr Hunt: If the hon. Lady is worried about funding, she might explain why funding for the NHS in England went up by double the rate of funding for the NHS in Scotland over the last Parliament—[Interruption.] I will get her the figures on Northern Ireland, but I say that by way of reference. I apologise for my error.

I agree with the hon. Lady. Lady that it is not just about the ageing society; it is about changing consumer expectations and the fact that people want access to healthcare 24/7 today in a way that was not the case 10 or 20 years ago. That in itself is the cause of a lot of the additional pressure.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome today’s announcement on mental health. It is absolutely clear that the Government are serious about improving mental health treatment and prevention. The challenge is to translate ambitions into action. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he will put in place mechanisms to ensure that the proposals and those in the five-year forward view for mental health become reality? Specifically, will he look at ensuring that no sustainability and transformation plan is signed off without clear plans and funding for improving mental healthcare?

Mr Hunt: I can assure my hon. Friend that that is happening. Indeed, one of the key metrics by which we will judge STPs is their progress on delivering our mental health targets. She is absolutely right to say that ambitions need to turn into action, but she will find that, because of the comments that she and many other hon. Members have made over the past few years, there is much more understanding in the NHS that mental healthcare is a big priority, and more understanding that we need to stop resources constantly being sucked into the acute sector, as has happened over many years.

Michael Dugher (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Secretary of State recently announced that the Government were pressing ahead with significant cuts to the community pharmacy budget in the Department of Health in the face of huge opposition from Members on both sides of the House, members of the public and healthcare professionals. Given the evidence that one in five people who would usually see a pharmacist for medical advice say that they will make a GP appointment if their local pharmacist is closed—in areas of higher deprivation such as mine, it is four in five—and with the risk that many of those people in desperation will turn up at the local hospital, are the Government in danger of making an appalling crisis in the NHS even worse?

Mr Hunt: As with all parts of the NHS, we have to ask the pharmacy sector to make efficiency savings. Some 40% of pharmacies are clustered in groups of three or more, and it does not make sense for the NHS to continue to subsidise pharmacies that are very close to other pharmacies. Our reforms are designed to ensure, however, that where there is only one local pharmacy that people can access, that pharmacy is protected.
Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend acknowledge the damaging effect that loneliness can have on mental health, and will he join me in welcoming the launch of the Jo Cox loneliness commission at the end of this month?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that and to acknowledge the importance of this issue. The latest figures I have seen are that 5 million older people say that their main form of company is the television, which is not acceptable, and we all have a responsibility to do better. It is not just a moral but a practical issue, as loneliness makes people more likely to need hospital treatment, which is of course expensive and challenging for the NHS.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Secretary of State has talked a great deal about preventing people from needing to go to A&E by intervening much earlier, yet surely he must recognise that the cuts to local authorities and social care make it much more likely that people will not be picked up earlier in the progress of an illness but will have to resort to the health service in a much more difficult situation. Can he not now have a discussion with his ministerial colleagues, particularly the Chancellor, and tell them that they have got this wrong and that we have to invest in preventive services? That means more funding for local authorities, rather than the 57% cut my authority has had, and investing now in proper social care, not the £5 billion of cuts in social care since 2010, otherwise the pressure on our NHS will just continue.

Mr Hunt: I actually agree with the hon. Lady. Her party’s manifesto reflected this as well—in 2010 we faced a very challenging economic situation, and both parties recognised the need for cuts in public spending. What changed in 2015, however, at least in the Conservative party’s manifesto, was the recognition that we needed to increase funding for the social care system, and with the changes announced by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in December, all local authorities can now increase funding for social care in real terms. I hope that we can start to turn things around.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): With the recent Education Committee report on children in care in mind, I welcome the Prime Minister’s refocus on mental health and the Secretary of State’s continued support for action. What practical steps does he have in mind, given our finding that local integration, effective relationships and the teaching of personal, social and health and economic education all help to produce good outcomes?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend makes a point about the importance of the social care system and its interconnectedness with the NHS. As she well knows—her party’s manifesto reflected this as well—in 2010 we faced a very challenging economic situation, and both parties recognised the need for cuts in public spending. What changed in 2015, however, at least in the Conservative party’s manifesto, was the recognition that we needed to increase funding for the social care system, and with the changes announced by the Secretary of State, all local authorities can now increase funding for social care in real terms. I hope that we can start to turn things around.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I declare an interest in that my husband is an A&E consultant. If the Secretary of State were to speak to him, he would be told that, as we have already heard, the extra pressures on A&E are the result of the almost disappearance of preventive care, social care and make out to be such. This is about thinking through a smart way to improve resilience training and self-help and to educate schools so that they can spot when something is just a temporary thing in the run-up to exams, or whatever, and when it could be something a lot more serious, such as obsessive compulsive disorder, an eating disorder or something else that needs more immediate help. We have today started a big education programme with schools, but we want to go further.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I welcome the extra investment, if that is what it turns out to be, in mental health, but I want to press the Secretary of State on the question asked from the Dispatch Box by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) about educational psychology and how it will work. I speak as a mother of a child with SEN issues who has relied on clinical and educational psychology in schools. The school that my children currently attend is increasing class sizes from 30 to 33 and reducing the teaching staff—specifically those who engage with SEN children—because of changes to education funding. How does the Secretary of State think that will affect the mental health of pupils in my children’s school?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue. Like her, I have had constituents who found it difficult to access educational psychologists and they have not been able to get approval for the plan that they need. We will consider these issues in the build-up to the Green Paper, and I encourage the hon. Lady to participate in that process.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Will the Health Secretary please get the message out there loud and clear to health bosses up and down the country that we need more capacity in our A&Es, so that when my CCG goes to NHS England with a request for £285 million for its appalling plan to downgrade my local A&E, bulldoze Huddersfield royal infirmary and replace it with a small planned care unit with fewer beds, it will realise that that money would be better spent on frontline A&E care in one of the country’s biggest towns.

Mr Hunt: I take seriously, of course, everything my hon. Friend says. I will say that the NHS does not always get these things right. I led a campaign against an A&E closure in my constituency when I was a Back Bencher—[Interruption]—and the Labour party was in power and about to take a wholly mistaken decision, which I was luckily able to persuade the Government not to take in the interests of my constituents. We will look carefully into these issues. On the broader point that my hon. Friend makes, we have to understand across the NHS that capacity matters, but in the long run, we will not solve the problem solely by increasing capacity in A&Es for ever. We need alternative forms of provision. Demand is growing, so we need to find different ways to offer treatment to people who do not need to be in an A&E. That is what we are exploring.
other services. The problem is not individuals arriving in A&E who should not be there; it is other services that are referring people to A&E when they should not. Will the Secretary of State take responsibility for his Government’s decisions over the past six years that have now turned out to have been a false economy, because cutting all these vital services back to the bone is what is putting A&E on the brink of breakdown?

Mr Hunt: I agree with the broader principle that preventive care is vital, but with respect, I disagree with the suggestion that services have been cut to the bone. We have 1,600 more GPs—an increase of 5%—and the NHS was protected in the last Parliament. We recognise that there are problems in the social care system, which we are now in the process of putting right. Both at the last election, when the hon. Lady put a lot of input into Labour’s policies, and the one before it, the party promising the most resources for the NHS was the Conservative party, not the Labour party.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Everyone knows that the Secretary of State has an impossible job, which he does with humanity and energy. One part of his impossible job relates to the two-tier system, whereby much depends on where people live. In rural north Lincolnshire, people can wait more than three weeks to see a doctor and can wait two hours for an ambulance to come—[Interruption.] Yes, people have waited two hours, lying in the street, in places such as Market Rasen, while they wait for an ambulance. That is not acceptable, and it can be even worse on occasions. This comes on top of long-term lack of investment, which means we lack a psychiatric unit at the Peter Hodgkinson centre in Lincoln. I wonder whether we now need to start an honest discussion with the people about how we are going to devote more resources to health in this country. It could be through social insurance models or even—God forbid, and I know people will not agree with this—charging people who do not turn up for appointments.

Mr Hunt: While I do not agree with moving to a social insurance model, I have some sympathy with what my hon. Friend has said about the broader issue of resourcing healthcare. If there are to be a million more over-65s in the next five years, we shall have to find a way to continue to invest more in our health and social care systems over the decades ahead. We are doing that this year in providing an extra £3.8 billion, and Governments will need to continue to do it in the coming decades.

My hon. Friend has rightly highlighted a specific problem. I do not have a solution to it now, but I want him to know that I understand that, in rural areas, people can wait too long for ambulances. Our system of targets gives ambulance services an incentive to prioritise the calls to which they can respond quickly in nearby towns, but I shall look into the issue.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The Secretary of State tells us that he has a plan and a strategy, so I assume that he is on top of all the facts, but will he assure us that he understands the scale of the problem by answering this question? As of the latest count this week, how many hospital beds were being blocked by people who could not be discharged because no facilities for their care were available in the community?

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): More than a third of A&E attendances at peak times are caused by drunkenness. Behaviour on such a scale is unacceptable as it is irresponsible. What more can be done to reduce that proportion hugely by this time next year?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend has raised an issue of public accountability. These are our national health services, and we need to treat them in a responsible way. It is selfish to behave irresponsibly and impose pressure on an A&E department, because someone else who needs help may not be able to get it.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): First, may I ask whether the Secretary of State is accusing the Red Cross of weaponising the national health service? Secondly, let me point out that when the NHS makes cuts, the services that suffer time and again are the so-called Cinderella services: mental health services. The only way to prevent that is to ring-fence the funds and force local commissioners to demonstrate to local populations that the extra money is genuinely being spent on improving mental health services. Finally, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), when local authority services are cut to the bone, they can only provide statutory services and all the preventive services go—never mind the cuts in social care. What is preventing the Secretary of State from commissioning an all-party group to seek a sustainable, long-term funding model for social care?

Mr Hunt: The Prime Minister has said that we need to find a long-term solution to the problem of funding social care, and that work is ongoing. We recognise the urgency of the situation.

As for the evidence of whether mental health services are reaching the frontline, we need to establish whether more money is being spent on mental health provision than in previous years, and, as I said earlier, about £1 billion more is being spent than two years ago.

Karen Lumley (Redditch) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has mentioned, the A&E departments at the Worcestershire royal hospital and the Alexandra hospital in Redditch have been under huge pressure over the past few weeks. Can he reassure patients at both our hospitals that everything possible is being done to alleviate the problem? While I am grateful for the measures that have been introduced, what our trust really needs is agreement on a £29 million bid to increase capacity, and I urge my right hon. Friend to consider that as a matter of urgency.

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for her interest—on behalf of her constituents—in what has been happening. Subject to staffing, a new ward will be opened at the trust next week, and a new chief executive will arrive in the spring. We recognise the need for capital spending to increase capacity at both the Alex and the royal, and we will consider that bid sympathetically.
Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Secretary of State could not resist making his customary political attack on the Welsh NHS. This weekend, I had cause to visit my local hospital A&E department with a family member, and we received a brilliant, speedy and expert service. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the staff at the Royal Glamorgan hospital? Will he also congratulate the Welsh Labour Government on not having to call the Red Cross to any hospital in Wales, and will he further congratulate them on their long-standing emphasis on mental health? Wales spends more on mental health provision per capita than England or, indeed, any part of the United Kingdom, notwithstanding the £2 billion that he has cut from the Welsh budget in the last six years.

Mr Hunt: In the hon. Gentleman’s long list of statistics, what he was not prepared to say is that people wait twice as long for a hip replacement in Wales, more than double the proportion of the population is on a waiting list for NHS care—that is one in seven people in Wales, compared with just one in 15 in England—and those in Wales are 40 times more likely than those in England to be waiting too long for a diagnostic test result.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Torbay, like many other places, has been under pressure owing to the demographics of an ageing population in the bay area, but does the Secretary of State agree that it is encouraging to hear of work being done in places such as the Chelston Hall practice, which I visited on Friday, to make sure doctors can be available on the day for those who need them and people are sent on to specialists who can help them better, such as a physiotherapist, rather than just taking up vital GP appointments?

Mr Hunt: Yes, indeed, and I congratulate all the NHS and social care staff in Torbay on doing a fantastic job. I also congratulate them on the pioneering work they have done on health and social care integration, which has made a huge difference to my hon. Friend’s constituents.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Over the new year, East Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Trust saw life-threatening calls up 42% on last year, and the chair of Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust described its emergency department as pushed to the limit, with, as the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said, almost double the normal number of hospital admissions, so clearly these were necessary attendances, but surely many of them could have been prevented. The Secretary of State has already acknowledged the connection between inadequate social care and this entirely foreseeable crisis, so I ask again: will he commit his Government to fund this properly?

Mr Hunt: I find these questions about funding curious coming from members of the Labour party, as, had we followed its plans, we would be spending £1.3 billion less on the NHS this year than what the NHS is actually getting, and I just say to them that the reason why we are able to spend that extra money on the NHS is that we know how to run the economy.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): All too often, mental health patients have wondered whether this issue has enough leadership, and I am incredibly pleased that the Prime Minister made one of her earlier speeches on this issue, but while no one in this House would oppose an extra £1.4 billion being invested over the course of this Parliament, may I echo the words of the chief executive of Mind that the proof will be in the impact this investment has on patients’ day-to-day experiences? So will the Secretary of State ask the relevant Minister to meet me to discuss plans to build a new psychiatric and dementia care unit at Bath, to service the whole of the south-west?

Mr Hunt: I am happy, on my hon. Friend’s behalf, to ask the Minister responsible to meet him to discuss that psychiatric unit. Of course the proof of the pudding is in the eating, but this is the first time that I can remember that a Prime Minister has made her first major speech on the NHS about mental health and indeed talked, on the steps of Downing Street as she arrived, about the importance of sorting out mental health. That is a sign of the commitment coming right from the top.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The fabulous team at Imperial, St Mary’s in west London are featuring in a television programme this week, and the chief of service for emergency care is reported as saying:

“We’ve just had our worst 10 days on record. There’s nowhere in the hospital to move anybody. What’s happened in the last two years is the whole system, countrywide, has ground to a halt.”

That is partly because there is more than the equivalent of a ward of patients at any time who cannot move out of the hospital because there is nowhere for them to go. Does the Secretary of State accept that his Government have gone too far in the destruction of local government finance, including for social care, and does he accept that next year, despite all the rhetoric, local government finance will go down, not up?

Mr Hunt: First, I would like to thank the staff at Imperial, who, alongside other NHS staff, have done a fantastic job over a very difficult period. I would say to the hon. Lady that 50% of councils have no delayed discharges of care. It is a problem in many hospitals, but there are many areas where managing to deal with it. I suggest that the local authorities that serve her constituency should look at the other parts of the country that are dealing with this problem.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I welcome the provision of mental health facilities and services for schools, but will my right hon. Friend ensure that the type of first aid that he is proposing will also be made available to MPs and their staff, given the number of people with mental health problems that we deal with during our surgeries?

Mr Hunt: That is an absolutely excellent suggestion, and I will be very happy to take it up.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The problems in A&E that we have been hearing about this afternoon are symptomatic of problems elsewhere in the system. At Aintree hospital, whose staff are doing a fantastic job in very difficult circumstances, there are 130 patients who are medically fit for discharge today but social services are unable to support them to go home or to go into care elsewhere. The Secretary of State needs to accept that the cut of £4.6 billion to social services was
a mistake. He also needs to accept that the better care fund is simply not delivering. It involves money being recycled from elsewhere in the system. Let us look at the figures for Sefton, which was promised £9 million but has received less than £1 million. If he is serious about sorting out the problems in social care in the long term, he needs to get the funding right. He needs to reinstate all the cuts that have been made.

**Mr Hunt:** I accept that more funding needs to go into social care, and that is why we are putting an extra £3.5 billion per annum into social care by the end of the Parliament. Despite the very real pressures in social care, however, there are many local authority areas and hospitals that have no delayed discharges at all. Half of all delayed discharges are in just 20 local authorities. As we wait for that funding to come on stream—it is not all coming on stream at the start of the Parliament—there is lots that can be done.

**Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for paying tribute to frontline staff. I declare an interest as someone who worked in the NHS over the Christmas period and who saw at first hand some of the pressures that staff are facing, but I know from my 20 years’ experience working as a nurse that these are winter pressures that are faced every year. On mental health, will my right hon. Friend pay tribute to the mental health care nurses in Sussex and to Sussex police? Through their joint working, they have reduced the number of patients being placed in prison cells as a place of safety by 50%. That is a huge achievement in the county that contains Birling Gap and Beachy Head.

**Mr Hunt:** I welcome my hon. Friend’s contribution as a practising nurse; it adds greatly to the House. I am more than happy to pay tribute to our brilliant mental health nurses. They have one of the most stressful jobs anyone can have, and I pay particular tribute to the ones in Sussex, which has those tragic suicide hotspots.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Given that the cold weather is coming, I want to return to the risk of a flu epidemic. A desperate doctor wrote to me last night to say:

“Sooner or later, there will be an epidemic and let me tell you: we cannot cope. Another shift, another full hospital. Another gridlocked A&E, more desperate but often implausibly understanding patients. Another 13 or 14 hour shift with one 10 or 15 minute break. Some patients and relatives get angry, some despair, most watch us and realise we can’t physically do anything more.”

Please help me, as her MP, to represent her, and please help us to have more staff.

**Mr Hunt:** That doctor speaks for many doctors who are working incredibly hard, particularly in our emergency departments. I would say to that doctor that we recognise the need for more doctors and we are recruiting more doctors, not just across the NHS but in emergency departments in particular. We also recognise that we need to find a different way to deal with some of the patients who come to the hospital front door, so that we can alleviate the pressure. That is what we are looking at.

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): I recently visited Bridewell organic gardens, an award-winning charity in my constituency that improves the mental wellbeing of those suffering from a range of mental health conditions. I welcome the Prime Minister’s announcement this morning raising awareness of the ongoing stigma regarding mental health, as well as the £1 billion investment and the commitment to improving services, but is the Secretary of State prepared to investigate schemes such as the one I mentioned to ensure that treatment of those suffering from mental health conditions is not simply limited to the provision of medication?

**Mr Hunt:** I am absolutely prepared to do that. We need to be open-minded about the fact that mental health, in some ways, is a relatively new field, and research on what works best is continuing to uncover many new things—much of that research is happening in this country. There has been a big move away from thinking that medication is always the best way forward. We have seen a huge expansion in talking therapies in the past few years in this country, and I am sure that trend will continue.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): Despite the best efforts of dedicated NHS staff, patients attending one of my local A&Es were told that they would routinely have to wait 11 hours just to be seen. People were routinely on hospital trolleys for up to 20 hours. Mental health patients were sent to Colchester because it had the nearest available in-patient beds for 17-year-olds. Somebody I know waited six hours for a 999 ambulance, despite calling 999 three times. We can do better than that. To that end, I implore the Secretary of State—in fact, I plead with him—to intervene and suspend the needless downgrades of Dewsbury and Huddersfield hospitals, which will cost lives.

**Mr Hunt:** None of those examples of poor care is remotely acceptable. On my watch and under this Government we will see no return to the bad old days when people were routinely waiting far too long.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and the Prime Minister’s focus on mental health, particularly the suicide prevention strategy and the £1 billion funding commitment to improving services. Mental health often not only affects the patient but affects their family and those closest and dearest to them—those who care for the patient. Does he agree that raising awareness and addressing the ongoing stigma of mental health is a vital part of our work on mental health?

**Mr Hunt:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention that. We can approach this area with some optimism about the potential for change. If she looks at our progress on dementia over the past four years, she will see that not a day goes past without something in the newspapers about dementia. The understanding of
dementia has changed dramatically. We can change attitudes, and we absolutely need to do so because the only way to get help to people in mental health crisis is if they talk about it openly. That is a vital thing to change.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I entirely agree with the comments about the pressures on GP services, preventive health and social care, but I particularly want to ask about mental health services for students. There were three suspected suicides in the first few weeks of term this year at Bristol University, and I know from speaking to Dr Dominique Thompson, who runs the student health services there, that the number of students presenting with mental health issues has grown exponentially over recent years. What can the Secretary of State say to reassure us that students leaving home for the first time to go to university will be in safe hands?

Mr Hunt: I had an interesting afternoon visiting the suicide prevention unit at Bristol Royal Infirmary, where I had a good discussion about its pioneering work. I learned a great deal from that visit. We have a particular concern about the very significant growth in mental ill health among women aged 18 to 24. Today, the Prime Minister announced that we have updated the suicide prevention strategy to make sure that all parts of the country can learn from best practice, including places like Bristol.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I welcome today’s announcement on mental health, where excellent work is being done, led by Paul Farmer of Mind. Often, the key challenge is to identify those who need help and support, so will the Secretary of State agree to meet the Department for Work and Pensions to look at ways in which we can help to signpost those identified through the personal independence payments process to the additional support and help available?

Mr Hunt: Let me reassure my hon. Friend that those meetings are already happening; we have a health and work Green Paper, and we are particularly trying to speed up access to mental health services for people on benefits whom we can help to be more independent if we address their mental health problem more quickly.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I wish to pick up on a point the Secretary of State made about the right sort of patient arriving at A&E. Pat, a frail, elderly constituent of mine who had pneumonia-like symptoms, did not want to go to A&E and put pressure on hard-working staff, so she rang NHS Direct, only to be told there were 100 people in front of her for a doctor’s visit. Of course she thought she was going to die if she was left in her house, so she went to A&E, where she waited 20 hours for a bed. As the Secretary of State knows, that is unacceptable, so does he agree that there is urgent and immediate demand for out-of-hours doctors? If so, what is he going to do about it?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is right to say that we need better alternatives to A&E for people such as her constituent. Sometimes those do not exist, but one thing we need to do is make sure that people who call 111 and need to speak to a clinician can do so quickly. One thing we have piloted successfully in other parts of the country is better GP supervision of people in care homes, who are sometimes the most vulnerable patients. We are looking at all these things, but on the broad direction of travel she is right to say that we need to find a better way forward for people such as her constituent.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): In sparsely populated rural Lincolnshire, vital reforms of health and social care risk being undermined by the performance of East Midlands ambulance service. Our police and crime commissioner says that his officers are routinely acting, in effect, as ambulance drivers. I know the Secretary of State understands the problems we face in rural Lincolnshire, but does he agree that, as currently constituted, East Midlands ambulance service is not serving the rural parts of its area as well as its staff want to and as well as my constituents need it to?

Mr Hunt: As we discussed earlier when my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) spoke, there are places where the service that the ambulance service provides to rural areas is not as good as it should be, sometimes because of the perverse incentives relating to how the targets work. I have been nervous about changing the targets, because that can sometimes be taken as a signal to relax and I am absolutely determined that we should meet the current targets, but I did make a commitment to him that I would look into this issue and I will do so.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Last year, just 67% of category red 1 ambulance calls in Sheffield were answered within eight minutes. Last week, I met a constituent whose husband died while he waited for an ambulance for two hours and 40 minutes. Can the Secretary of State continue to stand at that Dispatch Box and say that there is no link between the underfunding of our NHS and these irresponsible and completely unacceptable response times?

Mr Hunt: First, of course what happened in that situation is totally unacceptable, but the hon. Lady makes a mistake to continually bring this back to funding, as it is also about demand pressures and models of care. Let me reassure her about the extra funding that has gone into ambulance services. We have about 200 more ambulances and about 2,000 more paramedics, and every day the ambulance service is doing about 3,400 more blue-light calls than it was six years ago. Significant investment has been made, but clearly more needs to happen.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): The number of mental health patients in police cells is, rightly, down by 80%. People have bravely come to my surgery to talk about when they and their families have been struggling with mental health provision for those between the ages of 18 and 24. I pay tribute to Solent Mind and Southern Health, which are doing their level best to deal with this issue. One issue directly affecting that age group is the tier system, and people not being “sick enough” and not being sure where they should be going. Will the Secretary of State please confirm that he will focus on recruiting specialists in this area, because it is not about funding in my local clinical commissioning group—it is about finding the people to help those in need?
Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right on both counts. We need to look carefully at where the tier system is not working, and that should be part of our work on the Green Paper that the Prime Minister announced this morning. It is unacceptable for people to be told that they are not sick enough to get the care they urgently need. All the things we have announced and intend to announce to improve mental health will fail if we do not get the recruitment and training of new staff right. Along with the commitment we are making today to invest more in mental health must come some important strategic workforce planning, which I hope will benefit my hon. Friend’s constituents.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State referred to temporary assistance being given to distressed trusts, but is there not a more fundamental ticking time bomb in the form of the sustainability and transformation plans? I draw his attention to the debate I led on 16 December on the north-east London plan, which envisages a deficit of £578 million by 2021 and says that on a “business as usual” case model, with normal-type reductions and savings, there will still be a £240 million gap. That will mean poorer services. There is no capital provision for the closure of the King George hospital A&E and its re-provisioning at Queen’s hospital. Will he look into this matter urgently? There is going to be a massive crisis in my area unless urgent steps are taken to provide more resources.

Mr Hunt: I am happy to look into that issue. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the staff of both Queen’s and King George hospital, who have not only done very well over the winter but have made great progress in turning around the trust, which, as the hon. Gentleman knows, is in special measures. We are hopeful that it might be able to come out of special measures at some stage this year under its new leadership, but that is obviously a decision for the CQC.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Kettering general hospital, which serves my constituency, has a significant problem with delayed discharges. Whatever the issues relating to money, perhaps the problem with social care is the model. Would it not be a good idea if the Opposition were to give a genuine commitment to try to work together to find a social care system for the future?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right to say that we need to have these discussions in a less politically charged way, because we need to find a solution that will survive changes of Government and be fit for the long term. We miss a trick when we say that the problem is primarily about funding. We have a huge variation in provision, and there are many local authorities where there are no delayed discharges of care, as we discussed earlier. What does not happen enough in the NHS and the social care system is people learning from best practice in other parts of the country. That is what we want to change.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has spoken a lot today about trying to avoid unnecessary admissions to A&E. Will he tell me why admissions to A&E on Teesside as a result of chronic malnutrition have trebled under the Conservative Government? Does he think that is any reflection on their broader approach to public policy and tackling poverty in this country?

Mr Hunt: The way to deal with those kinds of terrible problems is to have a strong economy that allows us to support people through difficult periods in their life. We have one of the strongest economies—in fact, I think we will be the strongest economy in the G7 this year. That allows us to do things such as invest in our health and social care system. It is the Conservative party that can deliver that.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I have spoken before about the staggering rise in the number of patients presenting at A&E at Addenbrooke’s in Cambridge, and the hospital confirmed to me this morning that it continues to see more than 300 people each day, with high levels of delayed transfers of care. The impact was brought home to me by a constituent, Ann, who told me that on Thursday last week the facilities were so overcrowded that an adjacent seminar room was pressed into use. Bloods were being taken in the room, and she was treated there for the closure of the King George hospital A&E and its re-provisioning at Queen’s hospital. Will he look into that matter urgently? There is going to be a massive crisis in my area unless urgent steps are taken to provide more resources.

Mr Hunt: I went to Addenbrooke’s in the autumn and saw at first hand how hard the staff there are working. That is another trust that is in special measures, but it has made huge progress in trying to turn things around. I met several staff in the emergency department as well, and I pay tribute to them for their very hard work. I have never said that it is not about funding; what I say is that it is not just about funding: there is huge variation. In parts of the country, emergency departments avoid precisely the kind of overcrowding that the hon. Gentleman described at Addenbrooke’s. Hospitals that do that very successfully include Luton and Dunstable. We need all hospitals to adopt what the best hospitals do.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I welcome the publication of the new suicide prevention strategy, and I welcome the fact that it includes self-harm. I am also grateful for the mention of the work of the all-party group on suicide and self-harm prevention, which I chair. Will the Secretary of State meet Dr Robert Colgate? He has set out a triaging system for mental health, which means that people do not have to wait six to nine months to see a consultant. With the support of frontline staff, they can get an immediate triage assessment and assistance for their condition. Will the Secretary of State meet urgently Dr Colgate, whose work is being peer reviewed by the University of Manchester, to look at how his system, which is being rolled out throughout England, can help us to tackle the problems we have?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her work on the all-party group. I am more than happy to meet Dr Colgate. The purpose of the refreshed suicide prevention strategy is to try to ensure that we adopt best practice throughout the country. Some areas of the country are doing a very...
good job in suicide prevention, particularly in co-opting the public so that they understand that they can make a difference, too, but I am happy to explore with the hon. Lady what more can be done.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The Secretary of State rightly pays tribute to NHS staff, but the reality is that many of our NHS workers are now at breaking point. They continue to perform their work with care and compassion in spite of, rather than because of, any action taken by the Health Secretary. It is now time for him to act. What commitment will he give to investing properly in NHS staff, and to reversing the process of the deskilling, demoralisation and downgrading of NHS staff that he and his Government have presided over since 2010?

Mr Hunt: With respect to the hon. Lady, who I know cares passionately about the NHS and often asks me questions about it, we now have 11,400 more doctors and 11,200 more nurses in the NHS than in 2010. We protected the NHS budget in 2010, when her party wanted to cut it, and we promised £5.5 billion more for the NHS than her party was prepared to promise at the most recent election. Her characterisation of this Government as not being prepared to back NHS staff is utterly absurd.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister’s focus on mental health today is welcome, but does the Secretary of State accept that we will achieve parity of esteem only if we are prepared to accept how far we currently are from it? It is not a recent problem: the lack of recognition for mental health dates back to the inception of the national health service and is driven by our culture and choices as a country, rather than by any particular Government. Nevertheless, does the Minister accept that even the measures set out today, each of which is welcome in and of itself, will only really provide a sticking plaster for the problem? As it stands, on current progress, we are looking at having to wait decades before we achieve parity of esteem for mental health conditions.

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his interest in that issue. Sometimes, this is a challenging area. We legislated for parity of esteem, with cross-party support, in 2012. The danger is that such a concept can be nebulous, which is why we asked Paul Farmer, the chief executive of Mind, to look independently at what would be reasonable, fair and sensible progress towards parity of esteem by 2020. He said that he thought it would be a 10-year process, but that this was the right ambition for 2020. It was his report that the Prime Minister accepted this morning. We are making progress against benchmarks that independent people have looked at. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we will not get there by 2020, but we must make sure that we deliver on that commitment while he and I are both MPs.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Very seriously mentally ill people rely on support from a whole range of services, including—obviously—mental health services, but also housing, social services, sometimes the criminal justice system and, crucially, family support services. What is being done to ensure a whole-Government strategy to raise the standard of care, particularly for very severely ill people who need protection from harm both to themselves and, sadly, sometimes to others in society?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. One example where that is particularly true is in addiction services. Highly vulnerable people whom we are trying to help kick a drugs habit may also have a housing problem, a debt problem or a work problem. Unless we solve those problems holistically, we are unlikely to be able to address the health problem that sits at the heart of those challenges. In essence, that is what the STP process is trying to address—I am talking about providing more joined-up integrated services. I am happy to have further discussions with her as to how we can make more progress in that area.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): In his statement, the Secretary of State promised a Green Paper on children and young people’s mental health before the end of the year. That could be 11 and a half months away. One in four people have a mental health disorder, and the Government’s own research says that young people are disproportionately affected. We have all heard stories. I certainly have in my constituency—of young people waiting more than a year for support, including those who have been victims of domestic violence. Schools and parents are picking up the pieces. Young people deserve better. Will he clarify the reasons for what appears to be quite a long delay and commit to bringing forward the Green Paper so that action can be taken more quickly and that this pressing issue is not kicked into the long grass?

Mr Hunt: May I reassure the hon. Lady that we will not be kicking the issue into the long grass? The Prime Minister has made a statement that we will have a Green Paper. There is a very specific reason why we need a bit of time: we want to ensure that the changes that we make—[Interruption.] We are getting a bit of chuntering from the Labour Front-Bench team. They might want to listen to the answer. The reason why we need to take some time is that a number of pilots concerning the improvement of mental health provision are taking place in schools at the moment, and we want to see them go through and evaluate them to inform what we do in the Green Paper. That will take a bit of time, but, at the end of it, we will get a better evidence base for the right way forward.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Young people in Sheffield have for some time now been telling me that they are waiting 25 weeks for an appointment with CAMHS after referral. Headteachers are telling me that they are digging into their budgets to buy in support for pupils in crisis, because they cannot access NHS services. Is it not deeply cynical for the Prime Minister to be raising hopes that we will be tackling the mental health crisis of our young people when the measures and the money that have been announced fall so desperately short of what we need?

Mr Hunt: It would be cynical if we raised hopes and had no intention of doing anything about the matter. What the Prime Minister said this morning in her speech was that this was the start of a process. She pointed to those problems and said that we will have a
Green Paper to look at how we deal with them in detail, which does take some time. I hope that we will get to a position when we can deal with those problems. The hon. Gentleman is lucky to have Professor Tim Kendall working in Sheffield, as he is the NHS lead mental health psychiatrist and a specialist in homelessness, and he is helping us to shape the strategy.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Secretary of State and to colleagues across the House.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you been informed whether the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has any intention of making a statement to the House on the resignation of the Deputy First Minister and the implications for the Assembly?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that I have not received any indication of an impending statement by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the matter to which he refers. I appreciate that it will of course be of great interest to many Members of the House. The fairest thing I can say is that we must await the development of events. I am conscious that there is a Westminster Hall debate tomorrow afternoon. The possibility of an oral statement by the Government must clearly exist.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Over the past number of weeks in Northern Ireland, we have witnessed continuing political instability, which has been characterised by a scandal of immense proportions in relation to the renewable heat incentive and the continuing failure of the First Minister to step aside while an investigation, which my party had called for, takes place. As a consequence, we see the Deputy First Minister resigning today, which means that the house of cards will fall. As a consequence of that, what other avenues are available to hon. Members to discuss this particular political instability and difficulty, which will probably result in further Assembly elections or new negotiations?

Mr Speaker: This is an extremely sensitive situation, and I do not want to say anything that adds to that sensitivity. Suffice it to say that the hon. Lady inquired as to what other avenues are open to ensure discussion of this matter. In using the word “other”, I assume that she is referring to other avenues beyond the possibility of a Government statement, which, of course, it would be for the Government to decide whether to make. She is well familiar with the mechanisms available for scrutiny of the Executive in this place. The fairest thing I can say is that I would be extremely surprised if this matter were not fully aired in the next few days in this Chamber. As Speaker, I would want to facilitate the House if that is what is desired. My senses are that it will be desired and that it will happen.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Many will be alarmed by the recent reports of attempts by a foreign Government to “take down” Members of this House, including a senior Minister. Given the very serious implications of this matter, what measures will you take to investigate it, not least because one party to the discussions, according to the press coverage, was, or is, at least partially a paid employee of this House?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for notice of it. At this stage, in direct response to his inquiry, I am not aware of anything that has happened that is a matter for the Chair.
If it transpires that something has happened that is a matter for the Chair, I will of course consider what action to take. The matter of concern is serious—I do not dispute that for one moment—but it is important to be accurate in the use of terms and language. To the best of my knowledge and belief—I do not doubt the good intentions of the right hon. Gentleman—the individual to whom he has indirectly referred has not been an employee of this House. The individual concerned was an employee of a number of institutions and people. My understanding is that she has resigned from one full-time post and from another part-time post. The part-time post, which had caused her to work administratively with a Member of the House, has ended and the pass that was available to her is being returned. I think that is a pretty full answer to the right hon. Gentleman, which it is intended to be, and I hope that it is helpful, but I do not think that it would be helpful further to dwell on the matter now. I thank him for raising the matter, which is obviously of concern to him.

I do not want to invite trouble, but the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who is a very senior Member of the House—I know that he would not take liberties—is looking at me in a state of great perturbation. If he really wants to raise a point of order, I am not going to stop him.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con) indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: He does not. What a remarkable display of self-restraint by the hon. Gentleman. It might catch on—you never know. I think that colleagues would probably say to me, “Good luck with that one.”
(a) ensure that persons receiving education or training under subsection (1) receive information, advice and guidance relating to their future careers, and that such information, advice and guidance is delivered in a way which meets each person’s needs and is impartial;
(b) ensure that such information, advice and guidance may be taken into account by relevant authorities and partners to meet the needs of local or combined authority areas;
(c) ensure parity of esteem between technical, further and higher education; and
(d) monitor the outcomes of such information, advice and guidance for recipients.

(4) The provisions specified in subsection (3) shall have specific regard to particular needs of different groups of persons receiving education or training under subsection (1), including—
(a) persons with special educational needs;
(b) care leavers;
(c) persons of different ethnicities;
(d) carers, carers of children, or young carers, as defined by the Care Act 2014; and
(e) persons who have other particular needs that may be determined by the Secretary of State.

(5) The strategy shall include guidance for the purposes of improving careers education, to which the following bodies shall have regard—
(a) the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills;
(b) the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education; and
(c) the Office for Students.

(6) The Secretary of State shall by regulations designate relevant authorities and partners for the purposes of subsection (3)(b).

(7) The Secretary of State may by regulations designate—
(a) further groups of persons under subsection (4)(e); and
(b) further national authorities or bodies under subsection (5).

(8) Regulations made under this section—
(a) shall be made by statutory instrument; and
(b) may not be made unless a draft has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.

(9) For the purposes of this section, “careers education” means education about different careers and occupations and potential courses or qualifications to attain those careers and occupations.

This new clause would establish a statutory requirement for the Government to produce a strategy on careers education, which shall be taken to be the “Careers Strategy”.

Amendment 4, in schedule 1, page 21, line 13, at end insert—
'(4) The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education in performing its functions must have regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity in connection with access to, and participation in, education or training provided in a form specified in subsection (6).'

This amendment would ensure that the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education must have due regard for widening access and participation.

Amendment 5, page 21, line 13, at end insert—
'(4) The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education in performing its functions must co-operate with the Apprenticeship Delivery Board on progression into, and delivery of, apprenticeships.'

This amendment would ensure that the Institute has a duty to co-operate with the Apprenticeship Delivery Board.

Amendment 6, page 21, line 13, at end insert—
‘2A After section ZA2 (general duties) insert—
“ZA2A Expenditure by the Institute
In the discharge of its duties and functions under this Chapter, the Institute shall in any one year expend a sum no less than the sum projected to be raised under the Apprenticeship Levy in that year.”

Amendment 7, page 22, line 2, after “to” insert “state-funded”.

Amendment 8, page 22, line 23, at end insert—
‘(1A) In making determinations under subsection (1)(a) on occupations relating to apprenticeships, the Institute shall attach particular importance to the needs of apprentices aged between 16 and 24.’

This amendment would ensure the mapping of occupation groups has particular regard for people aged 16-24 taking apprenticeships.

Amendment 9, page 23, line 2, at end insert—
‘(2A) Outcomes under subsection (2)(b) shall include recognised technical qualifications.’

This amendment would ensure that all apprenticeship standards include a recognised technical qualification.

Amendment 10, page 28, line 6, leave out “course document” and insert “standard or technical assessment design specification”.

Amendment 11, page 28, line 9, leave out “another person” and insert “other persons”.

Amendment 12, page 28, line 10, leave out “another person” and insert “other persons”.

Amendment 13, page 28, line 12, leave out section A21A(4).

Amendment 14, page 28, line 17, after “education” insert “route”.

Amendment 15, page 28, line 28, after “education” insert “route”.

Amendment 16, page 28, line 32, after “education” insert “route”.

Amendment 17, page 28, line 30, leave out section A3A(2)(c).

Amendment 18, page 28, line 39, after “Ofsted” insert “, the QAA”.

Amendment 19, page 29, line 1, after “Ofsted” insert “, the QAA”.

Amendment 20, page 29, line 3, after “England,” insert “including those offered by Higher Education Institutions”.

Amendment 21, page 29, line 13, at end insert—
‘“QAA” means the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.’

Amendments 18, 19, 20 and 21 would ensure that the QAA would be included in the list of organisations required to share information and that degree apprenticeships were fully covered by this requirement.

Gordon Marsden: Mr Speaker, may I, on behalf of everybody in the Chamber, wish you, the Deputy Speakers—one of them is taking your place as I speak—and all your officials a very happy new year, and the same to all Members of the House?

The issue we are pursuing this evening is whether this will be a happier new year for apprentices and the new Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. The Government will know that the Opposition have been broadly supportive of the process that they are bringing forward, although it was somewhat forced
upon them when their original mechanism, which was
to get many of these things through in the academies
Bill, was shipwrecked—the academies Bill mark 2 proved
to be no more popular with some of their Back Benchers
than the academies Bill mark 1. We therefore got a
fairly rapid notice of the Technical and Further Education
Bill before Christmas.

Having said that, we had a good Committee stage
and I want to pay tribute to the Minister for his conviviality
and the constructive way in which he responded to us.
Of course, as the old saying goes, fine words butter no
parsnips, but I hope that by the end of this evening we
will have at least a few parsnips buttered.

**Rob Marris** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): A
whole meal.

**Gordon Marsden**: Possibly a full meal, for those of a
vegetarian instinct.

**Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Lab): My hon. Friend
and I, and indeed other Members, tabled a number of
amendments in Committee that the Government do not
appear to have taken on board. They were not pressed
at the time, but we had hoped that the Government
would bring some of them forward as their own
amendments. Is he somewhat disappointed by that?

**Gordon Marsden**: I am always slightly disappointed
when intimations of progress in Committee are not met
with specifics on Report. Of course, the Government
have the opportunity this evening, in commenting on
our amendments, to do something about it, and indeed
to accept some of them in principle. If they think that
the amendments are defective but the basic principle is
fine, they should take them on board.

6.15 pm

Let me turn to the raft of amendments that we have
tabled. We moved new clause 1 in Committee and I
think that it remains valid. It would require the Secretary
of State to present to Parliament an annual report on
consider how best to engage with apprentices on an ongoing basis
before the institute goes live in April 2017. The institute will
to technical education and apprenticeship expansion,
which issues to focus on
board. The panel would be made up of apprentices from different
occupations and experiences. The panel would decide for itself
what the Minister did say in Committee—I thanked
him for this—was this:

What the Minister did say in Committee—I thanked
him for this—was this:

“I think we can square the circle by agreeing that the institute
should draw on the experiences of apprentices, so I am pleased to
announce that we expect the institute to invite apprentices to
establish an apprentice panel, which would report directly to the
board. The panel would be made up of apprentices from different
occupations and experiences. The panel would decide for itself
which issues to focus on... The Institute for Apprenticeships and
Technical Education will ensure that the first panel is in place
before the institute goes live in April 2017. The institute will
consider how best to engage with apprentices on an ongoing basis
and how best to represent technical education students ahead of
it taking on that responsibility in April 2018.”—[Official
Report, Technical and Further Education Public Bill Committee,
29 November 2016: c. 145.]

Anyone reading the *Hansard* of that sitting would
have come to the conclusion, as I did, that it was a
welcome set of concessions from the Minister, and gave
strong assurances that a panel would be set up before April.
However, we have been through the finer detail of the belated consultation document and have found a paragraph that says that an apprenticeship panel reporting directly to the institute’s board would “perhaps” be set up to “to ensure that Apprentices have an opportunity to have their say about...education and training...and the chance to improve the experience of those who come after them.”

Now, “perhaps”—Madam Deputy Speaker, you are a student of the English language, as I am sure most of us know—is is lot weaker than the assurance that was given by the Minister in Committee. Will he confirm that the panel will still be set up before April?

The Minister also said in Committee that the institute will look at “how best to represent technical education students ahead of it taking on that responsibility in April 2018.”—[Official Report, Technical and Further Education Public Bill Committee, 29 November 2016; c. 143.]

Surely the logical step is to establish a similar panel for technical education students who are not undertaking apprenticeships. Hopefully, that similar panel will not be prefaced by phrases from the Minister’s civil servants that include the word “perhaps.” It is important that our experience and feedback help to guide the new institute, particularly as the timeframe and the capacities of the institute’s resources are so limited.

I will come back to what we have said previously in Committee, and will make the comparison between what is going on in this Bill and in the Higher Education and Research Bill. If whatever structure the Department for Education eventually produces for getting the views of apprentices and technical education students seems in any way inferior to, or not done in the same way as, the concessions made by the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation on the Higher Education and Research Bill, people—students and the FE sector in general—will think yet again that they are being treated as second-class citizens. I appeal to the Minister to reassure us by repeating his assurance that the panel will still be set up before April and by taking on board our new clause. If he is not able to accept it tonight, will he ensure that it is added to the Bill in another place?

New clause 4 would place on the Government a statutory requirement to produce a strategy on careers education. No one could fault the Minister on his enthusiasm verbally to get to grips with the subject—I am certainly not going to. It was one of the first things he said when he was appointed. In his regular columns in FE Week, he has continued to allude to the fact that we need, rapidly, to have a strong strategy. That is because the rhetoric on careers advice still does not match the woeful reality facing young people. I have seen, as I hope the Minister has, the disturbing report that has just been released by the Prince’s Trust, showing that young people’s self-confidence about their future is at its lowest ebb in eight years. A whole range of issues including advice, the state of jobs and thoughts of careers are cited with respect to that, but I will try not to stray from the new clause. We took the Minister at his word when he said in his new year article for FE Week that “2017 is all about making sure that the careers advice and guidance on offer encourages people to pursue professional and technical education and apprenticeships as much as it does university.”

New clause 4 would give a structure and framework to what he says.

During the passage of the Higher Education and Research Bill, Government Members, including the Universities Minister, said: “We can assure you that we will take that on board,” and this, that and the other. However, we are legislating not just for one Minister or one Parliament. With something such as further education, as with the Higher Education Bill, we are legislating, possibly, for something that has to stand for 15 or 20 years. It is no disrespect to the Minister to say that we appreciate his commitment but that we would like the duty to publish the strategy to be in the Bill. As he knows, a whole host of providers, employers and employers organisations have queued up to stress to his Department and to the previous Department—the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills—their exasperation with the way in which the Government have dealt with careers services in recent years. That is why, when I spoke to the Minister during Question Time in November, I said that the Government need to promote strong careers guidance and I referred to the cross-party verdict from two Select Committee Chairs. I think the Minister felt slightly aggrieved by that, but the truth is that if we are to make a success of the institute, these sorts of things have to be in the Bill. There has to be a mechanism for this House to hold to account Ministers of whatever party and whatever Government over the period of time for which the Bill is supposed to work.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I know the hon. Gentleman feels passionately about the subject, but does he not also agree with the fact that the Government have an overarching approach to careers advice, notwithstanding the Careers & Enterprise Company? It could be difficult to put arrangements that only apply to technical education into this Bill when there is a much broader issue at stake that the Government are tackling at a strategic level.

Gordon Marsden: I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying. It is true, of course—but this is outwith the discussion that we are able to have this evening—that careers advice and education in this Bill does not start at 16 or at the remit of the DFE. It starts much earlier. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that that is an argument for doing nothing within the limited scope of the Bill, I do not agree. We need to do something. I would like to see the overarching structures that he mentioned but, unfortunately, at the moment I would be quite happy to see a limited overarching structure for the area that we are discussing. The challenge for the Minister is to talk about the £90 million that the Government have allocated to the Careers & Enterprise Company over the course of this Parliament, how it will be spent, how it is being distributed and whether it is adequate.

There are some damning statistics in the report produced by the Institute for Apprenticeships under the aegis of Semta. As the Minister knows, the proportion of respondents saying that their careers advice and guidance was poor or very poor has remained high across all sectors in all surveys from 2014 to 2016. The report says: “Worryingly, this year 94 survey respondents, 6% of the total, said they had not received any careers IAG at all.”

When we discussed the matter in Committee, those were the sorts of statistics that were available to us. I said—perfectly fairly, I thought—that, although the Careers & Enterprise Company was beginning to make progress, I did not believe that it was yet able to do the
necessary coverage because it is heavily reliant on volunteers. Early in December, we learnt that the company does not cater to every college in the country, including the whole of London. There are not just a few cold spots, but whole cold areas. There is a postcode lottery for FE coverage, with 15 local enterprise partnerships not covered and London completely absent.

The chief executive of the CEC, Claudia Harris, confirmed that the company did not work with any of the capital’s 44 FE and sixth-form colleges. During an interview with FE Week, she blamed the lack of coverage on “ramp-up”—I think that is what lesser mortals would call the rolling out of pilots, but I await a definition from the Minister. Now, I am not laying the blame at the door of the Careers & Enterprise Company; the Government are expecting it to do too much with too little, and they should probably also think again about having a company that is so heavily reliant on volunteers to carry out these tasks.

6.30 pm

As I said, Claudia Harris said the offer would be expanded to all schools and colleges over the coming year. That is fine, but what are the budget indications? Is the Minister already working on the Chancellor on a substantial hike in funding for this area in the Budget? He will certainly need one if he is going to address the issues we are talking about in the new clause.

On top of that, a report in the middle of December from the Edge Foundation showed that the poor quality of careers advice was limiting young people’s choices. Research carried out by the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick, and commissioned by the Edge Foundation and City and Guilds, found that only 1% of students viewed careers advice as the most important influence on their decision to stay on in education. Research at the University of Warwick, and commissioned by the Edge Foundation and City and Guilds, found that only 1% of students viewed careers advice as the most important influence on their decision to stay on in further education and that over half said they wanted more information from employers.

As I said, the Minister’s new year article for FE Week put priority on this issue, so I am taking him at his word. If his aims are indeed those he has set out, this new clause sets out fairly comprehensively how the process would operate—if there are technical or practical deficiencies with it or its draftsmanship, we would welcome any suggestions—and it is exactly what he needs to make his rhetoric a reality. There is an old saying that if wishes were horses, beggars would ride, so perhaps the Minister should get on his white charger and accept what we say; otherwise, he will remain a beggar come what we say; otherwise, he will remain a beggar come

I want to couple that with another issue. We have talked a lot in this Chamber over the past year about the timescale for delivering the 3 million target. Amendment 5 says the institute “must co-operate with the Apprenticeship Delivery Board on progression into, and delivery of, apprenticeships.”

Under its terms of reference, the delivery board was originally to be chaired by the chair of the Apprenticeship Ambassador Network and the Prime Minister’s adviser on apprenticeships, and to provide support across all areas to ensure that the Government’s ambition of achieving 3 million programmes by 2020 was met. The terms of reference talked about the ADB’s purpose being to “implement an employer engagement strategy...increase the number of apprenticeships”
and “secure new employer engagement”.

It sounded absolutely great, but when we actually delve a little further into the delivery of the board, it is not quite as it seems.

First, the terms of reference talk about it being co-chaired by the Prime Minister’s adviser on apprenticeships, but the Government’s tsar—the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi)—was stood down last autumn, and that left only David Meller, the private sector co-chair of the board, as its sole chair. People are bound to ask, where is the Government’s adviser on apprenticeships now?

How about the rest of the board? When the issue was raised in Committee, the Minister sang the praises of the Apprenticeship Delivery Board, but its role so far has been somewhat underwhelming. It may be a fine body, but its members were drawn from a relatively narrow section of business, and, incidentally, they had only one woman among their number. There was no role for other bodies, such as FE providers, universities, trade unions or local authorities. To be fair, there has been some progress on the number of women on the ADB, and it now has three, but it is important that the lessons are taken on board with the institute.

When the board was announced, it was advertised as being a key part of the process: it was not simply there to be a bully pulpit but was to have a very direct and active role. Naturally, I questioned the Minister on that in Committee, where he responded:

“I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Apprenticeship Delivery Board is in full flow. I meet it and its chairman regularly. It goes up and down the country and works with businesses to encourage them to employ apprentices. Much of our success has been because of that board’s incredible work.”—[Official Report, Technical and Further Education Bill Public Bill Committee, 24 November 2016; c. 83.]

Yet having examined the minutes of the board, I do not get quite the same sense of achievement, because what they show, over the summer period, is a couple of employees from large employers telling each other about random conversations or meetings they have, or plan to have, with the occasional presentation from the Skills Funding Agency about its marketing plans. Very little co-ordinated action seems to have been taken over the summer months, and it is quite clear to me that the delivery board is not currently fulfilling that role. That is why we have tabled this amendment.

The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education does not have the resources or capacity to be taking on these responsibilities; its focus is supposed to be on developing standards. We know from the shadow chief executive that staffing levels and finance will be limited, with 60 staff, possibly rising to 100 when the technical education elements kick in, and there is a very short space of time between now and its April start. I should mention the princely budget of £8 million a year on which the institute is supposed to operate initially. There has to be more focused and targeted marketing. The delivery board is not just a trade fair; as the minutes suggest; it is meant to help to deliver and increase the number of apprenticeships, and it must co-operate with the institute to succeed. That is vital now that the Government have scrapped any involvement they had and, presumably, forgotten about apprenticeship tsars.

We have also tabled an amendment to try to get some clarity and to put some focus on to the Government with regard to delivering money that will be additional to, or a substitute for, existing Government funding. We were told that the Government were already spending £1.5 billion on apprenticeships in 2016, and we are now told that the levy was expected to raise £2.9 billion by 2020, of which, at the latest count, £2.4 billion will be spent in England. So where does the additional money go? Last year, I submitted a written question on this to the then Skills Minister and got a sort-of response saying:

“By 2019-20 we expect...to spend £2.5 billion on apprenticeships in England.”

My maths told me at that time that if £2.5 billion was raised from the sector and the Government were currently putting in £1.5 billion, that means an extra £1 billion, as mentioned in the Minister’s reply, I therefore come back to the point that we raised early last year: what will happen to the remaining £1.5 billion raised? Will there be 40% for apprenticeships with 60% going straight back to the Treasury? The challenge remains for the Government to convince employers and stakeholders that this remains a genuinely long-term funding commitment for apprenticeships and not just something that becomes regarded as a Treasury payroll tax.

Rob Morris: I apologise somewhat for interrupting my hon. Friend’s magnificent speech. Part of the problem with the apprenticeship levy is that the Government are all over the place on it. I talked to a major supermarket chain that has employees in Scotland and whose payroll is of sufficient magnitude that it will have to pay the apprenticeship levy, but because of devolution there is no guarantee that, in Scotland, its apprenticeship levy funding will in fact be used for apprenticeships. That may be the case in Wales and Northern Ireland as well—I know not. This may go some way towards explaining the gap that my hon. Friend has put his finger on very acutely about where the money is going. The reason is that it is matter for the Treasury, which has not yet got to grips with devolution.

Gordon Marsden: My hon. Friend, as usual, makes a very interesting and succinct point. If I were not constrained by talking about this amendment, we could have some very interesting conversations about how the devolution situation is panning out, but I need to stick to my last.

The other point that is germane to this amendment is the coming Budget. We now know that the Budget will be in the first week of March, so issues about what the rate and the threshold of the apprenticeship levy might be after its first year obviously come to mind. The former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, after much prompting and questioning during the previous Administration of David Cameron, said that “the government will keep the apprenticeship levy under review.”

So, as we all know, it could go up and of course, theoretically, go down. The level at which it is set, and how much companies get back from it, will be crucial in deciding whether it is a success or a flop. Given that it is only eight weeks until Budget day, what conversations has the Minister had with the Treasury to make sure that it gets the balance right? The more we hear—I said this in May and say it again today—about how the levy
will now need to fund the top-up, the devolved Administrations, English and maths at level 2, disadvantaged learners, incentive payments and non-levy payers, the more it seems inevitable that the Government will end up increasing it.

6.45 pm

I want now to deal with some of the slightly more technical amendments. Amendment 7 to schedule 1 is designed to ensure that the situation for privately funded training and bespoke qualifications is clarified. Without clarification, we are told, there is a danger, within the scope of the institute and Secretary of State rulings on technical qualifications, that steps on becoming competent may extend into professional accreditation schemes paid for solely by learners or employers. We do not believe that it is the Government's intention to include this possibility, but we propose the addition of state funding to clarify the position.

Rob Marris: I am a little bemused by this amendment, although I think I understand it. It seems to me that it would be desirable, certainly within England, if not within the United Kingdom, to have a national framework of standards such that the framework should not simply apply to qualifications that were obtained through a state-funded institution but be spread more broadly.

Perhaps my hon. Friend could say a little more about his approach.

Gordon Marsden: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of a national framework. Various research reports over many years indicate that the privately funded training market has been exceeding the publicly funded one by considerable amounts, and that includes specialist management training, IT vendor qualifications, and project and programme management. The Government may need to look a bit more carefully at how this process is going to move forward. I absolutely agree about the need to have an overarching national framework, which we do not currently have.

Amendment 8 would ensure that the mapping of occupation groups had particular regard to people aged 16 to 24. This is crucial, because many apprenticeship training providers are reporting that, under the new levy system, employers are deciding to choose apprentices aged over 19 rather than 16 to 18-year-olds, particularly with regard to the new standards. Employers say that there is very little incentive left for them to take on younger learners, especially in the higher funding bands where a £1,000 employer incentive is a small fraction of the overall funding available. As the Minister will know, the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, which has, up until now, predominantly delivered apprenticeships to 16 to 18-year-olds, is seeing the majority of its business switch from this age group to older individuals.

If one looks at Lord Sainsbury's comments and the skills plan commentary in relation to the changes in funding giving parity to older learners, one can see that the majority of apprentices in this age band are already 18, with little effort to change that through careers support. Perhaps that is the Government's plan. If so, the Government need to be honest and to tell us that; if not, something needs to change as otherwise we are in danger of ending up with fewer apprenticeship opportunities for 16 to 18-year-olds.

I want to quote to the Minister some recent remarks of JTL, a training provider. About the new system, it says:

"Our employers say that under the new system when the traditional age differentials in funding rates are removed, they would sooner employ young people aged 19 and over. Some 16- and 17-year-olds aren't allowed on site due to health and safety rules, and many of them have yet to pass their driving test, but the present funding makes it still worthwhile to take them on. Remove the incentive and employers will switch back to recruiting older apprentices."

It went on to say—I hope the Minister will give this point careful thought, given the emphasis on STEM—that the "so-called £1,000 incentive for employers to recruit 16- to 18-year-olds simply doesn't work for STEM sectors. Our level three apprenticeships typically last four years, meaning the incentive equates to a mere £5 per week, which is of no interest to employers given the additional challenges of younger employees."

That is a timely new year reminder to the Minister that the concessions he made after the Save Our Apprenticeships campaign, with which our party was very pleased to be involved—as he knows, the campaign involved a very broad range of people, whom he met and to whom promised changes—have not solved the problem. The concessions applied a temporary sticking plaster to the problem, and it remains to be seen how long it will stick. Coming on top of the continued lack of certainties about the new structures for apprenticeships and the delayed consultation, there must be concern about the fragility of the Government's performance in the 16-to-18 area. In FE sectors, such as mine in Blackpool, we desperately need to get such young people skilled apprenticeships, which means looking for them now.

As I am sure the Minister knows, the AELP has raised the issue that a framework of only 15 routes across technical education might create an elitist system of education that denies many young people a work-based route to level 2 or 3. We remain concerned about that, given that so many young people in the service sector are not likely to be automatically covered. I know that there have been conversations saying that this is not really about apprenticeships, but about technical education. Whether it is about apprenticeships or technical education, however, young people in Blackpool and everywhere else need good training, whether from the service sector or the manufacturing sector. I would have thought that focusing on that would make a major contribution to this Government's social justice agenda and even, arguably, to anticipating the impact of Brexit if controls on migrant labour are introduced. It is important to have a skills strategy that is inclusive, and this is a perfect opportunity to create such a coherent, inclusive strategy that covers a wide range of different abilities and aptitudes and that strives for excellence. That is what amendment 8 intends to do.

I want to talk briefly to amendment 9, which is about all apprenticeship standards needing to include a recognised technical qualification. As the Minister will know, it is not only we who have been concerned about this; a range of organisations—most recently, AELP—has been concerned about the omission of qualifications from some of the new standards. The investment in time and resource is leading to employer fatigue in some areas, and there is a lack of engagement. According to AELP, just under 50% of the current standards released still do not include a mandatory qualification. One alternative
solution is our proposed amendment, which would make the whole apprenticeship, rather than simply its components, into a recognised qualification.

I want to move on to amendment 10, which I will group with amendments 11 to 16 and, indeed, amendments 18 to 21. Amendment 10 is about the need to change the title of “course document” to “standard or technical assessment design specification”.

That would ensure that copyright was acquired only at a level equivalent to apprenticeships. It is argued that underpinning occupational standards and technical assessment design specifications that are the equivalent of assessment plans is all that is needed for Crown copyright. City and Guilds has specifically raised with us the issue of the imposition of acquired copyright in evidence, as have other groups.

We have tabled the amendments because there is concern that imposing acquired copyright is one of the most significant risks to the future vitality of the technical education market in the UK. I accept that this is a complex and technical area, but the Minister needs to look at it carefully. It is not simply a question of existing providers wanting to set in stone a form of protectionism; it is about intellectual property, and where intellectual property starts and ends. The concern of many providers is that there has been a degree of mission creep in that respect in the way in which the Bill has been drafted.

From a pragmatic point of view, I must say that if the broader definition of what the institute has to do on copyright remains in the Bill, even more resources may be required to police it, and I have already mentioned that there is a lack of such support. We need to look at these important issues.

The concern that each technical level will have only one awarding organisation has been raised by both the Centre for the Study of Market Reform of Education and NCFE. NCFE has said that, as currently set out, with some of the technical levels going to only one awarding organisation, having one would be unfortunate, but—to misquote Oscar Wilde—to have two might be beneficial. That would provide competition and enable providers to switch quickly in the event of problems, without the multiplication issues that have caused problems and difficulties elsewhere. NCFE has said, more in sorrow than in anger, that the

“current proposals do not seem to recognise the great expertise in designing and assessing Technical and Professional Education qualifications that already exists within Awarding Organisations.”

Our amendments 11 to 16 are consequential on amendment 9. Under an exclusive licensing model, the licence holder for a particular qualification may assume a quasi-monopoly position for the duration of the contracts. That is one of the reasons why the proposals are designed to move away from that principle. It seems to us that the principle should be that there needs to be a rationalisation of the operations of awarding organisations, but not necessarily to the point of having single operators on a licence, given the monopoly and single point of failure issues alongside all the intellectual property rights and Crown copyright ones. I repeat to the Minister that this is a complicated area and I appreciate that it is not easy to get the balance right, but I urge him to think very carefully about some of the representations that have been made and, if he is not able to do anything about them tonight, to at least bring forward solutions in the other place.

The final area on which I want to comment briefly—I have talked about routes and all the rest—is the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Amendments 18 to 21 would ensure that the QAA was included in the list of organisations required to share information, and that degree apprenticeships were fully covered by such a requirement. Ofsted should have the authority to inspect every apprenticeship. We welcome the growth in degree apprenticeships and expect many more under the levy, but some are not genuinely work-based learning and are a rebranding of more vocationally biased degrees. Stricter monitoring is therefore needed. We argue that the involvement of the QAA is very important in this respect. It is vital that apprenticeships are just that: proper apprenticeships, with which Ofsted and Ofqual need to be well and properly engaged.

I am aware that the Opposition amendments have had to be discussed in considerable detail and some are technical, but the broad thrust of what we are trying to do is: first, to ask the Government to act on their commitments in Committee; and, secondly, to go further than that and make the rhetoric around social mobility and widening participation a reality. The only way to do that is to improve the Bill with the amendments we have tabled this evening.

7 pm

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): I think this is the first time that a lapel microphone has been used in this way—I appreciate that. I wish the House, and the many apprentices who worked over Christmas and the new year, a very happy new year. I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for chairing the debate. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) for his amendments—as ever, very thoughtful.

I will start by discussing new clause 1, but I just want to make the point that the hon. Gentleman talked about the completion of apprenticeships. Some 70% of apprentices complete and 90% get either employment or further training. We have nearly 900,000 apprentices, an all-time high and a record in our nation’s history, so we are making good progress. He talked about NEETs. He will know that between 2014 and 2015 the proportion of 16 to 18-year-olds in education or work-based learning increased to 90%, which is the highest on record. The percentage of NEETs fell to 6.5%, the lowest rate since records began. He talked about the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education appointments and went on, yet again, about Christmas. I have to say that if FATE is not just for Christmas, it is for life and we want to get it right. We want to ensure that the appointments we make are the right ones and are not made in haste. He sometimes says that we are doing things too quickly and at other times he says that we are doing things too slowly.

On new clause 1, as I explained in Committee, the institute will be required to report on its activities annually under schedule 4 to the Enterprise Act 2016, and the report must be placed before Parliament. That provision will also allow the Secretary of State to ask the institute to report on anything else she thinks...
appropriate, such as the information requested in the amendment. We think it would be an unnecessary and significant duplication of effort, as the information is already collected and published by the Secretary of State on the performance of the FE sector, which includes apprentices—I gave the hon. Gentleman some of the figures only a moment ago.

Much of that information goes far beyond the role of the institute. The institute’s core role from April 2017 is to oversee and quality assure the development of standards and assessment plans for use in delivering apprenticeships. Under the reforms in the Bill, college-based technical education cannot be held wholly responsible for, for example, job outcomes and wage rates of apprentices once they complete their apprenticeships. It is essential that the institute is aware of the impact it is making. We would expect it to make good use of the data on the outcomes made available to it through these public data sources and surveys, and to explain in its annual report how it has deployed them.

**Rob Marris:** I am grateful to the Minister for the work he does. He is very committed—whatever I see him he is wearing an ‘A’ on his lapel to show his support for apprenticeships. Will he clarify one point in relation to new clause 1(2)(e), which would include in the report the satisfaction rates of employers? He will be aware that there is some concern that to reach the 3 million target there will be dilution. I am not saying there will be, but that there is concern that there might be. Is the satisfaction rate of employers currently collected—not for every employer, but through sampling—and published? If it is not, it would be very important for it to be published, so that the concerns about a dilution of standards could be somewhat allayed.

**Robert Halfon:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. It is published. I think, if I am not mistaken, employer satisfaction is near 90%; it might be 88% or 85% or something like that. I am very happy to provide him with the information if he so requires.

I agree with the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) made a remarkable speech in the Committee on a careers strategy. She cares passionately about this. I do, but I think we do have meat on the bones. It is not just words. The hon. Member for Blackpool South talked about budgets. We are spending £90 million, which includes the work of the Careers & Enterprise Company. A separate £77 million is being spent on National Careers Service guidance just this year. I am going further. I am looking at a careers strategy from the beginning to ensure that we address our skills needs, and to look at how we can help the most disadvantaged. I am looking at how we can ensure widespread and quality provision, and how that leads to jobs and security. I will set out my plans on careers over the coming weeks.

On the investment in the Careers & Enterprise Company, the hon. Gentleman seemed to suggest that there was no activity in London. I have been to a school in east London supported by the Careers & Enterprise Company and the local enterprise partnership. It is doing remarkable work. Some 1,300 advisers are connecting schools and colleges. They are slowly creating a way to connect with 250,000 students in 75% of the cold spots around the country. There is also money for mentoring. He talked about a famine. I would not say there is a feast, but substantive and serious funds are going in. I could spend a lot of time listing the different moneys, but if he looks at this carefully and fairly, he will see the work that the Careers & Enterprise Company is doing.

We will monitor carefully the impact of our work. In January 2017, destination data will be included in national performance tables for the first time, ensuring an even sharper focus on the success of schools and colleges in supporting their students. Before my time, we legislated to ensure that schools gave independent careers advice on skills and apprenticeships—that was done by my
Amendment 5 addresses the Apprenticeship Delivery Board. The hon. Member for Blackpool South was a little unkind about the board. The board’s representatives include the chief executive of Channel 4, the Compass Group, the City of London, Barclays bank, Sunsmart Ltd, Fujitsu, Wates construction, the Ministry of Defence and a significant retail sector member. As he said, there are three women on the board. They are doing important work. They advise the Government and work with businesses to encourage them to have apprentices. As far as I am aware, those people are not being paid. They do not have to do it; they do it because they want to serve our country. They have helped the Apprentice Ambassador Network. The chair, David Meller, is doing important work on that and running the board. I pay tribute to the board. I mean this kindly, but I would not be obsessed with whether or not the Prime Minister has an apprenticeship adviser. As far as I am concerned, the Prime Minister’s advisers are the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, which is me, and my boss the Secretary of State. A new adviser for the Prime Minister will not change the course of history for apprentices in our country.

Rob Marris: Most of us would see the Minister as a journeyman or time-served Minister rather than as the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills. He will forgive me for not researching this earlier, but I did not notice in the list he read out any trade union representation. Unusually for Conservative Members, he is an active trade unionist—or he was. Does he agree that it would be desirable to have trade union representation on that board to get buy-in from the workforce side?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that I am still a trade unionist. That is a good idea. The board is independent, but I will suggest it. I am very impressed and supportive of the work that Unionlearn does, which is why we have agreed to fund it by £12 million. It works to promote training and apprenticeships.

The institute will consult the Apprenticeship Delivery Board and other bodies but, as I have said, we do not need to straitjacket the institute with so much red tape that we stop it from being independent. The delivery board is not intended to have any special legislative standing or corporate identity. It would be unusual to name it in legislation, but the institute will consult the board along with others.

Amendment 6 would require the institute’s expenditure in any one year to exceed that raised by the levy. It is important to clarify that the institute will not have responsibility for the apprenticeship budget, which resides with the Secretary of State for Education. Although the institute is not a funding body, it will be asked to advise on the pricing of apprenticeship standards and allocation to funding bands. The institute’s operations will be funded by my Department and not from the levy funds. It follows that the institute should not be obliged to spend funds raised under the levy.

On devolution, which the hon. Member for Blackpool South mentioned, it will be up to the devolved authorities how they spend the money. If we were to tie the spending explicitly to the levy receipts, there could be adverse funding consequences for the programme as a whole. The budget for spending on apprenticeships in 2019-20

7.15 pm

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend, who campaigns a lot on diversity and equality, is absolutely right. The proposal will benefit the people who need it most. Many people from disadvantaged backgrounds and with disabilities are prominent in further and technical education.
for England and the devolved Administrations totals in excess of £2.9 billion, whereas the projected levy income is £2.8 billion. Having certainty over the funding for apprenticeship training is preferable to linking the funding on a year-by-year basis directly to the wider performance of the economy.

Mims Davies: Eastleigh College, which is the third-largest college providing apprenticeships in England and trains over 9,000 apprentices, is particularly interested in the funding formula for the institute will work and how that will support its work with communities, so the Minister’s clarity today around the levy, the funding criteria and how it will be delivered is very welcome.

Robert Halfon: I thank my hon. Friend. It is brilliant that her college is providing such training, and I would be pleased to come and see its training programme when I am next in the area. That it is doing this means that it will also be receiving significant funds. I congratulate the college on the work it is doing on apprenticeships.

Amendment 7 would limit the power to confer new functions on the institute to “state funded” apprenticeships and technical education. All the institute’s current functions in part 4 of, and schedule 4 to, the Enterprise Act 2016 and in schedule 1 to the Bill apply to all reformed apprenticeships and technical education qualifications, not just those that are state funded. We would therefore expect that any new functions the institute is required to carry out should also apply in the same way, to ensure that they are fully effective and do not treat some apprenticeships and technical education courses differently in accordance with how they are paid for. We want to ensure that as many people as possible can undertake an apprenticeship or technical education course, and we would not want this to be restricted to those that are state funded purely because the institute’s functions have been limited.

On amendment 8, it is important that the institute considers what apprenticeships might be appropriate for 16 to 24-year-olds. We know that apprenticeships are incredibly important to school leavers and are making sure that anyone from the age of 16 will have an offering of either an academic or technical education or an apprenticeship. The occupational maps that the institute will put together and which will guide apprenticeships and technical education courses differently in accordance with how they are paid for. We want to ensure that as many people as possible can undertake an apprenticeship or technical education course, and we would not want this to be restricted to those that are state funded purely because the institute’s functions have been limited.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): On STEM subjects and the advice given to young people, successive Governments have tried to effect change, and the Bill, which is well meaning, will make a positive difference in many respects, but is not the real problem the fact that successive Governments have failed to persuade people that the vocational route is as good as the academic route? Is this not a cultural problem that has bedevilled our country for decades?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman is completely right. When I talk about my priorities for skills and education, one of the first things I mention is transforming the prestige and the culture. As he says, this is regardless of what party is in government, and it is not just about Governments either; businesses have also underinvested. Vocational training has always been seen as a so-called—I hate the term—Cinderella sector. The whole purpose of the Sainsbury reforms and the levy is to change behaviours and give apprenticeships and skills and technical education the prestige they deserve.

Vernon Coaker: The question for the Minister, as it was for me and others here when we were schools Ministers, be we Conservative, Liberal Democrat or Labour, is this: why will it be different this time? The Minister is absolutely right in what he has said, but why will it be different this time from all the times that have gone before?

Robert Halfon: Unlike the hon. Gentleman, I was not around for all the other times that have gone before. We have our differences, of course, but there is much cross-party consensus on the Sainsbury reforms, for example. Moreover, the apprenticeship levy is a fundamental reform to change behaviours—it is not just about raising money; it also changes behaviours. I believe that there is a new national conversation about apprenticeships and that things are changing, but the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. I think we are on the tip of something special, but a lot more work needs to be done.

Because of time, I will speak only briefly on some of the other amendments. On amendment 9, the hon. Member for Blackpool South raised some important points, but we feel that the amendment is unnecessary. The important feature of approved English apprenticeship standards is the move away from a reliance on a series of small and pre-existing qualifications making up an apprenticeship and towards a single end-point assessment. By not mandating qualifications in standards unless they meet one of these criteria, we are ensuring that individual employers have the freedom and flexibility to determine how to train their own apprentices to ensure they gain full competency. It is expected that the institute will continue with this approach.

The provisions on education copyright are very complicated, and I understand why the hon. Gentleman has raised them, but we do not think that the proposed provisions are necessary. Some of the concerns are covered by existing legislation, but we believe that the institute should have the right of copyright, and the Minister is absolutely right in what he has said, but why do we not agree with the word “route” either because it could be confusing for employers. I want this form of training to be prestigious, and so I want the words “technical education”. I do not like the term “tech levels” either because it dumb Richard Martin down a very important qualification.

Amendment 17 is on the power to charge for technical education certificates, and I should say that we also have a duty of care to the taxpayer. The institute will not make money out of this provision. It is all about
[Robert Halfon]
giving it the power to do so if it so chooses and about having a duty of care to the taxpayer. It is for that important reason that we do not support the amendment.

On the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and amendments 18 to 21, the organisations named in the provisions will all have an important role. The omission of the QAA reflects in part the changes being introduced in the Higher Education and Research Bill, which is currently in the other place. Amendment 20, which specifies that the term “apprenticeships” should include those offered by higher education institutions, is not required. I am clear that the term “apprenticeships” includes all apprenticeships offered at all levels, regardless of the training provider.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for Blackpool South for his thoughtful new clauses and amendments on technical education and I thank other hon. Members for their contributions. I hope that my responses have reassured the hon. Gentleman and the House on their underlying concerns. I therefore ask that he withdraw new clause 1 and not press his other amendments.

Rob Marris: If you will allow me a little latitude, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to place my remarks on the amendments in context. I was recently speaking to someone who made a very good point about who is fitting all the kitchens and bathrooms in Poland. This person had experienced very good electricians from Romania working in this country. Our conversation was about Brexit and the skills shortage in the United Kingdom. Whichever side of the debate hon. Members support, Brexit provides our country with an opportunity to try to address the skills shortages that we have had for decades and have relied on filling on importing workers.

7.30 pm
Figures have been banded about, and I do not know the exact figure—perhaps other right hon. or hon. Members do—on the proportion of NHS employees who were trained abroad. I think we would all concede that it is quite a high proportion. Those people often, though not always, come from countries that can ill afford to lose them. The United Kingdom as a rich country ends up, because we have not got our technical education and apprenticeships architecture correct, poaching skilled labour from countries that desperately need that labour to build their own economies.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend is making very thoughtful points. He may be aware that there is now a fairly successful political party in Lithuania that is against emigration, not immigration, for that very reason.

Rob Marris: I am not surprised about that. In the last Parliament but one, I had the joy of visiting Lithuania with what was then the Trade and Industry Committee, and that was the sort of issue we talked about. In those days, Lithuania was already starting to import labour from Moldova—outside the European Union—because so many Lithuanians had come with their skills particularly to the United Kingdom and Ireland to ply their respective trades, and I specifically mean trades.

What my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) has sought to do from the Labour Front Bench is to beef up the Bill in two ways. One is to introduce even greater confidence in the new system that we will have, and part of that confidence building means moving towards national standards. This partly addresses the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) about parity of esteem. We talked earlier this afternoon about parity between mental and physical health, but in this case, we are talking about parity of esteem between the vocational and the academic.

Having been a semi-skilled worker for a number of years as a professional driver and a bus driver, I faced a fork in the road. Was I going to go down the vocational route—I had my eye on being a plumber—or was I going to go down the academic route with an eye to being a lawyer? I went down the academic route and I became a lawyer. I do not regret that at all. One reason I did so related to esteem or lack thereof, and another reason was that lawyers get to work indoors whereas plumbers sometimes have to work on building sites outdoors—and I do not like the cold. I am talking about quite a while ago, and the money was better in law than it was in plumbing. I am not sure whether that remains the case nowadays.

We live in a capitalist society. Part of what needs to be done to move towards parity of esteem in a cultural sense is the sort of thing that the Minister has attempted to do during his tenure of office and through this Bill; and, frankly, in a capitalist society, part of it is about paying people more. If we want parity of esteem, we should start paying people equal amounts of money—and pay plumbers as much as lawyers. Given that we live under capitalism, we are moving towards that because of skills shortages.

On new clause 1, I quite understand the Minister’s point that some of the information is already published as a result of the Enterprise Act 2016, but I believe that building this into the Bill as my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South has proposed, would be helpful for sending out the right message about confidence. It is the same with new clause 2, so that the representative panels can become more representative when they are put in place. I welcome the Minister’s assurance this afternoon that those panels will be in place by April, and I hope they will have a breadth of representation that should, I think, be built into the Bill. I asked the Minister a similar question in a slightly different context about the involvement of trade unions. This is not just a tit-for-tat along the lines of “You have the bosses there, so we have to have the workers there,” although that is important; it more about getting buy-in to the new regime from all sections of our society to build towards addressing the skills shortages that we will face, as I have said, under Brexit.

Under Brexit, there is no mistake about it: the price for staying in the single market would be free movement of labour and people; and the UK population has said that it is not up for that and does not want free movement of people or labour. We will therefore not be in the single market, but we will not have free movement either, because there will be restrictions—whether Members like it or not. We should use these circumstances in a positive way, so that local people can train up for jobs and so that we do not keep poaching skilled people.
from abroad—whether from Lithuania, as my hon.
Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins)
mentioned, or elsewhere. For that, we need national
standards.

When it comes to confidence, we need proper advice.
Careers advice in England has certainly been, to say the
least, patchy over the years. I remember when my
Government set up Connexions, which was not exactly
a resounding success—certainly not in the west midlands.
I urge the Minister to think again about new clause 4,
which is all to do with building confidence. That is
particularly clear in paragraphs (b) and (d) of new
clause 4(3). These highlight the fact that the Secretary
of State should seek to

"ensure that such information, advice and guidance may be taken
into account by relevant authorities and partners to meet the
needs of local or combined authority areas”

and to

"monitor the outcomes of such information, advice and guidance
for recipients.”

It is part of confidence building that we have a regime
that is sensitive to local labour markets, which will
change greatly from April 2019 when we are out of the
European Union.

This Bill is part of the Government—surprisingly,
given what is not happening in other areas—showing a
bit of foresight, on which I congratulate the Minister. If
only we had such foresight about Brexit ramifications
for other areas of public endeavour; we do not, but this
Bill is a step forward and part of that jigsaw. I am not
saying that this is why the Minister has sought to
introduce the Bill, but I do think we should look on it
positively in that way, and I think that new clause 4
would help to build confidence in the new system, by
ensuring that it would be reflective and flexible.

In referring to amendment 9 and others that my hon.
Friend the Member for Blackpool South said were in a
sense under its umbrella—amendments 10 to 16—the
Minister talked about employers having freedom and
flexibility. Amendment 9 deals with “recognised technical
qualifications” and these are connected, certainly for
England as I said, with national standards. We need
those standards as part of the confidence-building measures,
but also to make sure that we get the right people with
the right skills—in a sense, workforce planning.

This country is pretty poor at workforce planning.
The one area where we could have excellent workforce
planning because the number of employees is so enormous
and they almost all work for the state is in healthcare
delivery, yet it is absolutely appalling. We do not have
enough doctors trained here; we do not have enough
nurses trained here; we do not have enough
delivery, yet it is absolutely appalling. We do not have
and they almost all work for the state is in healthcare

The one area where we could have excellent workforce
planning that the Government have
singularly failed. Under the coalition Government, things
went backwards when some nurse training places were
shut down. Figures on the number of employees working
in the NHS in England alone are so huge that we could
take social trends into account and do some pretty
good workforce planning on the kind of skills that will
be needed in five years or the 10 years that it takes to
train a doctor, and so forth.

Arguably, we have been absolute rubbish at this since
1948. Having national standards is important not just
for confidence, but for workforce planning. That is why
I again urge the Minister to have another think about
the import of amendment 9, if not its wording. It is all
very well having flexibility and freedom for employers.
These were the sort of words that the Minister used—he
will correct me if I am wrong—when he explained why
he thought amendment 9 was unnecessary and invited
my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South to
withdraw it. In my view, however, the Minister should
have another think about that, because I believe that
national standards are important. Again, I draw on my
own experience. When I qualified as a lawyer, I took a
national exam that had to be taken by all those seeking
to become solicitors in England and Wales. For most of
us, if we passed, that led to what was, in a sense, the
equivalent of an apprenticeship. It was called "articles
of clerkship", and it involved two years in a solicitor’s
office. What had been a national exam taken by everyone
who wished to be a solicitor in England and Wales
then became a moderated Law Society final exam. My hon.
Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) will
remind me what it was called. [HON. MEMBERS: “Legal
practice course.”] Yes. It became a legal practice course,
and standards went down. I say that having talked to
people in post-secondary institutions at the time and
having trained articled clerks who had experienced the
later system when national standards no longer existed.

National standards are not, of course, a guarantee of
quality output, but they can be used by any Government,
legitimately and properly, to ensure that we have confidence
in the system and to ensure that those who undergo an
apprenticeship process and emerge from it fully qualified
have a qualification that is worth their having as individuals,
and worth our society having.

Robert Halfon: Qualifications may be mandatory in
an apprenticeship standard if that is a mandatory
requirement set by the regulator. They include qualifications
that are recognised as a legal requirement—that is, licence
to practise—that are required for professional registration,
or that are used in a hard sift when apprentices are
applying for jobs in the occupation related to the standard
and would be disadvantaged in the job market without
them.

Rob Morris: I thank the Minister for that clarification.
In a sense, he has made my point for me. There will be
some national standards in certain fields of endeavour,
which he has helpfully specified. However, I think that
there is a contradiction in his position, a contradiction
from which I do not think I suffer.

Amendment 7, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member
for Blackpool South, would insert the words "state-funded".
I found the Minister’s argument persuasive when he
explained why he thought that the amendment should
not be passed. I may have misunderstood what he said,
but he seemed to be saying that he wanted a more
overarching model that would encompass privately obtained
qualifications. I agree with him. I merely suggest that, if
amendment 7 is not accepted, it would be logical to
accept something along the lines of amendment 9,
which would not limit the requirement to state funding
but would provide for national standards, not just in the
broad but restricted field defined by what the Minister
helpfully read out a moment ago, but more widely.
I think that that would be better for confidence, better for our economy and better for the people—many of whom will be young—who will acquire those qualifications. I therefore ask the Minister to think again.

A similar issue is raised by amendments 18 to 21, which relate to the involvement of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. They, too, seem to me to relate to the ability of employers and prospective apprentices—and, in the case of young apprentices, their families—to feel confident that the system will deliver a qualification that our country needs and that involves enough training to ensure that those apprentices are likely not only to end up with jobs but to contribute to society as we would like them to. That returns me to the workforce planning issue to which I adverted earlier.

The Minister and the Government ought to think again about those amendments. They may not want to accept the exact wording, but I should like them to include the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the list of agencies that will have a role to play in the planning, the maintenance and perhaps even the raising of standards. That would be desirable.

7.45 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I was a member of the Bill Committee, which was very constructive and involved much cross-party support. The Minister has a real passion for, and depth of knowledge about, this issue, and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), also demonstrated a genuine interest.

I want to focus on a specific issue raised by the shadow Minister in connection with his desire to promote equality of opportunity. I think that that should include people with disabilities, and specifically those with learning disabilities. The Government have made great progress—they have helped some 600,000 more disabled people to obtain work in the last three years, which is fantastic—but those with learning disabilities still find it extremely difficult to benefit from the opportunities of work. The proportion is about 6%.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for the work that he did as Minister for disabled people. Does he agree that we also need to help employers? Does not dealing with people with learning difficulties or mental health issues, about which the Prime Minister has talked today, require a great deal of support for the employer as well as the apprentice?

Justin Tomlinson: Absolutely. That is at the heart of the points that I am going to make. People need time to develop the necessary skills, and employers need to be able to provide suitable opportunities for individuals with learning disabilities. All Governments, in all generations, have tried their best to give opportunities to people with learning disabilities. The proportion has stayed rigidly at about 6%, which is the worst percentage involved in any disability and therefore presents us with the largest challenge.

When I was Minister for disabled people, I visited Foxes working hotel in Bridgwater. I was incredibly impressed by the fact that it had managed to get 80% of its young students into work. Its three-year course involved two years in a working hotel, where the students learned how to acquire independent living skills and how to work towards obtaining jobs once they had finished. They were acquiring skills that were needed for their local towns, involving restaurants, hotels and care homes. We all have our own skills gaps in our constituencies, so the skills would be adapted accordingly.

The students spent their final year continuing their learning directly in the workplace. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) mentioned employers. That final year gave employers an opportunity to receive support. Foxes academy provided training and advice for employers, and for the staff with whom they would be working. Young lads and ladies were able to learn their skills patiently over the year, which seemed to me to constitute an apprenticeship: they were learning skills on the job.

I invited the team to my Department. I said, “This is amazing: why can we not increase numbers?” I was told, “We could increase numbers, but that final year is so expensive, because we have to support the employer, that we have to cap them.” I think that if we could re-badge the system as an apprenticeship, we could access the funding that is being created through the apprenticeship levy, and bring about a huge number of additional opportunities. I met the then Minister for Skills, my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), who agreed with me, and we set up the Maynard review. I am delighted that the Government have accepted every one of its recommendations, and I pay tribute to both Mencap and Scope for the huge amount of proactive work that they did, as part of the review, in helping to shape real, tangible opportunities.

I have spoken personally to the Minister, I know of his passionate desire to see all that through. We touched on the issue in the Bill Committee, but let me urge him now to crack on with those pilots. Every young adult will seize the opportunities which—as I know, having met hundreds of young people with learning disabilities—they are desperate to be offered. I ask the Minister to continue to make this a priority, and, in his summing-up, to explain where we are, what is the timetable, and what more we can all do to raise the issue with local employers.

Kelvin Hopkins: It is a great pleasure to speak in this important debate. I, too, was a member of the Bill Committee, and I am somewhat disappointed that Government amendments have not been introduced at this stage reflecting some of the points made in Committee, especially as they seemed to be accepted at the time, in broad terms, by the Minister. I therefore hope that amendments will even now be brought forward in another place to reflect some of the discussions we had in Committee, and, indeed, some of the points made this evening, particularly by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) on the Front Bench, who made a tour de force speech introducing all his amendments. It is surprising that there are no Government amendments or new clauses on Report; that is very unusual.

All the amendments and new clauses have been introduced by my hon. Friend on behalf of the Labour Opposition—and they are all splendid and I support them all. The lack of Government amendments is disappointing, even though there is a degree of agreement
on the value of this legislation, and we all know we have to do something about improving apprenticeships and training our young people for the future. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (MrWarren) said, we have to train our own rather than just poach people from abroad.

New clause 1, requiring the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to report annually, is specifically about the outcomes of completed apprenticeships: it is about the quality of apprenticeships, not just other, broader measures of success. The quality of apprenticeships is vital, to ensure that they lead to the development of skills for quality, long-term jobs after their completion. Young people who complete their apprenticeships must be desirable to their own and to other employers; they must be able to command good jobs for the long term and to look forward to relatively high pay and advancement in those jobs. It is very important to make sure that apprenticeships are high quality not just in words, and that apprentices can do the things they are required to do after they have qualified.

I remember the days, many decades ago now, when we had full employment. I taught in further education during that era, and in many ways it was a better and happier period than we are in now. Everybody who wanted a job got a job, and teaching in further education was a sheer joy. It has been more painful and stressful since then, I have to say, and less well paid, and the conditions of employment are less good than when I was teaching. But that was several decades ago, back in the early 1970s. We also had large companies, mainly in the manufacturing sector, and the giant public utilities, which were then in public ownership, employing thousands of apprentices every year. They had to train their own and they wanted to make sure they were good. Some of those they trained moved off to other jobs, of course, but it was nevertheless beneficial to those doing the apprenticeships and to wider society.

Our society did well because we were training our own, but we have failed to do that in recent times; we have left things to the market, and the market does not always work well in these matters. A degree of Government intervention is required, and it is significant that the Prime Minister has used a phrase not used by any Government for a long time: she has talked about the need for an industrial strategy. I absolutely support that, and we had a debate on industrial strategy just a few weeks ago, which the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) led very well.

The subject we are discussing now is part of that industrial strategy. We have to train these people, to make sure we rebuild industry. We do not produce enough any longer, particularly in the manufacturing sector; we do well in services, but not in manufacturing. We have a gigantic trade deficit because we cannot produce enough and we have to buy in from abroad. We must rebuild the manufacturing sector, not so that it becomes the dominant force necessarily, but at least so that it produces sufficient to have a sensible trade balance, which we do not have at present.

Apprenticeships have always been insecure in recent times because companies are much smaller now than they were and they are less secure because of economic crises. I have many anecdotes from my own experience. Just after the 2008 crisis, I was being driven to Heathrow for a parliamentary visit and the driver had an apprenticeship in the construction sector, but the company he had been with had collapsed and he finished up being a cab driver, which he could have done without doing an apprenticeship.

I have heard of fears, too, such as small companies training apprentices who are then poached by larger, more financially lucrative companies. That is particularly the case in the motor trade, where there are skilled small companies training their own people who are then poached by large companies that do lucrative insurance repair work, which can pay a lot more.

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for, yet again, making a thoughtful speech. I do not have the figures to hand, but the evidence suggests that apprentices in companies are more loyal to that company than those on any other training scheme or in work experience or doing early-career jobs, and that they tend to stay with the companies they do their apprenticeships in.

Kelvin Hopkins: I am sure the Minister is right in the majority of cases, but for some there is pressure to move on—for instance as a result of what is happening with house prices at the moment, as one can imagine. Certainly in Luton I know of companies, such as small motor repair firms, that employ apprentices who are under pressure to get a home, and if they can earn a few thousand pounds more at a larger company nearby to help them get on the housing ladder, they will do that. I agree that loyalty is important and many of them want to be loyal, but if the financial pressures on their lives are such that they have to move, they will in the end move.

I particularly want to support the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South about the need for a strategy for improving career education and new clause 4. We must ensure that when young people are at school or in further education they are aware of the enormous range of opportunities out there and they do not just look at a narrow field. In Luton too high a proportion of students want to get into the legal profession, for example; they want to be professionals and do not appreciate that there are highly paid, highly skilled jobs in manufacturing industry.

Vauxhall Motors still has a plant in Luton, and almost all its senior executives started as apprentices, leaving school, doing apprenticeships and going up the ladder, eventually doing higher qualifications such as higher national certificates and higher national diplomas and becoming highly paid senior executives in the company. Those opportunities are out there, and young people must be made aware of them. We must have a careers strategy making sure that every young person knows about all the thousands of different roles they could assume in life, rather than just going into the professions, or, indeed, just going into a local company; there are lots of things young people can do.

Life can be very exciting, and it is important that all of us do something we enjoy. I am very fortunate in that I was fascinated by politics in my early life and I finished up in Parliament where I wanted to be; I do not regret a moment of it. But sometimes people are not aware of the enormous range of possibilities in life. Having a powerful careers advice strategy is vital not just for young people’s lives, but for the economy. If people are
happy in their work, they will work better and the economy will work better, and the world will be a much better place.

I have one more story that explains something tragic that has happened in Luton. We were a town that trained thousands of apprentices, and I know many of them personally. Recently I visited a small manufacturing company that makes components for Formula 1 and Jaguar. It could not find one toolmaker from a town of over 200,000 people that used to be dominated by manufacturing, but could not find one. It is a disgrace that we have failed to train sufficient numbers of people in these areas.

There are many other things I would like to say—I could speak for an hour unaided, I am sure—but as others want to contribute, I will leave it there. I hope the points I have made are of interest.

Vernon Coaker: I was not a member of the Committee, but I know that the Technical and Further Education Bill has generated a lot of really good debate and positive views on how we might achieve what we all want, which is an improvement in the technical and vocational education in this country and in apprenticeships. The fact that there is no division between us on that was illustrated by the contributions from the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) talked about the kind of skills needed at Vauxhall. Our defence industries are crying out for engineers to repair the ships and to do other highly skilled technical jobs. There are thousands of vacancies. When was the last time anyone said they were going to send their son or daughter to a school because they would end up in a first-class technical or vocational job? That does not happen, and that is a real challenge for us as a Parliament. It is a challenge for the Government, and it is a challenge for us as the Opposition to work with the Government to do something about this. I say this not as a criticism but as a challenge to us all.

I will tell hon. Members what I think, and the Minister and those on my own Front Bench might want to reflect on it. I genuinely believe that our country needs a national crusade on technical and vocational education. It needs something that will really shake the system up. We have a Minister and a shadow ministerial education team who are saying exactly the same things. Let us challenge our country to turn all this talk about the importance of skills and of technical education into reality. If we could do that, we could improve our economy. Just as importantly, in addition to valuing our doctors and lawyers, who are really important, we would for the first time be giving the work and vocational education of many families the esteem that they deserve. Our country would be better for that. We would improve educationally, and many of our poorest communities—where equality of opportunity in education is a rhetorical myth rather than a reality—would actually be able to do something. What an achievement that would be for a Parliament, let alone for a Government. I wish the Minister well, and I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. I also thank everyone on the Bill Committee for the contributions they have made towards tackling one of the most fundamental problems that our country faces. Good luck with it all.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): New clause 4 deals with careers education provision in technical and further education, and I want to build on the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris). As the Minister knows from our time spent together on the Bill Committee, this issue is of particular interest to me, and I would like to thank him for the courtesy that he has extended in explaining what the Department is doing in this area, and for introducing me to the Careers & Enterprise Company. I also thank him for his keen interest in improving careers education. After due consideration, however, I feel that the new clause is necessary and that it will complement the work that is already under way. There have been a lot of warm words and verbal support, but not including careers education provision in this legislation is an enormous missed opportunity.

The Bill will shake up the technical and further education sector considerably, and accepting the new clause would show how important career planning is to the House and to the Government. During private meetings before the Bill went into Committee, real concerns were raised with me about the lack of careers education provision in our colleges. It has been stressed that the
lack of advice available is such that, without explicit legislation on careers guidance, the matter will be nudged even further towards the back of the priorities queue. Resources in our colleges are overstretched, and I was disappointed to hear that in one institution a receptionist with no specialist qualifications or training had been asked to give careers guidance. The problem of a lack of careers guidance is stark. It has been brought to the attention of the Department by the co-Chairs of the Sub-Committee on Education, Skills and the Economy. In its report, the Sub-Committee states:

“Ministers appear to be burying their heads in the sand while careers guidance fails young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and exacerbates the country’s skills gap.”

It is clear that we cannot rely on warm words and reassurances alone. We must have provisions in writing and in legislation, because we have an obligation to our learners. As we know, the world of work that our young people are entering is changing really fast. The sector in which an apprentice starts their learning will have transformed enormously by the time they reach their last year. Access to guidance and advice should not be left behind when they step into a career. It should be more agile and responsive to the skills and experience they are picking up. It is those opportunities that new clause 4 would seize, including an opportunity for a strategy to be laid before the House that was specialised for further and technical education, that was ongoing, and that provided parity of esteem between technical, further and higher education, using the expertise of the new Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. This is a huge opportunity that is too good to miss.

Gordon Marsden: I thank all those who have spoken. I particularly thank the Minister for confirming that the implications of what we asked for in new clause 2 will be satisfied by the Government, which is an important concession or confirmation, depending on how he wishes to look at it. Whatever it is, we thank him for it.

I will withdraw new clause 1 but, as shown not least by the powerful speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) and others, it is a huge missed opportunity that the Government are not including the strategy in the Bill. I mean no disrespect to the Minister and his personal qualities, but we believe that the strategy needs to be embodied for the foreseeable future in the Bill. On that basis, we will be pressing new clause 4 to a vote.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 4

CAREERS EDUCATION: DUTY TO PUBLISH STRATEGY

“(1) The Secretary of State shall publish a strategy for the purposes of improving careers education for persons receiving education or training—

(a) in the course of an approved English apprenticeship;
(b) for the purposes of an approved technical education qualification; or
(c) for the purposes of approved steps towards occupational competence.

(2) The strategy shall be laid before Parliament.

(3) The strategy shall specify provisions under which the Secretary of State will seek to—

(a) ensure that persons receiving education or training under subsection (1) receive information, advice and guidance relating to their future careers, and that such information, advice and guidance is delivered in a way which meets each person’s needs and is impartial; 
(b) ensure that such information, advice and guidance may be taken into account by relevant authorities and partners to meet the needs of local or combined authority areas; 
(c) ensure parity of esteem between technical, further and higher education; and 
(d) monitor the outcomes of such information, advice and guidance for recipients.

(4) The provisions specified in subsection (3) shall have specific regard to particular needs of different groups of persons receiving education or training under subsection (1), including—

(a) persons with special educational needs;
(b) care leavers;
(c) persons of different ethnicities;
(d) carers, carers of children, or young carers, as defined by the Care Act 2014; and
(e) persons who have other particular needs that may be determined by the Secretary of State.

(5) The strategy shall include guidance for the purposes of improving careers education, to which the following bodies shall have regard—

(a) the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills;
(b) the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education; and
(c) the Office for Students.

(6) The Secretary of State shall by regulations designate relevant authorities and partners for the purposes of subsection (3)(b).

(7) The Secretary of State may by regulations designate—

(a) further groups of persons under subsection (4)(e); and
(b) further national authorities or bodies under subsection (5).

(8) Regulations made under this section—

(a) shall be made by statutory instrument; and
(b) may not be made unless a draft has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.

(9) For the purposes of this section, “careers education” means education about different careers and occupations and potential courses or qualifications to attain those careers and occupations.”

—(Gordon Marsden.)

This new clause would establish a statutory requirement for the Government to produce a strategy on careers education, which shall be taken to be the “Careers Strategy”.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 186, Noes 274.

Division No. 115] [8.10 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Mr David
Ashworth, Jonathan
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
| Chapman, Jenny | Lewis, Clive |
| Coaker, Vernon | Lewis, Mr Ivan |
| Cooper, Julie | Long Bailey, Rebecca |
| Cooper, rh Yvette | Lucas, Caroline |
| Corbyn, rh Jeremy | Lucas, Ian C. |
| Coyle, Neil | Lynch, Holly |
| Crausby, Sir David | Macaggart, rh Fiona |
| Creagh, Mary | Mahmood, Mr Khalid |
| Creasy, Stella | Malhotra-Seema |
| Cruddas, Jon | Mann, John |
| Cryer, John | Marris, Rob |
| Cunningham, Alex | Marsden, Gordon |
| Cunningham, Mr Jim | Maskell, Rachael |
| Dakin, Nic | Matheson, Christian |
| Davies, Wayne | McCarthy, Kerry |
| Davies, Geraint | McDonagh, Siobhain |
| De Piero, Gloria | McDonald, Andy |
| Dougherty, Stephen | McDonnell, rh John |
| Dowd, Peter | McGinn, Conor |
| Dugher, Michael | McGovern, Alison |
| Eagle, Ms Angela | Mclnnes, Liz |
| Eagle, Maria | McKinnell, Catherine |
| Elford, Clive | McMahon, Jim |
| Elliott, Julie | Meale, Sir Alan |
| Elman, Mrs Louise | Mearns, Ian |
| Elmore, Chris | Miliband, rh Edward |
| Esterson, Bill | Moon, Mrs Madeleine |
| Evans, Chris | Morden, Jessica |
| Farrellly, Paul | Mulholland, Greg |
| Farron, Tim | Murray, Ian |
| Field, rh Frank | Nandy, Lisa |
| Fitzpatrick, Jim | Om, Melanie |
| Fieldo, Robert | Omwurah, Chi |
| Fletcher, Colleen | Osamor, Kate |
| Flint, rh Caroline | Owen, Albert |
| Flynn, Paul | Pearce, Teresa |
| Foguargue, Yvonne | Pennycook, Matthew |
| Foxcroft, Vicky | Perkins, Toby |
| Furness, Gill | Phillips, Jess |
| Gapes, Mike | Phillipson, Bridget |
| Gardiner, Barry | Powell, Lucy |
| Glass, Pat | Rayner, Angela |
| God sift, Mr Roger | Reed, Mr Steve |
| Goodman, Helen | Rees, Christina |
| Green, Kate | Reeves, Rachel |
| Greenwood, Lilian | Reynolds, Jonathan |
| Greenwood, Margaret | Ritchie, Ms Margaret |
| Griffith, Nia | Robinson, Gavin |
| Haigh, Louise | Robinson, Mr Geoffrey |
| Hamilton, Fabian | Rotheram, Steve |
| Hanson, rh Mr David | Ryan, rh Joan |
| Harris, Carolyn | Sheerman, Mr Barry |
| Hayes, Helen | Sherriff, Paula |
| Hayman, Sue | Shuker, Mr Gavin |
| Hepburn, Mr Stephen | Simpson, David |
| Hoey, Kate | Skinner, Mr Dennis |
| Hopkins, Kelvin | Smeeth, Ruth |
| Howarth, rh Mr George | Smith, rh Mr Andrew |
| Huq, Dr Rupa | Smith, Angela |
| Hussain, Imran | Smith, Cat |
| Jarvis, Dan | Smith, Nick |
| Jones, Gerald | Smith, Owen |
| Jones, Helen | Spellar, rh Mr John |
| Jones, Susan Elan | Starmer, Keir |
| Kane, Mike | Stevens, Jo |
| Kinnock, Stephen | Streeting, Wes |
| Kyle, Peter | Stringer, Graham |
| Lamb, rh Norman | Stuart, rh Ms Gisela |
| Lammy, rh Mr David | Tami, Mark |
| Lavery, Ian | Thomson-Symonds, Nick |
| Leslie, Chris | Thornberry, Emily |
| Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma | Timms, rh Stephen |
| Trickett, Jon | Turley, Anna |
| Turner, Karl | Twigg, Derek |
| Twigg, Stephen | Umunna, Mr Chuka |
| Vaz, Valerine | Watson, Mr Tom |
| West, Catherine | Whitehead, Dr Alan |
| Williams, Mr Mark | Adams, Nigel |
| Aldous, Peter | Allan, Lucy |
| Allen, Heidi | Amess, Sir David |
| Andrew, Stuart | Ansell, Caroline |
| Argar, Edward | Atkins, Victoria |
| Bacon, Mr Richard | Baker, Mr Steve |
| Baldwin, Harriet | Barclay, Stephen |
| Bartwell, Gavin | Bebb, Guto |
| Bellingham, Sir Henry | Benyon, Richard |
| Beresford, Sir Paul | Berry, Jake |
| Berry, James | Bingham, Andrew |
| Blackman, Bob | Bloodwood, Nicola |
| Bone, Mr Peter | Borwick, Victoria |
| Brady, Mr Graham | Brazier, Sir Julian |
| Burt, rh Alistair | Bridge, Andrew |
| Brine, Steve | Bruce, Fiona |
| Buc klund, Robert | Burns, Conor |
| Burns, rh Sir Simon | Burrows, Mr David |
| Bur, rh Alistair | Cairns, rh Alun |
| Carmichael, Neil | Cartlidge, James |
| Cash, rh Sir William | Caulfield, Maria |
| Chalk, Alex | Chishti, Rehan |
| Chope, Mr Christopher | Churchill, Jo |
| Clyverly, James | Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey |
| Coffey, Dr Thérèse | Collins, Damian |
| Colville, Oliver | Costa, Alberto |
| Courts, Robert | Cox, Mr Geoffrey |
| Crouch, Tracey | Davies, David T. C. |
| Davies, Glyn | Davies, Dr James |
| Davies, Mims | Davies, Mims |
| Davies, Philip | Wilson, Phil |
| Wilson, Sammy | Winnick, Mr David |
| Winterton, rh Dame Rosie | Woodcock, John |
| Wright, Mr lain | Zeichner, Daniel |

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Jeff Smith and Thangam Debbonaire

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**NOES**

| Davies, rh Mr David | Dinenage, Caroline |
| Donelan, Michelle | Double, Steve |
| Dowden, Oliver | Doyle-Price, Jackie |
| Drummond, Mrs Flick | Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain |
| Durme, Mr Philip | Elliott, Tom |
| Ellis, Michael | Ellison, Jane |
| Ellwood, Mr Tobias | Elphicke, Charlie |
| Eustice, George | Evans, Graham |
| Evans, Mr Nigel | Evennett, rh David |
| Fabircant, Michael | Fallon, rh Sir Michael |
| Fernandes, Suella | Field, rh Mark |
| Foster, Kevin | Fox, rh Dr Liam |
| Frazer, Lucy | Freemam, George |
| Freer, Mike | Fuller, Richard |
| Fyeh, Marcus | Gale, Sir Roger |
| Garnier, rh Sir Edward | Garnier, Mark |
| Gauke, Mr Rh David | Gibb, Mr Nick |
| Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl | Glen, John |
| Goodwill, Mr Robert | Grant, Mrs Helen |
| Grayling, rh Chris | Green, Chris |
| Green, rh Damian | Greening, rh Justine |
| Grieve, rh Mr Dominic | Griffiths; Andrew |
| Gyimah, Mr Sam | Halfon, rh Robert |
| Hands, rh Greg | Harper, rh Mr Mark |
| Harrington, Richard | Harris, Rebecca |
| Hart, Simon | Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan |
| Hayes, rh Mr John | Heald, rh Sir Oliver |
| Heappey, James | Heaton-Harris, Chris |
| Heaton-Jones, Peter | Henderson, Gordon |
Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clause 14

**Objective of Education Administration**

**Gordon Marsden:** I beg to move amendment 1, page 8, line 4, at end add—

‘(3) Before an education administrator may perform functions specified in subsection (2), they must ensure an appropriate assessment is made and published of the impact of performing such functions, including, but not restricted, to—

(a) the impact on the quality of education provided to existing students of the further education body;

(b) the capacity of another body or institution to undertake any additional functions or provide education to additional students;

(c) the infrastructure of the local area, in particular transport;

(d) the ability of students to travel to another body or institution; and

(e) any financial impact on those students, including the cost of travel by students to attend another body or institution, and steps to mitigate those impacts."

(4) The Secretary of State shall make regulations to specify suitable bodies for making the assessments at subsection (3).

(5) Regulations made under subsection (4)—

(a) shall be made by statutory instrument; and

(b) shall be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.”

This amendment would ensure that an appropriate assessment is made of any potential impacts on students and their education, if an education administrator puts a further education body into “special administration” and takes action such as transferring students to another institution or keeps an insolvent institution open for existing students. This amendment would also require the Secretary of State to specify suitable bodies to perform such assessments.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 2, in clause 18, page 9, line 15, at end insert—

“(e) suspend the Office for Students protection action for students.”

This amendment would give the court the power to suspend Office for Students’ student protection action for the period of insolvency in which the education administrator has responsibility for the management of an FE body.

Amendment 3, in clause 28, page 13, line 2, at end insert—

‘(1A) Sums guaranteed under subsection (1) shall include statutory pension obligations payable to staff employed by a further education body subject to an education administration order.”

This amendment would ensure that staff employed by an FE college continue to accrue statutory Teachers Pension Scheme and Local Government Pension Scheme pension obligations during an education administration.
Amendment 22, in schedule 2, page 30, line 39, at end insert—

“3A The education administrator may not transfer assets of any further education body to a for-profit private company where he or she considers that more than half of the funding of the acquisition of the asset came from public funds.”

This amendment would ensure further education bodies with a track record of accruing assets publicly, could not be transferred to a for-profit private company.

Gordon Marsden: May I wish you a happy new year, Mr Deputy Speaker?

We turn to the extremely important part of the Bill, which is one of the reasons why the Bill is in the form it is. I shall deal with that in a moment or two when discussing amendments 2 and 3. First, I wish to focus on the importance of clause 14 and of the Government’s welcome introduction into the Bill of the role of the education administrator. Although we welcome that, we want to probe, as we did in Committee, just how it is going to work in practice, and that is the purpose of amendment 1. It is extremely important to remember the end product we are all aiming at. We hope—and I believe, as I am sure the Minister does—that the number of occasions when the detailed insolvency provisions laid out in the second part of the Bill will be required will be as few as possible. Shortly, I will suggest why I think they are particularly necessary and deal with some of the related issues.

This amendment would ensure that an appropriate assessment is made of any potential impact on students and their education if an education administrator puts a further education body into special administration and takes action such as transferring students to another institution or keeps an insolvent institution open for existing students. It would also require the Secretary of State to specify suitable bodies to perform such assessments.

The amendment has been tabled at the urging of the National Society of Apprentices and it touches on an area where the Minister and I have common ground: the importance of understanding what the end product of this new education administrator is all about. He or she is there to provide protections and support that would not be available in a traditional insolvency process. That is extremely important in terms of the position of young people, particularly those who might be at college as part of their apprenticeship or of other training.

I wish to speak particularly to the proposed new subsections 3(c), 3(d) and 3(e) set out in our amendment. One thing that the NSOA’s research has shown —this was in 2014 and the figure may well have increased since—is that apprentices spend, on average, about £24 a week on travel, which equates to a quarter of the salary of an apprentice earning the apprentice national minimum wage. Additional research has indicated that some young people were choosing the apprenticeships they could afford to get to, rather than those they were keen to do. In the light of the area review process in England and the creation of fewer, more resilient colleges, we are concerned about the impact on those potential apprentices in terms of their travel time between provider, employer and home. We have had our disagreements with the Government over that review process and will doubtless continue to probe them strongly on it.

The Opposition believe it is important that the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education takes a clear and early lead role in encouraging local authorities and transport companies to ensure that all young people, including apprentices, are covered by travel concessions. Without a high-profile champion for their needs, apprentices can too often be excluded from such concessions, because apprenticeships are perceived as employment rather than education and are excluded from the relevant definitions. The crux of the amendment is to ensure that the entitlement that the Bill gives to students to continue their education works in practice. The ambitions of the provisions on special administration are noble; the amendment is intended to be a safeguard against any unintended consequences.

8.30 pm

The education administrator will be given four options for supporting students to continue their education if their college becomes insolvent. As discussed in Committee, the options are: a provision to sell assets to keep a college afloat; a provision to bring in another body to take on different functions of the college; a provision to transfer students to another college; and, finally, in slightly ambiguous wording, a provision to keep the college “going until existing students” can finish their courses. Those are all sensible options, and I do not think that anyone present would suggest that they should not be pursued by the education administrator should students’ education be put in jeopardy by insolvency. However, I have tabled the amendment to explore what they would actually mean and to propose an assessment of the impact of the decision on students and the local community. We hope that, through such an assessment, any negative effects could be mitigated appropriately.

I shall give some brief examples. If an administrator keeps a college going for existing students to finish, it would be entirely understandable, and possibly probable, that lecturers and staff at the college might look to leave. The involvement of an education administrator would essentially be a sign of a failed college, and the taking of that option would mean that their employer would be closing in the near future anyway. Any exodus of staff in such circumstances could have untold effects on the quality of education the students received. So we want to know from the Minister—as would students, I am sure—what transitional measures would be put in place to protect the quality of education being received in a college that was being kept open only on life support.

Should the administrator decide to begin to sell off college assets to deal with insolvency issues, what protections will there be so that resources that are integral to a learner’s studies will not be sold off? Computers spring to mind as possible attractive assets that could be sold quickly for a good taking, but selling them off could leave even fewer resources to share between the remaining students of the college and have a negative impact on their experience.

What about circumstances in which students need to be transferred to another college? How close to their homes and their old college would the new college be? How much more expensive would it be to get them there? College attendees spend a lot of money on travel, the cost of which is already risking making education inaccessible for the less well off. What financial support
might be available to help them to access education at the new institution if the costs were considerably higher? Would the new college have the capacity to respond to an influx of new students?

Because of insolvency, some students could find themselves forced to travel longer distances, but there is no reference in the Bill to how they would be compensated. As I have said previously, mergers between colleges could be particularly harmful to the social fabric, and to the mobility of young people in rural and suburban areas. The implications for their being able to maintain their courses, which are, after all, the liability of the colleges, will be significant if issues such as travel are not considered.

When giving evidence to the Bill Committee, the new Further Education Commissioner said that

“provision at levels 1 and 2, in particular, needs to be as local as you can get it to the learners, whether in an urban or rural area.”—[Official Report, Technical and Further Education Public Bill Committee, 22 November 2016; c. 27, Q35.]

He accepted that if people do not have the money to travel, they will not be able to do so.

Shakira Martin of the National Union of Students also gave evidence. She said:

“It is also not clear how the Government will make sure that the education the student receives in the college is kept open and to a high-quality standard.”

Bev Robinson, the principal and chief executive of my local college, Blackpool and The Fylde College, and part of Lord Sainsbury’s panel, said she

“would wish to make sure that learning within a reasonable travel-to-learning pattern was protected as well as students.”—[Official Report, Technical and Further Education Public Bill Committee, 22 November 2016; c. 51, Q69 and 70.]

I see nothing in the Bill, and little has been said by Ministers, about where the funding to support the process will come from.

Research released in 2015 by the NUS and the Association of Colleges showed that only 49% of FE students—virtually half—could always afford their travel costs. The average travel time for those surveyed was two hours and 48 minutes a day, with an average distance of 11 miles. Four in 10 young people were relying on financial support from parents or guardians for travel costs. The situation is exacerbated by the lack of a national funding scheme. Even the minority of councils that offered discount travel to young people are unlikely to do so now following continuing Government cuts. This amendment would at least require that such things be considered, so that appropriate measures could be put in place.

Rob Marris: My hon. Friend is much more familiar with the Bill than I am. On the clarity that he seeks to introduce by this amendment, does he share my concern—perhaps he does not, because he knows the Bill better—that it is not clear in the Bill what an education administrator is? I know that he or she will be an officer of the court and that they will carry out certain functions. Training is central to what we are talking about on the Bill, yet I cannot see anything that says there has to be certain qualifications for an education administrator. It is a bit fuzzy.

Gordon Marsden: As usual, my hon. Friend is perceptive. If we had the time and if it was within the scope of this amendment, I would acquaint him with the debates in Committee during which we discussed that matter at some length. Although we have not moved any more specific amendments in that area—obviously, this is something for the other place—the Minister needs to reflect further on what, if anything, needs to be put in the Bill to answer perfectly legitimate and important questions such as the one my hon. Friend has just asked.

There are a number of effects that the invocation of these education administration powers may have on students, but that is precisely the point of the amendment: to ensure that whatever impacts these powers have in practice, they are assessed within the local circumstances of the colleges in which those changes are needed.

Let me turn now to amendment 2, with which I hope the Minister will have some sympathy. Again, if he not happy with its structure, perhaps we can juggle with it. The amendment would give the court the power to suspend student protection action by the office for students for the period of insolvency in which the education administrator has responsibility for the management of an FE body.

The Association of Colleges is particularly keen to see amendment 2 addressed. It is concerned that the insolvency regime is being introduced at the same time as a separate protection regime takes place in higher education under the control of the new office for students—that Bill has entered its Committee stage in the other place only today. We have some sympathy with its belief that the Government have missed an opportunity to introduce a joint legal regime, covering both further and higher education corporations. However, we are where we are, and that is the basis on which this proposal is being put tonight, so this Bill needs to be amended to remove duplication between the HE intervention regime and the FE regime. This affects colleges that want to maintain or develop their HE provision, which is an important part of the system and which involves up to 150,000 students. I feel strongly about this because it affects my local college, Blackpool and the Fylde College, which has up to 1,000 students.

We have two Government Bills creating two separate control systems with two sets of obligations on colleges. Ministers will say that special administration and the OFS powers will be used only in exceptional cases, but, inevitably, colleges will have to prepare for the worst. If they have higher education provision, they will need to boilerplate—double insulate—their finance to satisfy the organisations with which they deal. This could make it a lot more expensive to run HE provision than it needs to be. The purpose of the amendment is to confirm that the OFS regime will be suspended during a special administration.

I wish to speak briefly to amendment 3, which addresses the need to ensure that staff are employed by an FE college continue to accrue statutory teachers’ pension scheme and local government pension scheme obligations during an education administration. This issue has been raised not just by the Association of Colleges, but by the University and College Union. Colleges employ large numbers of staff and not all of them are teachers. In addition to caretakers, catering staff and cleaners, they employ learning support assistants, IT technicians and administrators. On Second Reading, we made a point of emphasising that, just as with universities, it is not simply teachers, administrators and bureaucrats
who keep these institutions going. The same is true of FE colleges. We would be appalled if, as a result of any of these issues, people’s pension rights or their potential pension rights were affected.

We believe that there are more than 70,000 people in colleges who are not teachers and who are eligible in law to membership of the local government pension scheme. There is some evidence that the Bill has raised concern among those running local government pension schemes and that it is already resulting in additional financial demands on colleges. We do not think that it is the Government’s intention to use the process to renege on their obligations and that the Government will ensure that any additional debt accrued is covered. That would ensure that statutory TPS and LGPS pension obligations are suspended but that employed staff can continue to accrue entitlements, but that that does not result in penalty interest, which is written into TPS and LGPS rules once they recommence.

In case the Minister thinks that this is only a hypothetical issue, it is worth making the point—the UCU has done so—that there are already real concerns about pension scheme deficits in certain colleges, and that the regulation, if the issue is not addressed, could cause alarm with lenders and raise interest rates, which could of course negate the stated aim for the introduction of insolvency regulations and preclude the increased confidence in the insolvency scenario that the Government and we are very keen to see.

Rob Marris: May I assure my hon. Friend that the Minister is well aware of that scenario, because my local college, the City of Wolverhampton College, has a big pension problem, and when I have discussed it with him he has been extremely helpful in trying to resolve it?

Gordon Marsden: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, because he has provided a specific example of precisely the issue that has led us to table the amendment.

Amendment 22—I give notice that we will be pressing it to a vote—would ensure that further education bodies with a track record of accruing assets publicly could not be transferred to a for-profit private company. We had a significant discussion about that in Committee. For the benefit of those who were not in Committee, and indeed those who were, I will try to summarise it as briefly as possible, because I think that the principle is extraordinarily important.

The current situation raises some significant questions about what would happen to the transfer of assets. The information states that assets should be transferred only to charitable bodies, and it is on that point that I wish to focus my remarks. Where the bodies are not charities, assets must be transferred in accordance with the charitable purpose of the trust. It then links to a list of prescribed bodies to which assets could be transferred, including sixth-form colleges and governing bodies. The point that I am making is that it is expected that all transfers should be made to charitable bodies, but that is not the same as saying that that is required.

When colleges were incorporated in 1992, it took them formally outside the aegis of local authorities. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) spoke eloquently about that in Committee. We have to take into account that the asset base in many cases was built up with local authority support and funding over 20 or 30 years. I reminded the Minister in Committee about my own local college, Blackpool and the Fylde College, which he has visited. He went to the Bispham campus, which has buildings and elements that go right back to the 1950s and ’60s. When the Building Colleges for the Future process took place in 2000, we did not get the new college that we hoped we would for a variety of reasons to do with where we were in the food chain. Nevertheless, I am illustrating that the estates of many buildings we are talking about have been accrued either on an active financial basis or by the ceding of land by local authorities and other organisations.

8.45 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a particular issue in higher value areas, where it may be tempting to build some more flats on public land that should actually be used for the common good?

Gordon Marsden: My hon. Friend has a double qualification to speak on the subject: as the Member of Parliament for the constituency she represents and through her previous career as a distinguished local government leader in London. She knows whereof she speaks and she is absolutely right that the problem is accentuated in those areas.

Money has come in over the years including pre-1992 and in the major Building Colleges for the Future programme that the Labour Government introduced in the 2000s. Then, of course, significant sums of money were put in by regional development agencies and sometimes through regional growth fund developments and offshoots of European structural funding. As I said, FE colleges deliver not just FE, but higher education. If 10% to 12% of total HE provision is being delivered by FE colleges, it is really important that we do not lose that position.

I do not want to rehearse—indeed, we do not have time to tonight—the arguments that were made in 2011 about the private for-profit sector training coming in and being involved with various equity funds whose investment platforms were very much focused on a broad area. However, I would say, as many in the sector would, that although the private equity funding sector can be extremely profitable and useful, it is based on a relatively short-term view of providing management and initial capital to buy other companies and then taking them off the public share markets. It is entirely reasonable for us to be concerned about the possible disposal of lands with significant amounts of public assets. The question is not simply whether it is a good thing to transfer a significant number of public sector
assets to a private provider, but what the financial guarantees are. More importantly, there are issues regarding the nature of the body and the guarantees to the students and the people employed there if such organisations use the insolvency to take on those colleges.

Ministers may talk about guarantees for staff under TUPE, but I am sure that hon. Members realise that TUPE does not offer protection forever and a day. I have had significant experience of that in my constituency in Blackpool over the years with people who have been outsourced from the civil service and TUPE-ed into other organisations that have then passed on to someone else, at which point those people’s automatic rights and security of tenure have almost become extinguished. Those are our concerns and they are not irrelevant. They are concerns of pragmatics and of principle. It is not as though there have not been concerns in the area previously.

In December 2014, the Public Accounts Committee severely quizzed officials from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which then had responsibility for the matter, about why private providers were allowed to engage in untrammelled expansion without proper quality checks. In February 2015, the Committee published a report that said that BIS has repeatedly ignored advice from the Higher Education Funding Council for England about vast sums of public money going to for-profit colleges without due process and consideration. There is the potential, as Martin Doel, the former chief executive of the Association of Colleges, said, for private organisations to “asset strip colleges’ buildings and facilities” or “pick” assets.

So, for the avoidance of doubt, we are not saying that we would oppose any private sector takeover of a college in any circumstances; we are saying that the education administrator will have to make a judgment. We are also saying that, without the protection in this amendment, the potential for the things I have described to happen would be very high, and that is why we are determined to press the amendment this evening.

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) again for his amendments. I will begin by discussing amendment 1, which affects clause 14. I have to stress that, in the unlikely event that an FE body becomes insolvent, we want to ensure that any disruption to students’ studies is avoided or minimised as far as possible. It will be for the education administrator to deal with that, and according to the relevant clause in the Bill, they will be an insolvency practitioner—they are likely to come from one of the bigger companies and to have education experience. It will be the same system as with insolvent companies.

The education administrator will decide how the special objective will best be achieved. Clause 14(2) does no more than suggest ways in which that might be done. The education administrator will need to consider the specific circumstances of any insolvency and then determine the most appropriate approach. It is inconceivable that they would draw up proposals for achieving the special objective without having had discussions with a wide range of stakeholders, such as the Further Education Commissioner, student bodies and others, and without considering a wide range of pertinent issues.

Our expectation is that that will include discussions with the key stakeholders, local authorities and others. Where appropriate, it may also involve—I brought this up in Committee—a conversation with the care leaver’s personal adviser. We discussed in Committee the additional personal and pastoral support that care leavers might need. I undertook to consider the matter further, and I hope the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) will be pleased that we are keeping the promise we made in Committee. We will ensure that the guidance to local authorities on their corporate parenting responsibilities, being introduced through the Children and Social Work Bill, includes advice on the role of personal advisers in the event of a college insolvency affecting a young person for whom they are responsible.

We expect the education administrator, in developing their proposals, to take account of the quality of alternative provision and, if it is necessary for students to complete their studies in other locations, to consider the impact of travel distances. The hon. Member for Blackpool South will be aware that we provide funding to colleges to support disadvantaged and vulnerable young people. In addition to the disadvantage funding for post-16 places—£550 million in 2016-17—which can be used to subsidise college buses, there is also the 16-to-19 bursary fund and the fund for the particularly vulnerable. Colleges will be able to offer this funding to eligible students who transfer to them under a special administrative regime. There may be scope for the education administrator to set up a scheme to cover some or all of the additional travel costs if students do have to travel to another location.

In Committee, the hon. Gentleman said: “We do not want this to become a ‘long-winded, time-consuming process’”—[Official Report, Technical and Further Education Public Bill Committee, 1 December 2016, c. 174].

I share that view. It is in the interests of students and staff to have certainty as soon as possible about what will happen. Requiring formal assessments to be carried out in the way proposed by the amendment would lengthen the process and reduce the education administrator’s discretion to find the best way of achieving the special objective. That is not to say that we do not agree that these issues are important, but I have shown that they are at the front of the education administrator’s mind.

On amendment 2, I understand the issue about double protection and why the hon. Gentleman has tabled the amendment. The amendment is unnecessary because the court, on hearing an education administration application, already has the discretion to make any interim order it thinks appropriate. If it is necessary or appropriate to make an order relating to an existing student protection plan, the court has the power to do that under the Bill.

On pensions, we have followed as far as possible the provisions of the ordinary administration regime that exists for company insolvencies. We propose to adopt similar provisions for college insolvencies, which, as I say, will be very rare indeed. As with any administration, once the administrator has adopted the employment contracts of the staff they decide to keep on, they are personally liable for the costs of those individuals, such as their salary and their pension contributions. They would take...
on the amendment only if they were confident that sufficient funds were available to meet the costs. Some pension contributions will continue to be made and benefits accrue. Some staff may be made redundant, whether at the start of the education administration or subsequently, but this will of course be in accordance with statutory employment rights. For these staff, contributions to the pension fund will end once they are no longer employed by the body, but this is no different from the position of any other person leaving their employer’s pension scheme. It is important to be clear, however, that the benefits individuals have accrued in the scheme prior to the end of their employment will not be lost.

I accept that the hon. Gentleman feels very strongly about the transfer issue. FE colleges are statutory corporations with very significant freedoms to deal with their own assets. A solvent college is free to transfer property to any person or organisation it chooses. In order to benefit, the college would of course expect to receive value when transferring an asset to a third party, and in general this would mean transferring at market value, although this depends on the nature of the transaction as a whole. In this case, however, we are talking only about a situation where a college has failed financially and is insolvent—an extreme case.

I need to make it clear to the hon. Gentleman that there are four vital protections that act as a quadruple lock to safeguard assets that belong to the college, which may well have been paid for with money from the public purse but have to be dealt with because the college is insolvent. First, unlike solvent, operational colleges that wish to transfer property, if the education administrator decides to make a transfer scheme, they are restricted as to whom they can transfer the assets. These bodies are prescribed in the secondary legislation made under section 27B of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. They are public sector bodies with educational functions. In addition, transfers can be made to private companies, but the company must be established for purposes that include the provision of educational facilities.

Secondly, just as with any other action of the education administrator, any transfer scheme must be for the purposes of achieving the special objective of avoiding or minimising disruption to students’ studies. Thirdly, creditors have a general right to challenge should they consider that the education administrator is selling things “on the cheap”, for example. Finally, the Secretary of State or Welsh Ministers must approve the proposed transfer scheme. Any approval will include, among other matters, consideration of whether it is for the purposes of achieving the special objective. I believe that the quadruple lock answers the hon. Gentleman’s concerns.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his amendments, and thank other hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I hope that my response has reassured him, and the House, on his underlying concerns. I therefore ask that the amendments are not pressed to a Division.

Gordon Marsden: I have listened carefully to what the Minister has said and taken note of his views and the proposals he has made. On that basis, we are prepared to withdraw amendment 1.

On amendments 2 and 3, I heard the reassurances that the Minister has given, but when the Bill reaches the other place there needs to be a further examination of the very important issues around the pension schemes. I am not entirely convinced that the assurances, which I am sure have been made in good faith, will actually do the business.

As regards amendment 22, I thank the Minister for his explanation of what he described as the quadruple lock, but I am afraid, not least because of seeing past practice, that we have to plan in this Bill not for the best circumstances but for the worst. This is also a really important issue of public policy that we should establish within the Bill. On that basis, we wish to press amendment 22 to a vote. I beg to ask leave to withdraw amendment 1.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule 2

EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION: TRANSFER SCHEMES

Amendment proposed: 22, page 30, line 39, at end insert—

“3A The education administrator may not transfer assets of any further education body to a for-profit private company where he or she considers that more than half of the funding of the acquisition of the asset came from public funds.”—[Gordon Marsden.]

This amendment would ensure further education bodies with a track record of accruing assets publicly, could not be transferred to a for-profit private company.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 183, Noes 278.

Division No. 116 [8.59 pm]

AYES

| Abrahams, Debbie | Cryer, John | Cunningham, Alex |
| Alexander, Heidi | Cunningham, Mr Jim |
| Ali, Rushanara | Dakin, Nic |
| Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena | David, Wayne |
| Anderson, Mr David | Davies, Geraint |
| Ashworth, Jonathan | De Piero, Gloria |
| Benn, rh Hilary | Doughty, Stephen |
| Berger, Luciana | Dowd, Peter |
| Betts, Mr Clive | Dugher, Michael |
| Blenkinsop, Tom | Eagle, Ms Angela |
| Blomfield, Paul | Eagle, Maria |
| Brabin, Tracy | Efford, Clive |
| Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben | Elliott, Julie |
| Brennan, Kevin | Elliott, Tom |
| Brown, Lyn | Elman, Mrs Louise |
| Brown, rh Mr Nicholas | Elmore, Chris |
| Buck, Ms Karen | Esterson, Bill |
| Burgon, Richard | Evans, Chris |
| Cadbury, Ruth | Farrelly, Paul |
| Campbell, rh Mr Alan | Farron, Tim |
| Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair | Field, rh Frank |
| Champion, Sarah | Fitzpatrick, Tim |
| Chapman, Jenny | Fiell, Robert |
| Coaker, Vernon | Fletcher, Colleen |
| Cooper, Julie | Flint, rh Caroline |
| Cooper, rh Yvette | Flynn, Paul |
| Coyle, Neil | Fovargue, Yvonne |
| Crausby, Sir David | Foxcroft, Vicky |
| Creagh, Mary | Furniss, Gill |
| Creasy, Stella | Gapes, Mike |
| Cruddas, Jon | |
Gardiner, Barry
Glass, Pat
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Helen
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kinahan, Danny
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Oliver
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, John
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Olney, Sarah
Onn, Melanie
Onwarah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Powell, Lucy
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Ummuna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and
Thangam Debbonaire

Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Sir Julian
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, Neil
Carlridge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Therese
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyne-Price, Jackie
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinsrake, Kevin
Holloboone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margaret
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allan, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Following my certification, the Government will table bells will be rung two minutes before the House resumes in order to make a decision on certification. The Division will suspend the House for no more than five minutes in Sandbach, Antoinette Rutley, David Rudd, rh Amber Rutley, David Sandbach, Antoinette Scully, Paul Selous, Andrew Shapps, rh Grant Sharma, Alok Shelbrooke, Alec Simpson, David Simpson, rh Mr Keith Skidmore, Chris Smith, Henry Smith, Julian Smith, Royston Soames, rh Sir Nicholas Solloway, Amanda Soubry, rh Anna Spelman, rh Dame Caroline Stephenson, Andrew Stevenson, John Stewart, Bob Stewart, Ian Stuart, Rory Streeter, Mr Gary Stride, Mel Sturdy, Julian Sunak, Rishi Swain, rh Sir Desmond Swire, rh Sir Hugo Thomas, Derek Throup, Maggie Timpson, Edward Tolhurst, Kelly Tomlinson, Justin Tomlinson, Michael Tracey, Craig Tredinnick, David Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie Truss, rh Elizabeth Turner, Mr Andrew Vickers, Martin Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa Walker, Mr Robin Wallace, Mr Ben Warburton, David Warman, Matt Wharton, James Whately, Helen Wheeler, Heather White, Chris Whitaker, Craig Whittingdale, rh Mr John Wiggles, Bill Williams, Craig Williamson, rh Gavin Wilson, Mr Rob Wilson, Sammy Wollaston, Dr Sarah Wood, Mike Wragg, William Wright, rh Jeremy Zahawi, Nadhim Tells for the Noes: Mark Spencer and Graham Stuart

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I will now suspend the House for no more than five minutes in order to make a decision on certification. The Division bells will be rung two minutes before the House resumes. Following my certification, the Government will table the appropriate consent motions, copies of which will be shortly available in the Vote Office and will be distributed by the Doorkeepers.

9.16 pm

On resuming—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I can now inform the House of my decision about certification. For the purposes of Standing Order No. 83L(2), I have certified clauses 2 to 38 of, and schedules 2 to 4 to, the Technical and Further Education Bill as relating exclusively to England and Wales and within devolved legislative competence, and clause 1 of, and schedule 1 to, the Bill as relating exclusively to England and within devolved legislative competence. Copies of my certificate are available in the Vote Office.

Under Standing Order No. 83M, consent motions are therefore required for the Bill to proceed. Does the Minister intend to move the consent motions?

Robert Halfon indicated assent.

The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England and Wales) (Standing Order No. 83M).

[Mr Lindsay Hoyle in the Chair]

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I remind hon. Members that if there are Divisions, only Members representing constituencies in England and Wales may vote on the consent motion for England and Wales, and only Members representing constituencies in England may vote on the consent motion for England. As the knife has fallen, there can be no debate

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83M(5)).

That the Committee consents to the following certified clauses of the Technical and Further Education Bill:

Clauses certified under Standing Order No. 83L(2) as relating exclusively to England and Wales and being within devolved legislative competence

Clauses 2 to 38 of, and Schedules 2 to 4 to, the Technical and Further Education Bill.—(Robert Halfon.)

Question agreed to.

The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England) (Standing Order No. 83M(4)(d)).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83M(4)(d)).

That the Committee consents to the following certified clauses of the Technical and Further Education Bill:

Clauses certified under Standing Order No. 83L(2) as relating exclusively to England and Wales and being within devolved legislative competence

Clause 1 of, and schedule 1 to, the Technical and Further Education Bill.—(Robert Halfon.)

Question agreed to.

The occupant of the Chair left the Chair to report the decisions of the Committees (Standing Order No. 83M(6)).

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair; decisions reported.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sure that the House was greatly entertained by the farce that we
have just witnessed. I hope that during the adjournment, you had the opportunity to take advantage of the facilities here and even make yourself a nice cup of tea. Mr Deputy Speaker, because it was a completely and utterly pointless waste of time.

Because of the way in which the programme motion has been designed and because of the lack of time available, it has not been possible for the Legislative Grand Committee to consider all these important English-only measures. Given that English votes for English laws is supposed to be of paramount importance and one of the main innovations of this Parliament, is it not disappointing that English Members have not had the opportunity to lend an English—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I think the hon. Gentleman and I both know, first, that that is not a point of order and, secondly, that an important debate took place today, and it was regarded as important to have a special debate on health as well. The fact is, however, that time has gone. The House agreed to the rules and they have now been applied. Going over all that is not going to change anything. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the point of order and he has now put his point on the record. The bottom line is, however, that these are the rules that the House has chosen, as he well knows. That is the end of it. We move on to Third Reading. Perhaps time for a cup of tea. [Interruption.] Order. If you have a problem, Mr Wishart, you should pursue it through the usual and proper channels. The fact is that you did not raise a point of order, as you well know. I know it was not a point of order and you know it was not, which was why you raised it. The bottom line is: if you do not like it, go and get your cup of tea while the House gets on with the business.

Third Reading

9.21 pm

Robert Halfon: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I want to give my special thanks to all the individuals who have shared their time and knowledge during the Bill’s passage through the House, to the officials who have worked so hard to bring it before Parliament and to those providing written and oral evidence. I would like to thank members of the Committee for their diligent approach and careful consideration of the practical implications of the Bill, and Members who have already spoken today.

I am clear about the priorities that we want to see in apprenticeships, further education and skills, creating a ladder of opportunity for all. These include a transformation of prestige and culture; widespread, high-quality provision; a system that addresses our skills needs; social justice; and job security and prosperity. The Bill seeks to build those priorities into our system, bringing to life the fundamental reforms needed to ensure that we have a skills and education system that rivals the best in the world.

For too long, technical education has been overly complex, overlooked and undervalued. Putting employers at the heart of these changes, as demonstrated through the current apprenticeship reforms and as recommended by Lord Sainsbury’s independent report, we can provide a clear route to employment for our young people. The changes in the Bill will support the achievements of those young people from difficult backgrounds, such as those with special educational needs or disability. In response to what my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) said earlier, we are doing a lot to implement the Maynard reforms, we are spending £2 million to help apprentices with mental health difficulties, and we announced over Christmas that apprentices with severe hearing problems will be able to do sign language instead of English as a functional skill.

We expect individuals with SEND to be over-represented on technical education routes: 23% of those who access technical education routes will have some form of special educational need compared with 7% of those taking level 3 academic qualifications, and 20% of those in the cohort as a whole.

The measures in the Bill will drive up the productivity of our country, turning us into an apprenticeship nation and providing the skills we need for our country to thrive. That is why the CBI has said:

“Businesses have long called for a vocational route...so today's proposals are a real step forward.”

David Rutley: I thank my right hon. Friend for the incredible work he has done in taking the Bill forward and I commend him for his efforts. Does he agree that one of the most important factors is engaging businesses in these apprenticeships and making the route to skills more relevant for business so that this will not only help to address the productivity challenges that he has mentioned, but improve life chances for the young people involved, too?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend, whom I thank for his work on the Committee, is absolutely right. We introduced the apprenticeship levy to change behaviour and involve businesses in supporting apprenticeships, we have created the institute and the employer panels, and we are giving huge financial incentives to businesses, especially small businesses, to ensure that they hire apprentices.

The Bill also introduces an insolvency regime for the further education sector that will, in the unlikely event of a college insolvency, provide clear-cut protections for learners to minimise disruption to their studies as far as possible, while offering certainty to creditors. During oral evidence, we heard from representatives of the Association of Colleges, Collab and others, who supported the insolvency regime and the protections that it includes for learners. Although there were issues about which the banks had questions, many spoke in support of the clarity provided by the proposed measures. Santander told us that it was keen to lend more to the further education sector, and said:

“On the Bill and the proposed insolvency regime, we are actually supportive of the clarity that they provide.”—[Official Report, Technical and Further Education Public Bill Committee, 22 November 2016; c. 38, Q41.]

Kelvin Hopkins: As the Minister will remember, I suggested in Committee that all colleges should have professionally qualified members with financial skills in both management and governorship, so that skilled eyes would be trained on the finances to ensure that at least mistakes were not made internally.
Robert Halfon: I accept the hon. Gentleman’s premise, but, as I think I said in Committee, I do not want to put a straitjacket on colleges. The principal of Blackpool and The Fylde College acknowledged that there might be different requirements for different colleges. Nevertheless, there should be as much financial expertise as possible in further education colleges. When there is real financial leadership, those colleges will always be in good financial health whatever the funding pressures.

We forecast that, by March 2017, we will have spent a total of about £140 million on propping up colleges facing extreme financial difficulties. That money should have been spent on education and training priorities. While we envisage that only a very small number of colleges will ever find themselves insolvent, providing protection for learners and clarity for creditors is a crucial part of what we are trying to do, and of our responsibility to support the sector.

Since the Committee stage, we have been in a position to publish for consultation the Secretary of State’s draft strategic guidance. Following our conversations about the importance of incorporating the views of students in the running of the institute, it will come as no surprise that the guidance sets out our firm expectation that the institute will establish an apprentice panel by April this year. The panel will report directly to the board, ensuring that the learner voice—the apprentice voice—is at the heart of the institute. I am glad that the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) is encouraged by our approach. We also intend to publish for consultation before the institute becomes operational in April, an operational plan for the institute which will set out in more detail how it intends to carry out its functions.

As for the insolvency elements of the Bill, we discussed in Committee the protections given to students through the special objective, and the possible ways in which the education administrator could ensure that disruption to students’ studies was avoided or minimised. In particular, we discussed whether the particular regard that the education administrator must have to the needs of students with special educational needs and disabilities should be extended to any other groups. I also recognise the importance of taking account of the needs of care leavers, recognising that they may need additional personal or pastoral support to deal with any uncertainty or upheaval should their college ever be subject to insolvency. Such support is best provided for each individual by a local authority-assigned personal adviser. As I said earlier, we will take steps to ensure that the guidance being produced for local authorities on their corporate parenting responsibilities includes advice on the role of personal advisers in the event that the young people for whom they are responsible attend colleges that enter education administration.

There is much to be proud of in our current system, given that 71% of FE colleges are good or outstanding and more than 50% are in good financial health, the proportion of 16 to 18-year-olds in education or taking up apprenticeships is at a record high, the reforms made following the 2011 Wolf review have raised the quality of qualifications, and 88% of students were recorded as having a sustained education destination in the year after key stage 5.

We know that high-quality further education can have a truly transformative impact on young people. That is why we announced as part of the spending review that we will protect the 16-to-19 national base rate of £4,000 per student for the duration of this Parliament. By 2020, if we include the adult education budget, the 19-plus apprenticeship funding and advanced learner loans, more funding will be available to support adult further education participation than at any time in England’s history.

The measures in this Bill will build on the key priorities, enabling students to make better choices about their future, with the opportunity to gain qualifications valued by employers that will secure their future prosperity and that of our nation.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): In my constituency we are very fortunate in having Richard Huish sixth-form college, which has just been shortlisted as one of the six best sixth-form colleges in the country for The Times award. It runs apprenticeship courses, but there are concerns that it cannot get enough students to apply for some of the business admin courses. There is a real demand from business for those students, yet there are loads of apprentices doing courses where business does not really have jobs for them. Does the Minister agree with me and the principal of the college that provisions in this Bill to develop the synergy between education, apprenticeships and business are welcome, and indeed vital in addressing the skills shortage in this country?

Robert Halfon: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and she is absolutely right: everything this Government are doing—the apprenticeship levy, this Bill, FE and technical education reform, the drive up of standards, the encouragement of apprenticeships, the money we are putting in with £2.5 billion that will be doubled by 2020—is designed to solve the problems she has talked about.

The OECD has said about the skills plan that “the UK has a promising plan to advance technical education from a last resort to a first choice.” Colleges, too, have spoken highly of the plan, including the principal of my own Harlow College, who said: “As colleges we are not just about courses, we are about careers—we therefore believe that any reform that brings us closer to employers means our students gain higher skills and better jobs.”

This Bill is a Ronseal Bill: it does what it says on the tin. It transforms the prestige and quality of apprenticeships and technical education in our country, addresses the skills deficit, protects students in the event that colleges face extreme financial difficulty, and ensures that the most disadvantaged are able to climb the ladder of opportunity. The Bill underlines the Prime Minister’s commitment to a country that works for everyone. I commend the Bill to the House.

9.32 pm

Gordon Marsden: May I associate myself with the Minister’s comments in thanking the officials and all Committee members? I particularly thank my Labour colleagues, who did sterling work in supporting us on the Front Bench in Committee. May I also commend the support that the Public Bill Committee gave to us? The role of the Opposition in challenging the Government on these matters is sometimes equivalent to that of David taking on Goliath; we do manage occasionally to get a few slingshots in, and I am grateful on this occasion they have not incapacitated the Minister concerned.
This is an important Bill with some important provisions, which is why we have not opposed it on Second Reading or on Third Reading tonight. However, that does not mean that we do not continue to have profound concerns about its implementation, process and progress. That was indicated in the excellent, although relatively truncated, debate we had on the amendments, in the contributions of my hon. Friends the Members for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Morris), for Luton North (Kelin Hopkins), who is still here, for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who gave an inspiring speech on the need for us to have vocational passions, and for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), a relatively new Member of the House. All of them talked about practical issues such as implementation, about which we still have real concerns. This is not just a matter of formulae. For a long time—indeed, until it was almost too late—there were no links between higher education and further education in the way envisaged when the previous higher and further education legislation was brought forward.

I ask the Minister to reflect on a matter that is perhaps even more important. We have had a spirited discussion today about whether we need to have a strategy for careers advice in the Bill. We still believe that we do, and we think the Minister has missed a trick in that respect. The inclusion of such a strategy would have entrenched his position and his passion for careers advice, rather than diminishing it. The broader issue, however, is that the things that the Minister and everyone else would like to see happen are not solely a matter for the Department for Education. I know that he is as passionate about delivering traineeships as I am, but to do that we need to build structures and links between the DFE and the Department for Work and Pensions and to reach a concordance over the 16-hour law and other things. If the Government want to deliver careers advice, there will need to be a similar engagement and balancing act between the DWP and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. These things cannot just be left in one particular box.

I pay tribute to the Minister for the passion that he has shown on apprenticeships, but the fact is that apprentices are still handicapped by a number of things on which the Government have yet to prove their bona fides. That includes issues relating to GCSEs in English and maths. I have heard encouraging words on that from the Secretary of State and the Minister, but they have not yet nailed that issue down and it will not go away unless there is a satisfactory solution to the often soul-destroying requirement to retake GCSEs in those subjects.

Apprentices do not work and exist in a vacuum. The question of how their families are supported—through child benefit and in other ways—needs to be looked at, not just by the Department for Education but by other Departments as well. If that does not happen, there will be a real problem. Our new clause on this matter was ruled not to be within the scope of the Bill, but this is still a really important issue.

Mention was made in passing of devolution. I do not want to go into that issue much further tonight, but the Government need to think very clearly about it. They are going ahead with the devo-max process for combined authorities. Let us hope that the structures in the Bill do not reflect the reality of what the delivery of adult education, and possibly apprenticeships, will be like. Personally, I do not think that we can have a proper long-term skills strategy on a localised basis without taking apprenticeships into account as well as adult education. That point has not been addressed in the Bill.

The Minister has talked about insolvencies, and I associate myself with his view that it is a minority issue in regard to further education colleges. Let us pray that it continues to be so. However, it is worth remembering that the Bill is being introduced in the context of a period of profound funding cuts in the FE sector. The Government need to address the fact that that is the context in which they have decided to introduce this standalone Technical and Further Education Bill. The Minister also mentioned travel support. I note in passing that if the Government had taken up our proposals on education maintenance allowance, the process might perhaps have been speedier.

I want to return to the question of how the provisions will be delivered, and the timescale involved. It is three months until the apprenticeship levy funding kicks in. We still do not know who the new chief executive of the institute will be, and we do not know about the board. We have had some progress on those issues today, but we are told, for example, that the Skills Funding Agency will stay in charge of the new register of apprenticeships, which raises genuine bewilderment among many people out there—the Minister will have seen the comments made to FE Week in the past couple of days on this subject—as to why it is not Ofqual, if not IFATE, that is administering the register of approved apprenticeship assessment organisations. Is the real reason why the SFA is doing this because it is basically the civil service and that it would give a reserve power to Ministers to micromanage? It is not a question of what the Minister might do but what some of his successors might do.

Those important issues will need to be reflected on in the other place. Two key issues still remain. Will the funding and the staffing numbers that were dragged out of the Government when Peter Lauener spoke to the Committee be adequate for all the responsibilities? I would say that it is doubtful at this stage. How arm’s length or genuinely independent of judgment will the new institute be, or will Whitehall still be micromanaging the strings? Those are not just petty issues. They are issues that, if not resolved properly, will not gain the full-hearted consent of stakeholders, providers and all the people whom the Minister needs, and we all need, in order to meet the targets and to make his aspirations and my aspirations for apprenticeships for the next generation a reality.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Business without Debate

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENT

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)),

TAXATION: A COMMON CONSOLIDATED CORPORATE TAX BASE

Corporate Tax Base; considers that the proposals do not comply with the principle of subsidiarity for the reasons set out in the Twenty-third Report of the European Scrutiny Committee (HC 71-xxi); regrets that because of the inflexibility of the deadline for providing a Reasoned Opinion over the Christmas period it has not proved possible in the time available for the House to serve a Reasoned Opinion in accordance with Article 6 of Protocol No. 2 annexed to the EU Treaties on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality; and instructs the Clerk of the House to forward this motion and the Reasoned Opinion recommended by the European Scrutiny Committee to the European Commission by way of political dialogue.—(Christopher Pincher.)

Question agreed to.

Sixth-form Education: International Comparisons

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

9.41 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I pay tribute to all those working in sixth-form education for the fantastic work they do on behalf of our young people and our country. I particularly praise the two excellent colleges, North Lindsey and John Leggott, that serve young people in north Lincolnshire. Having led John Leggott as principal before being elected to this House, I know the importance of this phase of education in transforming life opportunities. I also know that, since I stood down as principal, the challenges facing those who lead colleges has been immense. Three direct cuts were imposed on 16 to 18 funding in the last Parliament, whereas five to 16 funding was protected. On top of that 13.6% real-terms cut, colleges now face a further 8% erosion of the current national funding rate over the remainder of this Parliament due to inflation. There are further pressures from increased employer pension and national insurance costs.

The average funding per student in the sixth forms of schools and academies and in sixth-form colleges is now £4,583, which is 20% less than the funding received to educate each 11 to 16-year-old and 47% less than the average university tuition fee of £8,636 per student. How, in all logic, can it be so much cheaper to educate a 16 to 18-year-old than a 15-year-old or a 19-year-old?

The Government claim that they have “provided sufficient funds for every full-time student to do a full timetable of courses”.

But they have not published any research on the sufficiency of the funding provided to educate 16 to 18-year-olds. In short, the Government do not know how much it costs “to do a full timetable of courses”.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. With his track record, he is the right person to be leading it. I suspect like many colleagues, I will be mentioning my college, Lowestoft College, but does he agree that sixth-form colleges such as Lowestoft are the underfunded, unsung heroes of the British education system and that, with the right resources, they can play a key role in addressing this country’s productivity gap?

Nic Dakin: The hon. Gentleman is right to praise Lowestoft College, which, like many colleges in the country, does a fantastic job on behalf of the young people it educates. He is also right to say that these colleges need to be properly funded to ensure they continue to do that good job into the future.

In reality, the national funding rate—currently £4,000 for 16 and 17-year-olds and £3,300 for 18-year-olds—is calculated by taking the settlement arrived at between the Department for Education and the Treasury, and dividing it by the number of students in the 16 to 18 age group. It is no more sophisticated than that. In the independent sector, sixth-form fees are higher than secondary fees to reflect the actual cost of delivery for this age group.
Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend accept the remarkable statistic that sixth-form colleges outperform all other 16 to 19 forms of institution across the country, as has been recorded by the Sixth Form Colleges Association in its wonderful manifesto?

Nic Dakin: I thank my hon. Friend for rightly highlighting the high level of performance that sixth-form colleges deliver. He does a fantastic job as a governor of Luton Sixth-Form College and as chair of the all-party group on sixth-form colleges.

There is now a significant gap between the funding made available to educate sixth formers and the actual cost of delivering the rounded, high-quality curriculum we would all want to see well into the future.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I, too, have a highly acclaimed sixth-form college in my constituency, Richard Huish College. It has just been shortlisted for The Times Educational Supplement top sixth form awards, and I hope it might win—potentially beating Lowestoft College. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that with the budgetary cuts we have seen the enrichment courses—art, drama and sport—being dropped from many sixth-form colleges? It is often in such areas that the students who might not excel academically could excel. Might there not be a potential knock-on effect on mental health—everybody is talking about that—and spikes in young people’s mental health if we do not enable them to do these much more rounded courses, which are so beneficial?

Nic Dakin: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the fact that certain elements of the curriculum are under threat when there is such pressure on funding. Enrichment activities, including those that address mental health issues, are one of the many activities that have been under threat over the past six years. The dramatic collapse in funding does have an inevitable impact on the education that 16 to 18-year-olds receive. As someone who has managed resources in a sixth-form college, I know that there are only a small number of variables to play with when facing significant funding cuts, as the sector has since 2010. Alongside the usual good management things relating to the back office, procurement, charges, efficiencies and so on, there are a limited number of options: shrink the curriculum offer; increase general studies; reduce student contact time; increase class sizes. In reality, all those things have to be done to make things hang together.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly powerful case. On the issue of underfunding, does he agree that sixth-form colleges are uniquely cruelly treated, because unlike schools and academies they cannot cross-subsidise from the more generous funding available for younger students in schools and they do not receive a VAT reimbursement? So not only are they the most efficient, with the best track record on delivery, but they are the most underfunded section of the higher education area.

Nic Dakin: The hon. Lady is right to point out the performance of sixth-form colleges and the pressure on their funding. Of course the funding situation for 16 to 18 education is not just affecting sixth-form colleges—it is affecting school sixth forms and academy sixth forms, too. It is affecting all 16 to 18 experience.

Since 2010, the programmes of study followed by students have altered in those typical ways I outlined. Back then, most level 3 students followed a curriculum of four advanced courses in year 1, plus general studies, enrichment and tutorial. They progressed on to three or four courses in year 2, plus enrichment and tutorial. In most cases, as the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) pointed out, the enrichment has gone, the tutorial has shrunk significantly, general studies has largely disappeared and the number of advanced level courses taken is now normally three in both years. That leads to significantly lower student contact time. I know from experience that there is a direct correlation between contact time and achievement, particularly for students who have struggled to achieve at 16.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I thank my north Lincolnshire neighbour for giving way and congratulate him on securing this debate. On the point he just made, he will know that his neighbouring constituencies in north and north-east Lincolnshire are coastal communities, so have particular problems with social mobility. Does he share my hope that when he responds the Minister will indicate the Government’s continuing support for sixth-form colleges such as Franklin College in Grimsby?

Nic Dakin: I thank my constituency neighbour for his contribution. Franklin College is, of course, a high-performing, well-regarded sixth-form college, as are all four Humber sixth-form colleges—Wyke College, Wilberforce College and, of course, John Leggott College in Scunthorpe. I am sure the Minister is listening carefully. He is a very good Minister and I am sure he is going to give us all hope for a rosy future when he speaks later in the debate.

The impact of the changes on students has been significant. The Sixth Form Colleges Association’s 2016 funding impact survey shows that sixth-form college education is an increasingly narrow and part-time experience. Two thirds of sixth-form colleges have already dropped courses as a result of funding cuts and cost increases. Some 39% have dropped courses in modern foreign languages, and the vast majority have reduced or removed the extracurricular activities available to students, including music, drama, sport and languages. Worryingly, 64% do not believe that the funding they will receive next year will be sufficient to support students who are educationally or economically disadvantaged—the very point made by my neighbour, the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers).

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Franklin College in my constituency has already been mentioned. It has experienced significant funding cuts, to the point where it has lost around £1 million per year, resulting in a reduction in the courses offered. Does my hon. Friend think that that will also have an impact if students want to choose a variety of higher education courses to further their education beyond A-level?

Nic Dakin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is an inevitable impact on the progression into higher education, particularly for courses such as modern foreign languages, as well as, rather worryingly, certain aspects of science, technology, engineering and mathematics courses.
Today, 15 to 17 hours of weekly tuition and support has become the norm for sixth-form students in England, but that would be considered part-time study in most national education systems. Research commissioned by the Sixth Form Colleges Association from the Institute of Education describes sixth-form education in England as "uniquely narrow and short" compared with the model adopted in Shanghai, Singapore, Sweden and elsewhere.

In Shanghai, the upper secondary curriculum is based on eight fundamental subjects: Chinese, mathematics, English, science, thoughts and politics, society, arts and physical education. In addition, there are extended subjects and activities that allow for greater specialisation or for new or collective forms of learning. Finally, there are research-based subjects that take two hours per week. Overall, there is a total of 35 lessons per week, plus an extra hour per day for meetings and physical exercise. Lower and upper secondary education offer broadly the same number of lessons per week, and students receive at least 30 hours of tuition per week.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I rise to speak as one of the vice-chairmen of the all-party group on sixth-form colleges. I am proud to have Greenhead College and Huddersfield New College in my neck of the woods. I went to both their awards evenings last week. Greenhead College was celebrating 60 of its students getting their Duke of Edinburgh gold award, while 85% of New College students went on to university and academically it is in the top 10% nationally. Nevertheless, as we have heard there are huge funding challenges. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the conclusions of this debate should be that we have a review of funding so that it really does tackle the realistic costs of providing a well-rounded range of subjects so that we can compete internationally?

Nic Dakin: I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman’s comments. He is absolutely on the money—literally and metaphorically. The Minister needs to review the funding and to check that we are appropriately resourcing that well-rounded education that we all want to see. The reason for making these international comparatives is to say, “Well this is what is being invested in other high performing systems.” If we want to compete effectively with those high-performing systems, we need to be willing to look at what we are doing in a self-critical way and to set out our stall accordingly. I am sure that that is what the Minister will want to do when he comes to speak later on in the debate.

In Singapore, the upper secondary curriculum is based on core examination subjects, elective examination subjects and compulsory non-examination subjects. The core examination subjects are studied for around eight hours a week. Students choose three to four elective subjects and study each for around four to six hours a week. Compulsory non-examination subjects—assembly, physical education and character development—take up to four hours a week. Students receive between 27 hours’ tuition and support for those taking three elective subjects and 32 hours for those taking four. The duration of study is either two or three years.

Let us make a European comparison. In Sweden, where I worked for a number of years, upper secondary education is structured primarily through three-year national programmes. Each programme covers a series of foundation subjects—English, history, physical education and health, mathematics, science studies, social studies, Swedish and religion. In addition, a number of subjects specific to a given programme are chosen. Students receive around 19 hours of tuition a week, but, crucially, this entitlement is for three years rather than two.

The Institute of Education concludes its report by describing the English model as “low hours and short duration.” Students in other leading education systems receive more tuition time, study more subjects, and in some cases benefit from a three-year programme of study rather than a two-year programme.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this subject to the House. In fact, the issue has been raised in my constituency by the principal of Barton Peveril, who has talked about the problems relating to enrichment, the narrowing of education, efficiency and cross-funding, which are at the heart of our children’s education, and of course about the impact internationally. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if the Government were to look at this matter, there would be an impact on our universities? I am talking about them having to pick up the pieces of our narrow education if we are to compete internationally.

Nic Dakin: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. In some ways, she reinforces the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn).

As I said, the Institute of Education describes the English model as “low hours and short duration.” By contrast with their peers elsewhere in the world, students in England receive around half as much tuition time and are following a three-subject diet. In addition, the funding cut for 18-year-old students has created a financial disincentive for schools and colleges to offer young people a third year to complete their sixth-form studies—and these are the very young people who need the additional support and additional time.

The Institute of Education contrasted the narrowing of the curriculum in England when students reach the sixth form compared with the model adopted by our international competitors. It said that “unlike other national systems where the amount of tuition actually increases in upper secondary education when compared with the lower secondary phase, the English experience is the opposite. The sharp reduction in the number of subjects studied post-16 (an average of four subjects, now reducing to three) compared with pre-16 (10+ GCSEs or vocational equivalent) appears to represent sudden movement to a part-time curriculum.”

Bizarrely, despite these huge pressures on mainstream 16 to 18-year-olds, the Government have, since 2010, been able to spend money on unproven, untested and different types of provision for 16 to 18-year-olds. That is money that could have been spent on mainstream students. It has been unwise indulgence in political peccadillos at a time when there is contraction in both the population and the budgets.

Some 169 new academy and maintained sixth forms were opened between 2010 and 2015, but the total number of enrolled school students has been static. Average cohort sizes were already small and have declined further. Curiously, the Department for Education offers
little in the way of practical advice to make school sixth forms work and has not researched the effectiveness of the reforms that have brought in so many smaller sixth forms.

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Nick Dakin: In March 2016, Ministers introduced five new tests to ensure that new sixth forms are viable, which I welcome, but that was a limited step because it does not cover sixth forms that are already open. There is now a long tail of small institutions, with 1,180 school sixth forms enrolling fewer than 100 students. There is emerging evidence that some of their performance is not quite what we would wish it to be.

Meanwhile, university technical colleges have struggled to achieve viability in a system currently built around exams and transfer at age 16. As a result, six have closed and one did not open as planned. A sensible policy from the Department for Education would be to review sixth forms that are particularly small or underperforming, in the interests of value for money at a time when money is short.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): May I add to the adulation that my hon. Friend is rightly receiving for his speech tonight? I cannot help mentioning Ashton Sixth Form College, which is just outside my constituency—it is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who is sitting on the Front Bench. Does he agree that one of the strange bits of Government policy, as I understand it, is that where demand does exist for more sixth-form provision, that can be met only through the creation of school, academy or free school sixth-form provision? That seems very strange, given the credit that has rightly been given to the sixth-form sector by Members on both sides of the House this evening.

Nick Dakin: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Minister is listening carefully and will obviously take that point on board, along with the other points that hon. Members have made.

I would like to conclude by posing a few questions to the Minister. Why are sixth-formers in England funded to receive only half the tuition time and support available to sixth-formers in Shanghai, Singapore and other leading education systems? Why are sixth-formers in England facing a standard diet of just three advanced-level subjects, while those in other international systems can study eight or nine?

It is good to have a Secretary of State who was educated in the comprehensive system and who attended a comprehensive sixth-form college—it is a first that I very much welcome. She will be well aware that 744,000 16 to 18-year-olds choose to study in colleges, while 433,000 choose to study in schools. All are affected by the squeeze in funding for their age group. Will she therefore move away from funding sixth-formers based on an arbitrary funding rate and conduct a review of funding to ensure that it is linked to a realistic cost of delivering a rounded, high-quality curriculum? Will she agree to work with the Sixth Form Colleges Association, the Association of Colleges and the Association of School and College Leaders in conducting the review, building on the current evidence base?

Finally, in the state sector, education funding decreases at the age of 16 to an average of £4,583 per student, per year. In the independent sector, school fees increase at the age of 16 to an average of £15,333 per student, per year. What does the Minister think are the implications of that for social mobility? On the day when the Prime Minister has made an important speech on the matter, it sounds to me like the sort of everyday injustice that she would be keen to tackle in her desire to build a shared society.

10.4 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): May I start by adding to House’s adulation of the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nick Dakin) and congratulate him on securing the debate? Ensuring high-quality post-16 education is a priority for the Government and for the country. We recognise the contribution of the dedicated staff working in all types of post-16 education and the hard work of students. In fact, a record proportion of young people are now participating in education, training or apprenticeships. I can give my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) the assurance that the Government support sixth-form colleges, including the sixth-form college mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) and Franklin College in Grimsby.

Education and training in England is widely respected around the world, but we are determined to make further improvements to ensure that 16 to 19-year-olds are ready for the demands of the workplace by moving directly into skilled employment or by continuing to higher education. We are therefore reforming academic and technical education for over-16s and we are learning from the best international systems.

All countries that we look to learn from have a stage of education that no longer exclusively takes place in school. At this stage, there are options for students to gain relevant experience to prepare them for work either through apprenticeships or technical education, as we heard in the previous debate, or to prepare for further academic study at university. The way that works and the age at which it starts varies considerably around the world. For example, in countries such as Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, there is a high level of investment by employers in vocational training in the secondary phase and an early emphasis on workplace training. That leads to lower rates of young people who are not in education, employment or training than in England, but the difference in academic standards between pupils from different socioeconomic backgrounds in those countries is larger than in England.

By contrast, only about one fifth of 15 to 19-year-olds in countries such as Japan and Korea are enrolled in vocational upper-secondary programmes. The remaining 80% of those cohorts continue a rigorous academic programme. It is useful to benchmark ourselves—if “to benchmark” is a new verb—against such countries to understand the strengths and weaknesses of our education system and to raise our expectations of what students here can achieve. That is why I am determined that we should improve our maths teaching by learning from
Alison Wolf in 2011 found that at least 350,000 16 to 19-year-olds conducted by Professor of reform under way. The landmark review of vocational technical education, where we have a major programme quality teaching rather than taking exams.

We have also redesigned the assessment model, increasing the time available for high-undergraduate-level study. We have also redesigned a number of key A-levels, to ensure that pupils continue to be fully equipped for the future. We are strengthening the design of A-levels to make sure that pupils continue to be fully equipped for the future. We are strengthening the design of A-levels to make sure that students who did not achieve a good GCSE pass at age 16. More broadly, we are reforming both academic and technical education.

International examples of programme hours are widely used, but those comparisons need to be carefully interpreted. It is important that we understand what the estimates include, how programmes of longer duration or higher intensity are funded and how they sit beside other routes for young people to take from school to work. It is not always clear in the various studies where work experience is included in the figures. Certainly in the planned hours used to benchmark our own programmes for funding, we do not include self-directed study or homework, which is a key part of this phase of education. It is important that we develop a system that serves our pupils and our economy.

In England, we have an established academic route for sixth-form students through well-respected A-level qualifications. It is true that our system requires pupils to make choices and therefore, to a certain extent, to specialise in a smaller number of subjects for the sixth-form stage, but some degree of specialisation is a feature of systems in other countries as well. Through the A-level route, our academic system at post-16 is effective in preparing pupils for successful futures through in-depth study of the subjects they choose. We have some of the best universities in the world, and the proportion of English students studying in higher education is now larger than it has ever been. That includes the highest ever entry rate for the most disadvantaged 18-year-olds.

Of course, we are not standing still, and we are strengthening the design of A-levels to make sure that pupils continue to be fully equipped for the future. We have given higher education providers a leading role in redesigning a number of key A-levels, to ensure that pupils who take these qualifications are prepared for undergraduate-level study. We have also redesigned the assessment model, increasing the time available for high-quality teaching rather than taking exams.

Where we have not matched our neighbours is in technical education, where we have a major programme of reform under way. The 2011 review of vocational education for 14 to 19-year-olds conducted by Professor Alison Wolf in 2011 found that at least 350,000 16 to 19-year-olds were working towards vocational qualifications that offered no clear progression routes. The review led to the introduction of new study programmes and of per-student funding instead of per-qualification funding to ensure fair funding for FE colleges in line with other 16-to-19 institutions. As a direct result of the recommendations in the Wolf report, we now include only approved qualifications in performance tables. This means that young people can have confidence that their qualifications will enable them to progress to further study or into employment.

However, we recognise that the system is still not doing enough to support students who wish to pursue technical education. We recognise that we are still not matching the most effective systems of technical education in other European economies. That is why, following publication of the Sainsbury review, we are embarking on a radical reform of England’s post-16 technical education system. Learning from the best technical education systems overseas, we are working to introduce new technical routes that will enable young people to gain the knowledge and skills required for work, according to standards designed in partnership with employers. Bringing training for young people and adults in line with the needs of businesses and industry will be key to looking at increases in productivity, which has lagged behind, even as economic growth and employment levels have improved. It will also help to ensure that young people and adults can move into sustained and skilled careers that lead to prosperity and security.

Alongside that, we are continuing the reform of apprenticeships, as we have heard. We are increasing the quality of apprenticeships through more rigorous assessment and grading at the end of the apprenticeship. We are also giving employers control of the funding so they become more demanding customers. We are committed to reaching 3 million apprenticeship starts in England by 2020.

Caroline Lucas: I genuinely very much welcome the Minister’s support for the sixth-form sector and sixth-form colleges, but he has been speaking for nearly 10 minutes and has said nothing about the arbitrary funding that has been the focus of so much of the concern expressed from both sides of the House. Will he commit to look at this funding issue? Will the Government look at how much funding is required for the rounded curriculum that sixth-form colleges want to deliver? Colleges in my constituency, such as Varndean College and Brighton, Hove & Sussex Sixth Form College, are desperate to deliver it but are being undermined by the lack of funding, which the Minister still has not really addressed.

Mr Gibb: If only the hon. Lady had waited just two more seconds, we would have come to that pivotal part of my response to the debate.

Clearly, the right level of funding needs to be in place to match our ambitious academic and technical reforms. In 2013, investment in education in the UK as a whole—combining public and private sources—was above the OECD average across all phases, including post-16. We have made the system more coherent so that school sixth forms and colleges are all funded and have their performance reported in the same way. Funding is on a per-student basis, giving schools and colleges the freedom to design the best programmes for their students, rather than rewarding institutions for providing large numbers of small qualifications that have little value.
Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister says that all institutions are treated the same, but free schools, in particular, were outwith the area reviews of provision that we have just seen undertaken in many parts of the country. Is he aware of Connell Sixth Form College in my constituency, which was opened by a grammar school and has recently received a “requires improvement” Ofsted rating? That sixth-form college is operating below the numbers required to sustain it, and it was outwith the area review. Does he think that is a good use of public funds in the context of this debate?

Mr Gibb: Area reviews can take schools into account, but 2,000 or more schools have sixth forms, and if we were to bring them all into the area reviews, that would make the whole system unmanageable. The free school system was introduced to challenge the status quo in terms of sixth forms and in terms of schools themselves, because in the past we have had monopoly provision of new schools. The free school movement has been phenomenal in opening up sixth forms such as King’s College London Mathematics School, where 100% of youngsters are getting A or A* grades in maths A-level, and Exeter Mathematics School. These schools are challenging the status quo in these areas and providing a very high-quality education. We need to see more of those innovative and demanding free sixth-form schools that open up for young people opportunities that they would not otherwise have had.

Nic Dakin: I have been listening to the Minister very carefully. Does he accept that the research available demonstrates that since 2010 the funding for 16 to 18-year-olds has been reduced in real terms, and that the impact of that has been to reduce the level of tuition time to 13 to 17 hours per student? I am interested in whether he recognises that as an issue, and if so, whether he sees it as a problem.

Mr Gibb: I absolutely recognise that resources are tight for 16-to-19 education and training. In recent years, we have had to make some post-16 savings while working hard to sustain funding levels for schools, bearing in mind the fact that success in school pre-16 is the best predictor of outcomes in post-16 education.

We have made clear commitments to 16-to-19 education, where we have protected the base rate of funding at £4,000 per student for all types of providers until 2020. This was announced in the 2015 spending review, at a time when public finances are under great pressure. Providers receive additional funding for students taking part in more expensive programmes, and there is also a large programme uplift for providers who have pupils studying four or more A-levels, provided they achieve minimum grade requirements, and about £540 million of funding is allocated each year to enable schools and colleges to give extra support to disadvantaged students. That is essential in helping those from poorer backgrounds or those who, pre-16, have not attained well enough to get the help they need to succeed.

Overall, we plan to invest about £7 billion during 2016-17—taking apprenticeships together with other education and training options—to ensure that there is a place in education or training for every 16 to 19-year-old who wants one. This commitment means that all types of providers are funded for 600 planned hours per year per full-time student. That level of funding supports a significant programme of study. For example, it will allow for three A-levels and 50 hours of tutorials, plus either one AS-level or about 150 hours of enrichment or work experience. While we have not been able to protect budgets for sixth-form education in real terms, there is funding to ensure that every sixth-form age student has the opportunity to undertake high-quality study that will help them to move on to skilled work or further or higher education.

Our commitment to the post-16 sector has contributed to the current record-high proportion of 16 to 18-year-olds in education, training or apprenticeships, and the lowest proportion of young people not in education, employment or training since consistent records began in 1994. Applications to higher education from 18-year-olds are at an all-time high.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Scunthorpe for raising this important issue. I recognise that there is more to do to continue improving our post-16 education system to ensure it is established as one of the world’s best, but we should be proud of the achievements so far and recognise that we are building a system that is both affordable and in keeping with our country’s needs.

Question put and agreed to.

10.20 pm

House adjourned.
The humanitarian situation in Yemen is one of the most serious crises in the world. The UN estimates that 19 million people are in need of help. The UK is providing support, and we are spending more than £100 million to provide assistance. We all agree that a political solution is the best way to end this conflict. I met foreign Ministers from Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and the United States on 18 December in Riyadh, along with Ismail Ahmed, the UN envoy, to advance the UN road map, which I hope will bring all parties back to the table.

Luciana Berger: The humanitarian situation in Yemen is deteriorating, and the UN estimates that 80% of the population are in need of humanitarian aid—about 21.2 million Yemenis. According to the Government’s own figures, British aid, although welcome, has reached less than 5% of the people in Yemen who need it—obviously nowhere near enough for a major emergency that is affecting people not only in Yemen, but in my constituency.

What plans does the Minister have to increase the number of people in Yemen who can directly benefit from British support?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady raises an important aspect of this very sad conflict: we are denied a political solution, but it is the people of Yemen who are suffering. The cause of the problem is the inability to get aid into the country. The port of Aden is used as a conduit, but the main access to the majority of the country is through the port of Hodeidah, which unfortunately is currently in Houthis hands. The cranes are out of action, but we must ensure that we can gain greater access through. I spoke with Ismail Ahmed about what we can do to repair the cranes so that bigger ships can get in with equipment and support, which can then be distributed across the country.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I wholly endorse the remarks of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). The UN reports that there might be up to 370,000 starving children in Yemen, so in addition to our own aid what discussions has my hon. Friend had with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states about providing significant humanitarian aid themselves?

Mr Ellwood: It is fair to say—that while the headlines are about the military campaign Saudi Arabia and other members of the coalition are doing huge amounts to provide support and humanitarian aid for refugees in their countries. This is often done outside the auspices of the United Nations. During the United Nations General Assembly, my right hon. Friend the Secretary for International Development held a conference to bring further countries together to support Britain’s work to get aid into and across the country.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I thank the Minister and the Foreign Secretary for their personal efforts in trying to broker a ceasefire. That is the key: we need a ceasefire in the same way as Turkey and Russia managed to achieve one for Syria. Have there been any further discussions with the United States about getting this back on to the agenda of the Security Council? I know that the Foreign Secretary was in America at the end of last week, so was this issue raised? When can we get this back for discussion at the UN?

Mr Ellwood: A later question on the Order Paper focuses on a UN Security Council resolution, but to touch on it now; yes, it is our ambition to gain a resolution along the lines of what the road map sets out. We met on 19 December and confirmed the direction of travel in which we want to go. The right hon. Gentleman will know from his understanding of the country that it is not so simple as suggesting this is all about the Houthis versus President Hadi and forces on his side. The complex tribal structures that are involved require the buy-in of many parts of the country to ensure that the ceasefire and cessation of hostilities can last.

15. [908044] Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Can the Minister confirm media reports that Oman is now publicly backing the Saudi-led coalition’s attempts to bring security back to Yemen?

Mr Ellwood: I can confirm that Yusuf bin Alawi, foreign Minister for Oman, was at the discussions on 19 December, along with Adel al-Jubeir, the Foreign Minister for Saudi Arabia, and Abdulllah bin Zayed from the United Arab Emirates. These are the key nations providing support, and I pay tribute to the work that Oman has done through its discussions, bringing the Houthis to the table so that we can get something secure for the ceasefire that we are all searching for.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Inaccurate information has been provided to Parliament a number of times on Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The Minister has said previously that he acted
immediately. However, a new freedom of information request reveals that not only the Minister but the former Foreign Secretary knew as early as 29 June last year that Parliament had been misled, but this was not corrected until 21 July. Does the Minister believe that the ministerial code was complied with?

Mr Ellwood: I can only guess that the hon. Gentleman’s question relates to the sale of cluster munitions, because he did not explain its context. Perhaps we can meet later so that he can ask me a fuller question. Alternatively, he can attend the debate on Thursday, when we shall doubtless discuss Yemen in more detail.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Last month the Defence Secretary informed the House that the Saudi Government had given assurances that they would no longer use UK-manufactured cluster bombs. Has the Minister received confirmation from the Saudis that they have now disposed of their stocks of those weapons?

Mr Ellwood: They have confirmed that that is their intention, and I hope to be able to ensure that it has actually happened in time for Thursday’s debate. I can go further, and tell the House that, before the Prime Minister’s visit to Manama for the Gulf Cooperation Council conference, I invited all the GCC nations to sign the convention on cluster munitions so that they could join other countries around the world in condemning those horrific weapon systems.

Mr Ellwood: What the hon. Gentleman has said returns us to the original question. It is vital for us to gain full access to Sana’a, but again, unfortunately, that is in the hands of the Houthis. We are unable to utilise the airport, which would be the best way to get aid into the country, because of disagreements that are taking place. Sana’a, residents have resorted to scavenging the rubbish dumps for scraps of food. What progress is the Minister making towards brokering a ceasefire so that the Yemeni people can get the help they need?

Mr Ellwood: What is happening in Yemen, and much of the world, is diabolical. I know that the Ministers do not listen to their ambassadors, let alone their own UN ambassadors, but I must tell him that we have heard all this before. I think the hon. Lady has just illustrated that she has no grasp of the United Nations process itself, or of what is taking place on the ground in Yemen; and to suggest that any member of the Government does not listen to our ambassadors is to disingenuously mislead the House. I invite—

Mr Speaker: Order. Of one thing we should be clear: that the Minister has a grasp of parliamentary protocol. He cannot accuse somebody of disingenuously misleading the House; both words are wrong, and both must be withdrawn.

Mr Ellwood: I withdraw those remarks; if I add “inadvertently”, and say inadvertently disingenuously misleading the House, would that work with you, Sir?

Mr Speaker: If somebody is disingenuous there can be nothing inadvertent about it, which I would have thought the hon. Gentleman was well-educated enough to recognise; do try to get it right, man.

Mr Ellwood: I think the point has been made, Mr Speaker, and I am sorry to test your patience, but it is important to understand that we take the words of, and work with, our ambassadors very seriously indeed. I spoke to Matthew Rycroft only a few days ago. We are the penholders on this matter at the UN Security Council, and I will make sure there is a phone call between him and the hon. Lady. He can explain the processes of the United Nations so that she becomes aware that we will not get a Security Council resolution passed until we get the cessation of hostilities in place.
Mr Speaker: Progress, apart from anything else, has been glacial—far, far too slow—so we need to speed up.

George Low

2. Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): What recent representations the Government have made to authorities in northern Cyprus on the killing of George Low in Ayia Napa in August 2016. [908031]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Foreign Secretary raised this consular case in November last year, and our high commission in Nicosia is also raising this delicate matter, including in discussions with north Cyprus. We will continue to push to see those guilty of the murder of George Low brought to justice.

Gareth Johnson: I thank the Foreign Office for its hard work in trying to secure justice for both George Low and Ben Barker. Natural justice demands that people should not be able simply to walk away from custody when accused of murder; yet northern Cyprus has allowed this to happen with one of the suspects and it is feared that the second will soon follow. Please can the Minister reassure the victim’s family that every possible effort will be made to persuade northern Cyprus to allow decency to prevail and for these men to face trial?

Mr Ellwood: The House will not be aware of this, but I know my hon. Friend is. It has been a delicate and difficult case and I commend the work he has done, including in working with the families, and I can assure him that the Minister with responsibility for Europe and FCO officials are fully engaged to provide the necessary support to both families. My hon. Friend will realise that because this involves north Cyprus, we cannot speak too widely about what discussions have taken place, but we are working hard to ensure justice is seen to follow.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Minister is right that this has been a complicated case, but there have been far too many complicated cases involving British nationals in the various different parts of Cyprus. Does he agree that the truth of the matter is that until we get a proper settlement of Cyprus so we no longer have a divided island and a divided city, there will be no long-term justice either for the people of this country in Cyprus or for that matter for the people of Cyprus?

Mr Ellwood: I hope the former Minister for Europe will join me in congratulating the two leaders, who are coming together this week. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is going to Geneva to try to push forward what will be monumental discussions to finally provide that important solution. I hope that then cases such as this will be able to be resolved much faster.

Colombia: Political Prisoners

3. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): What reports he has received on the conditions in which political prisoners are held in Colombia; and if he will make a statement. [908032]

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank the Minister for his answer, but, following the amnesty law passed by the Colombian Congress on 28 December, will the Minister urge the Colombian Government to release all civil society prisoners, as agreed, as soon as possible?

Alok Sharma: We welcome the approval of the new amnesty Bill of course, and we believe it will lead to a benefit for all citizens and the wider region as part of the Colombian peace process. We look forward to all aspects of that law, particularly with regard to disarmament and reintegration.

Robert Fello: Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

The transition zones are an important, if not crucial, aspect of the peace agreement, yet we are hearing reports of work on living quarters not even having started, of food being so rotten that people are suffering from severe and possibly lethal food poisoning, and of the supply of water being very scarce. Given that the transition zones are where the FARC troops are supposed to be concentrated as an essential element of the peace agreement, will Her Majesty’s Government please put absolute pressure on the Colombian authorities to ensure that the zones are properly completed?

Alok Sharma: We do of course raise these matters with the Colombian authorities on a regular basis. I take the point that the hon. Gentleman has made, and we will of course relay it back.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): The United Kingdom has supported the Colombian Government of Juan Manuel Santos throughout the difficult, recently concluded and very welcome peace process, and we have pledged our continuing support through the United Nations and the European Union. Will the Minister outline what specifically will be supported, and tell us whether the Colombian people and civil society will be included in the discussions on how the funds will be allocated?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is right to suggest that 2016 was an historic year for Colombia. The peace deal with the FARC ended the longest conflict in the western hemisphere. He asks about the range of support that we are providing for the peace process. It includes a contribution of £7.5 million to the UN trust fund, with more than £2 million dedicated to de-mining.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): According to a report from the Institute for Development and Peace Studies in 2016, there is now a paramilitary presence in 31 of the 32 Colombian departments. Will the Minister make urgent representations to the Colombian
Government to ensure that the proliferation of paramilitaries and private armies is countered, and that the articles of the peace process are upheld?

Alok Sharma: I can confirm that we are concerned by reports of violence against human rights defenders, which has increased in 2016. Those attacks have increased in areas from which the FARC is withdrawing, which is disturbing. We will of course raise these matters with the Colombian Government, particularly the importance of security in conflict-affected areas.

Yemen

4. Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): If he will review the UK’s support for the Saudi-led coalition forces operating in Yemen.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Despite signing the partnership for peace agreement, the Houthis invaded the capital, Sana’a, placed Ministers under house arrest, took over ministerial buildings and committed extra-judicial killings. The Saudi-led military coalition was formed, following the legitimate request from President Hadi as set out in United Nations Security Council 2216. It is in this context that the UK supports the military intervention.

Carolyn Harris: At a time when millions in Yemen are facing starvation, it beggars belief that the Saudi coalition is routinely targeting airstrikes at cattle markets, dairy farms, food factories and other agriculture infrastructure. Can the Minister explain why the coalition is doing that, and why we are supporting it?

Mr Ellwood: We are not supporting them doing that, as the hon. Lady can no doubt imagine. We are working closely with the Saudi Arabians and the coalition to ensure that the protocols and standards that they are using in sustained warfare meet the international standards that we would expect, were we to be involved ourselves. Much of the information that comes from the battlefield is very unclear indeed, but we are enforcing transparency in a way that the Saudi Arabians and many other members of the coalition have never seen before.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, as the Saudi-led coalition intends to restore the legitimate Government in Yemen, it is clearly right and proper that we should support it?

Mr Ellwood: My right hon. Friend knows the region well and he is absolutely right. I want to make it clear, however, that the coalition has made errors. It has made mistakes. It has not endured sustained warfare in this manner before, and it is having to meet international standards as never before. It is having to provide reports when it makes mistakes, and it has never done that before. It has no experience of even writing reports. It wants to meet those standards and to work with the international community. We need to ensure that when errors are made, the coalition puts its hand up in the same way that we do and that the Americans did in Afghanistan only a few months ago.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Given that Saudi Arabia has finally admitted to using illegal cluster bombs in Yemen, what consequence or sanction is being planned by the UK Government against Saudi Arabia for that clear breach of international humanitarian law?

Mr Ellwood: If I may attempt to correct the hon. Gentleman, those cluster bombs are not illegal, because Saudi Arabia has not signed up to the convention on cluster munitions. Therefore it is in its right—indeed, any country’s right—to use cluster munitions should it wish. As I mentioned earlier, I have encouraged Saudi Arabia to make sure not only that it has destroyed all the cluster munitions that we sold it in the past, but that it gets rid of its entire arsenal of cluster munitions and signs the convention.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): Has the Minister talked to the Saudi coalition about dealing with the long-standing threat from al-Qaeda and the growing threat from Daesh in Yemen, which threatens not just the Gulf but our security at home?

Mr Ellwood: In all our discussions with the Saudi Arabians and other coalitions that are learning how to conduct necessary warfare to the standards that we expect, we sometimes gloss over the fact that the absence of a solution allows the incubation of extremism in the form of Daesh, which is now present in the peninsular, and al-Qaeda. Until very recently, the port of Mukalla was completely run by that extremist operation. From our security perspective, more terrorist attacks are plotted in the peninsular by al-Qaeda than by any of its wings. Yes, it is very important that we work with our coalition friends to ensure that we defeat extremism in Yemen.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): May I endeavour to make a better case for Britain’s policy on the Yemen tragedy than the Minister made in his earlier replies? Will he now make clear the value to our security and to our dynamic aerospace industry of our relationship with the Saudis and the Gulf states? Will he also make clear the concern of the UK and the international community at the expansionist and subversive activities of the Iranian regime?

Mr Ellwood: There is nothing in that question with which I would disagree. Saudi Arabia is an important ally in the region. Its security and the region’s security is our security, too, but as the right hon. Gentleman also articulated, Saudi Arabia is unused to conducting such sustained warfare and it needs to learn. We are standing with Saudi Arabia to make sure it is learning lessons and to make sure that we work towards peace in Yemen, for all the reasons that we have discussed in the Chamber today.

West Bank: Illegal Settlements

5. Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his counterpart in Israel on illegal settlements in the west bank.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I spoke to the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr Netanyahu—he is also the Israeli Foreign
Minister—on 23 December and raised the subject of illegal settlements. I probably spoke for a large majority of Members when I said that I am a strong and passionate supporter of the state of Israel, but I also believe that the continued expansion of illegal settlements in the west bank is by no means conducive to peace.

**Paula Sherriff** (Reigate) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his response. Will he further advise us on what assessment his Government have made of the Israeli Government’s intent to comply with UN Security Council resolution 2334 on illegal Israeli settlements?

**Boris Johnson** (Leeds Central) (Lab): I welcome the Government’s vote in favour of UN Security Council resolution 2334, with which the Foreign Secretary does not agree?

**Boris Johnson** (East Devon) (Con): Let me try to get this right: the British ambassador is summoned formally in Israel because of the way the UK voted at the UN Security Council; meanwhile, in the UK, an employee of the Israeli embassy is caught on film conspiring with a British civil servant to take down a senior Minister in the Foreign Secretary’s Department, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee and other Members of this House; and the Israeli ambassador makes a couple of phone calls and all is forgiven and forgotten. Can the Foreign Secretary enlighten us on the thinking behind all this?

**Boris Johnson** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and colleagues for a British civil servant to take down a senior Minister in Israel, which is that the Israeli diplomat in question is no longer doing it in this city. The Israeli ambassador has made a full apology for the matter and I am happy to consider it closed.

**Several hon. Members** rose—

**Mr Speaker** (Con): Order. I am sorry, because these are very important matters, but I must say that progress is lamentably slow, so long questions will be cut off from now on, because there are people lower down the Order Paper who must be reached.

**Alex Salmond** (Gordon) (SNP): But if a UK embassy official had been caught on film in Tel Aviv talking about “taking down” an Israeli Government Minister, they would have been booted out of the country without any further ceremony, so why did that not happen to Mr Masot? If the Foreign Secretary showed even a teensy-weensy bit of resolve in such matters, perhaps Israeli diplomats would not talk about him in such disparaging terms.

**Boris Johnson** (Con): The right hon. Gentleman seems, alas, to have been failing to pay attention to the salient point, which is that the Israeli diplomat in question is no longer doing his job in London—whatever his job is, he is no longer doing it in this city. The Israeli ambassador has made a full apology for the matter and I am happy to consider it closed.

**Mrs Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and colleagues to discuss our grave concerns about resolution 2334, which my constituents believe will make peace in the middle east harder to achieve by imposing a complex set of preconditions that the Palestinians will use to avoid serious engagement in negotiation?

**Boris Johnson** (Con): I am very grateful for that question, and I am happy to offer exactly such a consultation with colleagues. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), has already undertaken to do just that.
Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House will join me in condemning the horrific attack on Israeli soldiers in Jerusalem on Sunday. We will never achieve a lasting peace until all sides accept a two-state solution and a viable Palestinian state can be built, free from the threat of terror. Nor will we achieve that lasting peace until all sides accept a two-state solution and a viable Palestinian state can be built, free from illegal settlements. In his allegedly frank discussions with the incoming Trump Administration on Sunday, was the Foreign Secretary frank about those points, too? If so, what response did he receive?

Boris Johnson: The answer to the first question is yes, and the answer to the second is wait and see.

Mr Speaker: I call Virendra Sharma. Not here. Where is the feller? I am becoming accustomed to having to say this every day; it is very unsatisfactory.

Diplomatic Relations: UK/Germany

7. William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the strength of diplomatic relations between Germany and the UK.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): First, let me repeat the condolences that we have offered, and that I am sure that many Members will want to join me in offering, to the people of Germany for the terrible attack that they sustained on 19 December. We continue to work with our German counterparts to strengthen security. We have superb relations with Germany, and it is vital, both as we go through the Brexit process and beyond, that we deepen and intensify that friendship.

William Wragg: I associate myself with my right hon. Friend’s expression of condolence to the people of Berlin. Given that Germany is a net exporter to the United Kingdom and would not want its economy to be affected through the imposition of tariffs, what extra work is being done to build diplomatic relations for the benefit of future reciprocal free trade between our two countries?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful for that question because, as my hon. Friend will know very well, a big operation as my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) is so apposite and why engagement is vital.

8. Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the strength of diplomatic and economic relations between countries of the Gulf Co-operation Council and the UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Thanks to our historical connections and our shared economic and other interests, which include foreign policy, defence, security, trade and culture, we have exceptionally strong relationships with the Gulf Co-operation Council nations. That was reflected in the warm reception that the Prime Minister received when she attended the GCC summit in November and established a new UK-GCC strategic partnership.

Jo Churchill: So does the Minister agree that Britain has a unique competitive advantage in securing a free trade agreement with the GCC due to those desired sectors and our long-standing friendship, as well as the GCC’s desire for economic diversification?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One reason why the Chancellor was visiting the region only a couple of weeks ago was to enforce those exact points. I am sure that once the Brexit discussions have moved forward, one of the first areas with which we will consolidate a trade agreement will be the GCC nations.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): In December, the Foreign Secretary accused Saudi Arabia of “playing proxy wars” and destabilising the region. Soon afterwards, a spokesman for the Prime Minister said that that was not the Government’s view. Whose view was the Foreign Secretary expressing?

Mr Ellwood: Let me expand that out further to our relationship with the GCC nations. As I said earlier, those countries are advancing, but they are still very new. Saudi Arabia became an independent country in modern terms only in 1932. It is because of our close relationship with those countries in a wide variety of sectors and the trust that we have in them that we are encouraging them to advance in their governance systems.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The diplomatique state of the GCC has risen significantly in recent years, not least because of the wise guidance of the GCC Secretary-General, Abdullatif al-Zayani, who is a friend of the Minister and of mine. In view of the impasse in the middle east peace process and the GCC’s relationship with the Arab states and Israel, does he believe that the time is now right for the GCC and the Arab states to take some initiative to move the middle east peace process forward?
Mr Ellwood: I know that that is close to my right hon. Friend’s heart, and that he worked very hard on it when he was Minister for the middle east. He is absolutely right that, as the GCC grows in its prowess, strength and authority, it has an important role to play in what is arguably one of the longest-running concerns, which started with the occupation of the occupied territories more than 50 years ago. In the year that we mark the Balfour declaration, I hope that we will also make progress in this area.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Is not one of the biggest challenges facing the GCC countries the conflict in Yemen, where they have in excess of 100,000 troops? They are up against a rebel group that has been involved in extra-judicial killings, that is trying to overthrow the country, and that is involved in torture. The Library briefing notes put the number of child soldiers in the country, and that is involved in torture. The Library briefing notes put the number of child soldiers in the country, and that is involved in torture. The Library briefing notes put the number of child soldiers in the country, and that is involved in torture. The Library briefing notes put the number of child soldiers in the country, and that is involved in torture. The Library briefing notes put the number of child soldiers in the country, and that is involved in torture. The Library briefing notes put the number of child soldiers in the country, and that is involved in torture.

Mr Ellwood: I agree that it is one of the biggest challenges for the GCC. We forget that this is its neighbourhood—its backyard. Those countries want regional security in the same way that we do—we want it near where we live, work and want to raise families. Exactly the same applies to the GCC nations, and it is something that I will explore more in the debate on Thursday.

Exiting the EU: Diplomatic Relations

9. Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his EU counterparts on diplomatic relations after the UK exits the EU. [908038]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): We have regular consultations about the future shape of our diplomatic relations with the rest of the EU. The hon. Lady should understand that we may be leaving the EU treaties, but we are not leaving Europe. There will be plenty of ways in which we will continue to collaborate on all the issues that are vital to us, whether in the EU or out.

Emma Reynolds: I welcome that answer. Free movement is a key issue in discussions with our EU counterparts. Have the Government therefore considered that in order to get the best possible access to the European single market, we should propose a managed migration system that still gives preference to EU workers, welcoming those with high skills, but limiting the numbers of low and semi-skilled workers coming here to work?

Boris Johnson: I hope that the hon. Lady will forgive me if I say that that would come under the category of our giving a running commentary on our negotiating position. We cannot do that—\[Interruption.\] The hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) says that Brexit means Brexit, and she is perfectly right.

Mr Speaker: I call a Kentish knight, Sir Julian Brazier.

Sir Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Given the trade ties that my right hon. Friend has already mentioned and the fact that we are Europe’s largest defence contributor, does he agree that we should not have to make deals on immigration and free movement to secure a good trade agreement with our allies and friends in Europe?

Boris Johnson: May I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend on his well-deserved knighthood in the new year’s honours list? He speaks very good sense. I think that I can agree with him completely without in any way being convicted of giving a running commentary on our negotiations, so I thank him very much.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Never mind a running commentary, has the Foreign Secretary given any commentary at all to his own officials, such as Sir Ivan Rogers, who left the service saying that he had not been given any sense of the Government’s negotiating objectives? Will the Secretary of State perhaps speak to Sir Tim Barrow and give him a clue about what the Government intend to do?

Boris Johnson: If the hon. Gentleman consults the speeches of the Prime Minister more closely, he will discover a wealth of information about our negotiating position, but since he has not bothered to do that, I do not propose to enlighten him now, except to say that Sir Ivan Rogers did an excellent job and always gave me very good advice. I think his reasons for stepping down early were persuasive. Sir Tim Barrow, as anybody who has worked with him will know—I think that people on both sides of the House will have done so—is an outstanding public servant with long-standing experience of UK representation in Brussels, and he will do a superb job in the forthcoming talks.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I am sure my right hon. Friend will agree that not only are diplomatic relations important, but relationships between Members of this House and European partners have been important. Membership of the Council of Europe, of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and of all-party groups has never been more important, so can he give an assurance that his Department will assist in every way in making sure that bilateral relationships that exist between Members of this House and Europe will be encouraged?

Boris Johnson: Absolutely—I am very happy to give that assurance to my hon. Friend. As he will know, there are parliamentary bodies of one party or another that have links with sister parties across the continent, and we will do absolutely everything we can to promote that in the years ahead.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): On behalf of Labour Members, may I pay tribute to the long and distinguished career of Sir Ivan Rogers? He served successive Governments with great distinction, and most of the Secretary of State’s predecessors had the good sense to appreciate it; it is a pity that he could not do so until just now when my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) managed to press him. In his resignation letter, Sir Ivan said:

“Contrary to the beliefs of some, free trade does not just happen”. Can the Secretary of State explain who Sir Ivan had in mind?
Boris Johnson: I have given my views about Sir Ivan, but I am happy to repeat them: I think he is, as the hon. Gentleman said, an outstanding public servant, and he always gave me very frank advice. It is vital for officials to continue to give their round, unvarnished views of matters such as the ease of negotiating free trade deals. It is not necessarily going to be simple, but there is no reason to think it cannot be done speedily, and no reason to think we cannot have fantastic free trade deals, not least with the United States of America.

Middle East Peace Talks

10. Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to promote the resumption of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): We are using every forum at our disposal to try to encourage both sides to get to the negotiating table. It is deeply frustrating. I join hon. Members on both sides of the House who have condemned the appalling attack on—the murder of—four Israeli soldiers at the weekend. All I can do is repeat what we have said: the only way forward has to be a two-state solution, and that is why it was important to restate the Government’s position in resolution 2334.

Mrs Ellman: The General Secretary of the UN has warned about Iran’s activities in arming Hezbollah in Lebanon through its base in Syria. What can the Foreign Secretary do to combat this growing menace to the prospects of any peace in the region?

Boris Johnson: It is very important to recognise that Iran is a malign influence across the region, and we must be very vigilant about what it is doing. On the other hand, we have to engage with Iran. I think the JCPOA—joint comprehensive plan of action—does represent, still, a substantial and valid way forward, and it would be regrettable if we were to junk that process now.

22. [908052] John Howell (Henley) (Con): In looking at the steps to promote peace talks, what effect does the Foreign Secretary think the current level of Palestinian violence is going to have on that process?

Boris Johnson: As my hon. Friend will know, the level of violence, as we have discussed, has been down by comparison with 2015, but it is still too high. I think it was important, therefore, that the resolution, which has been so much discussed this morning, had that balance in it and that language in it pointing out the threat that Israel faces. It is important that we stress that, and that we encourage the Palestinians to understand that there can be no hope of peace unless they get their extremists under control.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I am pleased that the Foreign Secretary is using every forum to bring peace. Will he, therefore, be attending the Paris conference, and what new initiative will the UK Government be putting forward there?

Boris Johnson: I can certainly assure the right hon. Gentleman that the UK Government will be attending the Paris talks and we will be reinforcing our message, which is that we think that both sides must get round the table and negotiate. That is the only way forward. It would be folly now to abandon a two-state solution, because, in the end, a one-state solution is not in the interests of Israel.

Middle East (Persecution of Christians)

11. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What recent reports he has received on the persecution of Christians in the middle east.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Government regularly receive reports of sectarian attacks on Christian and other religious communities in the middle east. We want to work with all Governments across the middle east and north Africa to ensure that freedom of religion or belief is respected.

Kevin Foster: Although the genocide of Christians in the areas ruled by Daesh has rightly taken the most attention, my hon. Friend will be only too aware that the persecution of Christians across the region is way too common. Will he join me, therefore, in welcoming the work done by Open Doors to highlight that, and what plans does he have to consider its latest report, which is due to be launched in the House tomorrow?

Mr Ellwood: May I briefly say that I very much welcome the work that is done by organisations such as Open Doors, and the work that my hon. Friend has done to promote them? I look forward to reading the report, which I think is due out tomorrow. Open Doors makes a major contribution to that work and the Government’s thinking to try to support Christians and other religious communities in the middle east and north Africa.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Given all these crimes against Christians in the middle east, will the Government ensure that we do everything we can to make sure that this is recognised as genocide in the international courts?

Mr Ellwood: I have said in this House that I personally believe that acts of genocide have taken place, but it is not my view that counts; it is whether we can legally prove that. As we have debated here before, it is important that we collect the evidence. I am sure that the House will be delighted to know—it has been confirmed already—that the Foreign Secretary joined other countries, including Iraq, at the United Nations General Assembly to launch the work to be done to collect the evidence to make sure that we can hold those who have conducted these horrific activities to account.

Mr Speaker: I could not be more grateful to the Minister.

Anglo-American Discussions

12. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What recent discussions the Government have had with the incoming US administration.
The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I have come back this morning from the United States, where I have been discussing these matters with the incoming Administration. It was clear that there is a wide measure of agreement between us over the challenges we face. I assure the House that our embassy in Washington and the Prime Minister’s office—No. 10—and officials at all levels are engaging with the incoming team to make sure that we work in lock step to build on those areas of agreement.

Henry Smith: In addition to talks with the incoming US Administration, what talks, specifically with regard to security and trade, did my right hon. Friend have with congressional leaders?

Boris Johnson: I have to say to the House that there was a huge fund of goodwill for the United Kingdom on Capitol Hill, and a very large measure of understanding that now is the time to do a free trade deal. They want to do it, and they want to do it fast. That understanding was most vivid and most urgent on the part of the incoming Administration.

Topical Questions

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Virendra Sharma. Has the feller now manifested himself? No, sadly not. Never mind. He is not here, but Rebecca Pow is.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): My priorities for 2017 are to renew our efforts to address the crisis in the middle east; to work towards securing the best deal for Britain in the negotiations with our European partners that will be begun by the triggering of article 50; and to build an even stronger working relationship with the US Administration. As I have said, I have just returned from furthering that ambition in the US. As this is the last FCO questions before the end of the Obama Administration, let me repeat formally my thanks to John Kerry for his tireless dedication.

Rebecca Pow: Illegal trading in wildlife is now the fourth most lucrative transnational crime, and it has a hugely destabilising effect on habitats and on many communities. On that note, will the Secretary of State tell me what his Department is doing to help to combat the poaching and illegal ivory trading in Africa?

Boris Johnson: This Government have made it clear that combating the illegal wildlife trade is one of our priorities. We have a dedicated illegal wildlife trade team in London, working with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. As my hon. Friend will know, the Secretary of State recently came back from a highly successful conference in Hanoi on the ivory trade. We are supporting—[Interruption.] With our funds, we are supporting—[Interruption.] Let me tell the hon. Member for Islwyn South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), who mocks the elephants, that the number of elephants is diminishing by 8% every year. Thanks to the efforts of this Government, that issue is being raised up the international agenda again. We are spending considerable sums of money to support those who are combating the poachers.

Mr Speaker: All questions and answers from now on need to be extremely brief, irrespective of how distinguished those who put the questions are or judge themselves to be. I call Mr Alex Salmond.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): When the right hon. Gentleman was a columnist, he was supportive of some aspects of President Putin’s policies. When he became Foreign Secretary, he became vehemently hostile to Russian policy. After his visit to New York, we are told he is pursuing a twin-track policy, which means that we will be supportive and hostile at the same time. At what time during his visit to Trump Tower did he decide that duplicity was the best policy?

Boris Johnson: I really must ask the right hon. Gentleman to go back and look at what I said previously. I have never been supportive of the policies of President Putin in Syria. Quite frankly, I do think it is important to understand that Russia is doing many bad things—if we look at what they have done on cyber-warfare and what they are doing in the western Balkans, there is no doubt that they are up to no good—but it is also important for us to recognise, and I think he will find that this is exactly what I said a few years ago, that there may be areas where we can work together, and that is what we should do.

Topical Questions

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Alex Salmond. Has the Gentleman was a columnist, he was supportive of some aspects of President Putin’s policies. When he became Foreign Secretary, he became vehemently hostile to Russian policy. After his visit to New York, we are told he is pursuing a twin-track policy, which means that we will be supportive and hostile at the same time. At what time during his visit to Trump Tower did he decide that duplicity was the best policy?

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T3. [908021] Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that until the divisions between the Sunnis and the Shi’as are reconciled, there will not be full regional peace, security and prosperity in the region? What role can Britain play in that process?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): My hon. and learned Friend asks a very fundamental question, because in a sense there is a cold war feel to the relationship between the Sunnis and the Shi’ites, yet the doctrinal difference is actually almost insignificant. Both agree on the absolute centrality of the Prophet Muhammad, but the big issue is about the succession—whether the successor was Ali, the cousin and son-in-law, or Abu Bakr, the father-in-law. She is absolutely right that if the two sides can be reconciled, prosperity and security will improve, and I hope Britain can have a role to play.

[Interruption.] Mr Speaker: As I have just been advised by our most esteemed procedural expert in the House, we do not need a lecture in each of these cases. We need a pithy question and a pithy reply.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): On Sunday, the Foreign Secretary met Steve Bannon, Donald Trump’s chief strategist, a man whose website is synonymous with anti-Semitism, racism, misogyny, homophobia, the hero worship of Vladimir Putin and the promotion of extremist far-right movements across the world. May I ask the Foreign Secretary how he and Mr Bannon got on?
Boris Johnson: I do not wish to embarrass any member of the incoming Administration by describing the friendliness or otherwise of our relations. What I can say is that the conversations were genuinely extremely productive. There is a wide measure of agreement between the UK and the incoming Administration about the way forward, and we intend to work to build on those areas of agreement.

T5. [908024] Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): When the Russian air force skirts along British airspace, Royal Air Force pilots fly Typhoons from my constituency to see them off. Does my right hon. Friend believe that our economic sanctions against Russia are hitting the targets just as effectively as our RAF pilots are?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful for that question because it is important for the House to keep in mind the importance of the sanctions. The support for sanctions against Russia—for instance, over Ukraine—is not as strong as it should be in other parts of the European Union, and the UK is in the lead in keeping the pressure on.

T4. [908023] Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): Following the Foreign Secretary’s trip to America, how confident is he that we might have a US-UK free trade agreement on the table within the next couple of years? Does he believe there is an appetite for it to be based on mutual standard recognition, rather than on single standard imposition?

Boris Johnson: The short answer is that my enthusiasm is nothing compared with the enthusiasm of our friends on the other side of the Atlantic. We will get a good deal, but it has to be a good deal for the UK as well.

T7. [908026] Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will the Minister please tell me what Britain is doing to ensure that the lessons of the past are learnt, and that proper stabilisation and reconstruction planning is in place for Mosul once that city is liberated?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have been there since 1994, should recognise the will of the Gambian people and step down.

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We did not learn the lessons, or the lessons were not learnt, in 2013 when there was a failure to listen to the moderate Sunni voices. That is what allowed Daesh to develop. Extremism is flourishing across north-east Africa and, indeed, the middle east, and will do so unless we engage with those moderates to ensure that they are brought to the table. That is why planning in places such as Mosul and Aleppo needs to be done at once, before the guns fall silent.

T6. [908025] Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): When the Foreign Secretary met the President-elect’s team, did he make it clear to them that the United Kingdom will not share intelligence with his Administration if his Administration is then to use it in association with a revived US torture programme?

Boris Johnson: I am sure the House will forgive me if I remind the right hon. Gentleman that we do not discuss intelligence matters or their operational nature.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my disappointment that the Palestinian authorities did not issue a prompt condemnation of the murder of Israeli soldiers over the weekend? Does he believe that the Palestinian Authority’s glorification of violence, refusal to recognise Israel and refusal to meet face to face is one of the major obstacles to a two-state solution?

Boris Johnson: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for that point because it is absolutely true. Yes, resolution 2334 has been characterised as a settlements resolution. As I have explained to the House, it also contains some valuable language about terrorism. But there can be no lasting solution for that part of the world unless there is better leadership of the Palestinians and unless they renounce terror.

T8. [908027] Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Next week a new President is due to be sworn in, but the current President is refusing, point blank, to budge. The people of Gambia have voted to end 22 years of civil liberties and human rights abuses at the hands of President Jammeh. Will the Minister join his counterparts across the world in condemning this and telling President Jammeh that he has eight days to get out of office?

Mr Ellwood: Not in so many words, but I have had the opportunity to congratulate President-elect Barrow. I believe absolutely that the previous President, who has been there since 1994, should recognise the will of the Gambian people and step down.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): May I ask the Foreign Secretary what agreement there will be on policy towards Russia between the British Government and the new US Administration, given the new Administration’s indebtedness to President Putin through the leaking and hacking of emails of the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman?

Boris Johnson: I make no comment on the electoral efficacy of the hacking of the DNC emails, except to say that it is pretty clear that it did come from the Russians. The point that we have made to the incoming Administration, and indeed on Capitol Hill, is just this: as I said earlier, we do think that the Russian state—the Putin Kremlin—is up to all sorts of very dirty tricks, such as cyber-warfare, but it would be folly for us further to demonise Russia or to push Russia into a corner, so a twin-track strategy of engagement and vigilance is what is required.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary referred to the middle east process. Secretaries of State Clinton and Kerry failed in their efforts to get a bilateral agreement between Palestinians and Israelis. Is it not now time to go to the international sphere, in the sense of the Arab initiative originally introduced by Saudi Arabia in 2002?

Boris Johnson: The only way forward is for both sides to get to the negotiating table and recognise that a two-state solution is the way forward.
Boris Johnson: It is very important to recognise that the Turkish state—the Turkish Government—was the victim of a violent attempted coup in which hundreds of people died. It was entirely wrong of many Governments in the EU instantly to condemn Turkey for its response rather than to see that, again, there is a balance to be struck. Turkey is vital for our collective security; the last thing we need to do is to push it away and push it into a corner.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Last month, a UK Government spokesperson told Sky News that the Government are “aware of reports of an alleged airstrike on a school” in Yemen “using UK-supplied weapons and are seeking further information regarding the incident.”

Can the Minister update us today on progress on that?

Mr Ellwood: I know the hon. Lady follows these events very closely. I do not know the details of that particular Sky report—I have not seen it. I am very happy to meet her outside the Chamber to discuss it. I think it is clear that it is extremely important for the UK to continue to support this increasingly important aspect of the special relationship.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): The Government, of course, support the Marshall scholarship programme. It is another example of Britain’s soft power, and I am delighted to say that we have made additional funding available to enable 40 scholars to study at UK universities from September this year.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary and Members will be aware of the deteriorating situation in Zimbabwe, economically and politically. What role can the British Government play over the next six months or so, which will be crucial to the people of Zimbabwe?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady knows the country very well indeed. Obviously, our relationship has been strained because of the current leadership. She speaks about six months, and who knows what will happen in those six months, but we are working closely with the neighbouring countries to provide the necessary support for the people, who are suffering more than ever before under the current President’s regime.

Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that improving trust and intelligence sharing with Egypt is vital to our security efforts in Libya? Given that we have heard no security concerns over the Sharm el-Sheikh airport, does he agree that resuming flights there would be a good place to start and would have important security dividends for UK citizens here?

Boris Johnson: It is, of course, true that the loss of UK tourist business to Egypt has been very severe, and we are working hard with our Egyptian counterparts to get the reassurances that we need to restore those flights, which we all want to happen.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Earlier this morning, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), said that the Government only support UN Security Council resolutions when they know they can be enforced. So, if the Israelis continue with the settlement programme, what steps will the Foreign Secretary take to enforce resolution 2334?

Boris Johnson: The hon. Lady will know very well that we are working with our international counterparts to persuade both sides to get to the table, to persuade the Palestinians to drop their violence and recognise the existence of the state of Israel and show some leadership, and to persuade both sides to understand that a two-state solution is the only way forward. I believe that that is the best thing for the Government to do.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Many of my constituents are concerned that the recent UN vote marks a change in the British Government’s stance towards Israel. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that that is not the case, and that we remain steadfast allies of that beacon of liberalism and democracy in the middle east?

Boris Johnson: As is well known, the state of Israel is just about the only democracy in that part of the world. It is a free and liberal society, unlike many others in the region. I passionately support the state of Israel. It was very important that, in resolution 2334, the UK Government not only stuck by 30-year-old UK policy in respect of settlements, but underscored our horror of violence against the people of Israel.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Just as a matter of interest—perhaps others are not so interested—does the Foreign Secretary find that his counterparts are somewhat surprised to find a genuine British eccentric holding the position he holds?

Boris Johnson: I honestly cannot speak for the response of my counterparts. The hon. Gentleman can take this in whichever way he chooses, but all I can say is that there was a wide measure of agreement on both sides of the table on some of the problems that our societies face in America and UK, on the need for some fresh thinking, and on the huge potential of the UK and the US to work together to solve those problems.

Mr Speaker: I very much doubt that the proposition that the Foreign Secretary is an exotic individual would be subject to a Division of the House.
Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary will be aware of my constituent Billy Irving, who is wrongly imprisoned in India. As we await yet another judgment, what are the Foreign Secretary’s plans to get Billy and his colleagues home whatever the outcome? Will the Foreign Secretary reassure us and them that that remains his priority, and that it will not be derailed by his Government’s Brexit bedlam?

Alok Sharma: Our heart goes out to Billy Irving’s family and all those involved. I raised this matter with the Minister of External Affairs and the Indian Foreign Secretary when I visited India in October. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister also raised it with Prime Minister Modi. We are pressing for speedy due process to take place. As the hon. Lady knows, we await the outcome of the appeal process.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): My right hon. Friend was an outstanding Mayor of London. During his time, he was the first to champion the City of London and a believer of the value of the single market. Will he assure us that, in his meetings with the incoming Trump Administration, he disabused Wilbur Ross, the incoming Commerce Secretary, of his view that Brexit is a God-given opportunity for London’s commercial rivals to take business from the City?

Boris Johnson: My right hon. Friend will find that the City of London has been through all sorts of vicissitudes that people prophesied would lead to its extinction. I remember people making exactly the same arguments about the creation of the single currency and about the economic crash in 2008, and the City of London has gone from strength to strength. Canary Wharf alone is now a bigger financial centre than the whole of Frankfurt. By the way, that opinion was shared completely by our friends and counterparts in Washington. I have no doubt that the commercial and financial dominance of the City of London in this hemisphere will continue.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Further to the question of the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), my constituent Ray Tindall and the other men of the Chennai Six, who are in prison for a crime they did not commit, will be looking for a little bit more than thumb-twiddling and warm words. Does the Minister have any concrete proposals to get those innocent men home within the next six months?

Alok Sharma: As I have said, we take this matter incredibly seriously. We have raised it on a number of occasions and will continue to do so. We cannot seek to interfere in the legal process of another country, but let me assure the hon. Gentleman that we are doing absolutely everything we can to urge a speedy process and to make sure the men get help in prison.

Mr Speaker: Finally, a cerebral and immensely patient Member of the House who is unfailingly courteous at all times, Jeremy Lefroy.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. What support are Her Majesty’s Government giving to the welcome moves towards a settlement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

Mr Ellwood: I had the pleasure of visiting the country last year. I was very concerned about the delay to the elections, of which my hon. Friend will be aware, and President Kabila not recognising that his time was up. I am pleased that political dialogue has now been developed between the Government and the Opposition, and that we are now on a programme to ensure elections happen in 2017. I will return to the country very soon to make sure that is enforced, and to offer our support and assistance to this important country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues. This Question Time session probably enjoys a greater demand than any other, but I am afraid supply is finite.

Mr Ellwood: Two hours!

Mr Speaker: Two hours, the Minister chunter from a sedentary position. I certainly would not object to that. He is a member of the Executive. If the Government want to table such a proposition, I think there might be very substantial support for it. I try to expand the envelope, but there are limits: if we do not have a longer session people will have to be briefer in questions and answers.

We now come to the urgent question. I call John McDonnell.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I’d support the two hours, Mr Speaker.
The shadow Chancellor’s comments do not accurately represent what the NAO said. It has actually recognised that HMRC’s move to regional centres is central to its strategic aim to increase tax revenue, improve customer service and make cost savings. The move to regional centres has never been just about cost savings or buildings; it is partly about how people work in those buildings. Ultimately, we will have an opportunity to change how we work. In 1982, my first job after leaving school was in an old tax office. Some of those offices are over 100 years old and some have not changed since I was working in one as a school leaver. It is absolutely right that we commit to making sure that staff can work in a modern environment.

All staff will be offered the chance to move, and for those who cannot, there will be one-to-one, bespoke support, and some of them will go to other Departments, so some of the comments we have heard are absolute nonsense. [Interjection.] There is a lot of chuntering from the Opposition Front-Bench team, but they are not listening to the facts and they have not read what the NAO actually said. This is a major programme, and it is right that the overall costs be periodically reviewed, but HMRC is not looking to make any significant changes to its overall strategy. We want its staff to work closer together in regional centres and specialist sites in a modern, flexible and high-quality working space.

Lastly, on tackling tax evasion and the tax gap, no Government have done more than this one. It is absolute nonsense to say that HMRC’s capacity to tackle those two issues is diminished; far from it—the UK’s tax gap is one of the smallest in the world and at its lowest ever level. In the summer Budget, we gave HMRC an extra £800 million to tackle tax evasion, and it has done that extremely well, such that once again we have reached record levels of compliance with regards to money from anti-tax evasion measures. I therefore rebut entirely the shadow Chancellor’s points in that regard.
Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will my hon. Friend take it from me that in my experience dealing with constituents and corporations in my constituency who have made inquiries to HMRC, its response times and how it handles cases have improved immensely over the past few years, and that in respect of its seeking to deal with tax evasion and avoidance, there is absolutely no doubt that it has raised its game considerably?

Jane Ellison: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments, and I am glad that he has put on the record his appreciation for staff. He is absolutely right. In the past six months, call waiting times have averaged less than five minutes and customer service has improved to the best levels in years. This is something that HMRC management keep under constant review. It is absolutely right that we seek to provide the best service possible, but we cannot do that in un-modernised offices. For example, we must recognise that investing in the most up-to-date digital infrastructure is unrealistic across an estate of more than 150 offices. We need to bring people together in an environment that is fit for the future both for staff and customers.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The NAO has actually said that “HMRC’s original plan has proved unrealistic”, that “suitable property will not be available...within the time frame set out”, that “HMRC now estimates it may lose up to 5,000 staff”, which will require recruitment while it simultaneously carries out redundancies, and that the plans were “over-optimistic...and carried too high a risk of disruption”. These are very similar warnings to those expressed in respect of the outturn failings in 2009 of the strategic transfer of the estate to the private sector—STEPS—programme. Given how clear and stark the warnings are, would it not make more sense to pause this, rip it up and start again?

Jane Ellison: No, that is not right; I cannot agree with the hon. Gentleman. The factors driving the programme—the reasons we want to transform HMRC into the most modern and digital tax authority in the world—all still stand. We have always been open about the fact that this is an ambitious transformation, and as with any major programme, a number of which are running at the same time, it is right that it be looked at regularly. Of course HMRC will respond in detail to the NAO report, but the principle driving the plan stands good, for all the reasons I have talked about—it is better for customers, better for staff and better for the taxpayer.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the STEPS programme, but the NAO report noted how much better HMRC had been managing it. There were problems with the programme, which was initiated under the last Labour Government, but the report compliments HMRC on the way it is managing it and got some of the private finance initiative costs under control, and so on. It is right that we constantly re-evaluate programmes of this importance, but I do not agree with the thrust of his question. It is also worth noting that while Scotland accounts for 8% of the UK’s population, 12% of the HMRC workforce will remain there, so Scotland remains a very important part of the HMRC estate.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is good to hear the Minister make the point that the telephone answering is improving. On the Public Accounts Committee, we have been looking at this on an ongoing basis, and we have probably had more information on it from MPs across the House, than on any other issue. We support the programme, but with the digital world moving forward will the Minister set out how we will make sure that the staff on the end of the phone have the right qualifications to support businesses and individuals who need information?

Jane Ellison: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. Given her membership of the PAC, it is important and nice to have them on the record. Much work has gone into improving customer service levels. At the moment, they are very good and improving and remain a key focus. She made a point about supporting staff with training and so on. That will be much easier in regional centres. For example, at the moment we have a large number of offices, and owing to the nature of the tasks being undertaken and the number of people working in them, it is not possible to provide easy and effective training programmes or to plan career progression in the way it is when a large number of people are concentrated together. As is reflected across both Government and the private sector, we can do a lot more for people when we can concentrate a different range of skills so that people have a chance to plot a career within the same office. That goes to the heart of how we intend to improve the service to customers.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The trouble with all this talk of regional centres is that this is exactly what has happened in every other Department. In constituencies such as mine and across the whole of the south Wales valleys, it feels as if the Government have just said, “No, we’re not interested. Everything’s going to Cardiff. Forget about it.” May I urge the Minister to think again? The Treasury and the whole of Government have a social responsibility, particularly to areas such as Rhondda and the valleys, to ensure they have a local presence.

Jane Ellison: I cannot agree with the hon. Gentleman’s comments about the motivation. As I said, there is a balance to be struck between the service to customers, how we support staff and how we serve the wider taxpayer interest. Yes, across Government there has been a move towards more modern and—in some cases, perhaps—more centralised services. There is a balance to be struck, but there is a robust programme of support in place for staff who cannot move, and to help them extra money has been put into the transitional costs associated with transport, for example. HMRC is working with other Government Departments to make sure that where we can, we take advantage of the high skills people have, to move them to other Departments where their skills can be used.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): The Minister noted that there were some compliments in the NAO report on how HMRC has moved to a more realistic plan for this project, and is now managing the existing estate
better than before. Will she set out how HMRC will build on this progress to make sure that the skills are enhanced as this complicated project goes forward?

**Jane Ellison**: Of course. My hon. Friend is right to say that. As I have said, HMRC will respond in detail to the NAO report, and I will be pleased to discuss that with him. One of the NAO’s recommendations is precisely what he has drawn our attention to—that there should be an iterative process of learning from every part of the move, ensuring for example that experience from the first regional centre to be opened is reviewed and lessons learned from it. This is a long programme of change; it is not an overnight transformation. It is absolutely right to review it at every stage so that we learn as we go along.

**Sue Hayman** *(Workington) (Lab)*: You are proposing to close a very modern office in Workington. The NAO report says that the average distance between offices that are being closed and the regional offices is 18 miles, with most within 50 miles. However, Workington has been paired with Liverpool, which are 142 miles apart according to Google maps—a journey of three hours. To me, the situation is completely unacceptable. The workers in Workington cannot transfer down to Liverpool, and I cannot see how they can be reskilled to work in equivalent jobs in Workington. I would love to know your suggestions on that. As I say, this is just unacceptable.

**Mr Speaker**: I have no plans to close that office. To my very great life impoverishment, I have to admit that I am not aware of having been to Workington to date, and I certainly would not take it upon myself to presume to close something that I have not even visited.

**Jane Ellison**: I think we all recognise that you are busy enough, Mr Speaker, without taking charge of HMRC’s regional transformation programme as well.

The hon. Lady has written to me about this matter, and I have said that I am happy to meet her to discuss it, perhaps allowing more time for discussion. She has cited the average figure that appears in the NAO report, and we of course accept that the move is going to be much less easy for some people, perhaps even impossible. We will support those people. With a view to providing suitable jobs in other Government Departments, the HMRC HR department is working closely with the Department for Work and Pensions. A lot of work is being done to support staff into other jobs, but we accept that the move is going to be much less easy for some people, perhaps even impossible.

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**Philip Davies** *(Shipley) (Con)*: HMRC is planning to have a regional centre in Leeds, but it has not identified a site, and any site proposed will be incredibly expensive, crowding out private sector investment in Leeds. Just a few miles up the road in the Bradford district, a site is readily available, and it would be much cheaper for the taxpayer than it would be in Leeds, and it would help the local economy in the Bradford district as well. I urge the Minister to use this NAO report to pause, look again at these proposals and make sure that a regional centre in Yorkshire is not in Leeds, but in the Bradford district where many people in HMRC already work.

**Jane Ellison**: As my hon. Friend knows, I am familiar with all the localities that he mentioned. I know that Bradford was disappointed not to be the site chosen for the regional centre, but it is equally true that with a railway station in Shipley, my hon. Friend’s constituents are merely 10 minutes from Leeds on the train. I hope that it will prove to be a realistic project for his constituents to move to Leeds if they want to. I shall reflect on what my hon. Friend said and will write to him if I can provide further detail. HMRC has provided detailed responses, explaining the criteria used to select locations and thus explaining why Leeds was chosen over Bradford. I know that there has already been a good deal of correspondence on this issue.

**Ms Margaret Ritchie** *(South Down) (SDLP)*: The Minister will be aware that some HMRC offices have already closed in Northern Ireland, not only causing consternation to the staff who have had to be redirected to Belfast, but preventing accessibility for local businesses and ordinary people who are trying to deal with their tax affairs. In view of the NAO report, will the Minister please pause any further closures, as they simply cause chaos and upheaval?

**Jane Ellison**: I am not sure that I recognise the description of chaos and upheaval, given what I have said about improved average customer service times at the moment. There are good standards now, which does not align with what the hon. Lady said. I recognise that changes of this scale can be extremely difficult for the people affected by them, but I would like to pick up one point about how people interact with HMRC. We live in a different world from the one that obtained when the estates were last looked at on this sort of scale. The vast majority of taxpayers, both individuals and businesses, interact with HMRC digitally or on the phone. We have to adjust to the way the world is now rather than what it was like some decades ago.

**Mr David Nuttall** *(Bury North) (Con)*: I want my constituents to get the best possible service from HMRC, particularly when they have a problem and things go wrong. Given that HMRC has about 58,000 employees, will my hon. Friend at least consider the feasibility of HMRC allocating at least one named employee for every constituency, so that each MP has someone permanently in place to contact within HMRC?

**Jane Ellison**: We have had the experience of working through recent challenges in respect of the Concentrix contract and the fallout from it. I have looked personally at how HMRC interacts with Members of Parliament. I have not looked at the specific idea that my hon. Friend mentions, but I shall reflect on what he said. I am looking to ensure that, as colleagues found while resolving issues, the resources allocated to MPs were effective in helping them to get results quickly in some of the most difficult cases. I shall reflect further on my hon. Friend’s points because I want to make sure that HMRC serves colleagues of all parties as effectively as possible.

**Sammy Wilson** *(East Antrim) (DUP)*: This modernisation and improvement programme in Northern Ireland has led to the closure of offices in towns that already have high unemployment, to frustration among people who have difficult cases and to a loss of expertise, especially
in border areas where criminal evasion of tax is widespread. How does that fit in with the Government’s commitment to spread economic growth, to provide better service to customers and to reduce tax evasion?

**Jane Ellison:** It is worth noting on the broader point that employment in our countries is at an all-time high. We would always want to retain expertise within HMRC, but there will always be people leaving any large organisation and people being recruited and trained up simultaneously. I refer the hon. Gentleman to what I said earlier: it will be much easier to support people who want to join the organisation to become highly skilled and professional and to plot a career in HMRC, so that they can have long-term, fulfilling careers in a variety of different areas, under the new modernised structures.

**Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab):** The Minister has said a number of times that there will be a better service for customers in these regional centres, but I note that the NAO report says that HMRC has not demonstrated that. Can she reassure me on how she has reached the conclusion that the service will be better, more efficient and more effective for customers?

**Jane Ellison:** I did note that point, but I am not sure that I agree with how the hon. Lady has expressed what I said. Let me provide one example. Many HMRC local offices are in very old buildings. As I said, some are over 100 years old and many are from the 1950s. Then there is the latest digital infrastructure, and many more taxpayers are interacting with HMRC digitally, through more than 7 million personal tax accounts. As anybody knows, it is difficult to bring an old office up to modern standards with the right digital infrastructure. If we want to make sure that staff can make the best use of modern computer systems and put them at the service of customers who increasingly interact digitally, it is much better to do so in newer buildings that have been bought for the purpose and where we have planned that sort of arrangement from the start.

**Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP):** The Minister speaks of saving money and of modern offices. The HMRC offices at the Pyramids business park in my constituency are high-tech and high-end, with highly skilled staff, and there is plenty of further space. It would save the Government £70 million to keep that estate and develop it. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the details and perhaps consider retaining the hub in West Lothian, rather than moving it to a city centre where rents will be more expensive?

**Jane Ellison:** I have had a number of conversations with, in particular, some of the hon. Lady’s colleagues who are based in Scotland, and I am, of course, always happy to meet any parliamentary colleague to discuss anything. No change in the plan for that regional centre is envisaged, but some of the challenges relating to West Lothian have been brought to my attention.

**Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab):** Sheffield staff are already commuting considerable distances to their HMRC office because of previous office closures. Does the Minister not agree that HMRC can ill afford to lose 5,000 experienced staff at this time?

Given that HMRC has struggled to find suitable property in the suggested locations, may I ask the Minister to re-assess the proposed locations on grounds of cost, ability to retain experienced staff and impact on customer service? Will she reassess them on the basis of evidence, rather than simply deciding which location in each region is easiest for Whitehall civil servants to get to?

**Jane Ellison:** I am pretty certain that that was not the rationale for the choice of locations. Very careful discussions took place. I will, of course, read the report and reflect on it, as will we all, and, as I have said, HMRC intends to respond in detail, but a great deal of thought went into choosing the regional centres. I acknowledge that some people will not be able to move because the distances will be too far to travel, and we certainly want to retain experienced staff. Those who will not be able to move will have a number of different levels of experience, but if we can retain their skills and ensure that they are at the service of the taxpayer through other Departments, we will obviously try to do so.

**Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC):** HMRC Portmadog is earmarked for closure, and in all likelihood the Welsh language unit will be centralised in Cardiff, four hours away. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how these services can best be provided in a region where 71% of the population can speak Welsh and where Welsh is the working language of a county administration?

**Jane Ellison:** We have considered that issue, and we intend to work on it with other Departments. As I have said, I am always happy to have a conversation with colleagues—[ Interruption ]—not in Welsh! I will write to the hon. Lady, because the Welsh language has been raised with me before, and I know that it has been thought about in some detail.

**Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab):** It is not very often that the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) and I find ourselves on the same page, but on this occasion we certainly are, because he made an excellent point in defending Bradford. In closing offices in that city, HMRC would be turning its back on a skilled and diverse workforce, access to leading universities and one of the best MBA programmes in the United Kingdom, all of which would help it to achieve its aim. Will the Minister therefore reconsider and take a more sensible approach?

**Jane Ellison:** I assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that, as a Bradford girl, I would never do anything to harm Bradford. Equally, however, as a Bradford girl, I make the extremely short commute between Bradford and Leeds many times a year. I do not think we would wish to lose any experienced staff or expertise from the Bradford office, but the commute from Bradford to Leeds is possibly one of the shortest that any transferring HMRC staff would have to make.

**Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP):** Obviously, there will be an economic impact on many towns and cities that will lose their largest employer, but has an equality impact assessment been made in respect of staff, particularly those with disabilities, who have been asked to move 100 miles away?
Does the Minister not believe that the loss of local expertise will apply not only to tax evasion but to non-compliance with the national minimum wage, which, according to statistics, is on the increase in this country?

**Jane Ellison**: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we announced more investment in tackling non-compliance with the national minimum wage in the autumn statement. In fact, activity in that regard has been stepped up considerably, as I said when answering a parliamentary question this week. He may wish to refer to Hansard for the statistics. As for his wider point about losing expertise, of course we do not want to do that. We want to do as much as we can to help people to move, because it takes a long time for them to reach their highest level of skill, and we want to retain them when they are at the peak of their professionalism. I will write to him about the equality impact assessment.

**Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister think again about the location of the Wales tax centre? Will she consider siting it not in Cardiff but in the Swansea Bay city region, where property prices and other costs are lower, urban deprivation is much lower in European Union terms and skills are abundant because we have two universities? That was the logic of siting the headquarters of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency in Swansea. As the biggest urban footprint in Wales, we need all the support we can get, and it is very costly in Cardiff.

**Jane Ellison**: The hon. Gentleman has neatly illustrated the challenge involved in deciding on locations as part of such a programme. He has made the case for Swansea, but other Members have made the case for their areas. It is always necessary to assess against a set of objective criteria, because every area will rightly have its advocates in Parliament.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Is the Minister aware that it will be feared throughout the United Kingdom, but particularly in Northern Ireland, that a policy that the Minister has presented as regionalisation will actually become centralisation and that a very small number of offices with a large number of employees will not adequately service the needs of the community?

**Jane Ellison**: Of course I am aware of that, but at the heart of HMRC’s wider transformation programme, which will enable it to become the best digital tax authority in the world, is a desire to do more for customers: to collect more tax, to serve people better and to bear down constantly on customer waiting times. Indeed, all HMRC’s programmes—not just the estates transformation programme—are designed to achieve that end.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Minister accept that the closures will have a devastating impact on some communities, that £150 million less will be available to tackle tax avoidance as a result of HMRC’s failure to plan the move properly and that HMRC is even less effective at saving money than at collecting it from slippery global corporations?

**Jane Ellison**: I think that, for the most part, what the right hon. Gentleman has said is just a political points-score. The facts simply do not bear it out. Since 2010, HMRC has secured more than £130 billion in additional compliance revenues, and in 2014-15, as I said earlier, the United Kingdom’s tax gap fell to its lowest-ever level of 6.5%.

**Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): In Wales, the facts are that the Government are creating one national centre in Cardiff, the most expensive site in the country; that the office in Wrexham is not small, given that it employs 350 people; and that the alternative site proposed by HMRC is in Liverpool, but that has not yet been identified. This is a shambolic policy. It is ill-conceived, and it is being badly implemented. The Minister should listen to my colleagues from Wales—she has heard from many of them today—and reconsider the policy, because it is very bad indeed.

**Jane Ellison**: I note the hon. Gentleman’s criticisms but cannot agree with the thrust of his points. HMRC will respond in detail to this report. This is a programme over a period of time and we will learn from each move. I do not recognise the description the hon. Gentleman just gave, but I do understand the point made, especially about some of the larger offices, and I realise that until the site in Liverpool is identified things are a bit more unsettling for his constituents who work in the Wrexham office than they might otherwise be.

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Cumbernauld tax office already ticks all the boxes in terms of what HMRC apparently seeks in a regional centre: it is the right size and has experienced staff and an excellent location. So what on earth is the point of closing it, disrupting staff and damaging communities?

**Jane Ellison**: I have had a number of conversations specifically about the Cumbernauld site, and I will write to the hon. Gentleman with the detail, but there are a lot of different factors that go into choosing where to locate. Indeed, the site in Liverpool is identified things are a bit more unsettling for his constituents who work in the Wrexham office than they might otherwise be.

**Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): I think that the Minister would be outraged if people living in villages, towns and small cities all suddenly stopped paying tax, yet suddenly our civil service is being centralised in a few cities. Please will she reconsider these points? This is totally outrageous for people in north Wales.

**Jane Ellison**: I am not entirely sure I recognise the point being made. Most of our taxpayers, whether businesses or individuals, now interact with HMRC on the phone or digitally. The number of people who make personal visits, and expect to be able to make a personal visit to a local office, is dramatically lower than a generation or two ago. It is right that we pursue this modernisation programme, but it is also right, as the NAO has reminded us in this timely report, that we review the programme at every stage to make sure we are getting everything right and we learn from each iteration.

**Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I am sorry, but I have to disagree with the Minister on customer service, having seen my wife wait for half an hour for someone...
at HMRC to answer the phone over Christmas and given that a previous NAO report has shown that three in 10 people give up before being answered, as the average waiting time is 47 minutes before somebody picks up the phone. As the Minister will know, this was only resolved when HMRC recruited an additional 2,500 members of staff to deal with this crisis at the end of 2015. Is she confident, even though an NAO report says that for every pound saved by this change £4 will go on telephone bills, that it will not cause a decline in customer service?

Jane Ellison: The focus on customer service is vital. At the heart of the wider transformation programme, not just the estate transformation programme, is the desire both to make sure HMRC is the most effective tax collector that it can be and to deal with customer service. So that is central to all the questions I ask of HMRC and it asks of itself.

On the specific point, I am sorry to hear the hon. Gentleman's wife waited for that long. I am concerned about the number of people who wait so long. Although they are a small proportion of the customers who ring HMRC, because of the large numbers who do so, it is still quite a lot of people, and it is an issue I have specifically been discussing with senior HMRC customer service managers, with a view to addressing it further.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Given that the Department for Work and Pensions is also conducting an estate review and is threatening to close eight job centres in Glasgow, what discussions is the Minister having with ministerial colleagues about the cumulative impact of the Government's shrinking of their estate? What impact is that going to have? How many HMRC employees are going to find themselves without a job and without a local job centre to go to?

Jane Ellison: The last question is difficult to answer because ultimately individuals will decide what is right for them at the time when the facts of a possible move are known. A great deal of support is being put in place to help them either make the choice about moving or move to other jobs. I have had the chance to speak not just to managers managing this programme, but people affected by it on the frontline, when some of them attended an event in London a few months ago. The HMRC human resources department is working closely with the DWP because there are some opportunities for people to move between Departments. However, on the specifics of the hon. Gentleman's local office, I am afraid it is not easy to give an answer until more is known about what the actual move would be and the numbers affected.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): The vast majority of staff in the HMRC office in Enniskillen in my constituency will be closer to two hours' journey time from the proposed new location than one hour. Does the Minister not see merit in the NAO report suggesting she should step back from the proposals?

Jane Ellison: As I have said, it is the nature of responding to an urgent question that one has not had a chance to look at the whole report and reflect on it, but HMRC will of course respond to it. Its chief executive is coming to the Public Accounts Committee fairly imminently and I imagine this is likely to be raised by the Committee. Of course we will look at this report—it is important, and we will look at what it says—but the central reasons that drive these plans still stand: modernising our estate, providing a service to the customer that reflects modern life and making sure the working environment for staff and the career progression open to them are the best they can be.
Northern Ireland: Political Developments

10 JANUARY 2017

1.25 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the political situation in Northern Ireland.

As the House will be aware, yesterday Martin McGuinness submitted his resignation as Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. This also means that the First Minister, Arlene Foster, also ceases to hold office, although she is able to carry out some limited functions. Under the terms of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 as amended by the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2007, the position is clear: should the offices of First and Deputy First Minister not be filled within seven days from Mr McGuinness’s resignation, it falls to me as Secretary of State to set a date for an Assembly election. Although there is no fixed timetable in the legislation for me to do that, it needs to be within a reasonable period.

In his resignation letter, Mr McGuinness said:

“In the available period Sinn Féin will not nominate to the position of deputy First Minister.”

I am very clear that in the event of the offices not being filled, I have an obligation to follow the legislation. As things stand, therefore, an early Assembly election looks highly likely. I should add that the rules state that, once an election has been held, the Assembly must meet again within one week, with a further two-week period to form a new Executive. Should that not be achieved, as things currently stand I am obliged to call another election. So right hon. and hon. Members should be in no doubt: the situation we face in Northern Ireland today is grave and the Government treat it with the utmost seriousness.

It is worth reflecting on how we have reached this point. The immediate cause of the situation we now face is the fallout from the development and operation of the Northern Ireland renewable heat incentive scheme. Under the scheme launched by the Northern Ireland Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in 2012, which is equivalent to a scheme in Great Britain, businesses and other non-domestic users were offered a financial incentive to install renewable heat systems on their premises. The scheme was finally shut to new applicants in February last year, when it became clear that the lack of an upper limit on payments, unlike in the GB equivalent, meant that the scheme was open to serious abuse. In recent weeks there has been sustained media focus and widespread public concern about how this situation developed.

The renewable heat incentive scheme was, and remains, an entirely devolved matter in which the UK Government have no direct role. It is primarily the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly to take the necessary action to address the concerns that have been expressed about it. However, I believe that it is imperative that a comprehensive, transparent and impartial inquiry into the development and implementation of the scheme is established as quickly as possible. In addition, effective action needs to be taken by the Executive and the Assembly to control costs. The RHI scheme has been the catalyst for the situation we now face, but it has also exposed a number of deeper tensions in the relationship between the parties in the Northern Ireland Executive. This has led to a breakdown in the trust and co-operation that are necessary for the power-sharing institutions to function effectively.

Over the coming hours and days I will continue to explore whether any basis exists for resolving these issues prior to my having to fulfil my statutory duty to call an election. I have been in regular contact with the leadership of the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Féin, and also with the Justice Minister, Claire Sugden, an Independent Unionist. Yesterday evening I had a round of calls with the main Opposition parties at Stormont. I am also in close touch with the Irish Foreign Minister, Charlie Flanagan. Immediately after this statement I will return to Northern Ireland, where I will continue to do whatever I can to find a way forward.

The UK and the Irish Governments will continue to provide every possible support and assistance to the Executive parties. However, we have to be realistic. The clock is ticking, and an election is inevitable if there is no resolution, despite the widely held view that an election would deepen divisions and threaten the continuity of the devolved institutions.

Over recent decades, Northern Ireland’s politicians have rightly earned plaudits from across the globe for their ability to overcome difference and to work together for the good of the whole community. That has required courage and risk on all sides. We are currently in the longest period of unbroken devolved government since the 1960s. This political stability has been hard gained, and it should not be lightly thrown away. In the 14 months since the “Fresh Start” agreement, significant advances have been made in areas such as addressing paramilitarism, supporting shared and integrated education and putting the Executive’s finances on a sustainable footing. This summer’s parading season passed off peacefully, and the long-running dispute in north Belfast has been resolved. We have also been working intensively to build the necessary consensus to bring forward the bodies to address the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past, as set out in the Stormont House agreement.

I am in no doubt that what Northern Ireland needs at this time is strong stable devolved government, not a collapse of the institution. Northern Ireland deserves fair, accountable, stable and effective government. It needs to continue to implement the Belfast agreement and its successors. It also needs to strengthen the economy and to ensure that Northern Ireland responds to the challenges and opportunities presented by EU exit; it needs to build a stronger, shared society in which there is respect for everyone; and it needs to address the legacy of the past in a way that enables Northern Ireland to move forward. We must not put all that at risk without making every effort to resolve differences. We must continue to do all we can to continue building a brighter, more secure Northern Ireland that works for everyone. I therefore urge Northern Ireland’s political leaders to come together and to work together to find a way forward that will be in the best interests of Northern Ireland. I commend this statement to the House.

1.33 pm

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I wish we did not have to be here for this statement today, but we are. I thank the Secretary of State for giving me notice of his
statement. I want to make it clear from the start that we in the Labour party will support him in his endeavours to maintain the political stability in Northern Ireland. Those of us with long memories can remember a time in which people across Northern Ireland did not know the peace that we can see today, and any damage to this peace on our watch should rightly be to our shame. The issues facing Northern Ireland are many. They include the questions of how we deal with Northern Ireland’s past and its legacy; how we help the many people living in poverty; and how we handle our impending exit from the European Union, bearing in mind that Northern Ireland has the UK’s only land border with the EU. That will be a huge issue in any Brexit negotiation, and we are going into this election period just weeks before the Government sign off on article 50.

Any divisions now will be most damaging for Northern Ireland, when we should all be focusing on coming together to combat the common problems facing us all. This impasse does not help victims or families, and it does not help the economy. For those reasons, all of us in this House must come together, put aside partisan concerns and try to support those in Northern Ireland in order to maintain an enduring and peaceful devolution settlement.

The issues surrounding the RHI scheme have reached an impasse after many weeks of developments and, as the Secretary of State said, we might now be moving towards an election. That election would see constituencies reduced from six to five seats, and as we deal with the many challenges facing Northern Ireland, we could see the loss of many diverse voices that could have benefited the Assembly, which has been together only since the beginning of last year. The election could even deliver a similar result to that seen in 2016, and we would then be back at square one with the underlying issue unresolved. That could result in an even more polarised position than the one we face now.

If we have an election, what will it be fought on? Will it be fought on who can deliver the best outcome for the Northern Ireland economy and for its schools and hospitals? Will it look forward to progress or look backwards to division? With so much at stake, not least the institutions themselves, surely it is time for moderation. Lines in the sand are not what are needed. From the feedback that we are getting from people on the ground in Northern Ireland, I do not believe that the population there want an election, and certainly not so soon after the last one. Is that really what people want?

This is not just about us; it is about the world. The world is watching this. There is a huge amount of good will towards Northern Ireland and huge admiration for the success we have seen after decades of despair. People look to the Assembly for a lead, and that is a huge responsibility for the Assembly and for us in this House. People do not want us to fail. They want us all to rise to the hard challenges and work through them. They do not want us just to walk away when things get tough. We know from sad experience that the worst thing that we can do in Northern Ireland is to leave a vacuum. Six weeks of polarised election campaigning will not move the RHI issue forward one inch, but it could push back the real agenda that matters to the people of Northern Ireland on a day-to-day basis. For these reasons, we call on the Secretary of State today to convene a roundtable in Northern Ireland to discuss ways to end this impasse and to help the discussions. I am glad to say that he has engaged with his counterparts in the Irish Government and with politicians in Northern Ireland. Let us all keep at it. Let us not give in to despair.

On the RHI scheme, can the Secretary of State tell us what assessment he has made of the effect the projected overspend will have on the Northern Ireland budget? I thank him again for coming to the House today, and I reiterate that we in the Labour party will do all we can to ensure that the devolved institutions remain, not just for six weeks or six months but for the many years to follow.

James Brokenshire: I am grateful for the support of the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) and for his comments. He underlines the significance of the issues and highlights the importance of having a strong, working, functioning Executive that can take Northern Ireland forward. There is much to be positive about when we look at the jobs that are being created and the incredible businesses that have been established. I always get a really positive sense of that spirit and the belief in what Northern Ireland can and will be. It has a bright future to look forward to.

Clearly we need the parties to come together and to work together, as I have said. The hon. Gentleman underlined that message in his comments. My intent, over this short period, is to continue to engage with the parties and determine what support the UK Government can provide in finding a solution and whether there is a way of pulling back from the current situation if things do not change. I commit to doing everything I can in my role to support that activity.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the costs to the Northern Ireland budget. I know that the Executive have made an estimate of around £490 million over a 20-year period if no mitigation takes place. One of the key issues is to determine what mitigation could be put in place. We need to support any proposals to mitigate the situation in the best interests of taxpayers in Northern Ireland. Certainly we stand ready to work with the Executive to play a role and to assist if necessary, but obviously we must focus, as time is short before I have to consider my responsibility to call an election. Again, that is why we need to work together.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Unsurprisingly, a very significant number of colleagues are seeking to catch my eye. I would like to accommodate most, if not all, of them. My prospects of doing so will be greatly enhanced if colleagues who are customarily addicted to long or multifaceted questions are today able to content themselves with minimal preamble and a simple, pithy inquiry, which I know will enjoy a pithy response from the Secretary of State.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Given that new elections would probably return the parties more or less in the same numbers as they have now, does he agree that repeated callings of elections will not really address the fundamental issue? Do we
not therefore need to look closely at how the institutions are actually constructed and formulated so that we can move away from this constant threat of those institutions collapsing or being collapsed.

James Brokenshire: I welcome the comments of the Chair of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs on the need to focus on the issues at hand and on the extent to which an election will change things. Between now and next week, our immediate focus and attention has to be on seeking to establish whether there is a way forward between the parties and on encouraging that. Obviously, various points and questions have been raised, but my responsibility at this time is to seek some form of resolution, to see whether a resolution is possible and to take stock as circumstances develop.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): As the Secretary of State alluded to in his statement, this has been coming down the line for a couple of months. Although it is deeply regrettable to see the Assembly stumble, it may need a serious jolt to get it going again. People will have differing opinions about the circumstances of Mr McGuinness’s resignation, but it leaves the Secretary of State with limited room to manoeuvre and leaves Northern Ireland stuck on pause. Can he clarify what steps he is taking to ensure that public confidence remains in the future of the institutions in Northern Ireland?

Can the Secretary of State also assure us that he is taking steps to ensure that democracy remains at the centre of the debate in Northern Ireland? As it seems clear that the relationship in the Executive has broken down and, as he said in his statement, the clock is ticking, and unfortunately it appears unlikely that the parties will get back around the table, is he prepared to face that fact, act quickly and let the people of Northern Ireland get on with choosing who they want to sit in Stormont?

Furthermore, the Secretary of State’s opportunities to affect the direction of Brexit negotiations appear as limited as those of the Scottish Secretary, given that neither is regularly invited into the room. Now that there is no effective Administration at Stormont who can speak up for Northern Ireland in the Joint Ministerial Committee, and remembering that Northern Ireland voted to remain, can he tell us what he is doing to ensure that the interests of the people of Northern Ireland are being looked after when Brexit negotiations are considered?

Finally, will the Secretary of State tell us of his discussion with the leader of the Ulster Unionist party regarding the possibility of suspending the Stormont Assembly until an inquiry into the RHI is concluded? Is he seriously considering that course of action?

James Brokenshire: One of the primary roles of the UK Government is to provide political stability, and we take those responsibilities very seriously. As I have already indicated to the House, if the time period elapses and the First and Deputy First Ministers are not in place, I have a duty and obligation to move in an appropriate way to call an election. As I have indicated to the House, that is my intent. We will take that approach. The hon. Lady highlights the issue of confidence in Northern Ireland’s political institutions, and those institutions are why it is incumbent on me to use this period to work with the different parties to see how confidence can be injected. Finding a resolution still remains the best outcome, if such a resolution can be found in the days ahead. That is where my focus will be.

The hon. Lady also highlights the issue of Brexit and speaking up for Northern Ireland. I assure her that that is precisely what I have done and will continue to do. I have regular meetings across Northern Ireland, and I continued to do so even earlier this week, to ensure that that voice is heard. Obviously, having a strong Executive in place and remaining in place is important, and therefore the Executive’s ability to make points to the UK Government underlines the need for us to find a way forward at this time. That will ensure that Northern Ireland’s voice is heard through that mechanism, as well as through the strong voice that I will continue to give.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that, although an election looks highly likely, it should be possible to come up with a rigorous, transparent and comprehensive way to investigate the overspend of the RHI that does not have to involve the break-up of the coalition, an early election or the First Minister standing down?

James Brokenshire: I certainly believe there should be opportunities to find a way forward. I intend to use the days ahead precisely to see whether we can find an agreement. There is a sense of establishing some form of inquiry—I think there are indications from all the parties on ways in which that could happen—and of giving a sense of accountability and confidence in what happens next. I will certainly be using my influence to see what can be done to achieve that.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State, and indeed the whole House, accept that we share the deep regret about the highly irresponsible decision of Sinn Féin singlehandedly to cause the collapse of the present Executive and precipitate what he has rightly called a threat to the continuity of the devolved institutions? Is it clear from what Sinn Féin have said in their resignation letter that it is not about RHI, because had this continued we would have had an investigation and proposals to mitigate costs. It has happened because, according to them, they are not getting their own way on a whole series of demands, including on rewriting the past and putting more soldiers and security forces in the dock, despite our having just agreed a programme for government in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State and the whole House need to be assured that we want a full investigation into RHI and have proposals to mitigate costs. This must continue and it must not be blocked by Sinn Féin’s actions, which are the ironic outcome of what they are planning to do. Overall, he can be assured that we in the Democratic Unionist party will continue to work with him and other parties to ensure a stable Northern Ireland, moving forward, based on good government. We want to see the institutions continue, and we will do everything in our power to make this process work. We deeply regret that Sinn Féin has decided to walk away.

James Brokenshire: I welcome any indication of the parties working together, and we need to take this opportunity to establish what arrangements can be put...
in place. I will therefore continue my discussions with all the political parties in the days ahead. The right hon. Gentleman highlights the issues that are at stake, including the need for continued strong government within Northern Ireland so that those issues can be taken forward. That is certainly what I want to see, and I think it is what the whole House would like to see. We must establish whether there is a way forward to be able to achieve that end.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): Many hard-working people across Northern Ireland who just want to get on with their lives will be exasperated by recent events and will welcome the Secretary of State’s measured tone, and indeed the comments of the shadow Secretary of State. In his discussions, will the Secretary of State remind all parties of the huge effort and immensely difficult compromises that brought about the current settlement? Will he stress that the enormously valued long-term benefits must not be jeopardised for short-term political motives?

James Brokenshire: Again, I thank my right hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers) for all their work over many years to provide stability and security. Hard effort has gone into achieving the gains that we see today, and we need to approach the days ahead with that focus to see what resolution can be found.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): If there were to be an election, how does the Secretary of State expect a Government to be formed afterwards? Can he confirm that it is the Government’s intention that under no circumstances will emergency legislation be introduced in this House to introduce or reintroduce direct rule?

James Brokenshire: It is unhelpful to talk about either the suspension of devolution or direct rule—that is entirely premature—as the tone of the hon. Gentleman’s point and the way in which he made it suggests. If we are not able to reach a resolution in these next seven days, the next stage is for an election to be called. As I have indicated, it is likely that that election will be divisive, difficult and tough, and therefore the ability to reach a resolution at the end of it may be very challenging. That is why we need to use the time we have now to address a number of the points raised.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): The Secretary of State’s statement touched on the possibility of an impartial inquiry into the energy deal. Will he give a bit more information about that and the timescale involved? With possible elections looming, will such an inquiry happen quickly?

James Brokenshire: Ultimately, that will depend on the Executive and the parties in Northern Ireland reaching a resolution on it. As I have said, this is entirely within the devolved space, so it is right and proper that a solution should be created within that environment. Equally, this underlines the need for us to get on with it, where possible, to give that sense of assurance, to respond to the concerns that have been raised and to show where accountability may or may not rest, depending on the evidence that emerges.
committed to taking that forward, leading to a public phase in relation to that work. I judge that to be the right next step.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): Of course there has to be an independent, transparent investigation into the failings of RHI, but is this not a symptom of a wider problem; a breakdown of mutual trust and respect between the majority parties in Northern Ireland? Leaders do not have to be friends, but given the nature of the constitutional arrangements in Northern Ireland there has to be mutual respect and trust. Is this situation not purely a symptom of a breakdown of that? Do we not need to see leaders who are committed to putting personal differences aside in the interests of the institutions?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman may have noted that I said in my statement that, obviously, the focus has been on RHI, but other issues have come through from this. Indeed, the letter that Mr McGuinness published yesterday highlighted a number of those themes. That is why I make the point at this time about parties coming together and working together in the best interests of Northern Ireland, given so much opportunity that resides there. There needs to be that focus on the big issues at hand and the best interests of Northern Ireland.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): If there are constructive talks in the next few days, will the Secretary of State be willing to consider extending the seven-day period before an election has to be called?

James Brokenshire: As I have indicated, the law is clear about the seven-day period and I must act within a reasonable period following that. Obviously, if the time period elapses, I will need to consider the position carefully, but I am under that statutory duty and I will follow through on it.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): This is not the first time that the institutions have been brought to the brink, and each time leadership is required to bring them back. Principally, that leadership has to come from the parties in Northern Ireland, but there is a leadership role for the Government and the Secretary of State. He has the power under the Inquiries Act 2005 to constitute a public inquiry into the handling of RHI, so will he do so? As he finds his way through this, will he undertake to speak to all parties in Northern Ireland, not just to the DUP and Sinn Féin?

James Brokenshire: On the last point, I say that I had a round of calls yesterday evening to the main opposition parties in Northern Ireland, and I will continue to maintain that contact with parties at Stormont. On right hon. Gentleman's point about RHI and the nature of an inquiry, I remain of the view that the best solution is that a way forward should be found within Northern Ireland, taking his point about issues of leadership and showing that the devolved institutions are able to deal with the challenges that exist. That is where my focus will be in the days ahead.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) ably expressed the dismay at the grotesquely partisan and inequitable decision to instruct the Police Service of Northern Ireland to start pursuing retired British service personnel, while amnestied former terrorists freely walk the streets. Will the Government introduce legislation urgently to offer them at least the same protection as the amnestied terrorists undeservedly enjoy?

James Brokenshire: There are no amnesties. We have been clear on that in relation to the “on-the-runs” scheme, and Lady Justice Hallett’s report concluded in 2014 that these things never amounted to an immunity from prosecution. But my right hon. Friend makes a broader point about the need for a proportionate and balanced approach to legacy to ensure that all aspects are investigated properly, rather than by looking at one side rather than the other. That is precisely the approach that can be taken forward through the Stormont House agreement.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): We will have a debate later in Westminster Hall on this very subject. May I say to the Secretary of State that if we are going to have more talks, let us deal with this issue once and for all? It is unacceptable that veterans of the armed forces who served the Crown are waiting on the knock at the door, while the terrorists walk free.

James Brokenshire: I know the interest that the right hon. Gentleman has taken in this issue of legacy over many, many years. I agree that it is totally unfair that the alleged misdeeds of soldiers and former police officers should be investigated, while perpetrators of terrorist atrocities are ignored and their victims forgotten. It is precisely that part that was reflected in the proportionate, balanced, fair and equitable stance taken in relation to the Stormont House agreement; this is why we have been continuing discussions on that very issue and why I am determined that we will move to a public phase so that we can take that forward.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Had the historical investigations unit not been structured as it was, the Stormont House agreement would have failed and, in all likelihood, so would the Executive in 2014. Now that the Executive have apparently failed, does the Secretary of State share my sadness that the unit was set up as it was and had to investigate chronologically, meaning that servicemen were bound to be the subject of most of its investigations as terrorists sadly do not keep any records, and they certainly do not respond to letters from the Ministry of Defence inviting them to unburden themselves?

James Brokenshire: The historical investigations unit has not yet been established and the chronological approach that he highlights—that proportionate approach—is not in place. The need for reform and change was reflected in the Stormont House agreement, which is precisely why it is necessary to take this matter forward. Notwithstanding recent events, there is still the opportunity for us to move forward with the parties to ensure that we get the political stability required for these issues to be taken forward, precisely for the cross-community interests that reside around this issue.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Does the Secretary of State not recognise that it is the hubris of the outgoing First Minister that has brought about the humiliation
for our institutions of his now having to contemplate the options he has discussed today? Does he also note that Sinn Féin is saying it has called time on the “DUP status quo”, which seems to be how it is now describing the “Fresh Start” agreement? Would not a future real fresh start involve a return to a key precept of the Good Friday agreement: that the First and Deputy First Minister should be jointly elected by the Assembly? They might then both act as though they were accountable to the Assembly that appointed them, which would have avoided these difficulties.

James Brokenshire: We need to focus on using the time available over the coming days to see what resolution can be found and how people can work together in the best interests of Northern Ireland, because so many issues are at stake. Part of that is about how we move forward and get an inquiry in place so that questions can be answered and so that appropriate accountability, based on the information that comes from that inquiry, is allowed to happen. That is where the focus needs to be.

Claire Perry (Devizes) (Con): Like so many Members in the House, I have grave concerns about what seems to be a disproportionate and politically motivated investigation of those who believed that they were just doing their job during Operation Banner. I am sure my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is aware of those concerns, but he should know that, as an MP representing many serving members of the British Army, I know that this issue is having a measurable effect on current recruitment for our armed forces. Does he agree that this period of uncertainty provides us with an opportunity to set the record straight about what is and is not within the scope of the inquiry?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point, and for the way in which she makes it. I certainly am struck by the strength of feeling, which is why I underline the points I have made about how we need to see a change in the system. The attention of the state is focused in such a way that there are cases in which people have been murdered as a consequence of terrorist activity but are not being pursued. There are mechanisms that provide for that, and I am intent on taking that forward. Notwithstanding the current issues, that remains a priority.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm that other Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive remain in post and can continue to participate in the Assembly at this time to find the solution. I am not able to intervene; my hon. Friend will understand the rule-of-law issues, the related prosecutorial issues and the other aspects that sit around all this. Nevertheless, I am concerned about the balance of effort and the need to ensure that there are proper investigations that follow the evidence rather than anything else. Reform is needed. The situation as it is at the moment is wrong and has to change, and that is what I am committed to achieving.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I remind the Secretary of State that a previous Prime Minister intervened by writing letters, which got a lot of people off the hook. In the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive—probably for a period of months—will he confirm that he will assume all responsibilities for and powers over how the Brexit negotiations apply to Northern Ireland, and that he will not allow Northern Ireland to be prejudiced in any way by the petulance of those who have walked away from the table?

James Brokenshire: As I have already indicated, I am very clear about my role and responsibilities in relation to preparations for the triggering of article 50. I have worked over many months to engage with all aspects of society in Northern Ireland, and I continue to do so. I will continue to articulate firmly and clearly, in Whitehall and elsewhere, the best interests of Northern Ireland throughout the Brexit negotiations. That process is strengthened by having a functioning, capable Executive who can support that, and work with the UK Government to ensure that we get the best possible deal for Northern Ireland from the negotiations.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): The Secretary of State will have received correspondence from me regarding my concerns about the investigation of personnel involved in Operation Banner. On the RHI, he said in the House today, “The scheme was finally shut down to new applicants in February last year, when it became clear that the lack of an upper limit on payments, unlike in the GB equivalent, meant the scheme was open to serious abuse.” That is not a clear indication of when his predecessor was first made aware of the abuse. When was that?

James Brokenshire: The point is that this was a devolved decision. It sits in the devolved space, so the UK Government have not had that sort of direct role, which was why I made the point that I did. The hon. Gentleman’s question is perhaps directed more at some of the points that have been made about an ongoing inquiry and the
The Secretary of State mentioned legacy issues in his power sharing and that everybody comes back to the principle of Northern Ireland that those principles are adhered to Democratic Unionist party. Will the Secretary of State of the principle of power sharing, foremost by the we ha ve seen the disappearance and the withering a way and respect for political difference. In the past weeks, Ireland were the principles of power sharing, partnership Fundamental to the political institutions in Northern makes that job harder. election that seeks to create more difference, which rather than taking the risk of what may be a divisive bind people together and how we use this time at hand, the point about the need to look at those things that of the agreements that ha ve been reached and, indeed, across Northern Ireland. That is very much at the heart things from their past?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Stormont House agreement provides an important framework, agreed by all the parties, for how best to respond to issues from the past. My focus remains on seeking to give effect to that in accordance with the terms of the Stormont House agreement. I will continue to encourage parties to work together so that we can establish the political consensus required to achieve that, because of all the really important reasons that have been identified in the House today.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): The Secretary of State will be aware of the list of issues that the Deputy First Minister included in his resignation letter yesterday, Will the Secretary of State confirm to the House that he and Her Majesty's Government will not be weak in any negotiations with Sinn Féin and will not allow the rewriting of history?

James Brokenshire: I will certainly not be party to any rewriting of history—I have said that on several occasions in relation to the issues of the past. We need to focus on the time at hand and find a way forward from the very difficult situation we are now presented with so that we can see Northern Ireland moving forward. We need to use this time to bring people together, rather than looking at things that separate and divide. We must use these days to focus on how trust and confidence can be re-established, and work with the parties to do that.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Fundamental to the political institutions in Northern Ireland were the principles of power sharing, partnership and respect for political difference. In the past weeks, we have seen the disappearance and the withering away of the principle of power sharing, foremost by the Democratic Unionist party. Will the Secretary of State ensure in his discussions with the political parties in Northern Ireland that those principles are adhered to and that everybody comes back to the principle of power sharing?

James Brokenshire: The important part of the political settlement is the fact that it works for all communities across Northern Ireland. That is very much at the heart of the agreements that have been reached and, indeed, of the work that needs to continue. That is why I make the point about the need to look at those things that bind people together and how we use this time at hand, rather than taking the risk of what may be a divisive election that seeks to create more difference, which makes that job harder.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire)(SNP): The Secretary of State mentioned legacy issues in his statement, so will he give the House some practical details on how he will proceed on that in the hiatus? Will he also answer the point made by the shadow Secretary of State about a roundtable meeting, as that is something to which we all look forward?

James Brokenshire: On the last point, the most effective thing for me to do is to engage with the relevant political parties and establish the appropriate way in which we can facilitate further discussions to establish whether a way forward can be achieved without the need to call an election. As I have said, I stand absolutely by my commitments under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 as to what may be required if we do not fill the positions. On the hon. Gentleman’s point about legacy, I have underlined that I want to establish the necessary political consensus to move forward. The next step is a more public phase of that—I am talking about enabling all the public in Northern Ireland to have their say about the proposals. That is the next step I wish to take.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East)(DUP): Does the Secretary of State recall that, just two years ago, Sinn Féin plunged the institutions into crisis over the implementation of welfare reform and cost the Northern Ireland Executive £174 million—not in a projected or an estimated way, but in an actual way? None the less, in a bizarre irony, the decision to resign and to walk out of the Northern Ireland Executive means that there will be no Assembly to pass the mitigation measures that were due from the Stormont House Agreement. Therefore, Sinn Féin will be delivering the bedroom tax in Northern Ireland in six weeks’ time.

Mr Speaker: I am not sure that I detected a question in that stream of consciousness from the hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.] I hear him now chuntering from a sedentary position, “Does he agree?”

James Brokenshire: I am in no doubt about the tensions that exist at the moment but, in relation to welfare, I do look back to those days when there were differences. There were very strongly held views, yet a way forward was established. At this time, I call on the parties to reflect on that experience, to work together and to use this time now to find a solution.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): May I welcome the Secretary of State’s comment that we want to build a stronger shared society in which there is respect for everyone? We all want to see that but, in line with what the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), said, we need to have a completely new look at this. We need to get back to the Belfast agreement so that we do not go round and round in circles, but we must remember that Einstein said that “insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results.”

James Brokenshire: I know that the hon. Gentleman has put down some thoughts and I read his article at the weekend. The primary focus now is to see how we can use this short time ahead to work and build together to determine whether we can get through this current difficulty and ensure that we can look to a bright, positive and prosperous Northern Ireland. Ultimately, that is what we are about. That is what is at stake, and it is why I will be doing all that I can to establish whether a way forward can found and a solution created.
Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to clarify a question that I asked in Foreign Office questions, and to ask your advice on a very serious matter. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), appeared to be confused about what I was referring to in my question. I was in fact referring to his statement on 21 July 2016 confirming that four errors had been made in answer to parliamentary questions and in two statements on the issue of whether the UK Government had assessed alleged violations of international humanitarian law by Saudi Arabia in Yemen. That issue is very pertinent to debates that are going on in the House this week.

A number of Members and I are concerned that the Government have been attempting to prevent scrutiny on this issue and on what they knew about Saudi Arabia’s activities. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) was told in an answer to an urgent question in September that Ministers had acted immediately on recognising that they had given misleading information to the House. However, a freedom of information request released just before Christmas reveals otherwise. It is important to make you aware, Mr Speaker, that that information was released only after the Information Commissioner intervened and ordered the Government to release the information, viewing that they were in breach of the Freedom of Information Act. This is the only occasion when they have been forced to do that in the past year. The information revealed that not only did the Minister and indeed the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), know that there had been errors in information as early as 28 June 2016, but that they took nearly a month to provide that information to Parliament. They only provided it in a written statement on 21 July 2016. The information makes it clear that they were worried about the views of Parliament and the courts. I believe that this potentially constitutes a breach of the ministerial code and the courtesies of this House, which say that information should be provided in a timely fashion when errors have been made in answers. I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker, on how I might pursue the matter and find out whether a breach of the ministerial code has taken place.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for his point of order and for his courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise it. I must start by saying that the content of Ministers’ answers is the exclusive responsibility of those Ministers. If a Minister comes subsequently to realise that he or she has erred in saying something incorrect or even in giving an inadvertently misleading impression by failing to include in an answer information that should have been divulged, it is the responsibility of that Minister to correct the record.

The hon. Gentleman asks how he can best proceed in this matter. My instinct is that he should, if he feels that there has been a potential breach of the ministerial code, write directly to the Prime Minister, for it is for the Prime Minister who, under our existing constitutional arrangements, decides whether to refer an alleged and claimed breach to the independent adviser on ministerial interests. That therefore is the course that I recommend to him. It may avail him. If it does not, and the matter in his mind and that of others remains unresolved, and he feels that the House is in possession of wrong information that has not been corrected, he can always return to the matter by a variety of means. We will leave it there for now.
Mutual Guarantee Societies

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.18 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the creation of mutual guarantee societies, for their membership by small and medium-sized businesses for the purpose of lending to and by such business and for their operation; and for connected purposes.

I am a Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament. I am proud that I am introducing this Bill at the start of the Co-operative party’s centenary year. My thanks also go to Co-operatives UK and Philip Ross for their work in pressing the case for this legislative change.

For 100 years, the Co-operative party has been putting forward the case for more co-operation in our country. Correcting the legislative anomaly of the UK not benefiting from mutual guarantee societies not only is another step towards expanding co-operation but, importantly, would ensure that we increase the level of small and medium-sized enterprise bank lending. Put simply, my Bill seeks to harness the positive power of co-operation in order to increase SME lending in this country. SMEs are vital to the UK economy, and they are major drivers of employment and wealth for the country. Ensuring that they have access to the right type of finance at the right time is essential to make sure that they maximise their growth potential and develop new job opportunities.

An economy that allows for SME investment and a financial system that is prepared to lend to SMEs are essential. House of Commons research shows that SME lending is, for the first time since the global economic crisis, starting to become net positive, but a look at the broader Bank of England “Credit Conditions Survey” for 2016 makes less positive reading. It shows that the availability of credit remains static at best; indeed, the proportion of loan applications from small businesses that were approved showed a decline in quarter 2 and quarter 3 of 2016. The survey also shows that that decline is predicted to continue. That trend must be reversed, and the creation of mutual guarantee societies can be part of the solution.

My Bill would allow for the creation of mutual guarantee societies, which are private guarantee institutions created by beneficiary SMEs. While there are different forms of mutual guarantee society across Europe, they typically share a co-operative or mutual status. That means that the mutual guarantee societies’ capital is provided directly by the SMEs that apply for a loan guarantee in the form of co-operative or mutual shares. Each member has an equal voting right and participates in electing the general assembly and board of directors of the mutual guarantee society. By working together, SMEs can then negotiate a better deal from banks. For the banks, the underpinning of the mutual guarantee provides partial security on otherwise unsecured enterprise lending. The risk is lower, so the price of money is lower. The deal flow is greater and underpinned by peer review from SME members, so access to capital is easier.

A guarantee provided by a mutual guarantee society on behalf of the SME to the bank replaces collateral, enabling the bank to grant the loan. The guarantee is a financial commitment by the society to repay a certain percentage of the loan if the SME member cannot honour its payments.

In many ways, this Bill is a no-brainer. Mutual guarantee societies provide access to finance, achieve better credit conditions, provide assessments of companies’ intangible and qualitative elements, serve as a bridge between SMEs and financial entities, and can provide better advice and supervision in financial management. The creation of such societies in the UK would also be good for the banks because, among other aspects, they reduce banks’ overall risk, provide qualitative information for the banks, provide more detailed risk assessment at no cost, and allow them to work with supervised and reliable financial intermediaries. The OECD concluded in 2013 that mutual guarantee schemes “represent a key policy tool to address the SME financing gap, while limiting the burden on public finances.”

The UK is almost unique in not making use of mutual guarantee societies. In Europe, it is estimated that around 2 million guarantees have been made for a value of €70 billion to more than 2 million customers. This represents about 8% of all SMEs in the European Union benefiting from the activity of mutual guarantee societies. The UK has no mutual guarantee market for SMEs to improve their access to finance because of inappropriate regulatory barriers. The provision of mutual guarantees by SMEs is interpreted as requiring the full regulatory burden of being an approved insurer under the “surety” category, with, as a result, far higher capital requirements and regulatory burdens than in any other EU country. Other countries have been able to specify mutual guarantee societies when transposing EU directives so that they are regulated in a distinct and appropriate way. As the UK has no such arrangement, we have, in essence, regulatory gold-plating that blocks the entry of new models of mutual finance of this form.

Following work with the co-operative sector in 2012, the Financial Conduct Authority clarified that the best fit for any mutual guarantee society in terms of regulated activities under current legislation is suretyship. However, this imposes significantly greater capital requirements than is the case in countries that have a bespoke scheme for mutual guarantee societies, and it is not a particularly good fit anyway. My Bill would change that. It provides a definition of a mutual guarantee society and adds mutual guarantees to the list of regulated activities set out in the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Regulated Activities) Order 2001.

Despite the problems and barriers within the existing regulatory system, there is one UK-based member of the European Association of Mutual Guarantee Societies—the British Business Bank. This institution, which was created to drive SME lending, might not be the type of mutual that I believe would be created following the legislative change proposed in the Bill, but it neatly demonstrates the point that mutual guarantee societies must be part of the answer to the question of how we increase SME lending.

I hope that we are pushing at an open door. I note that in written answers to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris), Treasury Ministers have stated that officials plan to meet the FCA to discuss the possible development of mutual guarantee societies. I believe that this Bill would create a welcome mutual addition to our financial services sector.
and allow the UK to benefit from SME lending in the same way that other countries have done for many years.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Christina Rees, Mr Gavin Shuker, Anna Turley, Lucy Powell, Stephen Doughty, Mr Adrian Bailey, Seema Malhotra, Mr Gareth Thomas, John Woodcock, Jonathan Edwards and Christian Matheson present the Bill.

Christina Rees accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February, and to be printed (Bill 119).

**Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill**

**Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee**

**New Clause 1**

**CONDITION FOR EXERCISE OF POWER TO INCREASE LIMIT: ANALYSIS OF USE OF SEPARATE FINANCIAL CENTRES**

“After section 15 of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999 (limit on government assistance), insert—

“15A Condition for exercise of power to increase limit: analysis of use of separate financial centres

(1) The Secretary of State may only lay a draft of regulations under section 15(4) before the House of Commons if the Secretary of State has previously laid before Parliament an analysis on the use of separate financial centres.

(2) An analysis under subsection (1) shall consider and report upon—

(a) the countries in which CDC invests which do not have a sufficiently robust regulatory environment for its financial institutions to be used;

(b) the prospects for countries identified in accordance with paragraph (a) to cease to be in that category;

(c) the separate financial centres used for investments intended for countries identified in paragraph (a);

(d) the criteria used for determining the use of the financial centres identified in paragraph (c), and

(e) the Secretary of State’s assessment of the extent to which the financial centres identified in paragraph (c) comply with the standards of transparency and accountability in tax matters with which the United Kingdom complies.”—[Kate Osamor.]”

This new clause would require any proposal to increase the limit by secondary legislation to be accompanied by an analysis of the CDC’s use of separate financial centres where countries do not have sufficiently robust regulatory environments, the transparency and accountability of those financial centres and the progress made in precluding the need for the use of separate financial centres.

_Brought up, and read the First time._

2.29 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss new clause 2—_Condition for exercise of power to increase limit: report and business case_—

“After section 15 of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999 (limit on government assistance), insert—

“15A Condition for exercise of power to increase limit: business case and strategic plan

(1) The Secretary of State may only lay a draft of regulations under section 15(4) before the House of Commons if the Secretary of State has also laid before the House of Commons the documents specified in subsections (2) and (3).

(2) The document specified in this subsection is a business case for the proposed use of the new investment enabled by the proposed increase in the limit in force which includes information on—

(a) the expected market demand,

(b) the proposed sectors,

(c) the proposed locations, and

(d) the prospective development returns.”
This new clause would require any draft regulations to increase the limit on government assistance under section 15(4) to be preceded by a review, also to be laid before the House of Commons, of the extent to which the increase in the limit will contribute to a reduction in poverty, the aim of development assistance, and to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

New clause 7—Condition for exercise of power to increase limit: prohibition on investment in certain sectors

“After section 15 of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999 (limit on government assistance), insert—

“15A Condition for exercise of power to increase limit: prohibition on investment in certain sectors

(1) The Secretary of State may only lay a draft of regulations under section 15(4) before the House of Commons if he is satisfied that the condition in subsection (2) is met.

(2) That condition is that any new investment enabled by the proposed increase in the current limit at the time is not in any of the following sectors—

(a) a reduction in poverty, and
(b) healthcare providers that charge the end user,
(c) the real estate sector,
(d) mineral extraction,
(e) the palm oil sector,
(f) the fossil fuel sector.

(3) In this section—

the current limit at the time means—

(a) prior to the making of any regulations under section 15(4), £6,000 million, and
(b) thereafter, the limit set in regulations made under section 15(4) then in force.”

This new clause would prohibit any new investment arising from any increase in the limit on government assistance under regulations under section 15(4) from being in the sectors specified in subsection (2).

New clause 8—Condition for exercise of power to increase limit: prohibition on use of tax havens

“After section 15 of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999 (limit on government assistance), insert—

“15A Condition for exercise of power to increase limit: prohibition on use of tax havens

(1) The Secretary of State may only lay a draft of regulations under section 15(4) before the House of Commons if he is satisfied that the condition in subsection (2) is met.

(2) That condition is that any new investment enabled by the proposed increase in the current limit at the time is not in any of the following sectors—

(a) a reduction in poverty, and
(b) achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

(3) In this section—

the limit on government assistance under section 15(4) to be preceded by a review, also to be laid before the House of Commons, of the extent to which the increase in the limit will contribute to a reduction in poverty, the aim of development assistance, and to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

New clause 3—Condition for exercise of power to increase limit: poverty reduction purposes for spending outside LDCs

(3) The condition in this subsection is that the Secretary of State is satisfied that the condition in subsection (2) is met.

(2) That condition is that any new investment enabled by the proposed increase in the limit in force is in a country which is classified as one of the least developed countries.

(3) The condition in this subsection is that the Secretary of State is satisfied that any new investment enabled by the proposed increase in the limit in force will have a significant impact on the reduction in poverty (within the meaning given in section 1(1) of the International Development Act 2002) in the country or countries concerned.

(4) In determining the classification of a country for the purposes of subsection (2), the Secretary of State shall use the latest analytical classification of the world’s economies prepared by the World Bank.”

This new clause would require any draft regulations to increase the limit on government assistance under section 15(4) to be for additional investment which is either in least developed countries or which makes a significant impact on poverty reduction in another country.

New clause 4—Condition for exercise of power to increase limit: independent assessment of aid impact

(1) The Secretary of State may only lay a draft of regulations under section 15(4) before the House of Commons if the Secretary of State is satisfied that arrangements are in place for an independent assessment of the aid impact of new CDC investment which meet the conditions in this section.

(2) The first condition is that a framework agreement has been reached between CDC and the Independent Commission for Aid Impact for the Commission to carry out such an assessment on an annual basis.

(3) The second condition is that each annual assessment will be able to assess projects with a monetary value equivalent to at least 5 per cent of the total value of current investments in the year in question by the CDC.

(4) The third condition is that the Secretary of State is satisfied that the Independent Commission for Aid Impact has the additional resources required to carry out such annual assessments without impairing its capacity to undertake its other work.”

This new clause would require any proposal to increase the limit by secondary legislation to be contingent on an agreement being reached for an annual independent assessment of aid impact to be carried out by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact covering at least 5% of CDC’s investment portfolio at the time.

New clause 6—Condition for exercise of power to increase limit: contribution to Sustainable Development Goals

(1) The Secretary of State may only lay a draft of regulations under section 15(4) before the House of Commons if he has also laid before the House of Commons a review in accordance with subsection (2).

(2) A review under this subsection must provide the Secretary of State’s assessment of the extent to which the increase in the limit on the Crown’s assistance to the Corporation is likely to contribute to—

(a) a reduction in poverty, and
(b) achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

(3) In this section—

the Sustainable Development Goals means the Goals adopted at the United Nations on 25 September 2015.”

This new clause would require any draft regulations to increase the limit on government assistance under section 15(4) to be preceded by a review, also to be laid before the House of Commons, of the extent to which the increase in the limit will contribute to a reduction in poverty, the aim of development assistance, and to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

New clause 7—Condition for exercise of power to increase limit: prohibition on investment in certain sectors

(1) The Secretary of State may only lay a draft of regulations under section 15(4) before the House of Commons if he is satisfied that the condition in subsection (2) is met.

(2) That condition is that any new investment enabled by the proposed increase in the current limit at the time is not in any of the following sectors—

(a) education providers that charge the end user,
(b) healthcare providers that charge the end user,
(c) the real estate sector,
(d) mineral extraction,
(e) the palm oil sector,
(f) the fossil fuel sector.

(3) In this section—

the current limit at the time means—

(a) prior to the making of any regulations under section 15(4), £6,000 million, and
(b) thereafter, the limit set in regulations made under section 15(4) then in force.”

This new clause would prohibit any new investment arising from any increase in the limit on government assistance under regulations under section 15(4) from being in the sectors specified in subsection (2).
(2) That condition is that any new investment enabled by the proposed increase in the current limit at the time is not in either—

(a) an investment entity, or
(b) a company

which uses, or seems to use, tax havens.

(3) In determining whether the condition in subsection (2) is met, the Secretary of State shall consider—

(a) information provided by the OECD on countries or territories which are considered to be tax havens, and
(b) such information as is available to the Secretary of State, whether supplied by the CDC or others, about the current location of funds of the potentially relevant entities for the purposes of subsection (2).

(4) In this section—

“the current limit at the time” means—

(a) prior to the making of any regulations under section 15(4), £6,000 million,
(b) thereafter, the limit set in regulations made under section 15(4) then in force.”

This new clause would prohibit any new investment arising from any increase in the limit on government assistance under regulations under section 15(4) from going to an investment vehicle or company which uses or seems likely to use tax havens.

New clause 9—Conditions for exercise of power to increase limit: countries, poverty reduction and SDGs—

“Af rter section 15 of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999 (limit on government assistance), insert—

“15A Conditions for exercise of power to increase limit: countries, poverty reduction and SDGs—

(1) The Secretary of State may only lay a draft of regulations under section 15(4) before the House of Commons if he is satisfied that the conditions in subsection (2), (4) and (5) are met.

(2) The condition in this subsection is that any new investment in a country enabled by the proposed increase in the current limit at the time is in a country which is classified as either—

(a) one of the least developed countries, or
(b) one of the other low income countries.

(3) In determining the classification of a country for the purposes of subsection (2), the Secretary of State shall use the latest analytical classification of the world’s economies prepared by the World Bank.

(4) The condition in this subsection is that the Secretary of State is satisfied that any new investment enabled by the proposed increase in the current limit at the time is likely to contribute to a reduction in poverty.

(5) The condition in this subsection is that the Secretary of State is satisfied that any new investment enabled by the proposed increase in the current limit at the time is likely to contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

(6) In this section—

“the current limit at the time” means—

(a) prior to the making of any regulations under section 15(4), £6,000 million,
(b) thereafter, the limit set in regulations made under section 15(4) then in force;

“reduction in poverty” shall have the same meaning as in section 1(1) of the International Development Act 2002; and

“the Sustainable Development Goals” means the Goals adopted at the United Nations on 25 September 2015.”

This new clause would limit any new investment arising from any increase in the limit on government assistance under regulations under section 15(4) to the least developed countries and other low income countries and require the Secretary of State to be satisfied that such new investment contributed to the reduction of poverty and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

New clause 10—Condition for exercise of power to increase limit: proportion of annual official development assistance—

“After section 15 of the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999 (limit on government assistance), insert—

“15A Condition for exercise of power to increase limit: proportion of annual official development assistance

(1) The Secretary of State may only lay a draft of regulations under section 15(4) before the House of Commons if he is satisfied that the conditions in subsection (2) are met.

(2) The condition in this subsection is that the total value of any re-capitalisation of CDC enabled by the proposed increase in the current limit at the time will not, in any one calendar year, constitute more than 5% of total official development assistance.

(3) In this section—

“official development assistance” has the same meaning as in the most recent annual report laid before each House of Parliament in accordance with the provisions of section 1 of the International Development (Reporting and Transparency) Act 2006.

This new clause would limit any new investment arising from any increase in the limit on government assistance under regulations under section 15(4) to 5% of official development assistance in any one calendar year.

Amendment 2, in clause 1, page 1, line 4, leave out “£6,000 million” and insert

“the amount specified in subsection (1A)”.

This amendment paves the way for amendment 3.

Amendment 5, page 1, line 4, leave out “£6,000” and insert “£4,000”.

Amendment 3, page 1, line 4, at end, insert—

“(1A) After subsection (1), insert—

“(1A) The amount specified in this subsection is whichever is the lesser of the following amounts—

(a) £6,000 million,
(b) £1,500 million plus the amount determined in accordance with subsection (1B).

(1B) The Secretary of State shall determine the amount for the purposes of this subsection by estimating the amount which will constitute 4% of official development assistance in the relevant period determined in accordance with subsection (1C).

(1C) That period begins with the financial year in which the Secretary of State considers that the Crown’s assistance to the Corporation (determined in accordance with subsection (2)) will exceed £1,500 and ends at the end of the fourth subsequent financial year.

(1D) For the purposes of this section, “official development assistance” has the same meaning as in the most recent annual report laid before each House of Parliament in accordance with the provisions of section 1 of the International Development (Reporting and Transparency) Act 2006.”

This amendment would replace the proposed limit on government assistance under section 15 with a new amount, expressed as either £6 billion or the existing investment of £1.35 billion plus a sum not more than 4% of forecast official development assistance over a five year period, whichever is the lesser amount.

Amendment 6, page 1, line 5, leave out subsection (3).

This amendment removes the power of the Secretary of State to set a limit on government assistance above £6 billion up to £12 billion by means of secondary legislation.
Amendment 4, page 1, line 7, leave out “£12,000 million” and insert “the amount specified in subsection (4A).

(4A) The amount specified in this subsection is whichever is the lesser of the following amounts—

(a) £12,000 million,
(b) the current limit at the time plus the amount determined in accordance with subsection (4B).

(4B) The Secretary of State shall determine the amount for the purposes of this subsection by estimating the amount which will constitute 4% of official development assistance in the relevant period determined in accordance with subsection (4C).

(4C) That period begins with the financial year in which the Secretary of State considers that the Crown’s assistance to the Corporation (determined in accordance with subsection (2)) will exceed the current limit at the time and ends at the end of the fourth subsequent financial year.

(4D) For the purposes of this section—

“the current limit at the time” means—

(a) prior to the making of any regulations under subsection (4), £6,000 million,
(b) thereafter, the limit set in regulations made under subsection (4) then in force;

“official development assistance” has the same meaning as in the most recent annual report laid before each House of Parliament in accordance with the provisions of section 1 of the International Development (Reporting and Transparency) Act 2006.”

The amendment would set a new limit on the power to make regulations to increase the limit on government assistance under section 15, expressed as either £12 billion or the current limit at the time plus 4% of official development assistance over a five year period, whichever is the lesser amount.

Amendment 1, page 1, line 8, at end insert—

“(4A) The Secretary of State may not exercise the power under subsection (4) to increase the limit by more than the amount that the Secretary of State estimates is required to meet the plans for investment by CDC in the ensuing three years.”

This amendment has the effect of restricting each increase in the limit by secondary legislation to an amount necessary to support additional investment by CDC over a three year period.

Kate Osamor: Labour Members are unswerving in our belief that the UK must continue to spend 0.7% of gross national income on overseas aid. It is imperative, however, that the Government deliver this aid in a way that is accountable, ensures value for money, and delivers on the UK’s development objectives.

Although we support the aims of the Bill—it has reached Report without amendment—we remain concerned about the lack of safeguards. In new clause 2, we ask that no increase in the limit be granted without a report or business case. New clauses 3 and 9 are at the heart of the work of the Department for International Development, which leads the UK’s work to end extreme poverty. We on the Front Bench ask the Government to make sure that the Minister is satisfied that any new investment enabled by a proposed increase in the limit will have a significant impact in reducing poverty.

The Department must be at the forefront of tackling global poverty reduction. It is vital that the bolstering of CDC’s resources does not mean a reduction in funds for emergency and humanitarian aid in places such as northern Nigeria, Yemen and Syria, and in other parts of the world that face grave humanitarian crises. Will the Minister commit to ring-fencing such funds so that those in the direst need of help are able to receive it? Long-term investment and the establishment of a sustainable economy in order to kick-start jobs and growth are, of course, crucial to any credible development programme, but a development programme should, at its core, be a coalition of long-term investment and short-term relief. The consequences of losing sight of the latter element would be grave indeed. Just as the UK has a duty to help to lay the foundations for secure, sustainable economies in the poorest areas, where investment is a risk that few are willing to take, the UK also has a duty to assist those who bear the full force of conflict, climate change and food insecurity.

As was laid out on Second Reading, transparency should be the driving force behind any shift in the focus of the aid budget. I now speak to new clauses 4 and 8. It is vital that taxpayers’ money is spent not only effectively, but as transparently as possible. To that end, it is incumbent on the Government to put in place mechanisms that ensure maximum visibility regarding where aid money is being spent, and that minimise public scepticism. We all know that transparency is something that DFID does very well indeed.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): Before the hon. Lady moved on to the important issue of transparency, she was talking about balance. It is fair to make the point, is it not, that CDC’s proportion of our development budget for its type, as foreign direct investment, is lower, at 4%, than comparables such as the French FDI of 12% and the Dutch at 30%? For the sake of proportion, it is fair to say that even with that increase, the UK will still spend more on development aid than most of our European peers do, and the proportion of FDI will be smaller than it is for many of those peers.

Kate Osamor: The hon. Gentleman makes a valuable point, but the Bill still needs scrutiny. That is what I am laying out.

We all know that transparency is something that DFID does very well indeed. Its performance in the aid transparency index demonstrates an international gold standard in that regard. Historically, however, the same cannot be said for CDC. It is of the utmost importance that the proportion of the ODA budget that is channelled through CDC be subject to the same checks on outcomes and value for money to which DFID holds itself. New clause 4 lays down conditions that would guarantee transparent governance through an agreed framework reached with the Independent Commission for Aid Impact and CDC. Proper annual measurements of outcome would be a welcome addition to the Bill.

In relation to new clauses 1 and 8 and the issue of CDC use of separate financial centres where countries do not have sufficiently robust regulatory environments, now is the time to put on record the Government’s commitment to strengthening financial service centres in developing countries. The Opposition know that the importance of addressing and tackling CDC’s use of tax havens cannot be overstated. Although we heard assurances in Committee from Diana Noble, the chief executive of CDC, that using offshore financial centres ensures legal certainty and lessens risk for investors, far more is needed to ensure transparency on that point. We need clear legislative safeguards, which is why the Front-Bench team will press new clause 1 to a vote. New clause 1 requires any proposal to
increase the limit by secondary legislation to be accompanied by a thorough analysis of CDCs use of such centres. Where the countries in question do not have sufficiently robust regulatory environments, it is the UK’s job to ensure that those centres are made more robust.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The hon. Lady makes some important points. Does she agree that the changes made to CDC five years ago, under which CDC was encouraged to make direct investments in developing countries—contrary to the preceding situation, in which it made investments in funds situated offshore—were a major step forward?

Kate Osamor: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and I will touch on that in my speech. Regardless of any development, we must always be robust and we must be able to show taxpayers that we have a transparent and accountable system. That is at the forefront of our objections to the Bill.

I seek assurances from the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), that he will consider supporting the implementation of such safeguards. It is of course to be applauded that the whole ethos of CDC has been transformed since it was the subject of widespread controversy some years ago. It is testimony to the organisation’s willingness to change that it reacted to that criticism by becoming a more positive institution and implementing an overhaul of the systems that were in place. These efforts were praised in the most recent report by the National Audit Office, which assessed CDC’s progress in implementing the recommendations that the NAO made in a report in 2008. It was heartening to read in the follow-up report that CDC has proved successful in adapting its strategy in accordance with NAO’s earlier recommendations, including instituting frameworks to limit excessive pay and to refocus CDC’s priorities on the world’s very poorest nations, rather than investing in markets that already attract foreign investors.

Jeremy Lefroy: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kate Osamor: No, I need to make some headway.

It was also encouraging to learn that CDC has not only met but exceeded the targets agreed with DFID relating to its financial performance and development impact, and has improved its procedures for documenting fraud and corruption. Although we on the Front Bench praise CDC for making those changes, we must not forget that the recent NAO report was by no means unequivocally positive, and that it highlighted significant areas for improvement. Allow me to quote directly from a passage in the report examining the efficiency of CDC’s methods of capturing its development impact:

“It remains a significant challenge for CDC to demonstrate its ultimate objective of creating jobs and making a lasting difference to people’s lives in some of the world’s poorest places. Given the Department’s plans to invest further in CDC, a clearer picture of actual development impact would help to demonstrate the value for money of the Department’s investment.”

That is quite some statement. According to the NAO, it is “a significant challenge” for CDC to demonstrate how effectively it does the very thing it was set up to do.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The hon. Lady refers to a quote about the challenges of capturing impact. That is an ongoing challenge in all aid work. In terms of efficiency, which is what she is referring to, the NAO report concluded:

“Through tighter cost control, strengthened corporate governance and closer alignment with the Department’s objectives, CDC now has an efficient and economic operating model.”

Does the hon. Lady agree that that is a testament to the improvements that have been made to CDC’s work over the last few years?

Kate Osamor: I said in my opening remarks that CDC has improved, but the report says that it is still very hard to know and to demonstrate the impact of development, and work on that still needs to be done. The report is not totally scathing, but we must pick up such objections. If CDC was transparent, I am sure Labour Members would not have to stand up in the Chamber and say what we are now saying.

New clause 7, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), lays down conditions about investing only in certain sectors and about not investing in sectors that provide little or no development impact in ending poverty. These sectors include the fossil fuel sector, the primary education and healthcare sectors that charge at the point of contact, the building of real estate, mineral extraction and work in the palm oil sector. If DFID’s investment in CDC is to increase the level proposed in the Bill, this challenge must be urgently addressed and resolved.

In spite of CDC’s very welcome improvements, the NAO’s recommendations show that we should not forget that it remains very much a work in progress for this organisation to demonstrate transparently and robustly that it is achieving its objectives. With that in mind, we cannot regard the Bill as the end of the process. There is no room for complacency within CDC or DFID on the need to alter the organisation’s processes further to ensure and to demonstrate the delivery of its goals. Given the scale of the proposed increase in DFID funding—from a limit of £1.5 billion to one of £6 billion—and the resulting consequences both for the UK’s development programme and indeed for the developing countries it supports, it is right that the Bill is robustly challenged and meticulously scrutinised where it is found lacking, and that stringent precautions are appended to it where necessary.

New clause 10 lays out that any proposed increase in the current limit would not in any one calendar year constitute more than 5% of total official development assistance.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I want to take the hon. Lady back to new clause 7—I tried to intervene earlier—when she listed the sectors that she feels should be excluded. Does she not agree, however, that by specifically mentioning “education providers that charge the end user” as an exception, she risks children in some of the most underprivileged communities not being able to access education? From some Select Committee work, we know that such means are the only way of getting education for many of these children.
Kate Osamor: The hon. Lady makes a valid point, but I am talking about private education, for which someone with no money would have to pay. I do not think we should support that in a developing country, because we do not do it in this country. If someone wants to pay to go to university, there are challenges in relation to that, but I am talking, ideally, about primary education.

Stephen Doughty: I am listening with interest to the hon. Lady’s point, but does she not accept that there is a bit of a double standard? The Secretary of State issued a letter on 16 December to other DFID suppliers— institutions, non-governmental organisations and people in receipt of our aid money—making it very clear that they should not invest in tax havens, yet she seems unwilling to apply the same to the CDC, which is also in receipt of taxpayers’ funding. Is that not a double standard?

Mrs Drummond: No, because we are investing in very difficult areas where robust systems may not already be in place, plus the CDC has very clear guidelines about where the money is going, so we can track it much more easily than we can with other aid agencies.

Jeremy Lefroy: Does my hon. Friend agree that the issue is not so much about offshore centres being invested in by funds from a variety of jurisdictions, but about the tax paid in-country for activities undertaken in that country? In that respect, the investments made by the CDC are excellent and provide major tax revenues of billions of dollars a year for those country’s Treasuries.

Mrs Drummond: I thank my hon. Friend for his very clear explanation, which befits what I have said.

On the case for raising investment limits, amendments 1, 3 and 6 and new clauses 2, 5 and 10 would hamper the CDC’s ability to use external financial sectors, is misplaced. One of the CDC’s aims is to help markets to develop, and what so often holds back the development of market sectors in poorer countries is the lack of a way to get in the seedcorn investment to start with.

The CDC has never invested in a particular way to dodge tax or get round a regulatory framework, and the concern that it would do so seems to me to be misplaced. The financial and regulatory frameworks of developing countries will never develop if we treat them with such suspicion and starve them of investment. The purpose of the CDC is to go into places where conventional investors may fear to tread. We should not be trying to prevent that in legislation. I hope for a time when the regulatory system will be robust enough that we do not have to use offshore centres, but we are not yet at that point.

Mrs Drummond: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, with which I totally agree.

Pauline Latham: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kate Osamor: I now need to make some progress.

Labour Members remain positive about the Bill’s ability to achieve its aim of improving the quality of life of people in some of the least developed countries in the world, but we believe that this can be achieved to its fullest extent only if appropriate safeguards are put in place. We retain our right to withdraw our support for the Bill if it becomes clear that the Government have not made sufficient progress.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call Flick Drummond.

Mrs Flick Drummond: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. It is the beginning of a new term after a long Christmas holiday, but may I remind Members that, if they want to speak, it is really easy—they just have to stand up?

Mrs Drummond: Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was expecting the Minister to respond to the first speaker, and I did not realise that I would be called next.

2.45 pm

When the House gave the Bill a Second Reading, it was striking that there was a complete disconnect between the Government and Opposition, which is very unusual on the broadly consensual area of overseas development. There is a real divide, and we can see it in the nature of the Opposition new clauses and amendments that have been tabled.

New clauses 1 and 8 would massively restrict the Secretary of State’s ability to drive forward the CDC. The Bill is the first stage in a process, of which the House will have oversight throughout, of boosting an existing proven aid delivery mechanism. The Bill will enable DFID, if it is given a clear business case by the CDC, to provide it with the necessary funding. It does not automatically give the CDC any money, and this is only the first in a series of checks and balances that are gone through before any money is provided. The target of these new clauses, which would restrict the CDC’s ability to use external financial sectors, is misplaced. One of the CDC’s aims is to help markets to develop, and what so often holds back the development of market sectors in poorer countries is the lack of a way to get in the seedcorn investment to start with.

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Stephen Doughty: The CDC has never invested in a particular way to dodge tax or get round a regulatory framework. The concern that it would do so seems to me to be misplaced. The financial and regulatory frameworks of developing countries will never develop if we treat them with such suspicion and starve them of investment. The purpose of the CDC is to go into places where conventional investors may fear to tread. We should not be trying to prevent that in legislation. I hope for a time when the regulatory system will be robust enough that we do not have to use offshore centres, but we are not yet at that point.
limiting sectors in legislation would make delivering the development process cumbersome, and I believe that it would hobble the CDC.

Pauline Latham: Does my hon. Friend agree that supporting the CDC is absolutely vital if we are to achieve the global sustainable development goals by 2030? We need to mobilise the private sector to fill an annual financing gap of about $2.5 trillion every year.

Mrs Drummond: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. One reason that I am so passionate about the CDC is that we need to build the capacity of developing countries. In my first speech on this subject, I said give a man fish and he will eat it, but give him a fishing rod and he is set for life. That is exactly the philosophy behind the CDC that I am so keen on.

There are circumstances in which some relatively more developed countries are host to companies involved in much poorer ones. As with the misplaced fears about offshore financial centres, we should not close off any path to investment and development. New clauses 3, 4, 6 and 9 all fail in that respect. All the amendments before us share a fundamental weakness and a misunderstanding of the CDC’s role in the world. We put less of our development investment through the CDC than other countries do through their equivalent bodies, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) mentioned earlier. We should be doing more through the CDC if we want to develop mature and robust market economies in the developing world, which is why I welcome the Bill.

Markets are transparent and flexible, and they empower people who take part in them. The aim of our development policy should always be to encourage self-sufficiency and the development of market economies. As I said in my first contribution on the Bill, the CDC is transparent, as the NAO report agreed. I champion the CDC’s philosophy of enabling people to build their own businesses, rather than handing out grants. It is an efficient and transparent model, and we should all give the Bill our wholehearted support and continue to be a major investor in improving the lives of our fellow citizens in developing countries.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I will speak to amendment 3 and new clause 6, which are in my name, and I will offer support for the Labour party’s amendments that I have added my name to.

Nobody here is arguing that the CDC should not exist. We all recognise there is a role for development finance and private investment. As I noted on Second Reading, the Scottish Government have just set up their own investment mechanism in Malawi. But even if we wanted to change some of the deeper fundamentals, that is not in the scope of the Bill. The Government, probably deliberately, have presented a very narrow Bill with the aim of increasing the statutory limit of their investment. Therefore, by definition, that is what our amendments must focus on.

I hope that the Government will see—certainly in the amendments I have tabled and, I think, in the Labour ones—that we have tried to respond to and take on board some of their concerns about some of our amendments in Committee. It is up to the Government to respond and indicate how they will take our concerns on board. We all want to work constructively with the Government on the Bill. We want to recognise and maintain the consensus on the importance of aid, our commitment to 0.7% and the effective use of those resources.

Amendment 3, which is in my name, and amendments 2 and 4, which are contingent on it, gets to the heart of the technical aspect of the Bill: what the cap on investment in the CDC should be. The Government have been repeatedly asked for their reasons behind the figures of £6 billion and £12 billion in the Bill, and I am afraid that they have still come up short. The best we have heard is that this is roughly what they think is needed, or could be managed, over the coming years. In the lifetime of this Parliament, that could still equate to an additional £1.5 billion to £2 billion a year of investment from the official development assistance budget to the CDC. As we have repeatedly said, every penny invested in the CDC is a penny not invested in other mainstream, grassroots and not-for-profit development projects and support.

On Second Reading, I asked about the use of a formula to link the cap with overall ODA budgets, and I proposed such a formula in Committee. The Minister’s first concern about a formula was that it would blur the line between stock and flow. But the aid budget is a flow. It goes up and it can, theoretically, go down as well. I recognise that the CDC investment is a stock: once funds are transferred, that is where they stay and they remain part of the overall capital fund. However, the formula would ask the Government, each time they want to disburse funds to CDC, to calculate how those funds will relate to overall aid spending in the coming years.

The Minister’s second concern was that my formula in Committee effectively discounted the £1.5 billion already invested in the CDC. Amendment 3 and the contingent amendments take that into account. By my calculations, based on figures from the Library, this formula would still allow the Government to invest an extra £3 billion, or a total of £4.5 billion, in the CDC by 2021. Even if the Government will not accept the amendment and we cannot persuade enough of their Back Benchers to join us in the Lobby to support it, I hope that they will commit to recognising that the £6 billion figure currently stated in the legislation is a maximum and that any additional investment they intend to make will ultimately reflect the ebb and flow of overall ODA calculations in any given spending round.

Irrespective of the caps and limits, much concern has been expressed throughout the passage of the Bill over how some aspects of the CDC’s resources have been spent in the past and how they will continue to be spent in the future. That is what I seek to address with new clause 6, which is particularly important in the context of increasing—potentially quadrupling—the overall resources available to the CDC. I welcome the range of amendments in Committee and here today that attempt to place various conditions on the exercise of the power to increase the limit.

As I said at the start, owing to the scope of the Bill, my amendments and those of Labour Members must relate to the increase in the limit from £6 billion to £12 billion under the terms of section 15(4) of the
Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999. Try as we might, it has not been possible to find a way to attach conditions to the investment of up to £6 billion. The Government have indicated that the timetable for using the statutory instrument powers would be some way in the distance, so it is not unreasonable to suggest that there should be some kind of conditionality and review process before those powers are used, especially given that we will apparently have so much time to prepare.

New clause 6 combines two conditions I called for in Committee: before the Government could increase the limit of their investment, the Secretary of State would be required to make an assessment of how an increased limit would contribute to a reduction in poverty, which is the statutory aim of ODA in the International Development Act 2002, and how that increase would help to meet the sustainable development goals. The Government have repeatedly argued that the CDC is doing both those things very effectively, in which case this is hardly an onerous request, but the new clause would have the effect of making it much clearer that this is the CDC’s overall purpose and that commercial gain, returns on investment and even raw figures on the number of jobs created are not an end in themselves, but only the means to the end of reducing poverty and building a more stable and secure world. Again, the responsibility is on the Government, if they will not accept our amendments, at least to acknowledge the concerns being expressed and to give commitments to show in any business case they publish for further investment how the key pillars of poverty reduction and the global sustainable development goals will be advanced.

I briefly speak in favour of, and indicate the Scottish National party’s support for, the range of thoughtful amendments tabled by the Labour shadow team and by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who serves on the Select Committee on International Development. I welcome the fact that there has been cross-party support for the amendments and suggest that the Government pay attention to that. There remains consensus in this House and across the country in support of the principle of aid, the 0.7% target and, of course, the effective use of that aid. Many of Labour’s amendments, as the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) said, simply ask DFID to hold the CDC to the same standards that the Government now demand of their external stakeholders. Their recent bilateral and multilateral development reviews were pretty much unilateral declarations of everything that was terrible and wasteful on the part of so many of their stakeholders and demanded that the highest standards of efficiency, impact and transparency be applied to them. It stands to reason that those standards should also be demanded of the CDC.

A Government who say they want to crack down on tax dodging should not be allowing an agency of which they are the sole stakeholder to be making use of offshore tax havens. A Government who want value for money and clear impact from their aid budget should not be afraid to ask for reporting on exactly those areas. My colleagues and I will be happy to join the Labour party, hon. Members from other Opposition parties, and any Conservative Member persuaded of the case in the Lobby in support of any amendments they wish to press.

I said on Second Reading that it was disappointing that the scope of the Bill was so narrow. The Government had the opportunity to widen the scope to strengthen the CDC’s effectiveness, transparency and accountability. They also had that opportunity with the substantial and, in some cases, creative amendments that have been proposed by Opposition Members from different parties. If Ministers continue to indicate an unwillingness to accept amendments—it is disappointing that they did not table any of their own to reflect the concerns raised by Members—they must give the strongest possible commitments now in response to the concerns we have raised. The Government must recognise, as the Labour Front Bench spokesperson said, that this is the beginning, and not the end, of a process.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call Richard Fuller.

3 pm

Richard Fuller: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am taking absolutely to heart your suggestion that, this being the new year, we have to stand up to get the chance to speak.

I would like to start by thanking all the members of staff at the CDC for the work they do on behalf of British taxpayers and, more importantly, for the people who depend on the CDC for their employment in many of the most troubled and difficult countries in the world. Over the past few weeks, the CDC has been the subject of much ill-founded and hostile criticism, and that must make its job much, much harder, so it is important to put on record our support for the work they do in helping to achieve our country’s development goals.

I would also like to thank the Front-Bench spokesman for the Labour party, the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor). She did a very good job in putting forward some points of scrutiny and in holding back on some of the wilder suggestions that might have been foisted on her in order to batter the Bill. The fact that historically there has been a cross-party consensus—given what she has said, it continues—on the valuable role of the CDC in achieving our development goals is important. It is a long-standing institution in our country; it is part of the British brand internationally, and she has done a great service today by focusing on the one amendment she wishes to press to a vote but pushing back on other ideas, which other Opposition Members might have asked her to press.

Pauline Latham: I am sure my hon. Friend is aware that the CDC last year upped its investment rate to $1.5 billion, which is the level projected for the next five years. Does that investment rate show that recapitalisation is not about some supposed new direction for the CDC but about allowing the good work it has done under its management to continue?

Richard Fuller: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have to be clear what is being proposed today. The proposal is not to do more than is being done now, but to enable the CDC to continue to do what it is doing now. If we were to take some of the suggestions from
the SNP and others, that might imply that that support should be reduced in the future, and that would be to the detriment of the countries affected and the British taxpayer.

Patrick Grady: ODA flows and gross national income can go up or down, so if, for some reason, GNI were to contract, and the ODA budget were to contract, surely it would make sense for the amount of overall capital investment in the CDC to contract so that more money was available for the traditional aid flows.

Richard Fuller: That is the hon. Gentleman’s point of view, but it is not my point of view, and I will come to the point about balance in a minute.

A general view of the amendments is that they seek to solve problems that do not exist, but that may exist. Statute is not the right way to approach such circumstances; that is a matter for oversight and scrutiny by the departmental Ministers and by us here in Parliament on behalf of our taxpayers—it is not about putting things into Bills. On that basis, I will oppose every amendment that has been proposed today.

There would be some validity to the amendments if there was a question about this aspect of foreign direct investment being unusually large. There might be something to them if the CDC had a poor investment record because it was losing shed loads of taxpayers’ money by making poor investments. If it was clearly ignoring development goals and was being held to account in reports for doing that, or if a problem in reporting oversight was evident and explained in various reports. However, not a single one of those conditions pertains to the circumstances of the CDC, so there is no a priori reason to put these amendments in place.

As I mentioned earlier, the proportion of our development budget that goes to our development finance institution—the CDC—is 4% if taken over five years, which is the usual investment period for a fund. That compares to PROPARCO of France, which has 12% of the development budget; DEG in Germany, which has 8% of the budget; and FMO in Holland, which is a very successful DFI, and which has 30% of the budget. So we are not unusually large—we are actually unusually small. In terms of such initiatives, we should be looking for a measured and slow increase in our ability to invest, so that we can play a fuller role. So I do not think that the point about that really holds.

The point about the poor investment record does not hold either. I have the numbers here, and the truth of the matter is that in terms of its annual return—this is a commercial return, and we have to understand that there are commercial returns for funds—the CDC was set a target of 3.5%, and it achieved 7.8% over the past five years. So there are not really grounds for saying that it is a poor performer in terms of its core function of investing on a commercial basis or that it is doing something untoward.

On the missing development goals, I understand that there is a bit of a laundry list of sectors that the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) wishes to turn his nose up to. I have no idea whether the list in his new clause is a full list or whether it just contains things he does not like. One of my hon. Friends made a good point about why there are good reasons to support parts of them. We will hear from the hon. Gentleman in a minute, and I am sure he will make an excellent case for that laundry list. However, in the meantime, I would say that there is not really any evidence of the CDC missing its development goals. Even the National Audit Office report mentioned that the CDC had met the targets for its financial performance, which was point 11 in its summary. In point 12, it said that the “CDC has exceeded the target for prospective development impact it agreed with the Department.” So there is no basis in that respect for the amendments.

Are there concerns about reporting for CDC? There may be, but I have not heard them. I cannot point to something that says there are concerns. I do not think that we have heard concerns about reporting on Second Reading, in the evidence stages or today. There may be additional pieces of information we wish to have, and they are listed in some of the amendments, but no real concerns have been raised that these things have not been provided in the past and that we should therefore ensure that the CDC provides them. Therefore, on the issue of whether there is a problem at the CDC that the amendments are needed to correct, there is no justification for the amendments whatever.

We have to be clear about what the role of tax havens has been. The hon. Member for Edmonton was very fair in pointing out that the CDC’s chief executive had made it clear that the CDC does not use tax havens in its policies, and the chief executive explained where those are used and why they are used. I am perfectly happy to rest on the judgment of the CDC, on its governance structures and on the oversight by the Department to make sure that that continues. I do not need to put a statutory underpinning on that. I also do not see that there is a problem at the moment in terms of the CDC having wandered off from what it said it would do. If there was such a problem, I would say, “Okay, maybe it is time for statute,” but the hon. Lady has not presented—maybe others will—a recent concern where that has happened. Therefore, I cannot see a reason for supporting new clause 1, although I understand that she wants to put it to a vote. I think we broadly accept—from that point of view, having a discussion about this is perhaps valuable—that there should be a strong message from Parliament about the use of tax havens and about what is and is not appropriate. If that is her intention, that is a perfectly reasonable point for her to make.

The CDC is a valuable institution. It has support from both sides of the House. I look forward to having further discussion on the amendments and then supporting the Bill on Third Reading.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): In July last year, as part of our ongoing inquiry, the International Development Committee visited the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As part of that, we went to see a hydroelectric power plant in the Virunga national park, which has been part-funded by the CDC. It is reinvesting a proportion of its earnings into community development projects and protecting the environment. The plant is bringing electricity to a region in which only 15% of the population has previously had access to power, and it has the potential to generate millions of
dollars each year and thousands of jobs for local communities. I cite that because such projects are impressive and demonstrate the positive impact that the CDC is already having.

Pauline Latham: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I was also on that visit, and that is probably one of the most impressive projects I have ever seen. It provides light to so many people in the DRC who so desperately need it. Those are just the sorts of projects we have talked about and said that the CDC should be investing in more, because they create jobs and make life better for so many more people.

Stephen Twigg: The hon. Lady is a highly valued member of the International Development Committee and I agree with her. The purpose of my remarks on Report this afternoon is to reinforce the point she made. Those are positive projects. We want to ensure that the high-quality we saw in that example in Congo becomes the norm for all the CDC’s investments, particularly as the limit is increased, which I will come to in a moment.

The private sector provides around nine out of every 10 jobs in developing countries. Its development and success is vital in helping countries to achieve sustainable and long-term development. I therefore believe it makes sense to increase the CDC’s investment threshold.

Poverty reduction must be at the heart of the Government’s development agenda, which must explicitly include the work of the CDC. In 2011, the predecessor International Development Committee produced a report, “The Future of CDC”, as the group approached its then cap of £1.5 billion, as set out in the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999. The Committee’s report concluded that the CDC’s mandate should be changed to a specific focus on poverty alleviation. Given that job creation is one of the very best ways to reduce poverty, it is important that the Government have a development investment arm that will help poorer countries to create new and innovative jobs.

As has been said by Members on both sides of the House, the CDC made significant changes following the 2008 National Audit Office report and the 2011 International Development Committee report in line with recommendations to move towards a focus on the alleviation of poverty. As has also been said, those changes were reviewed recently by a further NAO report released just before Second Reading of the Bill in November 2016. The report was mostly positive, and noted that the 2012 to 2016 investment strategy shifted the CDC’s investment focus to poorer countries, which is welcome. The report noted that the CDC had exceeded the targets agreed with DFID relating to financial performance and development impact. However, it also said that the CDC should do more to measure the development impact of its investments. That would not only provide a better basis for investment decisions, but increase the transparency of the CDC.

Poverty alleviation is absolutely central if we are to make a success of the global goals—the sustainable development goals agreed in 2015. Africa needs to generate 15 million new jobs every year if it is to achieve its global goals. That can be achieved only by working with the private sector, including organisations such as CDC. CDC has helped to create nearly 25,000 jobs in Africa and south Asia directly, and it says it has helped to create more than 1 million jobs indirectly. The businesses in its portfolio support around 18 million jobs. I am therefore happy to see the increase in the threshold, but I have a number of concerns to which I should like the Minister to respond.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): The hon. Gentleman will know that I respect not only his passion, but the balanced way in which he deals with CDC issues. Does he share my concern that we risk having a more prescriptive approach towards the CDC, which is a part-private sector organisation, than we have towards a range of non-governmental organisations that are beneficiaries of large-scale DFID programmes, which might be somewhat distorting? Although he makes valid points about the concerns, if we are to hamstring CDC in the way that one or two of the proposals would have us do, it would be an undesirable outcome for DFID.

Stephen Twigg: I am certainly not arguing for prescriptions to be applied to the CDC that would not be applied to other organisations funded by DFID. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) has made the valid point that, shortly before Christmas, the Secretary of State set out a number of conditions for suppliers to the Department, and that they should apply to the CDC. I am emphasising my support for the proposal to put poverty reduction at the heart of the CDC. All hon. Members would agree that that should be at the heart of the Government’s entire development and aid strategy, including DFID. I can plead not guilty to the charge that the right hon. Gentleman puts to me. I am not proposing in any sense to hamstring the CDC. I am certainly not proposing, and I do not believe the Opposition amendments seek, to impose any restriction on the CDC that would be out of step with the restrictions we apply to other bodies funded through overseas development assistance.

3.15 pm

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend makes a strong point, which is very much the point. The proposals are about bringing the CDC more in line with DFID’s overall priority countries and sectors, and with the restrictions placed on other UK aid money.

Stephen Twigg: I agree with my hon. Friend. I have read what the Minister said in Committee—reassurance can be gained from it—but I look forward to hearing him again today. It is very important that we have a sense that, with a very substantial increase in the potential money going through the CDC, we will ensure that it is geared towards poverty reduction wherever it is invested. As my hon. Friend rightly points out, part of that is the question of which parts of the world and which countries the CDC will invest in. Investments in some countries can deliver a lot more jobs and poverty reduction than investments in others.

As I have said, I am happy with an increase in the investment threshold, but we must ensure that the money is spent wisely. The 2012 to 2016 investment plan has expired and we are yet to see the 2017 to 2021 investment plan. I suggest that it would have been beneficial for the Bill, the Government and the CDC if Parliament had seen the plans for the next four years of investment.
before it was asked to raise the investment threshold. The amendment from my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State would ensure that, if the Government introduce regulations further to increase the limit, they would have to be preceded by a detailed plan of investment from the CDC that could be scrutinised by Parliament. I welcome and support that amendment.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): Successive Governments can be proud of the role played by DFID in improving lives and the economies of some of the world’s poorest countries but, in light of much of the public debate on international development spending, much of what my hon. Friend says on parliamentary scrutiny is correct in principle. Does he agree that that is absolutely essential for maintaining and building public confidence in international development spending?

**Stephen Twigg**: I absolutely agree with what my hon. Friend says, which chimes with my conclusion on the importance of scrutiny of both the CDC and the Government, including scrutiny by the House.

**Mark Field**: I have a lot of sympathy for what the hon. Gentleman says—in the context of the debate it would be useful to have an idea of the programmes that the CDC has in mind for the future. I hope that, when the Bill goes to another place, there is another opportunity to have one. However, does he recognise that, given the nature of the CDC’s expertise and experience, it might to an extent have slightly different goals from other NGOs who receive DFID money? In other words, given the CDC’s expertise, particularly its private sector expertise and experience, the absolute predominance of the alleviation of poverty could in some cases not entirely apply to everything it does.

**Stephen Twigg**: The focus and priority needs to be on poverty alleviation. At the beginning of my speech, I gave the example of a project we visited—the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) reinforced the point. That project undoubtedly delivered things beyond poverty reduction, but at the heart of that investment and its impact was the reduction of poverty. Keeping the reduction of poverty in mind is a useful lodestar for DFID when it approaches the work of the CDC. I would need some persuading that a project should be funded that did not have some connection to the alleviation and reduction of poverty.

Let me now turn to the issues of scrutiny that were referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). The recent NAO report, as was rightly said by the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller), revealed that the target development impact score is on average being met, but only on average. The CDC is making some investments that fall below the target. Some 23% of investments since 2013 have fallen below the target score based on their investment difficulty and propensity to generate employment. Given that the objective stated in the CDC’s current investment policy is to “focus its investments into the geographies and sectors where there is the most potential for development impact”, it is unclear why the CDC is investing in projects that achieve lower scores. So I say to the Minister that, along with a more robust approach to measuring development impact, I would like a minimum threshold for impact implemented in the new investment strategy.

As with all DFID spending—and, indeed, broader aid spending by other Government Departments—the International Development Committee will scrutinise very closely the CDC’s work in the months and years ahead. It is vital that we ensure the British taxpayer gets value for money for every pound spent on international development. As has been said on all sides of the House, the CDC has become more transparent following the Committee’s 2011 report and the NAO report in 2008, but more can still be done to ensure that money is being spent as well as possible. One way that could be achieved—I ask the Minister to explore this—is to allow the Independent Commission for Aid Impact to play a bigger role, for example carrying out a regular assessment of CDC investments, allowing scrutiny so we can really ensure full effectiveness and value for money of the programmes in which the CDC invests.

I think we can say that the CDC has been a world leader among development finance institutions in publishing details of its investments since 2012 under the International Aid Transparency Initiative. That is very welcome, but I suggest it would improve transparency further if it published similar details on its entire active investment portfolio, including those made prior to 2012. I ask the Minister to address that point when he responds to the debate. That would enable greater scrutiny of the CDC’s entire portfolio and hopefully provide assurance to the public that all the CDC investments are focused where they need to be: on the goal of poverty reduction.

In conclusion, I believe that the CDC has helped the UK to be a leader in global development, but as with any area of Government spending we need to ensure that every penny is going where it can have the greatest effect: the right places and the right people delivering value for money for the taxpayer. One way to achieve that is by regular scrutiny of the CDC, including by Parliament. I give a commitment that the International Development Committee will play its role in ensuring that we scrutinise and hold to account both the Department and the CDC as the additional money is allocated. Most importantly, as with all areas of development spending, we need to ensure that the ultimate goal is poverty alleviation and eradication, and that we never lose focus on that.

**Paul Scully** (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for your generosity in allowing me to contribute for a short time.

The CDC has a really important discrete role in our international development portfolio. There are few organisations with the skills and abilities to manage such risk in the most difficult markets. Often, it will bring an economic frontier country, area or sector the opportunities leading towards a risk profile that more established and traditional investment vehicles can get involved in. That is to be welcomed. It supports more than 1,200 businesses in more than 70 developing countries to create jobs.

We discussed a number of issues in Committee, including the fact that investments are not necessarily direct. Amendments tabled both in Committee and on Report
address whether that serves to divert resources from the least-developed countries. I would say that it is sometimes necessary to invest in opportunities in other countries as long as the outcomes go to the most needy and the least-developed countries. At the end of the day, that is what we are trying to do with our international development effort.

As many Members have said, it is important to concentrate on our core goals and the SDGs. In Committee, the Minister was explicit in saying he did not believe we needed more legislation. The International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015 already enshrines in legislation the need to focus on poverty reduction and the SDGs, and they are already enshrined in DFID’s own principles and processes, so I do not believe that we need to have yet more primary legislation.

On the limits referred to in relation to some of the amendments, we have to remember this is effectively an enabling Bill, which is why it is so short. It is not an immediate call to spend. It is not a case of saying, “Here’s £6 billion tomorrow and then we’re going to raise it further the day after.” The Bill simply seeks to bring the CDC in line with other organisations that have similar requests of Departments. In Committee, the Minister said that any requests for money would have to be subject to DFID’s strategy and have to have a robust business plan that was considered fully before any money was handed over. That can easily be done on a departmental level. I totally agree with my colleague and Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg). As a new Member, I look forward to being able to scrutinise the work of CDC.

I note that the CDC has changed. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) that some amendments address problems that may not occur or rehearse old problems from before 2010 when the then Secretary of State reorganised the CDC. I do not support amendments on problems that may or may not happen, or have happened in the past but have been largely sorted out. The CDC has moved from pre-2010 looking at low impact, high return investment programmes, to a far more proactive viewpoint to ensure we take into account the SDGs and poverty reduction. I will be scrutinising that along with my colleague the Chair of the Select Committee, but I will not be supporting the amendments, for the reasons I have set out. This can best be done at Department and Committee level through post and pre-decision scrutiny. In conclusion, I look forward to the Bill becoming an Act.

Stephen Doughty: I rise to speak in favour of new clause 7 and the other new clauses and amendments in my name and those of my right hon. and hon. Friends. It is fantastic to see such a great consensus in the room around the 0.7% aid target and Britain’s role in international development—in contrast, perhaps, to the shriller debate in the media in recent weeks. It might surprise those hon. Members who have criticised my amendments that there is actually much agreement around the role of CDC; I believe it has a vital role to play—I made this clear in Committee, as I am sure the Minister would acknowledge—in the wider portfolio of our international development effort and in the spending of our official development assistance.

I would like to thank my fellow Co-operative party MPs and the shadow Front-Bench team, as well as other Members from across the House, for adding their names to many of my amendments. It shows the level of very reasonable concern around the many unanswered questions concerning the priorities and operations of CDC. Those questions need to be addressed before we can countenance such a large increase in the official development assistance resources it receives from DFID. I am not suggesting that CDC should not get any more resources—it has reached the cap of £1.5 billion set in 1999 and clearly needs some increase and headroom to expand its activities—but it is worth recognising that it has coped well by recycling resources within itself, partly thanks to some of the investment successes it has enjoyed.

3.30 pm

Fundamentally, this debate is about choices when it comes to spending these precious and relatively small amounts of development assistance. We have a wide range of routes by which we can spend the money. We can spend it bilaterally; through multilateral agencies; through NGOs; through joint work with other Departments; and through vehicles such as CDC. For me, however, the fundamental question is about the balance between, and the coherence of, all those things. Are we coherent in terms of the countries in which we operate, the ways in which we operate, the sectors in which we operate and, as the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), just said, in the focus on poverty eradication for those who most need it?

Clearly, we cannot address all the concerns on Report today, and I do not want to reiterate too much the arguments made in Committee and on Second Reading, so I will speak only briefly to my amendments, some of which are probing amendments seeking clearer answers from the Minister about the Government’s plans. He said some helpful things in Committee that I hope he can elaborate on further. I want to focus today on three main areas: first, the volume of the Government’s proposed new investment for CDC; secondly, CDC’s continued use of tax havens; and, thirdly, its continued investment in sectors that do not appear to cohere with—indeed, often appear to run counter to—the wider agenda of our development spending. It is absolutely right that we are able to question these things.

CDC needed only £1.5 billion of capital investment from the UK Government between 1999 and 2016, and therein lies my fundamental concern: how can we justify upping the cap to £6 billion and then to £12 billion by statutory instrument? The Minister made some helpful comments in Committee confirming that it would not all happen in one year but would be spread over a longer period, but the fact remains that the explanatory notes to the Bill make it clear that this is about accelerating spending over this spending round in response to forecast market demand, although we are yet to see any of the projections of market demand.

I agree with the Chair of the Select Committee that it would have been much better had we had a clearer plan—not perhaps a detailed business plan but an assessment of the market demand in the sectors we could be investing in and of the potential development impact—before agreeing the new headroom for CDC.
The Government and CDC admitted in evidence to the Committee that it was the Government who came up with the figure: it was not a request from CDC. If there is this forecast demand and if CDC is in need of such an injection of resources—potentially a tenfold increase on its funding over the past 16 years—it strikes me as odd that this figure should have been plucked out of the air. It would have been much more helpful had the Government set out clearly the reasons for providing for a limit of £12 billion through secondary legislation.

In that regard, we have tabled some very important amendments. New clause 2, in the name of my hon. Friends on the Front Bench, rightly calls for a business case. I hope that the Minister will explain further how the process around a business case will work and what scrutiny role Parliament will have in seeking to understand what is being proposed before resources are drawn down by CDC. What scrutiny opportunities will Parliament have to ask the important questions we have all raised? Crucially, can CDC absorb this funding? We are talking about a potentially very significant increase. Were we proposing such an increase for an NGO or other multilateral development institution, there would be howls of fear around its capacity, staffing and planning processes to cope with the uplift. There is a real danger—whether it be CDC or another organisation—that if the resources it receives are massively increased without that degree of planning and staffing needed to ensure that it is done effectively and transparently, the resources can be skewed and not get used in the most effective way.

Richard Fuller: Is not the level of investment now consistent with this increase? For CDC’s current level of activity to be maintained, it requires this level of increase, so cannot concerns about too rapid growth perhaps be overstated?

Stephen Doughty: I do not believe that that case has been made; there has been no justification at any point for the actual figures. To maintain CDC at its current level of activity, we need to realise that it has managed perfectly well with £1.5 billion since 1999 and has recycled it within its own budgets. If it was going up by £1.5 billion or £2 billion, I could understand it with a view to creating space for the next 10 years, but £6 billion and £12 billion seem to me to be well out of the appropriate range.

Wendy Morton: From my understanding of the Bill and on the basis of evidence given in Committee, I would like to read the quote that “no money will go to CDC until a full business case is written in huge detail, which will be prepared in the summer of 2017.”—[Official Report, Commonwealth Development Corporation Public Bill Committee, 6 December 2016; c. 9] The suggestion that we are going to give a huge chunk of money to CDC straight away is perhaps creating an unfair impression.

Stephen Doughty: Clearly, the hon. Lady did not listen to what I was saying. I did not say that. I said that the Minister had acknowledged that it was not going to be spent in one year, which was the fear when this was initially proposed. What we are asking for in the amendments is just that clear business case. I hope that the Minister—he was nodding earlier—will be able to set out how that process and scrutiny of it will occur, which is only right. There was only limited scrutiny of the last amounts spent, which were quite significant.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): What my hon. Friend describes is, in civil service language, the ghastly phrase “absorptive capacity”. He will know that, unfortunately, the Department for International Development has allocated some funding into various World Bank trust funds that have not been fully spent with the originally envisaged timescale, suggesting that the Department is beginning to struggle to find suitable sources that can absorb its money as it wants. My hon. Friend is, in my view, right to worry aloud that this is a huge increase in money without any proven capacity to spend it.

Stephen Doughty: Indeed. My hon. Friend, one of the longest-serving Ministers at DFID, knows this only too well. He makes a very important point. I have spoken to other experts in the sector who suggest that to absorb that amount, even a doubling would be a struggle, so it certainly applies to the levels we are seeing. That is why it would be much more helpful if the Minister were clear about the schedule for this spending. What is his idea of the number of years over which this increase would be spent before we might require another Act to increase it even further?

We tabled some crucial amendments, as did SNP Members, in new clauses 3, 4 and 6 and my own new clause 9, emphasising the importance of focusing on the poorest, least developed and low-income countries and of ensuring that we remain coherent with the sustainable development goals—the global goals agreed by the UN—and focused on poverty eradication rather than other priorities.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. Has not DFID led the world on the importance of aid transparency and a focus on poverty reduction? The problem at the heart of these proposals is that there is very little prospect of transparency of how these resources are spent. Equally, there is very little ability for the Government to guarantee that the resources will be deployed and focused on poverty reduction. Is that not a matter of major concern?

Stephen Doughty: I think it is, and that gets to the point. A lot of information is provided by CDC online, and it is important to acknowledge that much of it is helpful. We can get into individual projects and see the particular spending on those individual projects. However, it is not the same when it comes to the level of spending, which is what the NAO was looking at. It is important to be able to prove prospective development impact and show where it is going.

To take just one example, the NAO looked at the issue of funding going into the health sector in India, and tried to get clear information about where the money was being spent in a particular hospital group. It looked at whether it was going to the poorest or to middle-income patients. The NAO told us in its evidence that it was going to middle-income patients, which does not strike me as a correct use of CDC’s money. That is not to say that the investment is not good in and of itself—I am sure that enabling access to hospital for people in general is a good thing. The question is whether we should be spending our aid money on that. Surely we should be focusing on the poorest.
When we examine the figures in depth—they can be found in a House of Commons Library research paper—we see that although the proportion of CDC’s investments in the least developed countries has increased, it is still significantly lower than the proportion of its investments in middle-income countries. As for spending in individual countries, it is a fact that in India most of CDC’s money is being spent in what are known to be the richest states. The highest proportion of its investments goes to Maharashtra, which is where Mumbai is located. I am not saying that the individual investments there are not good, effective or useful; I am saying that it is a question of priorities. In Committee, it was helpful to hear the Minister speak of the possibility of a cap or restriction on funds that go to India and elsewhere in south Asia rather than to Africa. Giving evidence to the Committee, Professor Paul Collier said that he shared the concern that had been expressed about whether CDC was focusing enough resources on the poorest countries. New clause 9, for instance, relates to those issues.

The wider issue of spending routes that is raised in both the SNP’s amendment 3 and our new clause 10 is crucial. We are not suggesting that CDC should not be given more money, or that it should not have a chance to expand its operations and the autonomy that it enjoys, but we believe that those elements should be in proportion to other forms of official development assistance. It is important that we introduce safeguards. By 2019-20, 6% of United Kingdom official development assistance will be spent by other Government Departments. Money goes into the prosperity fund and other Government funds, and there is often far less scrutiny and oversight than there is in DFID. That worries me, and I know that it worries other Members on both sides of the House.

We need to achieve a fair balance. CDC has its role to play in the portfolio, but that must be proportionate to other ways in which we can spend the money. We must ensure that we are pulling all the levers of development, rather than just one at the expense of others. For that reason, I am inclined to support amendment 3 if it is pressed to a vote.

I want to say something about tax havens, although I shall not do so at length, because we discussed the issue a great deal in Committee and we have also discussed it today. I find it surprising—this relates to new clauses 1 and 8—that CDC continues to use tax havens such as the Cayman islands and Mauritius. A fair point has been made about the importance of stable financial arrangements for investments. In some countries it is clearly not possible to set up arrangements within the legal structures of those countries to ensure that the right fiduciary controls are in place. However, I do not understand why we are not setting up such vehicles in England and Wales, or in other jurisdictions. Why are so many of them in the Cayman islands and Mauritius?

Moreover—I have asked parliamentary questions about this—we are paying management fees to financial services organisations, in the Cayman islands and elsewhere, that also support the far less transparent activities of other corporations and individuals. I find it deeply worrying that, whether or not there are any doubts about an individual CDC investment, we may be indirectly supporting the flourishing of the tax avoidance and evasion that exists in overseas territories.

Mr Gareth Thomas: Is my hon. Friend aware of comments made by the Secretary of State when she was a Treasury Minister about tax evasion and the need to limit the use of tax havens? Why does the Treasury seem to be concerned about the issue, and why is DFID suddenly not concerned about it? One would have thought that, when it came to such a crucial issue, there would be joined-up government.

Stephen Doughty: That was also a great surprise to me. I referred earlier to the letter that the Secretary of State sent to many of the other DFID contractors on 16 December. That letter was very clear about tax avoidance measures and tax havens. It contained a series of criteria, most of which I think are very reasonable, and which we should expect to be observed by organisations that are benefiting from our aid spending. My question is this: why are those criteria not being applied to CDC? The Secretary of State repeatedly refused to confirm that they would be. There seems to be one rule for one organisation and a different rule for others.

Eurodad research found that 118 out of 157 fund investments made by CDC went through jurisdictions that feature in the top 20 of the Tax Justice Network’s Financial Secrecy Index. That does not seem to me to be coherent with the other statements that are being made by the Government. Indeed, the will of the House has been shown by cross-party support for amendments to other Bills that would crack down on tax avoidance and evasion.

Lastly, I want to return to the issue of coherence, and I urge colleagues to support new clause 7. The hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) referred to this as some sort of laundry list and suggested I was creating hypothetical straw men that did not actually exist and was dealing with things that have happened in the past. That is not the case; I am talking about things that are happening now. It is a fact that, as data revealed to me since the Committee stage in parliamentary questions show, in 2015 alone CDC invested £56.9 million in private fee-paying education and £117.9 million in private fee-paying healthcare.

3.45 pm

The reality—I am sure hon. Members will say this: it has been alluded to already—is that there are private providers, voluntary providers and faith providers providing excellent health and education in many developing countries. That is a fact; indeed, it is how our education and health systems started out. The question, however, is: what is the priority for our spending of our money? Is it to further support and expand such fee-paying education and healthcare providers, or should it be, as I would argue, to provide free at-the-point-of-use public healthcare and education, supporting teachers’ and nurses’ salaries, and the development of good departments of national health and education, and removing user fees, as we in this country have done in the past, to ensure that there is access for the poorest people? Even very small user fees can be a huge disincentive, particularly to those on the lowest incomes. The evidence of individual projects—the Rainbow Hospitals trust in India that CDC has invested in, or GEMS Education, which appears to be funding private schools that charge up to £10,000 a year in Kenya—suggests that there is an incoherence between what we say we are doing and our priorities in health and education and what CDC is doing.
Another current example concerns palm oil. We have all heard about the scandals involving Feronia in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and all the concerns about this being an unsustainable product and about land grabs and human rights. Whether or not there have been improvements in that project and there are good aspects to it, it seems to me to be incongruous that we are providing taxpayers’ money to invest in things that are not in line with our other objectives.

Finally, on fossil fuels, the Minister and others made important points about the importance of CDC being able to invest in energy infrastructure. We heard a good example earlier from one of my fellow Committee members about excellent investment in energy infrastructure projects in Africa, and CDC is investing in many good projects. It is odd, however, that we would continue to invest in fossil fuel-led programmes when we have our climate change objectives and we are trying to help developing countries jump over that dirty phase of development. We should be setting higher standards and prioritising and shifting resources to ensure best practice.

I am therefore keen to see new clause 7 put to a vote. It enjoys support among Members from a number of parties. I hope the Minister will be able to answer some of the concerns raised on Report before we move further with the Bill. It is right that we ask these questions. This is a large sum of money: this is not a little increase of a few million pounds here and a few millions there; this is a large sum of money: this is not a little increase of a few million pounds here and a few millions there; this is potentially billions of pounds of spending, and a significant proportion of the international development budget, and it is only right that it receives the appropriate scrutiny.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I shall speak in support of a number of the measures on the amendment paper, but first I want to make a couple of comments about the political context in which this debate is taking place. I turned on the television over the weekend to see on the tickertape at the bottom of the news channel screen the information that our Government had stopped funding a girl band in Africa. I was shocked by this—I did not realise we were funding girl bands or bands of any other kind in Africa or elsewhere—so I thought I would look into the matter a little more. Of course, on doing so, I discovered that that was not the story at all.

The story was loosely based on a project in Ethiopia called Girl Effect, which is a huge programme that is aimed at empowering young women throughout that country. It has 500 direct participants and more than 10,000 participants online, and it operates from 8,000 schools throughout the country. It is designed to use music and performing arts to give young women in that country confidence so that they can take part in Ethiopian political and social life. It is undeniably a good thing. It country confidence so that they can take part in Ethiopian political and social life. It is undeniably a good thing. It

Tommy Sheppard: I do not want to have a big discussion about the project, but I will respond by saying that we should do both. Of course we should also try to put money into formal education, but the importance of that project was that it understood that digital communication was a much more effective way of reaching young people in Ethiopia than the bricks and mortar of a formal educational establishment. It also understood that music and lyrics can sometimes be better than formal texts at getting through to people, educating them and inspiring them with big ideas. That is true in this country as well. Those things have contributed to the social education of young women in Ethiopia. As I said, the Department for International Development itself said that the project was worth supporting.

The important point in all these debates is that we can win public support for foreign aid and rally the public behind the 0.7% contribution, provided that we are transparent about what we are doing, and that we demonstrate at every turn that the people who are getting the money are those who really need it. It is therefore important that those criteria are demonstrated through the work of CDC Group and others, and that evidence is produced. I am not sure which amendments and new clauses will be pressed to a Division, but I will vote for whichever ones are, because they would all strengthen the Bill. In my 20 months in this Chamber, this is the first time that I have seen a Bill come back on Report without a single Government amendment. I find that surprising. I know that the Bill is concise and brief, but given the concerns that were expressed on Second Reading about the work of CDC Group, I would have thought that the Bill
could have been tightened up a little. I hope that the Government will consider supporting some of the new clauses and amendments because they would make the Bill more efficacious in achieving its objectives.

New clause 6 states that before CDC Group gets a major uplift in funding, the case will have to be made that it is meeting the sustainable development goals and tackling poverty and inequality in the country in which the money is deployed. Let me put it another way. If a project was not tackling poverty or combating inequality, and not contributing to achieving the sustainable development goals, why on earth should we fund it? When it comes to prioritising when money is tight, we have to make sure that it is spent on what it is supposed to be spent on.

On Second Reading we discussed some of the—shall we say?—past mistakes in a number of CDC’s decisions. We talked about the shopping malls, luxury hotels and other inappropriate projects in which CDC Group invested, and we were assured—by the Minister of State, I think—that those things were in the past, that we had learned from them and that they would not be repeated in the future. Well, if that is the case, what is the difficulty in building a provision into the Bill so that when CDC gets a budget uplift, it will have an obligation to demonstrate that what that uplift is spent on will contribute to meeting these goals and fulfilling these criteria? That is self-evidently a way of ensuring that we do not rely on hope by instead writing down what, as a matter of policy, we want.

Amendments 3 and 4, to which I have put my name, would link any uplift in CDC Group’s funds to the overall ODA budget. It is important to look at doing that; the formula that has been suggested is not onerous and is perfectly achievable. There is an idea abroad that what might be happening is the outsourcing or privatisation of our foreign aid activity, and that pre-eminence is given to a market approach. We will have problems if that impression is not countered, because the truth of the matter is that there is a role for spending public money to try to support the creation of a small business sector in developing countries, to invest in such sectors and to create jobs, but let us not kid ourselves. The vast bulk of our priority aid should be directed at people who need it in order to combat the malnutrition, illiteracy, poverty and starvation that are present throughout such countries. That cannot be done by setting up a small business; it needs to be done through direct state and NGO intervention. That is why we should make it clear that the vast bulk of our foreign aid effort will remain in that sphere.

Although CDC Group and the market have a contribution to make, particularly in countries that are some stages along the process of development, that will not be the primary way in which we do things. I commend amendments 3 and 4 to the House because if we were to agree to them, we would strengthen the Bill and demonstrate to people what our intentions really are: to ensure that the hard-earned taxes that they pay—people politically agree that a small slice should be deployed for foreign aid—are spent doing the things that they want to be done. Those things are combating poverty and inequality in the developing world, and making sure that we get to a more equal world society, which of course is in our long-term interest, too.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I am particularly pleased to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). I am speaking today because of concerns brought to me by constituents, and only concerns brought to me by constituents. No NGOs have lobbied me. Constituents contacted me before Second Reading to express concern that, if the Bill were passed, we would run the real risk of aid money being spent inappropriately, and of our commitment to aid, of which we can all be proud, being undermined. I return to that concern, which I raised on Second Reading, and to what for me and my constituents are the core issues: directing the money to where it is needed most; scrutiny; and transparency.

On Second Reading, I quoted the recent NAO report on CDC. I know that has already been quoted today, but it bears listening to again. The report concluded:

“IT remains a significant challenge for CDC to demonstrate its ultimate objective of creating jobs and making a lasting difference to people’s lives in some of the world’s poorest places. Given the Department’s plans to invest further in CDC, a clearer picture of actual development impact would help to demonstrate…value for money”.

We are not getting the actual development impact promised. We cannot see what the development proposals are for the future; we are being asked to trust. Perhaps the Lords will see that, but we cannot.

4 pm

Like other Members, I accept that CDC has made changes. Its staff are motivated and hard-working, and improvements have been made since the negative reporting of 2008 and 2011. However, as the Bill stands, Parliament will have little direct opportunity to scrutinise in detail where funds are being directed and whether they are used for the greatest benefit of those in need. Let me go through some of the examples that have been brought to me.

In education, we have seen the use of the “school in a box” model, where large classes are taught by unqualified, low-wage teachers, with technology being used to teach standardised lessons. CDC has invested in the expansion of such schools in Kenya, Uganda and Liberia, through Bridge International Academies, to the tune of between $6 million and $15 million. The model, however, offers no guarantee of quality education and has been criticised by the UN special rapporteur on the right to education for, in essence, privatising education. In Uganda, 63 Bridge academies were forced to close following a court ruling, which found, among other things, that education and legal standards regarding the use of certified teachers, an accredited curriculum and appropriate teaching models had been neglected.

We have heard a good example about a utility development in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. CDC established a company called Umeme in 2005 to run Uganda’s electricity distribution following privatisation. The company has been highlighted as an example of the positive impact that such an initiative can have. The experience of Ugandans, however, does not chime with that, as power outages are reported to be regular and prices are high. The public services international research unit at the University of Greenwich noted that “Umeme was rated as one of the most corrupt institutions in the country by a Transparency International survey.”
On healthcare, a Unison-commissioned study found that the majority of CDC healthcare investments in India are in privately funded, fee-paying hospitals, many of which target international medical tourists. The knock-on effect of that is obvious: publicly funded healthcare suffers and low-income groups who need medical attention are denied access. As I have said, we have been told that CDC operations have improved considerably over the past few years, but giving it free rein to invest, with no conditions attached, is far from ideal. If we are to be standard bearers in international development, we need to ensure that our delivery of aid, whether directly or through investments, is transparent and of tangible benefit to those at the receiving end. The examples that I have mentioned suggest a tendency to invest in programmes that produce a quick fix, rather than creating sustainable, long-term solutions that will have a real impact on people’s lives. CDC is being seen to do something, but the end result is not the primary consideration. The Bill, if amended—but only if amended—provides us with an opportunity to prevent similar things from happening in the future.

Like many Members, I face questions on a regular basis, but in the past couple of weeks I have increasingly faced them about inappropriate international development spending. People come back to this issue over and over again. Last week, when I spoke to Porthcawl’s Newton women’s institute, I took many questions on spending on international development. I hope that the amendments and new clauses will allay many of the fears that my constituents have raised and set the important work that DFID does—it changes lives in some of the poorest countries in the world—as something that our constituents can all support, because they can see that it is transparent, scrutinised and accountable. Without that, I fear we face yet more weeks of negative and often false news reporting, which will undermine the credibility of the vital work that this country undertakes around the world.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): I begin by thanking right hon. and hon. Members. This has been a very instructive process. The new clauses and amendments tabled reflect what was a really good Bill Committee stage. The Government have huge respect for the intelligence, focus and precision of these amendments, and we hope that Members will see that all the concerns that have been expressed are going to be addressed through the strategy that is produced.

Before I address the new clauses and amendments in turn, I pay tribute very strongly to the Members on both sides of the House who have demonstrated their support for international development. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), who gave an extremely powerful speech in support of international medical tourists and about the vital work that this country undertakes around the world.

Mr Gareth Thomas: At the outset of his remarks, will the Minister explain why the legislation has preceded the strategy?

Rory Stewart: I shall deal with that when discussing the second set of amendments, which relate to that directly, but first I want to continue to pay tribute to other Members of Parliament, from both sides of the House, for their support for CDC. I was struck by the support of the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller). It has been a really tough time. As Members of Parliament, we are used to being under full public scrutiny and attack. CDC works very hard and has delivered some high-quality projects, and this has been a very tough period for it.

I should just recapitulate the extraordinary work that CDC has done and echo the thanks of the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller). It has been a really tough time. As Members of Parliament, we are used to being under full public scrutiny and attack. CDC works very hard and has delivered some high-quality projects, and this has been a very tough period for it.

Three types of amendments have been tabled. The first set basically says yes, we should be giving money to CDC, but we should be giving slightly less money to CDC; the second set says that there should be restrictions on the Government’s ability to give money to CDC; and the third set would restrict what CDC itself can do with the money. Essentially, the Government’s position is that these are all good points, but they are better dealt with through the governance mechanisms and the strategy than through statutory, primary legislation.

I shall deal first with amendments 1 to 5 and new clause 10, which essentially say yes, we should give money to CDC, but we should give less money to CDC. Why do we disagree with what was essentially the argument put forward by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty)? First, because, with respect, I still believe that the hon. Member for Glasgow North is confusing the stock and the flow. The fact is that the money put into CDC will be recycled. For the sake of argument, if an investment was 10 to 12 years in length and CDC had $12 billion in the pot, it would be in a position to maintain the current rate of investment of around $1 billion a year—the money would come back and go bounce again at around $1 billion a year. It is not fair to compare what happens in a capital stock used for equity debt investment with the annual expenditure of a Department.

Secondly, there is the question of demand, which the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth referred to. The demand is almost limitless. It is calculated that $2.5 trillion is going to be required annually by 2030 to meet the sustainable development goals, which is why the relevant question is not the demand for the money but the question of the absorptive capacity, which the hon. Gentleman raised.

Thirdly, the Bill is enabling legislation that sets a ceiling—a maximum limit; it is not saying, “This is the amount of money we are going to give.” Fourthly, the design is for the money to go into patient, long-term investment. The three-year review proposed in one of the amendments simply will not work for investments that are intended to be, on average, 10 years in length.

Mr Ivan Lewis: If the Bill is passed and its consequences are added to the fact that more than 25% of DFID’s spending currently goes through other Government Departments, the result will be that more than 50% of our aid will no longer be spent through DFID. Does it not raise serious questions about the Government’s...
intentions for DFID to remain as a stand-alone Department with a place at the Cabinet table if more than 50% of its spending will be spent by CDC and other Departments? No other Government Department would come to the House and ask for more than 50% of its resources to be spent via other means.

Rory Stewart: There are two distinct points there: DFID’s spending and the proportion of the spending. The first thing to understand is that CDC is 100% owned by the Department for International Development, which is one reason why a number of these amendments are not appropriate. On the proportion of money spent, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) eloquently pointed out, the small increase that we are talking about in terms of the annual amount that CDC will be able to invest will still be much smaller than comparable organisations in Holland, Germany and France. It will be about a third of the amount that the Overseas Private Investment Corporation can invest—OPIC is just one of the US’s development finance institutions that is able to invest—and only about a sixth of what the International Finance Corporation puts out a year. We are not talking—comparatively, globally—about a large amount of money. We are talking about something in the region of 8% at maximum—even if we hit the maximum of official development assistance—and the other 92% will continue to go in the normal way through non-governmental organisations and organisations such as UNICEF for the objectives that we pursue.

Stephen Doughty: It would be helpful if the Minister clarified the time period over which this increase, if it was granted, would be played out with CDC. The explanatory notes to the Bill say very clearly that the £6 billion is intended to be used in this spending review to accelerate CDC’s growth. Is that his view, and what about the £12 billion? Is that spread over a 10-year period, a 20-year period or a five-year period? Can he give us a ballpark figure?

Rory Stewart: Let me clarify this. The £6 billion represents an additional £4.5 billion, because CDC already has £1.5 billion. We anticipate that that would cover the next five-year period to enable CDC, at maximum—we do not expect it to draw down the maximum amount—to be able to make the kinds of levels of investment that it made last year. The next £6 billion—it is not an additional £12 billion, but an additional £6 billion—would apply to the next five-year period. We are looking at a steady state allocation, which might, at maximum, allow CDC to meet the kind of expenditure levels that it gets next year.

Let me move on now to new clauses 2, 5 and 6 and amendment 6. Essentially, these are a series of measures that restrict the power of the Government to give money to CDC. They do that either by saying that they should not be able to boost the amount of money that CDC has through delegated legislation, or through asking for a strategy to be put in place before the money is disbursed. Again, these measures are not appropriate. The role of Parliament as specified for CDC in the Overseas Resources Development Act 1948 and the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999 quite correctly relates to two things: the setting up of this body and the creation of a cap on the amount of money that this body is given.

However, it is not normal for Parliament to get involved in the detailed implementation of specialist business cases. That is true in everything that the legislature does in its relationship to the Executive. The money allocated to our Department in general through the Budget, which this House votes on, is then delegated to civil servants and to the Government to determine how it is spent. The same will be true here, but the strategy that will come forward will reflect very closely the arguments that have been made at the Committee stage and on Report. We will continue to remain in very close touch with Members of Parliament, and we will be judged by our ability to deliver, through that strategy, something that will address those concerns—above all, through the development impact grid and the development impact assessments on the individual business cases, which will address these particular issues.

Mr Gareth Thomas: Will the Minister specifically comment on the use of tax havens by CDC, and will he and other Ministers in his Department echo previous statements by the Secretary of State and instruct CDC to desist from using tax havens for future investments?

Rory Stewart: That is an invitation to move on to the last group of amendments, which comprises new clauses 8, 9, 3 and 7, one of which relates to the issue of offshore financial centres. These are restrictions on what CDC itself can do. There is a suggestion that there should be an annual obligation on ICAI to produce reports on CDC. Then there are restrictions on the routes through which CDC can put its money, and there are attempts through the new clauses to restrict the sectors and the countries in which CDC can invest. Let me take them in turn.

On ICAI, we are very open to scrutiny. The CDC has been scrutinised by the International Development Committee, the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee. We expect it to be scrutinised in that way and to be scrutinised by ICAI. We welcome scrutiny from ICAI. However, we do not think it is for the Government to impose obligations on an independent regulator. It should be for ICAI to determine its priorities and where it thinks the problems are, and to be able to apply its scrutiny accordingly. It may determine that an annual scrutiny of 10-year investments does not make sense and decide to do it more frequently, but that should be for ICAI, not for statutory legislation of this House.

4.15 pm

Moving on to offshore financial centres, it is important to understand that we do not put our money through tax havens if, by that, one means that CDC is ever attempting to avoid tax or to conceal its activities. CDC is not involved in that. CDC invests only in offshore financial centres that have been approved by the OECD at its highest level. However, we take on board the points made by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth and others, and we will push the OECD to improve the standards further. We will, in our strategy, focus on these offshore financial centres, and we will only use them for two reasons. First, occasionally when we are investing, for example, in the Central African Republic, it may be necessary to protect UK taxpayers’ money by not putting all the assets of CDC into
jurisdictions where it may be difficult to secure that money. Secondly, we may do so in order to pool money from other investors. That relates to the suggestion that we should operate only through London. It would then be very difficult to convince other African investors to invest in funds in London because they would face triple taxation: taxation in country of origin, taxation in country of business, and taxation in London. We hope through CDC’s operations to ensure that every dollar we spend brings it $3, $5 or even $30 of additional money.

That brings me to the last two sets of restrictions proposed by the House, one of which is a restriction on the number of countries in which CDC should invest. Again, we do not think it appropriate for primary legislation to restrict what the Department can do to respond to a flexible, changing world. We would not have imagined in 2010, for example, that there would be need in Syria. If the Bill stipulated that only low-income countries or least-developed countries could receive the money, the suggestion from the Chairman of the International Development Committee and his members that CDC should work in Syria, in Jordan, in Turkey and in Lebanon would be impossible to implement because it would be illegal under primary legislation. We need the flexibility to operate in a changing world and a world affected by conflict.

We also need to allow for the possibility that another Government—an SNP Government or a Labour Government—may take a different view on very poor people in countries such as India. A lot of the very poorest people in the world live in countries such as India. It is perfectly valid for a Government and its Department to discuss whether to put money into such a country, and they should not be restricted in that decision by primary legislation. Finally, we have to think about the cross-border possibilities. A restriction that prevented us from putting money into South Africa, for example, would mean that we could not put money into Grindrod, a great South African company investing in ports in Mozambique, because we would not have taken into account the ability to undertake cross-border operations that benefit the world’s poorest.

I turn to the new clauses on the individual sectors in which we invest. This relates to the points made by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). It is not appropriate for individual Members to ensure that we restrict such sectors indefinitely; it needs to be at the discretion of the Department to determine what those sectors are. The sectors listed in new clause 7 include private healthcare, real estate, and the Department’s other forms of activity, and above all the cross-border possibilities. A restriction that prevented us from investing in funds in London because they would face triple taxation: taxation in country of origin, taxation in country of business, and taxation in London. We hope through CDC’s operations to ensure that every dollar we spend brings it $3, $5 or even $30 of additional money.

On real estate, we need to look at the people who construct the buildings, not the people who use them. Those investments in the construction industry are benefiting the people who build the buildings, which is why CDC makes the investments. On palm oil, we need to understand that in places such as the DRC, 27,000 indirect jobs are secured by the palm oil investment, as is decent investment in infrastructure and health. On renewable energy, it would be a great pity if the only investments we could make in energy in Africa were in renewables. That would not be acceptable in a country that has struggled to build 6,000 MW of generating capacity over a decade. To rule out investments in natural gas would have a fundamental effect on the economic future of Africa.

To conclude, this has been an extremely thoughtful analysis, for which we are very grateful. The strategy will demonstrate that we have listened hard to all the points made on Second Reading, in Committee and on Report. We believe that this simple piece of legislation sets the right balance between economic development and the Department’s other forms of activity, and above all that the Bill will make a significant contribution to the lives of the world’s poorest people.

The House divided: Ayes 246, Noes 293.

Division No. 117] [4.21 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane                  
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina          
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara                    
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena             
Anderson, Mr David                
Arkless, Richard                  
Ashworth, Jonathan                
Bailey, Mr Adrian                 
Bardell, Hannah                   
Benh, rHilary                      
Berger, Luciana                   
Betts, Mr Clive                   
Blackford, Ian                     
Blackman, Kirsty                  
Blenkinsop, Tom                   
Bloomfield, Paul                  
Boswell, Philip                   
Bradhaw, rHr Mr Ben               
Brake, rHm Tom                    
Brennan, Kevin                    
Brock, Deidre                     
Brown, Alan                       
Brown, Lyn                        
Brown, rHr Mr Nicholas            
Bryant, Chris                     
Buck, Ms Karen                    
Burgon, Richard                   
Butler, Dawn                      
Cadbury, Ruth                     
Campbell, rH Mr Alan              
Carmichael, rHr Mr Alistair       
Champion, Sarah                   
Chapman, Douglas                  
Chapman, Jenny                    
Cherry, Joanna                    
Clegg, rHr Mr Nick                
Clwyd, rHn Ann                    
Coaker, Vernon                    
Cooper, Julie                      
Cooper, rHr Yvette                
Cowan, Ronnie                     
Coyle, Neil                       
Crawsbury, Sir David              
Crayley, Angela                   
Creagh, Mary                      
Cresay, Stella                    
Cruddas, Jon

Cryer, John                       
Cunningham, Alex                  
Cunningham, Mr Jim                
Danczuk, Simon                    
David, Wayne                      
Davies, Geraint                   
Day, Martyn                       
Debonnaire, Thangam               
Docherty-Huges, Martin            
Donaldson, Stuart Blair           
Doughty, Stephen                  
Dowd, Jim                         
Dowd, Peter                       
Dugher, Michael                   
Durkan, Mark                      
Eagle, Ms Angela                  
Eagle, Maria                      
Edwards, Jonathan                 
Efford, Clive                     
Elliott, Julie                    
Elliott, Tom                      
Ellman, Mrs Louise                
Elmore, Chris                     
Esterson, Bill                    
Evans, Chris                      
Farrelly, Paul                    
Farron, Tim                       
Ferrier, Margaret                 
Field, rH Frank                   
Fitzpatrick, Jim                  
Fiello, Robert                    
Fletcher, Colleen                 
Flint, rH Caroline                
Flynn, Paul                       
Fovargue, Yvonne                  
Fumiss, Gill                      
Gapes, Mike                       
Gardiner, Barry                   
Gethins, Stephen                  
Gibson, Patricia                  
Glass, Pat                        
Glindon, Mary                     
Godsiff, Mr Roger                 
Goodman, Helen                    
Grady, Patrick                    
Grant, Peter                      
Gray, Neil                        
Green, Kate                       
Greenwood, Margaret                

NOES

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane                  
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina          
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara                    
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena             
Anderson, Mr David                
Arkless, Richard                  
Ashworth, Jonathan                
Bailey, Mr Adrian                 
Bardell, Hannah                   
Benh, rHilary                      
Berger, Luciana                   
Betts, Mr Clive                   
Blackford, Ian                     
Blackman, Kirsty                  
Blenkinsop, Tom                   
Bloomfield, Paul                  
Boswell, Philip                   
Bradhaw, rHr Mr Ben               
Brake, rHm Tom                    
Brennan, Kevin                    
Brock, Deidre                     
Brown, Alan                       
Brown, Lyn                        
Brown, rHr Mr Nicholas            
Bryant, Chris                     
Buck, Ms Karen                    
Burgon, Richard                   
Butler, Dawn                      
Cadbury, Ruth                     
Campbell, rH Mr Alan              
Carmichael, rHr Mr Alistair       
Champion, Sarah                   
Chapman, Douglas                  
Chapman, Jenny                    
Cherry, Joanna                    
Clegg, rHr Mr Nick                
Clwyd, rHn Ann                    
Coaker, Vernon                    
Cooper, Julie                      
Cooper, rHr Yvette                
Cowan, Ronnie                     
Coyle, Neil                       
Crawsbury, Sir David              
Crayley, Angela                   
Creagh, Mary                      
Cresay, Stella                    
Cruddas, Jon

Cryer, John                       
Cunningham, Alex                  
Cunningham, Mr Jim                
Danczuk, Simon                    
David, Wayne                      
Davies, Geraint                   
Day, Martyn                       
Debonnaire, Thangam               
Docherty-Huges, Martin            
Donaldson, Stuart Blair           
Doughty, Stephen                  
Dowd, Jim                         
Dowd, Peter                       
Dugher, Michael                   
Durkan, Mark                      
Eagle, Ms Angela                  
Eagle, Maria                      
Edwards, Jonathan                 
Efford, Clive                     
Elliott, Julie                    
Elliott, Tom                      
Ellman, Mrs Louise                
Elmore, Chris                     
Esterson, Bill                    
Evans, Chris                      
Farrelly, Paul                    
Farron, Tim                       
Ferrier, Margaret                 
Field, rH Frank                   
Fitzpatrick, Jim                  
Fiello, Robert                    
Fletcher, Colleen                 
Flint, rH Caroline                
Flynn, Paul                       
Fovargue, Yvonne                  
Fumiss, Gill                      
Gapes, Mike                       
Gardiner, Barry                   
Gethins, Stephen                  
Gibson, Patricia                  
Glass, Pat                        
Glindon, Mary                     
Godsiff, Mr Roger                 
Goodman, Helen                    
Grady, Patrick                    
Grant, Peter                      
Gray, Neil                        
Green, Kate                       
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hiller, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinahan, Danny
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacTaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McLaughlin, Anne
Meale, Sir Alan
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pound, Stephen
Pugh, John
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Salmond, rh Alex
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Shepperd, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewiss, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whittingdale, Sir Philippa
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Wiseman, Pete
Woodcock, John
Zeichner, Daniel
Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, rh Mr Richard
Baker, rh Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Bawden, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Bone, rh Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Sir Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Mr Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burn, rh Alistair
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, rh Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chisholm, Rehman
Chope, rh Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Courts, Robert
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine

Tellers for the Ayes:
Nic Dakin and
Vicky Foxcroft

NOES
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, rh Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fuller, Richard
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, rh Sir Edward
Gauke, rh Mr David
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greenning, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hancock, rh Matt
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Hashelhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 1

AMOUNT OF THE LIMIT ON GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

Amendment proposed: 3, page 1, line 4, at end, insert—

“(1A) After subsection (1), insert—

(1A) The amount specified in this subsection is whichever is the lesser of the following amounts—

(a) £6,000 million,

(b) £1,500 million plus the amount determined in accordance with subsection (1B).

(1B) The Secretary of State shall determine the amount for the purposes of this subsection by estimating the amount which will constitute 4% of official development assistance in the relevant period determined in accordance with subsection (1C).

(1C) That period begins with the financial year in which the Secretary of State considers that the Crown's assistance to the Corporation (determined in accordance with subsection (2)) will exceed £1,500 and ends at the end of the fourth subsequent financial year.

(1D) For the purposes of this section, ‘official development assistance’ has the same meaning as in the most recent annual report laid before each House of Parliament in accordance with the provisions of section 1 of the International Development (Reporting and Transparency) Act 2006.”—[Patrick Grady.] This amendment would replace the proposed limit on government assistance under section 15 with a new amount, expressed as either £6 billion or the existing investment of £1.5 billion plus a sum not more than 4% of forecast official development assistance over a five year period, whichever is the lesser amount.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 244, Noes 299.

Division No. 118

[4.35 pm]
Hopkins, Kelvin
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr John
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Dakizuc, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
Debono, Geoffrey
Decherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fenner, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flinet, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Dr Tim
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gelhers, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hillier, Menzies
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Maclaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McNally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhan
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alan
McDonnell, rh John
McGarry, Natalie
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McLaughlin, Anne
Meale, rh Sir Alan
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Mr David
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicollson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Onley, Sarah
Onn, Melanie
Onur, Mahmoud
Osamor, Kate
Osband, Kirsten
Owen, Sir Martin
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pound, Stephen
Pugh, John
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Roberts, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Salmond, rh Alex
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Charles
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stammer, Keir
Adams, Nigel
Afrifoe, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Bone, Mr Nicola
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Sir Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Edith
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Witford, Dr Philippa
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Mike Weir and
Kirsty Blackman

**NOES**
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clewer, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davis, Chris
Davis, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Dodd, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Downing, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Third time.

I would like to begin by reiterating my thanks and the tribute we owe to right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House for their shared belief in the importance of international development. At the absolute core of the Bill is our moral obligation to some of the very poorest and most vulnerable people in the world. I pay tribute to right hon. and hon. Members for the important points raised, which will be reflected in the new strategy as it comes forward.

I will briefly lay out once more why believe that this is a good Bill. At its core is our understanding that there is extreme poverty and suffering in the world and that economic development will play an important part in addressing it. There is enormous demand in the poorest countries of the world for well-paid jobs. It is one of the first things that any of us discover when we go to Africa and other developing regions. As the Chairman of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member...
for Halton (Derek Twigg) said, 90% of the growth and employment in the poorest countries of the world is currently driven by the private sector. As he also said, Africa needs 15 million more jobs a year. Every one of those well-paid jobs is an opportunity for a family to deliver the stuff we all care about—for parents to provide education for their children and the healthcare their families need. Above all, it is through the revenue these jobs generate for Governments that a long-term sustainable future can be maintained. That is what allows a Government to pay for their education and healthcare systems and, if there is an earthquake or some other natural disaster, to access the resources to address it. In the end, the only long-term sustainable path is through the generation of that economic development and growth.

Why CDC? We have chosen CDC because it brings together two important things: on the one hand, the rigour of the private sector and its ability to work out whether investments make sense—are there genuine markets for these goods; can these jobs really be sustained?—and, on the other hand, the values of the public sector. The latter are what ensure we go into the hardest countries in the world—for example, that we do renewable energy in Burundi or the Central African Republic or get into Sierra Leone when Ebola happens—and, above all, ensure that investments are not about short-term commercial returns but are patient, long-term investments of the kind that the commercial sector will often not deliver.

Why CDC? Well, having been established in 1948, it is the longest-serving, as well as the best, development finance institution in the world. It proved it in the 1960s, through its investments in Kenya, and, much more recently, since 2012, with its fantastic reforms, which we have talked about at all stages of the Bill, on salaries, transparency, offshore financial centres, the geography of investments and the sectors in which we invest, all of which is summed up in the development impact grid. That is what answers a lot of the points made in the discussion today, and that is what allows us to make sure that every investment focuses on the areas that generate the most jobs and on the countries where investment is the most difficult, where the least capital is available and where GDP per capita is lowest.

We can see this in the real world: in the 17 million indirect jobs created by CDC; in its investments in places such as Burundi and the Central African Republic; in the hydroelectric investment in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo—not an easy place to invest in—which the Chairman of the International Development Committee referred to; and, actually, in the Globeleq investment, where CDC’s investment will help to generate 5,000 MW of power in Africa over the next decade. To put the latter in context, Africa managed only 6,000 MW over the previous decade, so that is almost the entire generation of Africa over the previous decade being driven by a single company supported by CDC. Moreover, there is value for money for the taxpayer because the money is recycled, and the need is absolutely there, as we can see from the fact that we need $2.5 trillion of investment by 2030.

In conclusion, our Department will do many other things besides CDC. Much of the money will continue to flow through NGOs such as Save the Children, CARE and Oxfam. Many of our investments will be with valued partners such as UNICEF. More than 90% of the money we will spend through overseas development assistance will continue to go to health, education and humanitarian assistance. Within that, not all the money in economic development will go through CDC. It will also go through our investments that will take place through support to Governments and technical assistance. However, that CDC investment, combining the rigour of the private sector, the focus on markets and the values of the public sector, reflects the values of the British public who care about poverty and show in their own philanthropic giving how much they care about some of the most vulnerable people in the world. We are showing our respect for the British people by pushing forward with a proven model that will provide the sustainable growth required to address some of the most vulnerable and poorest people in the world. This is our moral obligation.

4.55 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I associate myself with the Minister’s comments in thanking right hon. and hon. Members of all parties who have participated in what I believe has been a very constructive debate—irrespective of whether the amendments and new clauses have been accepted. What they set out has been utilised in the best possible way, as hon. Members have used them to raise some very important points. I offer my thanks, too, to all the non-governmental organisations that supported us throughout the process, to those who came before us in Committee to present written and oral evidence and to staff in the Public Bill Office, whose assistance has been invaluable, as always.

I would like to thank my hon. Friends who have spoken with great concern and passion about the Bill, and I particularly mention my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), whose experience in the Department for International Development is widely respected and was visibly expressed in today’s debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), who is no longer in her place, who also served outstandingly in Public Bill Committee. I do not want my hon. Friends’ valuable contributions to go unnoticed, and I include that of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), the Chair of the International Development Committee, who always makes a passionate case and has an informed stance on the matters in hand.

Let me be clear that in today’s constructive debate no Member has opposed the principle or spirit of the CDC itself, and no one has criticised its role and mission statement. All Members, particularly Opposition Members, have made the point time and again that we must not lose sight of the CDC’s sole or founding principle, which is poverty alleviation. We have all accepted that, and we have had constructive debates in Committee and on Report. The amendments and new clauses that were tabled have had some support from across the House. Some were tabled as probing amendments, but some were amendments intended to strengthen the Bill.

Throughout the Bill’s passage, we outlined a number of concerns that we held over its provisions, including on the accountability and scrutiny of the investments made by the CDC, on the need of the CDC to focus its investments on efforts to alleviate poverty and on the necessity of a business case from the CDC. These concerns have been fundamental to our position on the Bill, and they are concerns about which we have sought strong assurances from the Government.
[Imran Hussain]

On accountability and scrutiny, we had concerns, as illustrated in our amendments, over the fact that the CDC’s investments are not independently assessed on a frequent and regular basis. The absence of such assessments undermines the credibility of the CDC and its investments, and it weakens public confidence that taxpayers’ money, through DFID, is being spent by the CDC on efforts to alleviate poverty and help the poorest in the world. It is vital for every pound, every penny, of development to be directed towards that goal, and strong, independent scrutiny of the development impact of the investments would assure us of that.

We have heard assurances from the Minister today and in Committee that he would welcome further independent assessment by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact. I feel that he has listened, and I am grateful to him for that. We have also been assured that the annual reports and accounts provided by the CDC contain ample information, and that the CDC will be held to account for any discrepancies by either the Public Accounts Committee or the International Development Committee. I am sure that they will make any such discrepancy the subject of inquiries, as they have in the past.

As I have said, it is vital for us to ensure that the CDC’s investments focus on the alleviation of poverty, which is DFID’s legal aim and purpose. Given past investments involving the construction of luxury hotels and shopping centres in well-developed areas, Labour Members were concerned about the possibility that the CDC would use its additional finance to return to such activity. However, the National Audit Office report, which was published just before the debate on Second Reading, makes it clear that that is no longer the case, following the important reforms set in motion by the CDC.

The Minister has been kind enough to provide assurances in response to some of the concerns that have been expressed today, so we will not oppose the Bill’s Third Reading.

5.2 pm

Jeremy Lefroy: Whether people live in the United Kingdom, Tanzania or Colombia, the most important route out of poverty is a good job or a good livelihood, and that is why I fundamentally support the work of the CDC. It has done excellent work throughout the world for nearly 70 years, and in recent years it has concentrated on the most needy countries, where there is the highest level of unemployment or the highest level of poverty. I welcome the fact that the Government are to invest more through the CDC in the coming years.

However, I think that today’s debate, and our debates in Committee and on other occasions, have made it clear that the CDC must be careful. It must invest in areas in which commercial investors would not normally invest; otherwise, it should be the commercial sector that invests in them. The CDC must invest in the areas that create the greatest number of jobs in return for the investment made. That will often involve agriculture, and it will often involve difficult investments, because it is not easy to invest in agriculture in remote areas. However, that is what the CDC is there for: it is not there for an easy life. I know that—given the management that it has had recently, and given the calibre of its staff—it is up to those challenges, and I welcome the Bill.

5.3 pm

Patrick Grady: My colleagues from the SNP were grateful that the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) for their contributions during the Bill’s various stages. I also recognise the commitment and hard work of the CDC’s staff, and their positive engagement with the Opposition parties.

This is the first piece of DFID legislation in the current Parliament, but I wonder whether it will be the last. The Minister might be aware that I tabled a question to the Secretary of State about the applicability of the International Development (Reporting and Transparency) Act 2006 now that the millennium development goals it requires DFID to report on have been replaced by the sustainable development goals. The International Development Committee proposed a consolidating international development Act to bring together all the various pieces of legislation passed over recent years. Perhaps that is not such a bad idea, especially as the debate about the purpose of aid and development seems to be getting louder.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East said on Report, throughout the Christmas recess there seemed to be a drip-feed of very negative stories about aid spending, particularly in the gutter press. It is absolutely right that examples of waste and inefficiency are exposed and questions asked about value for money, but the answer is to improve transparency and efficiency, and to measure impact—especially over the longer term—and not simply to cut off the supply or take heavy-handed, but ultimately counter-productive, action.

The debate on the CDC Bill has catalysed a broader debate about the use and purpose of aid, and the Government can be assured in the coming months that the SNP will be happy to support the cross-party and public consensus on our moral duty to help people most in need around the world, and the symbolism and very real impact of meeting the 0.7% aid target. However, as we have just heard on Report, if the highest standards of transparency and effectiveness are to be demanded from DFID’s external stakeholders, they must equally be applied across Government and to their arm’s-length agencies, starting with the CDC in this Bill.

The Government did not accept amendments, but I join the Opposition Front-Bench team in welcoming the commitments the Government have given. We will, through the procedures of this House, hold them to account for those commitments. There is a consensus behind the need for continual improvement of the CDC, and we want to maintain that consensus.

The Government will see this legislation passed today— their majority in the House assures them of that—and it is unlikely, due to the nature of the Bill, that the
House of Lords will have any opportunity to amend or delay its progress on to the statute book. So the Government are being given a significant responsibility today; they are asking for the power to quadruple the budget of an agency which has a long but chequered history. The CDC has had significant successes in its history, but significant concerns have been raised and remain. If its resource base is to be massively scaled up, so must be its accountability and the standards it is held to. I hope the Secretary of State and her Ministers will confirm that they are prepared for the CDC, the Department, and themselves as Ministers, to be held to those standards.

5.7 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I will say about three sentences.

It is both a moral and practical responsibility and an opportunity to aid other countries. Christian Aid was set up after the second world war to develop Europe, and its success over the next 20 years was fantastic. The same can apply to Africa and other parts of the world, and the CDC has the opportunity, through infrastructure and education, to achieve that.

We must reduce barriers and provide opportunities, and provide a welcome to other countries having the same aspirations and achievements we have had ourselves.

5.8 pm

Stephen Doughty: I, too, want to place on record my thanks to the Clerk of Bills and all my colleagues on the Front and Back Benches who have taken part. We have heard excellent contributions from both sides of the House in what has been a very informative and useful process of scrutiny of this Bill through Second Reading, Committee and Report.

I was pleased to hear the Minister setting out a little more detail on the period over which we can expect the CDC to be drawing down moneys. His suggestion that it will be a five and 10-year period in two tranches is much more reassuring than some of the earlier suggestions. There will, however, be a temptation to draw that down at a faster rate because of changes in reporting how our aid is calculated and what proportion the CDC counts towards that. So while I take what the Minister said with great sincerity, I urge him to caution against those who would suggest dumping money, as it were, into the CDC as a way of artificially meeting the 0.7% target. He should only go there with a clear plan and business case, and a clear understanding of how that is going to contribute towards poverty eradication.

I am concerned that we are still not going far enough on tax havens. I listened to what the Minister said and I was pleased to hear the Minister setting out a little more detail on the period over which we can expect the CDC to be drawing down moneys. His suggestion that it will be a five and 10-year period in two tranches is much more reassuring than some of the earlier suggestions. There will, however, be a temptation to draw that down at a faster rate because of changes in reporting how our aid is calculated and what proportion the CDC counts towards that. So while I take what the Minister said with great sincerity, I urge him to caution against those who would suggest dumping money, as it were, into the CDC as a way of artificially meeting the 0.7% target. He should only go there with a clear plan and business case, and a clear understanding of how that is going to contribute towards poverty eradication.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lords Amendments</th>
<th>Time for conclusion of proceedings</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nos. 24, 96, 134, 136 to 142, 159, 302, 305 and 307</td>
<td>90 minutes after the commencement of proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nos. 1 to 23, 25 to 95, 97 to 133, 135, 143 to 158, 160 to 301, 303, 304 and 306</td>
<td>Three hours after the commencement of those proceedings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subsequent stages

(4) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(5) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(Mark Spencer.)

Question agreed to.

Policing and Crime Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I must draw the House's attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendments 24, 96, 159 and 302. I also remind the House that certain of the motions relating to the Lords amendments will be certified as relating exclusively to England or to England and Wales, or to England and to England and Wales, as set out on the selection paper. If the House divides on any certified motion, a double or triple majority will be required for the motion to be passed.

After Clause 26

INQUIRY INTO COMPLAINTS ALLEGING CORRUPT RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN POLICE AND NEWSPAPER ORGANISATIONS

5.13 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 24.

Mr Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

- Lords amendment 96, and Government motion to disagree.
- Lords amendment 134, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendment (a) in lieu.
- Lords amendment 136 to 142, and Government motions to disagree.
- Lords amendment 159, and Government motion to disagree.
- Lords amendment 302, and Government motion to disagree.
- Lords amendment 305, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendment (a) in lieu.
- Lords amendment 307, and Government motion to disagree.

Brandon Lewis: This first group of amendments includes 10 new clauses added to the Bill in the House of Lords against the advice of the Government. It covers four separate issues: part 2 of the Leveson inquiry; the funding of legal representation for bereaved families at inquests where the police are an interested person; the maximum sentence for the offence of stalking involving fear of violence or serious alarm or distress; and the rights and entitlements of victims of crime.

5.15 pm

The Government have reflected carefully on the debates on all the amendments in the House of Lords. Lords amendment 134 seeks to increase, from five to 10 years' imprisonment, the maximum sentence for the more serious stalking offence where the offender's behaviour puts a person in fear of violence. The Government are determined to do everything they can to protect victims of what can be a terrifying crime. The House will recall that, only last month, we announced plans to introduce a new stalking protection order, which will provide the
police with a new pre-charge option to help them to protect victims of stranger stalking in a similar way to orders that protect victims of domestic violence and abuse.

My hon. Friends the Members for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham) have been assiduous in pursuing this issue for some time and are to be much commended for their campaign, including the pursuit of a private Member’s Bill, on behalf of Dr Eleanor Aston, a Cheltenham general practitioner practising in Gloucester who was stalked by a former patient for seven years.

Each case must, of course, be considered by the courts on its facts, but given the harm that can be caused by the most serious stalking cases we are persuaded that, in such cases, sentencing judges should have greater latitude to pass a higher sentence that fits the crime and affords greater protection for victims. The Government amendment in lieu of Lords amendment 134 will therefore do three things.

First, the Government amendment will increase, from five to 10 years’ imprisonment, the maximum sentence for the offence of stalking involving fear of violence or causing serious alarm or distress. Secondly, it will similarly increase the maximum sentence for the equivalent harassment offence of putting a person in fear of violence, which will help to retain consistency of approach to the most serious harassment offences. Thirdly, it will increase, from seven to 14 years’ imprisonment, the maximum sentence for the racially or religiously aggravated version of the section 4 and 4A offences. In the normal way, those increased maximum penalties will apply only to offences committed on or after the date of commencement, but I trust that the amendment will have the support of my hon. Friends and, indeed, of the whole House.

The Government remain firmly of the view that, however well intentioned the motives behind them, the other Lords amendments in this group pre-empt the proper and detailed consideration of what are complex issues and that, accordingly, this House should disagree with them. I will take each of the three issues in turn.

Lords amendment 24 would require my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to proceed with what is commonly known as the “Leveson 2” inquiry into the relationships between the police and the media. Of course, it is vital that the police at all times uphold the very highest standards of integrity, whether in their dealings with the media or, for that matter, in their dealings with anyone else. However, given the extent of the criminal investigations into phone hacking and other illegal practices by the press that have taken place since the Leveson inquiry was established, and given the implementation of the recommendations following part 1, including reforms within the police and the press, the Government must consider whether proceeding with part 2 of the inquiry is appropriate, proportionate and in the public interest.

As hon. Members will be aware, the Government have sought the views of the public and interested parties, including the victims of press abuse, through a public consultation that, as it happens, closes today.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The consultation closed 17 minutes ago. The truth of the matter is that the Government promised that there would be one inquiry with two parts. As far as I can see, the Minister is effectively saying—nudge, nudge; wink, wink—“We are not going to proceed with part 2.” If that is the case, he should be straightforward and tell us so now.

Brandon Lewis: With great respect, the hon. Gentleman should look at Hansard when it is published. That is not what I said at all. I made it very clear that we have been seeking the views of the public and interested parties and that we have to look at what is appropriate, proportionate and in the public interest.

The consultation sought views on whether proceeding with part 2 of the Leveson inquiry is still appropriate, proportionate and in the public interest. As the last of the relevant criminal cases has only recently concluded, the Government believe that this is an appropriate time to take stock and seek views on the various options, as the then Home Secretary outlined 18 months ago. Submissions to the consultation will be important in helping to inform the Government’s thinking.

As hon. Members may also be aware, an application has been made to judicially review the consultation. Although I cannot comment on the current legal proceedings, the Government have committed not to take any final decisions relating to the consultation until the legal proceedings have concluded. Given the consultation and the ongoing related legal proceedings, I respectfully suggest to the House that this is not an appropriate matter for further legislation at this moment.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I hope the Government will not be intimidated by a campaign the press are waging at the moment to try to deter them from implementing the Leveson recommendations. May I just tell the Minister that yesterday I submitted my monthly article for the Aldershot News & Mail, as I had been invited to do—[Interruption.] May I say to hon. Members on both sides that it is normally very good reading? The article was about press freedom. I received an e-mail yesterday evening saying that the paper was sorry that it would not be publishing it because it was “contradictory” to its stance on “a free press”. It is extraordinary that the Aldershot News & Mail, owned by the Daily Mirror group, feels it is so vulnerable that it cannot accept an article by me—my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) is the other contributor. Leaving aside my criticism of the Aldershot News & Mail, with which I was pretty robust this morning, may I say to the Minister that this illustrates a real paranoia in the media about this issue and it is our responsibility, as parliamentarians, to be straightforward and recognise that what we are seeking to do is to protect not ourselves but ordinary people?

Brandon Lewis: As always, my hon. Friend makes an important point. However, let me make it clear again that the Government will make a decision on this once we have had a chance to review the outcome of the consultation and in the light of the legal proceedings, and not before the legal proceedings have concluded.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): But will it not be awkward for the Government if they completely ignore the Press Recognition Panel’s submission? After all, independently overseeing press regulation was what it was set up to do, and it is unequivocally calling for section 40 to be implemented.
Brandon Lewis: As I say, the Government will review the consultation, and I know the Secretary of State will look carefully at that. We are committed to not making decisions until the completion of the judicial proceedings. Hon. Members will also be aware that the Speaker has certified this amendment as engaging financial privilege. Our view is that amendment 24 is, at this time, unnecessary, inappropriate and ill-timed.

The Government fully understand the reasoning behind Lords amendment 96, which seeks to provide public funding for legal representation for bereaved families at inquests. It may be almost seven months since this House lasted debated this issue on Report, but the Government’s position has not changed. Our view remains that we should await the report, expected this spring, from Bishop James Jones on the experiences of the Hillsborough families. The Opposition have argued that this issue goes beyond Hillsborough. I do not dispute that, but the experiences of the Hillsborough families will have significant relevance for other families facing different tragic circumstances, and the issue of legal representation at inquests will undoubtedly be one aspect of those experiences. Bishop James’s report will provide learning that could be of general application, so it is entirely right that we do not now seek to pre-empt his conclusions. For that reason, I put it to the House that this amendment is premature. As with the other Lords amendments we are debating, we must take into account the potential significant financial implications of amendment 96. Of course, the resource implications of the amendment are just one consideration, but it cannot be ignored, and, again, the Speaker has also certified the amendment as engaging financial privilege.

Finally, Lords amendments 136 to 142 seek to make further provision in respect of victims’ rights and entitlements. These amendments ignore the extensive reforms and modernisation we are undertaking to transform our justice system, and to protect vulnerable victims and witnesses, and, where appropriate, spare them the ordeal of appearing in court, through an increased use of video link systems and by rolling out pre-recorded cross-examination. The amendments would result in an unstructured framework of rights and entitlements that are evidence-based, fully costed, effective and proportionate. They could impose significant obligations and financial burdens on the criminal justice system.

Putting aside the many difficulties we have with the detail of the amendments, the Government are already looking at what is required to strengthen further the rights of victims of crime. We are looking at the amendments considering how it might be improved and monitored. We are focused on making sure that we get this work right. We will ensure that any future reform proposals are evidence-based, fully costed, effective and proportionate.

As I have indicated, the intention behind many of the Lords amendments is laudable. On Lords amendment 134, we are persuaded that the case has been well made for increasing the maximum sentence for the more serious stalking and harassment offences involving fear of violence. I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work they have done on that.

As for the other Lords amendments, as a responsible Government we do not want to adopt a scattergun approach to legislation. Nor can we afford to be free and easy with taxpayers’ money by incurring substantial new spending commitments without offering any indication as to where the additional resources are to come from.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What are the Government going to do about strengthening protection for victims, particularly when they have to give evidence in court? Very often elderly people are frightened to go and confront the person they have accused.

Brandon Lewis: I noticed that the hon. Gentleman was trying to intervene before I made that comment. Hopefully he will be satisfied that we are looking to strengthen victims’ rights, but we want to do so in a proper, proportionate and appropriate way.
Brandon Lewis: As I said just a few moments ago, we do want to look at strengthening victims’ rights, but we want to make sure that we do so in a correct, appropriate and proportionate way. I want to do that work, and in due course we will come forward with those proposals and ensure that we are doing it properly. Taking into account the work we are doing. Lords amendments 24, 96 and 136 to 142 are at best premature and at worst confused, unfocused and unnecessary. As such, we argue that they should be rejected by this House.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Happy new year to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to the Minister.

We support Lords amendments 24, 96 and 136 to 142, along with consequential amendments 159, 302 and 307, and we will vote to retain them in the Bill. We also supported the original amendment 134, with consequential amendment 305. We are glad to see that the Government have changed their position, so we will not oppose their amendment in lieu of Lords amendment 134.

I thank those in the other place who have worked to bring these issues to our attention, particularly Baroness O’Neill and Baroness Brinton. I congratulate my noble Friends Lord Rosser and Baroness Royall, whose determination and outstanding advocacy for the most vulnerable in our society has led to the Government accepting our amendments to the stalking code. Each of the substantive issues before us is deserving of a full debate in its own right, but we have only a short amount of time. I will deal with each in turn.

Lords amendment 24—Lords amendment 159 is consequential to it—is a new clause that requires the Government to commission an independent inquiry into the way in which the police handle complaints relating to allegations of corruption between the police and newspaper organisations. It is commonly known as the Leveson 2 amendment, because it is similar in scope to the proposed second part of the Leveson inquiry. As was announced by Judge Leveson on 14 September 2011, this is a proposed examination into “whether the police received corrupt payments or were otherwise complicit in misconduct” and into any failure of the police and others properly to investigate allegations relating to News International and other news organisations. In 2012, the then Prime Minister, the right hon. David Cameron, said:

“When I set up this inquiry, I also said that there would be a second part to investigate wrongdoing in the press and the police, including the conduct of the first police investigation.—[Official Report, 29 November 2012; Vol. 554, c. 446.]”

Yet the Government’s consultation, which ends today, as we have heard, could be seen as a weakening of that commitment. That underlines the need for the clarity that this amendment would provide.

5.30 pm

Part 1 of the Leveson inquiry found unhealthy links between senior Metropolitan police officers and newspaper executives. Those links led to high-level resignations. There are also issues around the relationship between the police and the press more locally, as prior information appears to have been provided about particular people who will be arrested or a particular search that will be carried out. All those serious breaches speak to a fundamental need for us, as a nation, to assess the proper relationship between the police, the press, the public and the system of complaints. The proposed second stage of the Leveson inquiry would ask exactly those sorts of questions. Labour has consistently supported it but, sadly, real doubts are emerging about the Government’s commitment to the second stage of the inquiry. No timetable has been announced for it, and the Government have stated that it will not take place until all criminal investigations and trials related to part I are concluded.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Is not the Government’s position extremely sensible? A succession of criminal trials have looked into this matter. They have proceeded in a proper judicial way, and most of the information that we need is already available. To go on inquiring, inquiring and inquiring is merely adding to the already £50 million cost that there has been to the taxpayer.

Lyn Brown: I am really sorry that the hon. Gentleman continues to plough that path. As I have said, the second part of this inquiry was quite clearly in the mind of his Prime Minister when he made statements to this House. If we cannot accept the words of his Prime Minister—

Mr Rees-Mogg: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Lyn Brown: Oh, really.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let the hon. Gentleman put his concern on record.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is promoting me. The Prime Minister is Prime Minister to the sovereign, not to me.

Lyn Brown: I have heard some specious arguments in this place.

I hope that the Lords amendment is acceptable to Government Members and the Minister. It is explicit that the inquiry should not begin until the Attorney General determines that it would not be prejudicial to any ongoing relevant criminal investigations or court cases. To oppose the amendment is therefore tantamount to admitting that the Government are no longer committed to an investigation into corruption between news organisations and the police, and that they are not prepared to investigate how allegations of corruption are dealt with. If the Government block Lords amendment 24 today, the public really can have no option but to draw the conclusion that this Government have no commitment to asking the important and hard questions of our national institutions.

I now turn to Lords amendment 96, with consequential amendment 302, which was proposed in the other place by Lord Rosser. The purpose of the amendment is to establish the principle of parity of legal funding for bereaved families at inquests involving the police. Many hon. Members have championed this cause, including during the passage of the Bill. I pay particular tribute to the tireless campaigning and personal commitment of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham). Unequal funding at inquests and the injustice associated with that was highlighted by the sorry saga of the Hillsborough hearings. The scales of justice were
weighted against the families of those who had lost their lives. Public money was used not to discover the truth, but instead to defend an untenable narrative perpetuated by South Yorkshire police. The coroner dealing with the first pre-inquest hearings into the 21 victims of the 1974 Birmingham pub bombings backed and commended applications for their bereaved families to get legal funding for proper representation, but did not have the power to authorise the funds.

Fees in major cases have attracted considerable public interest, but inquests at which the police are legally represented are not confined to major tragedies such as Hillsborough; far more common are inquests into the deaths of individuals who are little known. Many bereaved families can find themselves in an adversarial and aggressive environment when they go to an inquest. Many are not in a position to match the spending of the police or other parts of the public sector for their own legal representation. In fact, bereaved families have to try, if at all possible, to find their own money to have any sort of legal representation. Opposition Members believe that the overwhelming public interest lies in these inquiries discovering the truth. It follows that public money should be there to establish the truth, not just to protect public institutions, and that must mean equal funding.

In the other place, the Government accepted that many would sympathise with the intention of the amendment. When she was Home Secretary, the Prime Minister commissioned the former Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, to compile a report on the experiences of the Hillsborough families. We are encouraged to wait for his report before considering the issues further, yet we already know that a system of unequal funding at inquests is wrong. Public funds are used to deny justice to these families to get legal funding for proper representation, but did not have the power to authorise the funds.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I urge Ministers to listen closely to the hon. Lady’s strong point. When someone dies while in the care of the state in a detained environment, people too often go up against the might of the state. That is simply not fair and it should not be tolerated.

Lyn Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point.

We also support Lords amendments 136 to 142, which were tabled by Baroness Brinton, along with consequential amendment 307. Those amendments are designed to improve the way in which the criminal justice system interacts with victims of crime, and they are based on the work of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). I presume that the amendments will be acceptable to the Government because, as we have heard, they would enact the 2015 Conservative manifesto commitment to introduce a victims’ bill of rights. Let me remind the Minister of what that manifesto says:

“we will strengthen victims’ rights further, with a new Victims’ Law that will enshrine key rights for victims”.

I understand that the former Minister, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning), already committed to a Green Paper on this issue in a private meeting with the campaign group Voice 4 Victims in February last year, but we are yet to have sight of that. This Bill is the ideal opportunity to take the matter forward, so I encourage the Government, even at this late stage, to think again and not oppose the amendments.

The House will know that victims’ rights are protected in the victims code, which was introduced in 2005 by a Labour Government. We still support that code, but the rights included in it are not legally binding, and in the past few years it has become clear that a firmer legal basis is required to give distressed and vulnerable victims the protection that they need.

Liz Saville Roberts: Does the hon. Lady agree that if the 2012 European directive on victims’ rights were put on a statutory footing in England and Wales, we would be following the lead of that which happens in Scotland already?

Lyn Brown: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, but I think that talking about Europe might be too much of a red flag in this Chamber.

If the amendments are agreed to, they will create a statutory duty on elected police leadership to produce an area victims plan depending on local needs, and they will require the commissioner for victims and witnesses to assess the adequacy of such plans. Finally, the amendments will empower the Secretary of State to order a homicide review—basically, a cold case review—when nobody has been charged with a crime. Taken together, the measures would allow the victims code to be better enforced and ensure that our criminal justice system works better for the victims of crime. The Government will, I hope, offer their wholehearted support to these amendments.

Finally, I turn to Lords amendment 134, with consequential amendment 305, which was proposed by my noble Friend Baroness Royall. The amendment would increase the maximum penalty for those found guilty of stalking from five to 10 years. In cases where the offence is racially or religiously aggravated, the maximum penalty would be increased from seven to 14 years. We are delighted that the Government have chosen to accept our case, and I congratulate my noble Friend and all who have pursued the campaign.

Home Office data suggest that as many as one in five women and one in 10 men will be stalked at some point in their lives. Just because stalking is common, it does not mean that it is not a serious matter. Stalking destroys lives. It violates an individual’s right to privacy, and therefore destroys their personal freedoms. It causes fear, and rightly so, since too often it is a precursor to violent confrontation.

I know that sentencing guidelines and specific sentences are the responsibility of the Sentencing Council and judges respectively. However, extending the maximum penalty will allow for greater flexibility in the most serious cases and make it clear that stalking is a serious offence. The Labour party has provided the Government with the opportunity to give judges the necessary flexibility to hand out appropriate sentences to serious criminals. I am delighted that the Government have seen the need for that and responded appropriately.
Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I rise to support the Government’s amendment on stalking in lieu of Lords amendment 134. This is a momentous day, because the proposed measures, which would have the effect of significantly strengthening protections for victims of stalking, represent the culmination of a 16-month campaign. I truly hope that what began with a meeting with my GP constituent Dr Eleanor Aston in 2015 will end here today.

In doubling the maximum sentences for stalking, the Government’s proposals emphatically and decisively do two things. First, they recognise that stalking is not a minor offence. Instead, it is a horrible, violating, destructive crime that rips relationships apart, ruins careers and can cause lasting mental harm. All too often, it is the gateway to serious violence. Secondly, the Government’s amendments will ensure that courts have the tools that they need to deal with the most serious cases accordingly. Most crucially of all, it will give the courts powers truly to protect victims and to put their needs front and centre in the criminal justice system.

Let me be clear: when we talk about victims of stalking, we are not simply referring to the rich and famous: this campaign has made it crystal clear that ordinary men and women can fall victim to stalking just as readily and just as severely as those in the public eye.

Lyn Brown: Before the hon. Gentleman continues, may I say that it was remiss of me not to mention the work that he has done on the matter and congratulate him on it?

Alex Chalk: That is very gracious of the hon. Lady. I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and I am grateful. The context for the proposals was the horrific seven-year ordeal suffered by my constituent at the hands of her former patient. I will not go through all the detail now, but I will set out some of it. He turned up at her surgery over 100 times. He posted foul items through the letterbox. He followed her on patient visits, slashed her tyres and sent threatening mail. He appeared at a children’s birthday party her daughter was attending. That caused her exceptional anxiety and fear. After serving a short prison sentence, he—in a pattern that is not uncommon with this type of offence—restarted his campaign. Dr Aston received packages at her surgery in Gloucester and at her home in Cheltenham. One was threatening and abusive, and made it clear that he knew where her children went to school. The second package simply said, “Guess who’s back.” When he was arrested again, the search on his computer revealed that the inquiry, “How long after a person disappears are they assumed dead?” The judge who sentenced Dr Aston’s stalker made it clear that he did not think he had the tools he needed, stating in open court that he had no doubt that the stalker was dangerous in the sense of posing a significant risk, but he went on:

“I am frustrated that the maximum sentence...is five years. I would, if I could, give you longer.”

5.45 pm

These proposals mean that instead of the maximum sentence being lower than that for shoplifting, it would be put on a par with that for another violating and upsetting crime—burglary. They mean that we no longer have the completely unsatisfactory situation in which the maximum a stalker can serve in prison on entering a guilty plea, even for the worst imaginable repeat offence against the same victim, is just 20 months.

I should also make it clear what this is not about. It is not about saying that all stalking cases should suddenly lead to longer sentences—that is plainly a matter for the discretion of the courts—it is about ensuring that in the most serious cases, where victims are truly at risk of serious harm, whether physical or mental, the courts have the tools they need to protect the innocent. It is not about throwing away the key and giving up on offenders. Ultimately, I and others want prison sentences that reform the offender and address the underlying obsession in an effective way. The reality, in fact, is that longer sentences, in appropriate cases, can provide the prison system with a greater opportunity to rehabilitate and to treat.

I want to thank parliamentarians from both sides of both Houses—including Baroness Royall, for the role she has played—who have backed these measures, both in relation to my private Member’s Bill in this place and in their support for the detailed report that I co-authored with my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who has shown extraordinary dynamism in this campaign.

I want to pay tribute to this Government. I am enormously proud that more has been done by this Government, both since 2015 and in coalition, than by any other in history to recognise the seriousness of this type of offending. In just a decade, stalking has gone from being treated almost as a joke to being recognised for the serious offence it is. This step builds on vital work that has gone before—from creating the offence in 2012 to enacting stalking protection orders that can offer protection to victims at the first sign of trouble—and should properly be seen in the context of other vital measures that are relevant to this topic, not least the introduction of Clare’s law to protect women from potentially abusive and dangerous partners.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, but may I enlighten him? He was not in the House when the stalking legislation was introduced by the Labour Government as a result of a private Member’s Bill, against a lot of opposition from his party at the time.

Alex Chalk: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. For that intervention, but the reality is that the Conservative-led coalition Government ensured that the measure was put on the statute book. However, in the spirit of being entirely conciliatory, I recognise that a lot of people have made efforts.

I close by saying that I am grateful to the many victims—typically, but not exclusively women—to whom I have spoken and who have shared their stories, as well as to the stalking charities, such as the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, the Network for Surviving Stalking, Protection Against Stalking, Paladin, the Hollie Gazzard Trust, the police and the University of Gloucestershire, which, incidentally, is a leader in research on stalking.

Finally, I want, above all, to pay tribute to my constituent Dr Aston. It was her ordeal that triggered this campaign. She has shown astonishing bravery, relieving her suffering again and again. I know that her greatest wish is that future victims can receive the full measure of justice. If these proposals are carried, that will be precisely the result. I commend the Government amendments to the House.
Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I had not intended to come along today, but it is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who rightly spoke about the real progress that is being made with the Stalking (Sentencing) Bill. There is no need to have a sort of ping-pong about who has done more about domestic violence, sexual violence and stalking because, frankly, we should all be trying to do everything we can, and I do not care who does it as long as it gets done.

The legislation and the amendments before us—particularly on stalking—represent real legislative progress, but that will mean absolutely nothing if, in practice, the legislation is not realised. As somebody who has worked on the frontline, I am afraid to say that so often we make brilliant rules in this place—beautiful, fancy written rules, still on all the fancy goatskins—and it means absolutely naff all to victims because of issues to do with resources and how things are properly realised by the different agencies. That is why I wanted to talk about the victims code and the amendments to the victims’ Bill that was introduced by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). I urge the Government to consider the amendments and to consider making a more robust framework for the victims code, which is a brilliant piece of regulation. I have no doubt that every single person in here is totally committed to making things better for victims. I do not sign up to the idea that you are buddies and we are goodies. We all come to this place because we want to make something better.

I was the victims’ champion for Birmingham and did a huge piece of work on the victims code and victims’ legislation alongside the Government’s Victims’ Commissioner, and I have to say that if Members can find me a victim who knows what the victims’ code is, I will give them some cash now. People do not realise that they have this many days to ask for something, and they do not realise that they can have a victim statement. Only 30% of people remembered even being asked for one. I ask hon. Members to think back to the day that the murderer of our friend and colleague Jo Cox was sentenced. The thing that we do not remember from that day is that man. The thing we remember is Brendan Cox standing and making the victim statement outside the court that he had made inside the court because he knew that he had the rights to do it. That is rare but it was so powerful in that case.

It is imperative that we look at the amendments that relate to the victims’ law and see how we can strengthen them, because I am telling you now—not you, Mr Speaker, of course, but everyone—that at the moment the victims code is a hope as far as victims of crime are concerned, and the Opposition amendments would definitely make it stronger, especially for victims of stalking and sexual violence. I ask the Government to think again.

I want to make a quick point about the amendments regarding the equality of arms in cases where the state is an actor. I speak for the victims of the Birmingham pub bombings, who are not just my constituents but my friends. We have a matter of weeks to answer their plight. Currently, the Chief Coroner agrees with them that they have not been provided with an equality of arms, so an adjournment has taken place before their inquest can be reopened. We have until February to right that wrong. At the moment, I see nothing that tells me that that will change. I ask Government Members to look at the amendments and think about how they would feel if it concerned the families in their constituency.

Brandon Lewis: With regard to the Birmingham situation, I am very happy to have a conversation with the hon. Lady outside the Chamber. I think that she may have slightly misunderstood what is happening, and I am happy to give a bit more detail about what is happening with the legal aid process.

Jess Phillips: I am only too aware that the Minister will almost certainly tell me that the legal aid, through the Legal Aid Agency, has been granted to two of the seven families of complainants. Although I am more than happy to meet the Minister outside of here, I am going to wager that I know a bit more about it than perhaps he does. I would be delighted to be proven wrong—in fact, the Home Office has heard our requests for Hillsborough-style funding—and, if I am, I will stand on every single platform I can to say that I was wrong and the Minister knew more than me. So I look forward to that!

I will conclude by saying that we all want something better and we all want victims to be treated better, and the hon. Member for Cheltenham has shown with passion how that can be realised. But unless we make sure our regulations are enacted, what we do in this place is slightly for nothing, so I ask the Government to look again at the amendments around victims’ rights.

Mr Charles Walker: In the last Parliament, I was totally politically incontinent—in and out of all sorts of Lobbies, voting with the Government, voting against the Government and voting with Labour. I have really tried to make sure that, in this Parliament, I was only in one Lobby—the Government Lobby. I have managed that loyally for the past 18 months, and I am just so disappointed that the Government are not willing to accept Lords amendment 96, because equality of representation is absolutely critical.

I spoke in this place in a previous Parliament about the terrible tragedy of deaths in custody—deaths in detained environments. Let us look specifically at deaths in police custody. If a person dies in police custody, there is obviously a coroner’s inquiry, but there is total inequality of representation at that inquiry. The family of the deceased are up against the state, the police and their legal representation. That legal representation is given to the police without question, and it is funded without question, whereas the families of the deceased, at a time of huge emotional turmoil, have their finances pored over with a fine-toothed comb—it is not just the finances of the parents, but the finances of siblings, aunts and uncles, and even cousins—to see whether the family can bear the cost of their legal representation. That is entirely unfair; it is not just.

The Lords amendment is very sensible in its scope, and I would hope, even at this late stage, that the Government—if for no other reason than to keep me out of a Lobby that I do not really want to be in—might consider accepting it, so that we can all finish the evening on a very happy and unified note.

Chris Bryant: I do not think that it is going to be a very unified note by the end of the day, and I think there was an element of irony in the contribution by the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker).
I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for their campaign on stalking. The legislation has changed over the years, particularly since 1997, and it is good that this issue is now recognised for the terrible harm that is done to many victims.

I want to talk primarily—this is a bit of a smorgasbord debate—about the Leveson issues and amendment 24, which I wish was not necessary. However, it is necessary, and it has been put on the amendment paper only because their lordships and a large number of us in this House are distrustful of the Government’s intention in relation to what happened over Leveson.

I believe that it is necessary to have the full Leveson—that is not two Leveson inquiries, but one Leveson inquiry, some of which could be done before the criminal investigations were completed, and some of which could not be done until the criminal investigations were completed. That was always the promise. It was never, “We will think about having Leveson 2 once we have come to the end of the criminal investigations; it was always said from the very beginning that there would be one inquiry with two parts and that the second part would happen. In fact, the Prime Minister, in the quote given by my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), said those words the day after Leveson 1 had been produced. So Ministers have absolutely no excuse for turning round now and saying, “Oh no, no, we never really intended to proceed with Leveson 2.”

Why does that matter? Why is it important? The truth is that we are talking about corruption in one of the organisations of the state that matters most to our constituents and to the rule of law in this country: the police. I am sure the vast majority of us agree, given the little bits and pieces that we have managed to glean from Leveson 1, that there was a time when the Metropolitan police, to all intents and purposes, were a partially owned subsidiary of News International. Metropolitan police staff went to work for News International. When they had finished working for News International, they went back to work for the Metropolitan police. There was a revolving door. On the very day that the police decided not to continue with the investigation into what had happened at the News of the World, the leading investigator was having dinner with Rebekah Brooks.

6 pm

We do not know all the facts because Lord Justice Leveson rightly said, “I cannot investigate all these elements of corruption in the Metropolitan police and what went on at the News of the World until such time as the criminal investigations have been completed.” They are now complete. I reiterate that not only Prime Minister David Cameron made those promises; the then Home Secretary repeatedly, time after time, said in this House that there would be Leveson 2. She did not say that we would have Leveson 2 if it proved necessary, or that we would perhaps have Leveson 2. She said that we would have Leveson 2 and that it would be proceeded with as is necessary according to the law, as the inquiry was originally set up, the moment the criminal investigations were completed.

From the way in which the new Government have conducted themselves, they need to listen to Conservative Members such as the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) and the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), who have rightly made the point that the Government are walking themselves into a cul de sac. The truth of the matter is that this House and the other place agreed legislation—section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013—that is yet to be implemented. This House and the other House agreed nearly but not quite unanimously that we would set up a royal charter to put a body in place to decide on the independent regulation of the press. If the royal charter is to be withdrawn, there must be a two thirds majority in this House and a two thirds majority in the House of Lords. That ain’t gonna happen. The Government are walking into a cul de sac unless they choose to act and act swiftly.

I believe that the Government should already have implemented section 40. The hon. Member for Aldershot is absolutely right when he comments on the wholly exaggerated campaign being run by the press. The victims of press intrusion were promised something very simple. The hon. Member for North Herefordshire was right to say that this is not about MPs or celebrities. To be honest, I do not give much of a fig about what happens with the stars. We put ourselves in the public domain—some of us have done it more than others—and to some degree we have it coming. However, what really upset me was when victims of crime had their phones hacked. Why did the Culture, Media and Sport Committee originally do our investigation back in 2003? We did it because the people of Soham felt that their privacy was being invaded by the press and they had no means of saying, “Go away. Leave us alone.” They were the victims and not the perpetrators of crime.

We want something that is very simple: a genuinely independent system of self-regulation. Frankly, IPSO is no better than IPSA. IPSO is exactly the same as the Press Complaints Commission. It has no more teeth than the previous organisation; it has some of the same staff, virtually the same code of conduct and the same structure. It is not independent at all. We want a code of conduct that can be relied on so that the intrusion into the victims of crime stops. We want a right of apology, and for the correction in the newspaper to be given the same prominence as the original offending article. I would have thought that it was in the interests of all the press, at a really difficult time for them, to have a cheap system of rectification.

The only reason why the amendment is on the amendment paper is that we want the Government to stand by the promises they made. I see the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on the Front Bench. I hope she will not walk us any further down this cul de sac, because it will do the victims of crime no favours. It will do politics no favours because it will look as though we have simply caved in to a nasty, tawdry little campaign by the press.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Section 40 should not be introduced. To say to 90% of the local, regional and national press that they have to be forced into a group they do not want to join is bullying of the worst kind. If it were to happen in other countries, the Council of Europe would probably say it was interference in the free media.

William Hone, whose life is described in the book “The Laughter of Triumph”, defied criminal libel law. We should remember that our press basically got its
freedom from that moment, when ordinary people on juries refused to convict because they said that the media ought to have the right to lampoon, to be rude and to investigate. I think that people ought to ask the question: what would be the effect of section 40? Would it increase investigative journalism? No, it would not. It would be a good idea if those backing IMPRESS and section 40 gave a list of successful and wrong defamation cases, including of leading politicians who denied they were drunk overseas and various other criminals who later turned out to be guilty of the things they were accused of by the media.

We rely on the media to find out the things few people know about and make them available to all. The whole effect of section 40 will be to chill the opportunity for the media to investigate and report. That is why I believe this House would be wrong to force the Government to bring in section 40. I hope that we do not and I hope that those in favour of it will find other ways to pursue their own aims.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I rise to support, as strongly as I possibly can, the Government’s amendment in lieu of Lords amendment 134. It recognises the force of the arguments laid out in the report by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and I last year, “Stalking: the Case for Extending the Maximum Sentence”. The report summarised the work of our researchers. Through them, we met victims, stalking charities, academics and police specialists. Everything we learned confirmed our initial instinct that there are a small number of very dangerous stalkers, such as my constituent Raymond Knight who pursued Cheltenham resident and Gloucester GP, Dr Eleanor Aston, to the point of nervous breakdown.

I pay tribute to the Government for accepting our report and its single recommendation of doubling the maximum sentence for stalking from five to 10 years, for amending the appropriate sections of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 on racial and religious aggravated harassment in line with the change to the maximum sentence for stalking, and for outlining in correspondence additional training that will be part of the measures to deal with the mental health issues of serious stalkers. I know the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice have worked closely on this together. I am grateful to both Ministers here today for their action.

I also want to thank Gloucestershire-based Baroness Royall in the Lords for her commitment and contribution, and all those who informed us and shared harrowing experiences, including a constituent and her family. I would like to quote from her 16-year-old daughter, who was so egregiously stalked. She told us that the stalker “broke into my house one night...all the knives in the knife stand were gone...I was sure I was going to die.”

In this particular case, my constituent and her family prefer to remain anonymous, not least because my constituent has been moved by the police to a safe house far from her home and her own children.

I am extremely grateful to all those who informed us, educated us and motivated us. I suspect the work I have done with my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham means that the neighbouring constituencies of Cheltenham and Gloucester have not worked so closely since the creation of the Cheltenham & Gloucester building society—now, alas, long since gone. It is for a good cause that we come together in support of the Government’s change of law.

The Government’s amendment in lieu will give judges the flexibility they need. As Dr Aston has said, victims will be able to sleep more easily when the worst stalkers are sentenced and the stalkers themselves will better understand the seriousness of their crime and receive more help in resolving what is a severe obsession and mental health issue. Of course, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) pointed out, that will not in itself stop stalking, but it shows that victims and judges are being heard, that MPs and ultimately the Government listen and that laws can be changed so that sentences better reflect the harm that a crime can inflict on innocent victims, most of whom, as in the instance that inspired my neighbour and me, are women. Ultimately, justice is only as good as the laws we adapt and the way in which they are implemented. In that context, I pay tribute to the Prime Minister, who made stalking a crime on the statute book when she was Home Secretary, and to the current Home Secretary, who has introduced protection orders against stalkers.

I will finish by returning to where this campaign started: the judge and the victim in Gloucester Crown court. I would like to thank Dr Ellie Aston for inspiring us, for being strong and for having faith; other victims for opening their hearts and sharing their stories; stalking charities, such as the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, the Network for Surviving Stalking, Protection Against Stalking and Paladin; and the Hollie Gazzard Trust, the police and the University of Gloucestershire, which happens to be a leader in research in this sad area. This part of the journey for justice for victims of stalking is now close to over. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley has reminded us that there will always be other issues to be raised and resolved, but today’s amendment in lieu deserves everyone’s support.

Sir Gerald Howarth: The whole House listened with great respect and interest to my hon. Friend the Members for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who have brought to the attention of the House and the country the appalling consequences of stalking. I join others in saluting their efforts to persuade the Government to recognise the gravity of the crime and in reaching this result tonight, which we can all applaud.

I thank the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for mentioning my intervention on the Minister about section 40 and Lords amendment 24. I will not vote for the amendment tonight, because the Government have agreed to a consultation, and I think it right that that process run, but as I said to the Minister earlier, I hope that the Government will not be intimidated by the campaign by the newspapers that the hon. Gentleman referred to. The newspapers seem struck by an extraordinary sense of paranoia and a feeling of vulnerability, when we all know, from the many cases that have appeared, that they are in the driving seat and have power without a lot of responsibility.

Insufficient attention has been paid to the Leveson inquiry and the subsequent report, which was a detailed and considered piece of work. We should do what the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, said that Parliament
should do. Since the *Aldershot News & Mail* was unwilling to publish my article today, perhaps I can give the House the benefit of it.

Mr Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con): My hon. Friend should place a copy in the Library.

Sir Gerald Howarth: My hon. and learned Friend suggests that I put the article in the Library, but when he hears what I have to say, I think he might be better informed, if not wiser, for I cannot account for his wisdom—he is a great man.

Chris Bryant: Division!

Sir Gerald Howarth: He seriously is a very great man.

I wrote this:

“I believe in a free press but I also believe in a responsible press. Sadly, the newspapers are becoming increasingly paranoid about what they see as an attack on them and are refusing to accept the recommendation of the latest inquiry under Lord Justice Leveson that an independent regulator be established. Leveson was set up after an appalling series of intrusions into the private lives of people, which included phone hacking on an industrial scale.”

Milly Dowler’s body was found 200 yards from the boundary of my constituency in a case that really struck the public as appalling.

6.15 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Phone hacking is brought up again and again by colleagues who, in my view, want to censor the press. Phone hacking is a criminal offence, for which people have gone to jail. There is no need for any further laws.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I have huge respect for my hon. and gallant Friend, but the fact is that the inquiry would not have taken place if phone hacking had not been discovered on what I have described as an industrial scale. People’s engagement with it was utterly immoral, and some went to prison, following legal action, which I think is fine.

My article continues:

“It is hard for those who have not experienced an assault by the media to appreciate the level of distress it causes. I know because some 30 years ago, together with my then colleague Neil Hamilton, I had to sue the BBC Panorama programme for libel—which we won”—

and had the director-general of the BBC fired—

“but at the risk of bankruptcy (and loss of our seats in Parliament) if we lost.”

For the record, our costs—Peter Carter and partners were our lawyers—were something in the region £273,000. So I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) that it is all very well for those who have got money. They are able to access justice, but this is all about providing a remedy for those who do not have money and cannot afford to undertake that sort of action. I continue:

“Since 1945, there have been no less than 5 Royal Commissions and enquiries to secure a better and cheaper form of justice for those maligned by powerful media barons.”

Chris Bryant: It is worth bearing in mind that when it came to suing the Metropolitan police to try to ensure that it gave the media information about what had happened to me, my costs were £380,000. My costs for suing Rupert Murdoch were £480,000. In both cases, because it was an no-win, no-fee arrangement, I did not have to pay anything. However, those no-win, no-fee arrangements are no longer available in these cases.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point.

I was mentioning the five royal commissions and inquiries since 1945. The article continues:

“Time and again, reports threatened new laws if the industry failed to sort itself out, time and again the industry failed. In his 1993 report, Sir David Calcutt, QC said of the then regulator, the Press Complaints Commission: ‘It is not...an effective regulator of the press...It is, in essence, a body set up by the industry, financed by the industry, dominated by the industry, and operating a code of practice devised by the industry and which is over-favourable to the industry’.

In 2012, Leveson recommended that newspapers should continue to be self-regulated and that the Government should have no power over what they publish. However, he also proposed a new press standards body created by the industry with a new code of conduct. The new self-regulatory body should be underpinned by a law to provide for a process to recognise the new body and ensure it meets certain requirements. It should also enshrine in law a legal duty to protect the freedom of the press and to provide a fair, quick and inexpensive arbitration service to deal with any civil complaints about its members’ publications. Ofcom should act in a verification role to ensure independence and effectiveness.”

There we have it. There is a proposal on the table that IPSO is perfectly at liberty to take up in respect of a cheap arbitration service. The other point is that it should not be dominated by former press people, but that is exactly what IPSO is all about. I am not specifically advocating IMPRESS, but I see no reason why IPSO should not be able to organise itself in such a way that it is compliant. Instead, it has set up a body dominated by former editors, which does not meet the Leveson conditions.

The Government are right to consult, but I really do not believe that the newspapers have anything to fear from these proposals. I believe that they will be in the interests of the press but, above all, they will provide a remedy for those who cannot afford to seek a remedy. Surely our responsibility is to remedy injustice.

Mr Cox: My hon. Friend knows how much I return his respect, and he knows that I would normally regard him as an infallible guide to almost everything in the planet, but in this instance I think that suggesting that IPSO is dominated by press editors when its presiding spirit is Sir Alan Moses—Lord Justice Moses, a very fine judge who is vigorously and fiercely independent—is over-emphasising the point.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s belief in my infallibility, and I assure him that he should not be misguided, because I am infallible in this instance as well. Let me respond to his point by saying that although there may be an eminent judge in the driving seat, the fact is that the membership is dominated by press and former press people. They are in the majority.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): That is not true.

Sir Gerald Howarth: It is true. Seven of the 12 are former press people, and that does not meet the Leveson conditions. Let us just meet the Leveson conditions: then we shall all be happy.
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, and, in particular, to follow some of the passionate speeches we have heard. I intended to focus on Lords amendments 136 to 142, but my thoughts have been drawn to comments that have been made about the press in the context of other amendments.

We have heard about the Aldershot News & Mail, but each week thousands of homes in Torbay receive a publication that reports on local news and local issues and gives the odd opinion on them. It is called “my weekly e-mail update”, and is subject only to libel laws, and to what I am happy to talk about and defend as the local Member of Parliament.

I think we should bear it in mind that we are living in a completely different era, when more and more of the media is moving online. There can be no such thing as a press regulator when there is no press—when websites can be based anywhere in the world and it is difficult to track them down even under our own libel laws, let alone regulate them. The era when people walked down to the newsagent each morning and again each evening to buy a local newspaper has pretty much come to an end. The fake news stories about which people talk—especially in connection with recent elections in the United States—were not put out by newspapers. They were not published by print media; they were published by various people online. There are websites that are effectively “clickbait”, featuring misleading headlines that people will merrily share or stories that do not really get to the nub. A story involving an hon. Member was recently circulated online. Anyone who knew the story has disappeared. We should think about what we really get to the nub. A story involving an hon. Member of Parliament.

When we debate these matters, we must be aware that the era when only a press publication could circulate a story has disappeared. We should think about what we are doing when it comes to a special system that puts them at a disadvantage, given that, increasingly, they are no longer as dominant as they were. It is more likely that local newspapers will close than that they will find themselves being the arbiters of all opinion. Most constituents are more than able to use their own common sense and take many of the claims that they see both online and in the print media with a pinch of salt, but we have libel laws, and we need to remember that.

Chris Bryant: I have heard many times the argument that the libel laws are there, and that it is all very fine and dandy. The truth is, however, that the people of Hillsborough had no legal remedy whatsoever. They had no opportunity to respond to the lies—not libels, because the people concerned were dead—that were told about them for many, many years. That is why we need a proper press regulator that is independent of Government, independent of politics, and independent of the proprietors.

Kevin Foster: The fact is that someone who wanted to spread mistruths today would do it on the internet, and that would not be covered by either of the proposed systems of press regulation. We would probably now see a story of that type circulating on the internet, whereas in the 1980s the internet was something that a few universities used, and the worldwide web was something that United States military had developed for the purpose of its own communications in the event of world war three. It was not as we see it today. That shows why we need to be conscious of today’s position on the media and legislation. The industry, in many cases, particularly the local media, is struggling to survive and is in decline and we do not want to end up throwing out the baby with the bathwater because of the horrendous practices of one or two newspapers, in particular The Sun in that instance.

I wanted to talk mainly about amendments 136 to 142. I listened with interest to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). She has a valid point when she says it is easy to put things that sound marvellous and fantastic on to goat skins, but the difference that makes on the ground is another matter. That is why I agree with the Government’s motion to disagree with the Lords amendments.

Some of the provisions of Lords amendment 137, for example, are relatively vague. “Adequate notice” is not defined. There is also the provision potentially making the police and other authorities liable for any “unnecessary delay”; how can the police be held liable if it is the defence that engages in delay? The judiciary have the role of preventing court cases from being unnecessarily delayed.

Jess Phillips: The whole point of these amendments is that all the actors in the criminal justice system—the courts, the CPS, the defence, or the police—have a responsibility. These provisions would make the monitoring of how well they are doing more robust. It does not matter who is to blame; what we want is the victim to be given the information.

Kevin Foster: The amendment talks about ensuring that victims of crime are “not subjected to unnecessary delay”; it does not talk about monitoring. I accept that if we were looking at having a system of guidance, for instance, proposing “must ensure” would be putting something on to the statute book. For me, ensuring victims of crime are supported through the court process would be more beneficial than these amendments. In addition, people now have police and crime commissioners whom they can hold to account for the work they do.

This is a large group of amendments and we could spend quite some time talking about it. I do not believe that adding these amendments to the Bill is the right way forward. We should look at having a properly consulted-on system that does not have unintended consequences. That is why I agree with the Government motion to disagree with the Lords amendments.

Bill Wiggin: I will not delay the House for long. I want to heap praise on the Secretary of State for not giving in to the pressure of the media moguls, and, although we are putting a consultation out, we are determined that no grass shall grow. I want her to be very clear that we truly appreciate what she has done.

Colleagues who are unhappy about amendment 24 ought to pay more attention to the brilliance of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), who has put together a fantastic plan for
dealing with this thorny issue. If they gave it their full attention, they would, like me, want to see section 40 implemented.

The Press Recognition Panel is completely independent, and given amendment 24 and the concerns being shown by their lordships—

Mr Rees-Mogg: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Bill Wiggin: I will be delighted to give way to my hon. Friend.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am so sorry to disagree with my hon. Friend, but the Press Recognition Panel is not independent; it is the creation, under a royal charter, ultimately of the Crown and therefore of the state.

Bill Wiggin: It is still independent because it does not choose who and what is the regulator; it determines only that the regulator is independent. It is perfectly acceptable. I know my hon. Friend is very keen to defend the press, but this whole instrument does exactly that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) emphasised the point that the local press in particular would be very vulnerable if it was not regulated—[Interuption.] Yes, it would. The regulator will protect it from having to pay the costs. This is why colleagues should really study what my right hon. Friend, the Member for West Dorset has put together. It is much, much better than they might originally have thought.

6.30 pm

The claims from the Hillsborough victims for Lords amendment 24 are deeply touching, and I wish the wording of the amendment was easier to support. This was touched on by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). My instinct is to support the victims of Hillsborough, but the wording of the amendment is not adequate. It proposes giving the Government a month to commission an inquiry, for example. My hon. Friend the Minister did a superb job in answering some of these points. The amendment is not good enough, but that does not mean that this matter ends here. I implore the Government to keep on with the good work that they are doing to ensure that we protect the freedoms of the press—the local press in particular—and, most of all, that we have a low-cost arbitration system, which will ultimately benefit everybody.

Mr Whittingdale: I had not intended to take part in the debate, but I want to say a few words about Lords amendment 24. A lot of the debate so far seems to have been about whether section 40 should be implemented, but that does not actually have anything to do with Lords amendment 24, which is specifically about whether there should be a further inquiry into the behaviour and performance of the police in relation to their dealings with news organisations.

Leveson 2, as it is now colloquially known, has been put on hold until the conclusion of all the criminal cases, and the amendment rightly recognises that it would be wholly wrong to have any kind of inquiry that could jeopardise criminal prosecutions. However, most of those prosecutions have now been concluded and it is worth looking at the outcomes of those prosecutions when deciding whether there is a case for proceeding. Operation Elveden, which was the police investigation into corrupt payments from newspaper organisations, overwhelmingly resulted in the acquittal of the journalists who had been charged with those offences. I think only two journalists were convicted; the vast majority were acquitted. We need to bear that in mind, because the suggestion that there was a massive corrupt relationship has not proven to be the case.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) talks about the importance of weeding out police corruption and of having confidence in an institution of the state. I completely agree with him on that. I want to refer briefly to the case made by the relatives of Daniel Morgan when considering whether there should be a further inquiry. I have every sympathy with the family of Daniel Morgan, who was murdered, because there was considerable evidence of police corruption. I can entirely understand their wish to have his killers brought to justice. A Home Office panel is examining that case at the moment, and we await its conclusion. It may well be that further action needs to be taken to deal with police corruption, and I shall wait to see what the panel concludes. Let us bear in mind that the Leveson inquiry was an inquiry into the culture, ethics and conduct of the press. It was not an inquiry into police corruption.

The main issue that has dominated the debate has been the implementation of section 40, which is not covered by this amendment. I share the views that have been extremely well expressed by my hon. Friends the Members for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster). However, the Secretary of State has set up a consultation. It concluded today, but it will take some considerable time before the results are made public. I believe that there has been a very substantial response to the consultation, so I do not expect the Government to be in a position to announce any conclusions about the implementation of section 40 or about whether there should be a further inquiry until that work has been done. I suspect that it will take several weeks, if not months. It seems entirely premature to table an amendment requiring the Government to commit now to a further inquiry when we have not even begun to assess the results of the consultation. For that reason, I strongly oppose Lords amendment 24.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I support Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 134. Having heard the hard-hitting accounts of my hon. Friends the Members for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham) in their report on stalking, no one can be left in any doubt that the Government amendment should be carried.

Turning to Lords amendment 137, having represented the police and the prosecutorial authorities as a barrister, and having represented victims both as a barrister and as a Member of Parliament, I hope I can see the situation from both angles. I am entirely supportive of the victims code. Victims have generally been empowered since the code came into force as a result of steps taken by the previous Labour Government, and the beefing up carried out by the coalition Government and the Government of today.

My concern about Lords amendment 137 is that it would make the police and prosecutorial authorities responsible, and in some cases financially liable, for
breaches of the victims code, even if they are not directly responsible. Under new subsection (3)(a), for instance, the police or the CPS could become responsible to a victim for delays caused not by them but by a third party, such as the defendant. Under new subsection (3)(b), the police or the CPS could become responsible if a defendant instructs their lawyer to present their case, but that is a matter for the judge, not the prosecutor, to control.

That often happens in the courtroom when a defendant gives evidence, or even through how a defendant instructs their lawyer to present their case, but that is a matter for the judge, not the prosecutor, to control.

New subsection (10) is even more concerning because it would require the Home Secretary to “take steps to ensure that victims of crime...have access to financial compensation from public funds for any detriment arising from the criminal case concerned”.

That is not necessarily a detriment caused by the prosecuting authority, and there is no requirement of bad faith, recklessness or negligence on behalf of that authority. That is a big step both in principle and in practice. It is a big step in principle because it appears to impose a liability on one body for the actions of a third party over whom it may have no control, and it is a big step in practice because it exposes the police and prosecuting authorities to a significant financial burden at a time when we regularly have debates in this House on the need for greater funding for the police and the CPS. Paragraph 128 of the explanatory notes on the amendments explains that “potentially significant” financial burdens are attached.

Although I am an enthusiastic supporter of the victims code and the need to give victims the very best support, imposing a broadly defined liability—indeed, a financial liability—on the police and the CPS is not the right way to proceed without more thought about furthering the aims of the code. More thought is needed, and I am pleased that the Government will be introducing their own proposals to give effect to our manifesto commitment to proceed without more thought about furthering the aims of the code and the need to give victims the very best support, including a number of my constituents.

Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 24.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I must remind the House that the motion relates exclusively to England and Wales. A double majority is therefore required.

The House having divided: Ayes 299, Noes 196.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England and Wales: Ayes 296, Noes 190.

Division No. 119] [6.38 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, ry Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Sir Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, ry Sir Simon
Burrowes, ry David
Burt, ry Alistair
Cairns, ry Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chihali, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, ry Greg
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabbb, ry Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, ry Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Dodds, ry Mr Nigel
Donaldson, ry Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Dyke-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duncan Smith, ry Mr lain
Dunne, ry Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, ry Mr Tobias
Epichie, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evanett, ry David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, ry Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, ry Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, ry Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fyeh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, ry Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, ry Mr David
Gibb, ry Nick
Gillan, ry Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, ry Mr Robert
Gove, ry Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, ry Chris
Green, Chris
Green, ry Damian
Greening, ry Justine
Grieve, ry Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, ry Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hajton, ry Robert
Hall, Luke
Hancock, ry Matt
Hands, ry Greg
Harper, ry Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, ry Sir Alan
Hayes, ry Mr John
Heald, ry Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, ry Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, ry Philip
Holloway, ry Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, ry Mr Jeremy
Hurd, ry Nick
Jackson, ry Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, ry Sajid
Jayawarden, ry Manil
Jenkins, ry Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, ry Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Policing and Crime Bill

10 JANUARY 2017

Policing and Crime Bill

Prentis, Victoria
Pow, Rebecca
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Perry, Claire
Percy, Andrew
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phlip, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria

Pritsk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shebrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tothurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Turner, rh Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Alin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Adam
Andrews, Sir David
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burton, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddes, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, rh Mr Jim
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elliott, Tom
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiell, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline

Tellers for the Ayes:
Steve Brine and
Chris Heaton-Harris

NOES
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hillier, Meg
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Kinahan, Danny
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahlod, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachel
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, rh John
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McMahon, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England and Wales: Ayes 290, Noes 195.

Division No. 120

[6.55 pm]

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter

Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, kh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Sir Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérése
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rk Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Dodds, rk Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rk Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyel-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duncan Smith, rk Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evannoet, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rk Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rk Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fu, Yush, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damien
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hafon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hancock, rh Matt
Hans, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rk Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinsrake, Kevin
Hollonbore, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardenena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth

**NOES**

Aldous, Peter
Afriyie, Adam
Adams, Nigel
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, kh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Sir Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérése
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rk Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Dodds, rk Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rk Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyel-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duncan Smith, rk Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evannoet, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rk Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rk Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fu, Yush, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damien
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hafon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hancock, rh Matt
Hans, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rk Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinsrake, Kevin
Hollonbore, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardenena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth

**Tellers for the Noes:**

Nic Dakin and
Vicky Foxcroft

**Question accordingly agreed to.**

**Lords amendment 24 disagreed to.**

6.54 pm

More than 90 minutes having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

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

After Clause 110

**POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONERS: PARITY OF FUNDING AT INQUESTS**

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 96.—(Brandon Lewis.)

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I must remind the House that the motion relates exclusively to England and Wales. A double majority is therefore required.


Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England and Wales: Ayes 290, Noes 195.

Division No. 120 [6.55 pm]
Policing and Crime Bill

Tellers for the Ayes:
Steve Brine and
Chris Heaton-Harris

NOES

Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Heron, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hoey, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Husain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Kinahan, Danny
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leslie, Chris
Levell, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Maclaggart, rfh Fiona
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, Mr Alasdair
McDonnell, rh John
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McMahon, Jim

Abott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Ali-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Mr David
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Bergen, Luciana
Bett, Mr Clive
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Elliot, Tom
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline

Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quinn, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robinson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shellbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streete, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Symms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Turholt, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warbuton, David
Warman, Matt
Whatton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whitaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Ms Arlene
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Ali-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Mr David
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Bergen, Luciana
Bett, Mr Clive
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Elliot, Tom
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline

Pow, Rebecca

Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milan, rh Anne
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Orford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel

Policing and Crime Bill

10 JANUARY 2017

Policing and Crime Bill
Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 96 disagreed to.

Government amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendment 134.

After Clause 145

CORONERS’ INVESTIGATIONS INTO DEATHS: MEANING OF “STATE DETENTION”

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 136.—(Brandon Lewis.)

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I must remind the House that the motion relates exclusively to England and Wales. A double majority is therefore required.

The House having divided: Ayes 298, Noes 198.

VOTES cast by Members for constituencies in England and Wales: Ayes 289, Noes 193.

Division No. 121] [7.13 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriye, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Sir Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, rh Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chahi, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Cleverley, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyndwr
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Dyke, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Elliott, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Elwwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, rh Mr Nigel
Evans, rh David
Fabrickant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Susiela
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Gauke, rh Mr David
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, Julian

NOS

Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Slevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Tam, Mark
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Mr Charles
Watson, Mr Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Noes:
Nic Dakin and
Vicky Foxcroft

Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Sir Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, rh Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chahi, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Cleverley, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyndwr
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Dyke, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Elliott, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Elwwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, rh Mr Nigel
Evans, rh David
Fabrickant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Susiela
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Gauke, rh Mr David
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, Julian
Redwood, Rh John
Raab, Mr Dominic
Quince, Wayne
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, Rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, Mr Amber
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Mr Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Somers, Mr Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, Rh Anna
Spelman, Rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Street, Mr Gary
Strie, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, Rh Sir Desmond
Swire, Rh Sir Hugo
Symes, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Mr Rob
Truss, Rh Elizabeth
Turner, Rh Andrew
Tyrie, Rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Rh Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, Rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, Rh Gavin
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Rh Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, Rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim
Tellers for the Ayes:
Steve Brine and
Chris Heaton-Harris

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Rh Mr David
Bailey, Rh Adrian
Beckett, Rh Margaret
Benn, Rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blenkinop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brake, Rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Rh Mike
Brown, Rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, Rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, Rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Clegg, Rh Mr Nick
Clywd, Rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Rh Mr Jim
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Rh Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Rh Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Field, Rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, Rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary

Tellers for the NOES:
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffiths, Nia
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, Rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, Rh John
Hendrick, Rh Mr Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Heron, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hoey, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Rh Mr Kevin
Jones, Rh Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, Rh Norman
Lammy, Rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Rh Mrs Emma
Lewis, Rh Mr Ivan
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, Rh Fiona
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malchta, Seema
Mann, John
Marrs, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Rh Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, Rh Alasdair
McDonnell, Rh John
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McMahan, Rh Jim
Meale, Rh Sir Alan
Milliband, Rh Edward
Moon, Rh Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Olney, Sarah
Omn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamar, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa

Pearce, Teresa
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Pickles, Rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Rh Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prents, Victoria
Prisk, Rh Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Wayne
Ratcliffe, Sir Eric
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Brandon Lewis: I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): With this it will be convenient to take Lords amendments 2 to 23, 25 to 95, 97 to 133, 135 to 143, 158 to 160, 301, 303, 304 and 306.

Brandon Lewis: I am conscious that this group covers approaching 300 Lords amendments, even if many are of a technical nature, and I appreciate that hon. Members would no doubt like me to go through all 300, but time is short, so, tempting as it might be, I will confine my remarks to the most significant amendments, so that other hon. Members may have an opportunity to speak.

On Report, way back in April and June of last year, a number of my hon. Friends and I expressed concerns about the governance of fire and rescue authorities in response to similar concerns raised in the Lords, amendments 193 to 199, among others, strengthen the process by which a police and crime commissioner may become the legal title of such a commissioner. My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) proposed a number of sensible further improvements to our firearms licensing regime, and I am pleased to say that Lords amendments 111 to 113 give effect to three of his helpful suggestions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) highlighted the dangers to music festival goers as a result of the irresponsible discharging of fireworks, flares and smoke bombs in the often confined space of a festival venue. Lords amendment 114 would tackle such reckless behaviour by making it an offence to possess a pyrotechnic article at a qualifying musical event. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport indicated in April, we will ensure that this new offence is in force for this year’s festival season. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier) sought to strengthen police powers to require the removal of disguises where there was a threat to public order. Lords amendment 94 will enable the required authorisation by a senior officer for the exercise of such powers to be given orally where it is impractical to confer the authorisation in writing.

Other Lords amendments respond to points raised by Opposition Members. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) expressed concerns about PCCs taking on the governance of police and crime authorities. In response to similar concerns raised in the Lords, amendments 193 to 199, among others, strengthen the process by which a PCC-style FRA to ensure that it is as robust and transparent as possible. She separately argued for a strengthening of the Licensing Act 2003 by putting cumulative impact assessments on a statutory footing. We agree, and Lords amendment 117 does just that.

Lords amendments 30 to 33 deliver on the commitment given by my predecessor on Report to amend the Bill to allow disciplinary action to be taken against former police officers outside the normal 12-month period following retirement or resignation in the most serious and exceptional cases. Lords amendments 36 to 42, among others, respond to representations from the Independent Police Complaints Commission and, indeed, from Opposition parties that the reformed organisation should retain the word “Independent” in its title. As a result of these amendments, the reformed IPCC will henceforth be known as the Independent Office for Police Conduct. This will help to reinforce public confidence that the reformed organisation will be fully independent of those it regulates.

On Report, the hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) argued that the current law requiring a coroner’s inquest in every case where a person dies under a fire and rescue authority, the title of their office should be amended to reflect their new and expanded responsibilities. Lords amendment 215 provides that in such circumstances the legal title of the PCC will become police, fire and crime commissioner. My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) proposed a number of sensible further improvements to our firearms licensing regime, and I am pleased to say that Lords amendments 111 to 113 give effect to three of his helpful suggestions.

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On Report, the hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) argued that the current law requiring a coroner’s inquest in every case where a person dies under a deprivation of liberty safeguard, even where the death was from natural causes, caused unnecessary upset to bereaved families.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): I wish to say how welcome amendment 135 is. As the Minister said, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) was particularly aware of the pressures...
services. I am also extremely glad that my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) on the Front Bench is, as I understand it, supporting the amendment as well.

Brandon Lewis: I thank the right hon. Lady for her remarks. Yes, we agree, and amendment 135 therefore removes the automatic requirement for a coroner’s investigation in such cases. There will be a continued duty on a coroner to investigate any death where there is a suspicion that it might have resulted from violence or unnatural causes or where the cause of death is unknown.

Last, but certainly not least, and importantly, Lords amendments 124 to 132 would right the wrongs suffered by gay and bisexual men who were for centuries persecuted under homophobic laws for conduct that society now regards as normal activity. These amendments will confer an automatic pardon on deceased individuals convicted of certain consensual gay sexual offences that would not be offences today, and on those persons still living who have a conviction for such an offence that has been disregarded under the terms of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012.

The amendments will also enable the disregard scheme to be extended, by regulations, to cover other abolished offences used to target homosexual activity, including the offence of solicitation by men under section 32 of the Sexual Offences Act 1956. These provisions will extend to Northern Ireland as well as to England and Wales, with the Scottish Government having separately announced its intention to bring forward legislation in the Scottish Parliament.

At this point, I want to take the opportunity to apologise unreservedly, on behalf of the Government, to all those men who will receive a pardon. The legislation under which they were convicted and cautioned was discriminatory and homophobic. I want to make sure that all who were criminalised in this way and had to suffer society’s opprobrium, and the many more who lived in fear of being so criminalised because they were being treated in a very different way from heterosexual couples, actually understand that we offer this full apology. Their treatment was entirely unfair. What happened to these men is a matter of the greatest regret, and it should be so to all of us. I am sure it is to Members across the House. For this, we are today deeply sorry.

This is an historic and momentous step, one of which we can all be justly proud. I pay particular tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), who is the Minister responsible for prisons and probation, for the work he has done in government to make this happen. For his campaigning from the Back Benches, I would particularly like to mention, among others, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson).

These Lords amendments improve and enhance the Bill, so I wholeheartedly commend them all to the House.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I rise to speak to this large group of amendments. In moving on to making what I hope will be brief remarks, I have to say how disappointed I am that the Government were not willing to move on the question of parity of funding, which is an issue not just for groups of families involved in Hillsborough, but, as the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) pointed out, for individual families whose family members die in police custody. This relates to the previous group of amendments, but I wanted to make that point.

Some amendments in this group are welcome. We support the new emphasis on the independence of the new Office for Police Conduct, given the central role it will play in ensuring that the police are held to appropriately high standards. I am glad this has finally been recognised by the Government, and I pay tribute to the work of my noble Friend Lord Rosser.

We are also pleased that anonymity for victims of forced marriage will now be extended to Northern Ireland, following the request by the Northern Ireland Minister of Justice. There is also a number of sensible and straightforward improvements to the regulation of firearms, including a clarification of the laws around antique firearms, and alterations of the definition of airsoft guns that should improve public safety.

I also welcome the Government’s support for amendments to clause 28 that make it possible for investigations into the most serious misconduct to take place more than a year after the relevant officers have left the service. Credit is due in particular to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) for his consistent arguments in favour of this reform. Families and communities who have been the victims of injustices in the past can be reassured that, in future, time need not run out on the service’s own disciplinary procedures.

Amendments 94 and 300 grant police officers the power to order a person to remove an item of clothing that is disguising their identity if a senior officer gives them oral permission to do so. This is obviously a practical measure, but we want some reassurance that this power will not be applied indiscriminately to Muslim women who are simply observing their religious beliefs, yet get caught up in the investigation of a crime. We would like the Government to consider ensuring that it is made absolutely clear in police training that the sole proper use of this power is to remove items of clothing that are purposely worn as a disguise. I ask the Government to look again at the language of the 1994 Act and to clarify to prevent such abuse.

The amended Bill also contains provisions for posthumous pardons for the victims of unjust laws that have subsequently been repealed. The Minister made a gracious reference to the work of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson), who has tabled a private Member’s Bill on the issue. There is much to welcome in this set of amendments. My noble Friend Lord Kennedy, along with Lord Sharkey, Baroness Williams and others, played a key role in the debate. Lord Cashman made the amendments more comprehensive in scope by including the many men who had been unjustly targeted, and Lord Lexden supported the extension of the legislation to Northern Ireland. Those contributions would have enormously enriched any legislation on this topic.

Labour Members are pleased that the Government have apologised, and support the pardons for wrongfully convicted gay men who have now died. Placing an unnecessary bureaucratic burden on victims of injustice was clearly wrong. We also praise the expertise that has featured in the process and the debate. Although we believe that the Government could have gone further—especially in relation to the issue of pardons for people
who were convicted under sexual offences legislation in the past purely because they were homosexual—we do not oppose their amendments.

Mindful of the fact that this is the last group of amendments we shall discuss before the Bill returns to the other place, I want to pay particular tribute to the expert views that have contributed to its progress. Many retired and serving police officers have made excellent contributions both here and in the other place, along with many learned members of the judiciary, and that has been reflected in the quality of the debate. It is important to note the expert nature of those contributions because in recent months some disdains have been expressed for expertise, although when it comes to police and criminal policy, expertise does not go amiss.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): I want to speak briefly about Lords amendment 114. Let me take this opportunity to thank the Minister, the current Secretary of State in her former guise as a Home Office Minister, and the Prime Minister in her previous role as Home Secretary for the work that they did with me in making the amendment possible. Provision for parity in law between people who let off fireworks, flares and smoke bombs at football matches and people who do so at music festivals is a step in the right direction. Every year hundreds of people are maimed and injured by flares, and I appreciate all the Government’s efforts.

The amendment provides a good example for any Member who is thinking of trying to introduce a ten-minute rule Bill. It proves that laws can be changed in that way, as long as Members work closely with Ministers—and, in this case, Home Secretaries.

Brandon Lewis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for thanking all who have been involved. He should be thanked as well, not just for the work that he did on his own account but for his work in bringing organisations together, so that they could act constructively to produce a workable provision.

Nigel Adams: I think it extremely important to work with industries when introducing new laws, to prevent any unintended consequences that might have a knock-on effect on them.

This is very positive news. During the next festival season, people will be able to go and enjoy themselves, and parents sending their kids off to festivals around the country will be safe in the knowledge that throwing flares is an offence. I hope that the amendment will discourage the lunatics from doing that next year, and, once again, I thank Ministers for all their work.

James Berry: I rise to support amendment 135, and I am delighted the Government have accepted Baroness Finlay’s amendment.

I am a barrister and have represented many bereaved families and public authorities at coroners’ inquests, but I had not expected this fairly niche area of legal practice to feature so prominently in my constituency casework after being elected as an MP. Shortly after I was elected, an incredibly dignified lady called Rosalind asked for my help because of inordinate delays in the west London coroner’s court in issuing her husband’s death certificate, which meant the insurance company was holding up funeral arrangements.

7.45 pm

There were certainly problems with the service standards at that coroner’s court, and unfortunately there still are, and I raised them both with the court and in this House. But that case would not have even been before a coroner’s court had Rosalind’s deceased husband not been the subject of a deprivation of liberty safeguard or DOLS and had he not died in a care home.

Section 1 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 requires that a coroner hold an inquest in certain defined circumstances such as a death in custody or otherwise in state detention—another example is a violent or unnatural death. In cases that do not fulfil those mandatory criteria, the coroner has discretion about whether to open an inquest, depending on the facts.

Since the Mental Capacity Act 2005 came into force, the definition of whether someone is detained or deprived of their liberty has been tested in the courts numerous times. In 2014, the Supreme Court considered the appeal of P v Cheshire West and Chester Council, and P and Q v Surrey County Council. In those cases, the Supreme Court gave a very broad definition of deprivation of liberty. The result of that decision has been that authorisations now have to be sought for deprivation of liberty in many more cases than they used to. That includes most cases where a person suffers from dementia and is in a care home, where they are not detained in the way in which we would use that word, but they would be prevented from leaving if they tried to do so.

In one care home in my constituency, 90% of residents are now subject to DOLS, and on the current interpretation of the law there would have to be an inquest in each of their cases, even if, as is likely, they died of entirely predictable natural causes in their sleep. This has caused not only a huge upturn in the work of coroners’ courts, but upset to many families who have to go through the trauma of an inquest after the trauma of losing a loved one.

I raised this problem, I think for the first time in this House, in a Westminster Hall debate on 16 December 2015, and I am delighted that the Government have now found a legislative vehicle to reverse the unintended effect of the Cheshire West judgment. I say “unintended” because that case was not about coroners’ courts, and the issue was not canvassed before the Supreme Court. I can safely say that it was not the intention of this House in passing the Coroners and Justice Act or the Mental Capacity Act to mandate an inquest in every case in which a DOLS applies and to apply a rule intended to cover people in the state’s care in terms of detention in a prison or an immigration detention facility or police custody to patients needing care in care homes or in hospital.

I should make it clear that this amendment in no way precludes inquests being opened into deaths in care homes or hospitals where DOLS apply. Those inquests will not only not be mandated; coroners will be able to open them at their discretion and the matter could be referred to the coroner by a family or by a member of staff at a care home or by anyone else.
When I got the first of my many cases in this area, I went to see the Chief Coroner for England and Wales. He was very helpful. I have read his 2014 and 2015 annual reports, both of which refer to this problem and to the massive increase in demand on coroners’ time caused by it. I am sure from having read his reports that the Chief Coroner would support this amendment or an amendment that has the same effect.

I commend the Government on accepting Baroness Finlay’s amendment, and I commend her on introducing it in the other place and Members of this House who have supported it. Finally, I commend Rosalind and Brook House nursing home in New Malden on first raising this problem with me. I hope they are satisfied that a piece of constituency casework that they brought to me has culminated in a change in the law.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 23, 25 to 95, 97 to 133, 135, 143 to 158, 160 to 301, 303, 304 and 306 agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments 24, 96, 136 to 142, 159, 302 and 307.

That Ms Diane Abbott, Victoria Atkins, Nic Dakin, Andrew Griffiths, Brandon Lewis and Amanda Milling be members of the Committee.

That Brandon Lewis be the Chair of the Committee.

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(Christopher Pincher.)

Question agreed to.

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

Business Without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

DANGEROUS DRUGS

That the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Temporary Class Drug) (No. 2) Order 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 1126), dated 21 November 2016, a copy of which was laid before this House on 23 November 2016, be approved.—(Christopher Pincher.)

Question agreed to.

Dean Quarry, St Keverne

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

7.51 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Two years ago, in January 2015, I took an early morning walk in the village of Rosenithon to visit a dormant quarry and the surrounding area. The reason for this trek was that I had received a number of emails from local residents, including those with homes just a few hundred metres away from the disused quarry, who were concerned about news that the quarry was to become a super-quarry supplying rock armour up to 10 tonnes in weight for the proposed Swansea tidal lagoon and for other infrastructure projects. For two years now, this threat has hung over the local community, so I bring it to the House today in order to bring it to the attention of the Government and to find some means of securing closure for all those affected.

The quarry, known as Dean quarry, is in the parish of St Keverne and Meneage, which has 5,220 residents. It is situated close to the picturesque tourist destinations of St Keverne village and Coverack village on the Lizard peninsula in Cornwall. Why are local residents and environmental experts fighting so hard to stop the proposed quarry development? It is because, like me, they have genuine concerns about what the reopening and expanding of the quarry will do to the area. They are concerned about: the impact on the Manacles marine conservation zone; the impact on the environment, including air and noise pollution; the impact on local food production; the impact on local inshore fishing; the impact on tourism and future investment; and the impact on the local community.

Quarrying from Dean helped to support villages on the Lizard peninsula in south-west Cornwall for over 100 years. Shire Oak Quarries Ltd proposes to reopen the disused quarry at Dean. Its plan is to turn a small disused quarry into a sea-based super-quarry—similar to those found in Norway and at Glensanda in Scotland—seven times the size of the original operation. The intention is for it to work 5.5 days a week, with regular blasting. The loading of rock armour into barges would take place 24/7 to meet the demand. The plan is to extract up to 1.5 million tonnes a year and to use large barges to ship the rock armour from a new breakwater and jetties that are to be constructed as part of the development scheme. The reason this causes the local community and environmental experts so much concern is that the local economy has moved on; the vast development that is proposed presents a real risk to the area and is creating considerable unrest as the scheme drags on.

I should like to address these concerns one by one. First, I want to address the concerns about the impact of the proposed quarry on the Manacles marine conservation zone. This was one of the first areas to be designated an MCZ, in 2013. It is a rare and sensitive ecosystem and is considered by many marine ecologists to be the jewel in the crown of the whole MCZ system. The intention is to build a 300-metre breakwater to provide shelter for jetties where barges will dock to be loaded day and night. The legitimate concern relates to how the construction and subsequent existence of the
breakwater will affect the marine conservation zone. Furthermore, consideration must be given to the potential damage caused by large barges as they manoeuvre in and around the breakwater and jetties as they collect their loads.

Secondly, there is the impact on the environment, including air and noise pollution. Nearly a third of Cornwall is designated as an area of outstanding natural beauty, granting it the same status and protection as a national park. The Lizard peninsula, particularly the area around St Keverne and Coverack, is unique. A combination of mild climate and complex geology has produced an area with a distinctive character and that includes some habitats and species that are unique to the Lizard and others that are extremely rare, hence the national nature reserve, special area of conservation and site of special scientific interest designations.

Environmental experts are concerned that reopening and expanding Dean quarry will result in the industrialisation of this area of outstanding natural beauty and site of special scientific interest. The concern is that the scale of the operation proposed at Dean quarry will threaten the bird breeding grounds and stop-off points for migratory birds, as well as threatening the harbour porpoises, bottlenose dolphins, grey seals, minke whales and basking sharks that are all regularly seen off the coast of Cornwall.

There will be an impact on local food production. Nearby farmers are concerned about dust settling across their fields, and they have worries about their cattle ingesting PM2.5 particulates. Although there have been no studies to show how such particulates might affect both the animals’ health and their milk, 4 million litres of milk per annum are produced within a mile of the quarry, much of it organic.

There will also be an impact on local inshore fishing. Alongside farming, risks arise for the fishing industry in the area. The Manacles have for centuries been used by local fishermen and are a flourishing sea bass breeding ground. It is suggested that proposed industrial activity relating to the loading of barges and the underwater noise generated will have a detrimental effect not only on the bass but on other fish, crab and lobster stocks, which still provide a sustainable living for local fishermen who, with the improved water quality, are now seeing stocks grow. Local fishermen have had to stop netting on the Manacles because of the marine conservation zone, so they are at a loss to understand why heavy industrialisation may be allowed to happen.

Tourism is a vital part of the rural economy, and this area of outstanding natural beauty is deeply valued by visitors and is recognised as a key economic resource. Tourism on the Lizard has largely substituted the area’s falling economic activity in farming, fishing and light industrial production. Tourism is now the significant employer in the area, and St Keverne and the Lizard has established itself as a significant destination for holidaymakers both from Britain and from further afield. A number of businesses have made a success of their operation on the Lizard, and two with which Members may be familiar are Roskilly’s ice cream and organic farm, which attracts up to 60,000 visitors each year, and Cornish Sea Salt, one of the great success stories in west Cornwall. Both businesses are located in close vicinity to Dean quarry. In fact, Roskilly’s organic farm surrounds the quarry, and the owners of the quarry own the mineral rights to the farmland.

The tourist season has extended, with many people preferring to holiday during the quieter months, which in turn enables many previously seasonal businesses to open all year round. The Lizard is unique, which is why visitors return year after year. At the moment, the Lizard is a desired destination for tourists, offering them peace, clean air, dark skies, beautiful landscapes, a stunning marine environment and the South West Coast Path national trail, which Lonely Planet now rates as one of the best walks in the world.

According to 2014 figures, local business turnover, supported by tourism, is worth more than £51 million a year to the Lizard peninsula, with more than 1,000 jobs directly generated by tourism. The estimated local gross wage income is more than £13 million. People involved in this important sector have raised a number of concerns with me. They are concerned about the impact on the local economy; fewer visitors equals less money in the local economy. In turn, that will have a negative impact on any associated trades, and the local jobs that go with them, such as those in property maintenance, restaurants, retail outlets, attractions, garden centres, website design, IT businesses, sporting facilities such as kayaking, and accountancy. We should not, in any circumstances, trade what has become a destination hotspot for holidaymakers around the year for noise, air pollution, a scarred landscape and loss of marine biodiversity.

The final concern relates to the impact on the local community. Summary findings from a noise impact survey were presented by Shire Oak Quarries Ltd at a public meeting on 30 January 2015. The assessment incorrectly stated that Dean quarry is “in a remote section of the Lizard Peninsular”.

In fact, there are several hamlets within 500 metres, and St Keverne is less than 1 km away. The noise levels at times will be 3 dB above the limits deemed suitable in a rural environment, which will have a considerable impact on how far and how intensely the disturbance will be heard. Further noise pollution will be created by explosions at the quarry, and by the loading and unloading of rock on to barges and lorries. Residents who live in the area have worked hard to foster a close-knit, caring local community with good local schools and services. They have developed a community that lives in harmony with the local environment and now benefits from the natural surroundings. All aspects of the quarry proposal fly in the face of those achievements.

I am bringing this to the Minister’s attention because, yet again, residents and businesses on the Lizard have been forced to return to the High Court on Friday
of minerals, is to deliver sustainable development. I should put on record that that does not mean development at any cost or anywhere. National policy sets out that planning must take account of the roles and character of different areas. It must recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of coastal areas and the wider countryside, the natural and historic assets located in an area, and the possible impacts on them as a result of applications for development of any kind, including the extraction of minerals.

In respect of the natural historic environment, local planning authorities and the Marine Management Organisation should set out in their local plans and marine plans a positive strategy for the conservation of the natural and historic environment. In doing so, they should recognise that heritage assets are an irreplaceable resource and conserve them in a manner appropriate to their significance, whether they are located on land or in the sea. Similarly, when processing planning applications, the aim should be to minimise adverse effects on the natural and historic environment. Special protection areas are given specific protections in national policy for that purpose. As my hon. Friend suggested, that is relevant in this case because the quarry is located in the Lizard special area of the Cornwall area of outstanding natural beauty, as well as being in the Coverack to Porthoustock site of special scientific interest. In addition, the Lizard special area of conservation borders the site to the south.

National policy makes it clear that the extraction of minerals is essential to support sustainable economic growth and quality of life. We rely on a steady and adequate supply of minerals to provide building materials for infrastructure, housing and other construction, fuel for heating our homes and transportation, and chemicals for industrial production, which in turn create employment and attract inward investment into our country.

As my hon. Friend alluded to in his speech, Cornwall is a mineral-rich area and has since antiquity hosted many forms of quarrying and mining for valuable minerals such as tin, lead, copper, china clay and hard rock. Quarrying and mining have historically made a large contribution to the prosperity of Cornwall's local economy, alongside its traditional maritime industries, such as fishing and shipping, and newer industries such as renewable energy and tourism. It was good to hear my hon. Friend acknowledge that in his speech.

The planning system has to make sure that the environmental impact of mineral extraction is minimised. It also has to mitigate its potentially adverse effects on the environment, such as through the use of planning conditions attached to individual applications and the continuous monitoring of extraction sites by the local authority during the operation of those sites.

Planning applications to extract minerals that were granted decades ago are, as my hon. Friend said, relevant in this case because Dean quarry is currently dormant. Before such quarries can reopen, their existing conditions have to be reviewed to make sure they meet contemporary environmental standards. The conditions are reviewed under the “Environment Act 1995: review of mineral planning permissions” guidance, which is popularly known. I am told, as ROMP. Members will be reassured to know that the extraction of minerals from dormant quarries cannot lawfully commence until the developer has submitted an application for revised mineral conditions.

The national planning policy framework, with which I have become intimately acquainted over the past five to six months, is clear that the purpose of planning, including planning for the steady and adequate supply
that has been agreed by the local authority, and that an application for review of conditions may need to be accompanied by an environmental impact assessment, as my hon. Friend said.

It is important to remember that the extraction of minerals is a temporary activity, so local authorities, through the use of planning conditions, can put in place early and high-quality restoration plans, agreed with the developer, as a condition for receiving planning permission in the first place. That means that once extraction operations have stopped, former quarry sites can be quickly returned to a productive land use, with the landscape restored.

I have illustrated the role that the land-based planning system plays in providing a key component of the regulatory framework that ensures that the extraction of minerals is undertaken with the minimal impact—that is my responsibility. However, for geological and historical reasons, many quarries are located along our coastline. The Marine Management Organisation, which falls under the responsibility of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, is the planning authority for English territorial waters. It plays a vital role in planning for mineral extraction where the land-based and marine planning systems overlap at the mean, high and low-tide waterline.

For sites such as Dean quarry that are situated on the coastline, the local authority—Cornwall Council in this case—and the Marine Management Organisation have to work collaboratively when considering planning applications that will have an impact on both the land and marine environments. Such an impact could be that from land-based operations that are in close proximity to marine conservation zones.

Despite the robust regulatory framework that the Government have put in place to plan for the steady and adequate supply of minerals, there are still many concerns about applications for mineral extraction and the possible negative environmental impacts, even if such applications constitute a temporary use of land and the land in question will be restored once that use is completed.

My hon. Friend eloquently set out his constituents’ concerns regarding this particular case. I am sure that the whole House understands those concerns, but it is the Government’s view that the local planning system is the best way to address them. Essentially, what we ask of the planning system in this country is that it balances the need for various kinds of development. We all recognise the need for more housing in this country and the need for mineral extraction, but those needs must be balanced against environmental concerns and the concerns of local residents, and the planning system is the way in which we do that.

What we need to decide in this House is the balance that we wish to strike between the Government’s role and that of local planning authorities and mineral planning authorities. It is our view that, in the main, the Government’s role should be constrained to setting national planning policy. Most decisions in relation to individual planning applications and the responsibility for enforcement activity rest with local planning authorities.

There are exceptions. From time to time, local councils, residents groups and Members of this House will lobby the Secretary of State to ask him to intervene in a particular application, to call in an application, or to recover an application that is with the Planning Inspectorate. It is the Secretary of State’s judgment—this is set out in policy through a written ministerial statement to this House—that those cases should be few and far between, and that they should have a wide national interest, rather than a particular local concern.

I will draw my remarks to a close by saying to my hon. Friend that he has powerfully set out the concerns of his constituents, and that he should express those concerns to the relevant planning authority that is responsible both for enforcement activity in relation to the particular issues that he mentioned and in determining any applications. If he believes that there are grounds for a particular application of any kind not to be decided by the local authority—if it raises issues beyond local importance, for example—he has the opportunity to make the case that the Secretary of State should call it in. I hope that I have at least set out for him the policies of this Government that try to strike the right balance between the needs to ensure a steady supply of minerals in this country, to protect our precious land and marine environments, and to ensure that the planning system addresses the concerns of his residents that he so eloquently set out this evening.

Question put and agreed to

8.13 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 11 January 2017

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Tajikistan

1. Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of her Department’s work in Tajikistan.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): UK development assistance has helped to reduce poverty and promote stability in Tajikistan since 2002. Between 2011 and 2016, DFID’s work has improved rural lives, promoted women’s economic empowerment, and delivered an important investment climate and managed public financial reforms.

Nigel Mills: I am grateful for that information. During a recent visit to Tajikistan, I saw the good work that DFID had been doing, but many people have expressed concern about the fact that certain projects have been quite slow to be approved. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the Department’s commitment to Tajikistan and on when those projects might be signed off?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend, both for his question and for going to see DFID’s work in-country. The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), is overseeing new international development programmes, details of which will be published in due course.

Central Asia, including Tajikistan, represents an important strategic imperative in terms of our wider development objectives. We are, of course, committed to ensuring that commitments are implemented and that we start to deliver on those programmes later in the year.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Tajikistan is very much at risk from climate change, which could threaten all the good work that is being done to improve livelihoods and economic development. Is dealing with that an element of DFID’s programme?

Priti Patel: As the hon. Lady will know, a variety of challenges exist in this part of central Asia. Dealing with climate change is one, but others are economic security, financial management and performance issues. DFID’s combined approach will help to deliver greater economic security in the long run.

2. Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the implications of demolitions in the occupied Palestinian territories in 2015-16 for her Department’s policies in that region.

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend, both for his update and for his question. I am aware that an element of DFID’s programme?

Simon Danczuk: As I have said, DFID is focusing on health and education, but the Foreign Office has legal support programmes. This issue goes to the heart of the Israeli planning system and involves controversies with the Israeli Attorney General. As my hon. Friend says, it

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): The Department’s assessment, in line with long-standing British Government policy, is that demolitions are illegal under international humanitarian law, and that they undermine the credibility and viability of a two-state solution.

Louise Haigh: The Bedouin village of Umm-al-Hiran remains under threat from a demolition that would cast out 800 villagers, and the number of demolitions in the occupied territories in the first two weeks of January is almost four times greater than the number at this point last year. What support is being given to the people who are being driven out of their homes, and what message is being sent to the Israeli Government that such demolitions are completely unjustifiable?

Rory Stewart: The hon. Lady raises two important issues, the first of which is long standing. Along with our international partners, we continue to lobby the Israeli Government, who are undertaking the demolitions, to stop doing so, both because they are illegal and because they undermine the two-state solution.

The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), had a meeting with the Israeli Defence Minister, Mr Lieberman, just before Christmas and raised the issue of demolitions with him directly.

Simon Danczuk: Will the Minister ensure that human rights non-governmental organisations operating on the west bank continue to receive support from the British Government?

Rory Stewart: We are absolutely focused on supporting NGOs, but above all we are focused on investment in health and education. It is getting the natural capital right, and providing opportunities and hope for the Palestinians, that will lead to security and stability for both sides in the conflict.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Many of the demolitions occur because it is virtually impossible for Palestinians to obtain building permits. What legal support can the Department give to those who are contesting the process?

Rory Stewart: As I have said, DFID is focusing on health and education, but the Foreign Office has legal support programmes. This issue goes to the heart of the Israeli planning system and involves controversies with the Israeli Attorney General. As my hon. Friend says, it
is very difficult to obtain planning permission, which is one of the reasons why settlements are built and demolitions then take place.

8. [908004] Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Among the buildings that the Israeli authorities have demolished are community facilities, some of which have been funded and developed with money from the Minister's Department. I would welcome his statement, but I think that we need action rather than words. Has the time not come to send Mr Netanyahu the bill for the demolition of structures funded by the British taxpayer?

1Rory Stewart: The British taxpayer has not funded any structures that have been demolished by the Israeli Government. The European Union has funded structures that have been demolished by the Israeli Government, but so far it has not decided to seek compensation.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Minister confirm that DFID, notwithstanding the efforts of a senior Israeli diplomat to "take down" a Minister, will continue to fight against collective punishment, demolitions in the OPTs and the expansion of the illegal settlements?

Rory Stewart: We are conflating two different issues here. As the Foreign Secretary said yesterday, the Israeli ambassador has already apologised for that incident, and the diplomat concerned has been removed from his post and sent home. I think I have dealt with the overall questions of settlements and demolitions in my answers to the other questions.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his responses, but I would like him to be a bit clearer and tell us how DFID has supported those people who are now homeless due to the systematic policy of settlement expansion.

Rory Stewart: The central story is that DFID is doing three types of things for Palestinian people. First, we are supporting Palestinian state structures, in particular health and education—doctors, teachers and nurses. Secondly, we are working on making sure that we can create a viable economy and employment, particularly through support to small businesses. Thirdly, we invest in human capital; in other words, we invest in making sure that the Palestinian people are educated, healthy and have opportunities for security and stability in the region in the short term. But in the long term there cannot be a two-state solution unless we address the needs of the Palestinian people.

Aleppo

3. Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support people in Aleppo.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): What has happened in Aleppo is a tragedy and underlines the regime's callous tactics of siege, starvation and indiscriminate bombardment. Through the UK's humanitarian leadership and diplomatic efforts, we are doing all we can to do support the protection of civilians and, importantly, ensure that they receive the aid they so desperately need.

Craig Williams: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. The UK committed £510 million in support at the London Syria conference in February last year. Is she on course to hit that target?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his question on this important issue, which gives me the chance to restate to the House the British Government's commitment to, and long-standing support for, Syria. We have surpassed that pledge of £510 million made at the Syria conference last year. It is fair to say not only that the UK can be proud of its support, but that we have ensured that there is the right support in terms of humanitarian supplies and the focus for the region, while at the same time using our international convening power to work with others globally to ensure that we do everything we possibly can to support Syria and the region.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): At the world humanitarian summit in Istanbul last year, the United Kingdom committed to the centrality of protection as a fundamental principle. How has that guided DFID's approach to the situation in Aleppo, and what lessons will we learn from the tragedy of Aleppo for future civilian protection?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point in relation to the conference last year and how the humanitarian community can come together and not just learn lessons, but understand ways of working in times of severe crisis and of conflict. There are a number of lessons we can learn, including on agencies working together, the pooling of resources, and making sure that Governments across the world are working together strategically in terms of both resource allocation and, importantly, our convening power—the leverage we all have collectively in the international space to challenge Governments where they are inflicting harm and causing grief and devastation, and to make sure that we stand shoulder to shoulder and are united in how we tackle the challenge.

10. [908007] Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): People give to Singing for Syrians because they know that 100% of the money they donate will be spent on prosthetic limbs and medical salaries in the region, as close to Aleppo as we can get it. What more can the Secretary of State do to ensure that DFID money is spent in the region and not wasted on advocacy and lobbying in the UK?

Priti Patel: First, I commend my hon. Friend on her work on, and leadership in, Singing for Syrians; it is an incredible organisation and has been very successful in raising important funds. On making sure that the money is not wasted and goes directly into the region and in-country, we not only support, fund and collaborate with trusted partners, but, importantly, measure the outcomes that we are delivering in these essential humanitarian policies.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Secretary of State is already talking about Aleppo in the past tense, but the besiegement is still happening right now, and the British Government must do more. What representations has she made to the Foreign Secretary about putting in place more and harder sanctions on Russia?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The situation not only in Aleppo but in Syria full stop is beyond comprehension. She asks about representations. The Foreign Secretary and I work hand in hand on international issues, and the Government are calling for greater collaboration on access to humanitarian routes into besieged areas. This is not a case of one Department versus another; it is the voice of the British Government working together to make public representations and representations behind the scenes.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Before the war, Aleppo had Syria’s largest population of Christians. Now it is estimated that 90% of them have fled. In Parliament today, Open Doors will launch its World Watch List, which shows that religious persecution is one of the key drivers of migration. What can my right hon. Friend’s Department do to help the poor, persecuted Christians of Aleppo?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the plight of persecuted Christians, especially in the context of Aleppo and Syria. She asks what we can do. This is not just a matter for DFID; the whole Government must speak out on the issue and constantly make it clear that the persecution of minorities and religious groups is totally unacceptable. That is the right thing to do. We also need to make that case within the international community and work collaboratively with donor countries and other countries across the world.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Following the announcement during the Christmas recess that DFID would be piloting the use of drones to deliver medical supplies in Tanzania and to map weather damage in Nepal, what discussions has the Secretary of State had with Ministers in the Ministry of Defence about how drone technology could be used to deliver aid or assess humanitarian need in Aleppo and other parts of Syria?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the fact that we have been innovating and looking at new technology in relation to aid provision via drones. A lot of work is taking place in that space, and we have had a number of debates in the House about other ways of delivering humanitarian assistance, particularly in besieged areas. In the specific context of besieged areas in Syria, work is taking place and there have been discussions. I can assure the House that we are actively pursuing this issue, not just in DFID but across the Government.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The Secretary of State’s heart is very much in the right place, as we all know, but the fact is that the greatest humanitarian catastrophe of modern times is taking place in Aleppo, Raqqa and Mosul today. In contrast to the warm words that we have heard in the exchanges of the past few minutes, should we not now admit that there is precious little that we in the liberal west can do to alleviate the appalling circumstances in Aleppo unless we have the support of the United Nations and Russia?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes an important point. In terms of the work that the Government are doing, we must never lose sight of the fact that we are leading in humanitarian assistance and support. People are in desperate need, and we have the right focus on giving them all the necessary support. The other point is diplomacy. It is the job of the Government to carry on putting on the pressure, and we must use all the avenues of international diplomacy to put that pressure on, where it is needed.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I should like to focus on Idlib in north-western Syria, where civilians who have fled Aleppo are the main target of Government strikes. Will the Secretary of State tell the House how DFID is supporting those wounded and displaced civilians?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Lady for her focus on the humanitarian issue in Syria, which is of course associated with Idlib as well. She asks about the work that is taking place. There are extensive humanitarian efforts in terms of relief, food and shelter in what is a desperate situation. As she and the whole House will know, I have spent a great deal of time working with all the agencies that we are directly supporting and funding to ensure that supplies are getting through, and they are. I would add the caveat that this is taking place in a challenging environment and climate. We are getting supplies through, but it is increasingly difficult to do so.

Energy Access: Africa

5. Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve energy access in Africa.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (James Wharton): Access to energy is a prerequisite driver of economic growth and development. Over 620 million people in sub-Saharan Africa have no access to energy. When able to secure it, the world’s poorest people can pay up to 80 times what we pay. That is why the UK and this Department are playing a key role in providing both on and off-grid energy access, such as through the Energy Africa campaign, which will help to secure energy supplies for over 4.5 million of the world’s poorest people.

Steve Double: I know from my visits to east Africa that providing access to reliable, sustainable, clean energy is crucial for economic growth and prosperity in Africa. Does the Minister agree that the CDC and its investment in Africa present one of the best opportunities to provide that?

James Wharton: I absolutely agree that the CDC can play a key role. I am pleased that the House showed support for its work only yesterday in a debate led by the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), with support from the Secretary of State. A good example is Globeleq, in which the CDC has a majority stake, which will drive forward energy provision of 5,000 MW in Africa—1,000 MW can support 800,000 jobs. That is the scale of the difference we can make when and where we get this right, and that is why we are doing it.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The German Government have called on the World Bank to focus all its work on climate and sustainability
targets and to put an end to investments in obsolete, climate-damaging technologies. Given that the World Bank is the largest recipient of UK aid for energy, will the Government follow Germany’s example and use their influence to call on the World Bank to stop investing in fossil fuels?

James Wharton: I have set out some of the reasons why energy supply is so important in driving development. Of course, it is also important that that supply is sustainable and environmentally friendly. In all the projects that DFID pursues, we seek to ensure that that is the case, including in our discussions with the World Bank. Given our contributions and their impact, we recognise that it is particularly important that the World Bank appreciates and works towards that agenda.

Middle-income Countries: Aid Withdrawal

6. Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): What measures her Department plans to put in place to ensure that marginalised groups in middle-income countries are supported in the event of aid from her Department being withdrawn from those countries?

James Wharton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Marginalised groups, particularly in countries that are not the poorest, are sometimes the most vulnerable. We rightly focus our efforts and attention on the world’s poorest countries with the largest number of people in greatest need of support, but other groups elsewhere also need support. We must always be aware of that and ensure that our programmes have a sustainable impact. I will be delighted to have further discussions with my hon. Friend about his idea.

Mike Freer: The American Government operate the Global Equality Fund to ensure that marginalised groups are not left behind. Will my hon. Friend consider whether the UK should initiate a similar fund?

James Wharton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Marginalised groups, particularly in countries that are not the poorest, are sometimes the most vulnerable. We rightly focus our efforts and attention on the world’s poorest countries with the largest number of people in greatest need of support, but other groups elsewhere also need support. We must always be aware of that and ensure that our programmes have a sustainable impact. I will be delighted to have further discussions with my hon. Friend about his idea.
aid leads to waste and excess such as the £1 billion spent each year on consultants. When can we get back to some common sense and stop spending more and more on overseas aid every year when the money could be much better spent at home?

**Priti Patel:** Like all Conservatives, I, too, want to focus on making sure that every penny of taxpayers’ money goes to helping the world’s poorest, which is exactly the mission of our Department. At the same time, my hon. Friend will know that overseas development assistance saves lives and transforms lives. He specifically refers to money spent on consultants, which is something that my Department is currently reviewing. [Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Secretary of State’s replies must be heard with courtesy. It is rather alarming when some of her own Back Benchers are not acceding her the proper respect. She must be accorded the proper respect.

**The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart):** The hon. Gentleman makes a fundamental point. We have talked a great deal about demolitions and settlements, but the only long-term stability in that region requires protecting the security of Israel as an absolutely essential plank, along with guaranteeing an autonomous, independent Palestinian state.

**T2. [90801] Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP):** We receive much lobbying on the Israeli and Palestinian need for delivery on the ground, but what is the Minister of State’s assessment of the effect of terrorism and how difficult it makes it to deliver on the ground to those in real need, whether it is education or humanitarian aid?

**The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart):** The hon. Gentleman makes a fundamental point. We have talked a great deal about demolitions and settlements, but the only long-term stability in that region requires protecting the security of Israel as an absolutely essential plank, along with guaranteeing an autonomous, independent Palestinian state.

**T6. [908017] Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con):** The most sustainable aid is aid through trade. Will the Secretary of State therefore ensure that, when we leave the European Union and the customs union, we give top priority and free access to our markets to exports from the poorest countries?

**Priti Patel:** My hon. Friend will know that our priority is, of course, economic development and making sure that, through our aid, we are delivering long-term sustainable economic development and prosperity in everything we do. He is also right to note that DFID is working across the Government as we leave the European Union to look at unilateral trade preferences and the work we can do to grow our trade footprint across the world.

**T4. [908015] Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP):** Unlike the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), we in the Scottish National party welcome the fact that OECD data show that, last year, the UK was one of only six countries to meet the 0.7% aid target. That, of course, includes the Scottish Government’s international aid fund. What assurances can the Secretary of State give that her Government’s commitment to that target is unwavering and will continue to be fulfilled beyond the next general election?

**Priti Patel:** We have been unequivocal in our commitment to 0.7% and, in addition, it is a manifesto commitment. Let me restate again, for the benefit of the House, that the focus of my Department is on poverty reduction and on ensuring that that money is spent to drive taxpayer value and deliver programmes for the poorest in the world.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Pauline Latham. The hon. Lady wanted to ask a question earlier. Is she no longer inclined to do so?

**Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con):** I am here. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. The Select Committee visited the Democratic Republic of the Congo last year and saw the amazing work done by the CDC, which is creating not only more energy for millions of people, but a lot of jobs. May we encourage the CDC to do even more schemes like that?

**Rory Stewart:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He will have heard in the previous responses our commitment to co-existence programmes and how they will not just drive the right values, but help to bring the two communities together in a very constructive way—this is in addition to our focus on targeted spending on public schemes such as health and education programmes within the region.

**PRIME MINISTER**

The Prime Minister was asked—

**Engagements**

Q1. [908080] Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 11 January.

**The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May):** This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

**Chris Law:** A very happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and I would like to extend that to everyone in this House.

It has been more than six months since the European referendum. Embarrassingly for the Prime Minister, the Scottish Government are the only Administration on these islands to have published a plan on what to do next. Has she read it yet? When will she be publishing her own plan?
The Prime Minister: I join the hon. Gentleman in wishing everybody in the House, not only Members, but all the staff of the House, a very happy new year.

As I said to the Liaison Committee when I appeared in front of it before Christmas, I will, in a matter of weeks, be setting out some more details of our proposals on this issue. I would like just to remind the hon. Gentleman, when he talks about the Scottish Government’s plan, that of course it is his party, the Scottish nationalist party, that wants to leave the United Kingdom and therefore leave the European Union.

Q3. [908082] Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Westinghouse’s Springfields site in my constituency employs more than 1,200 people in highly skilled jobs manufacturing nuclear fuel, which generates 15% of the UK’s electricity. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the nuclear industry is of crucial importance to the north-west economy? Will she continue to support the construction of a new generation of nuclear power stations to guarantee jobs in the region?

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that new nuclear does have a crucial role to play in securing our future energy needs, especially as we are looking to move to a low-carbon society. The industrial strategy that the Government will be setting out will have a strong emphasis on the role of regions in supporting economic growth and ensuring that the economy works for everyone. Like him, I very much welcome the proposals from NuGen and Toshiba to develop a new nuclear power station at Moorside in Cumbria. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy continues to work closely with NuGen and other developers as they bring their proposals forward.

Mr Speaker: I call Jeremy Corbyn.

HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is nice to get such a warm welcome, and may I wish all Members, as well as all members of staff in the House, a happy new year?

I hope the whole House will join me—I am sure it will—in paying tribute to 22-year-old Lance Corporal Scott Hetherington, who died in a non-combat incident in Iraq last Monday. I am sure the whole House will also join in sending its heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of seven-year-old Katie Rough, who tragically died in York earlier this week. I think it is right that we send condolences to her family.

Last week, 485 people in England spent more than 12 hours on trolleys in hospital corridors. The Red Cross described this as a “humanitarian crisis”. I called on the Prime Minister to come to Parliament on Monday, but she did not—she sent the Health Secretary. But does she agree with him that the best way to solve the crisis of the four-hour target is to fiddle the figures, so that people are not seen to be waiting so long on trolleys in NHS hospitals?

The Prime Minister: First, may I join the right hon. Gentleman in sending our condolences to the family of Lance Corporal Hetherington, who, as he said, died in a non-combat incident in Iraq? From everything I have seen and read about Lance Corporal Hetherington, he was a very fine young man. He delighted in being in the armed forces, and we are proud that such a fine young man was in our armed forces. I also join the right hon. Gentleman in expressing condolences to the family and friends of little Katie, who died so tragically.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the pressures on the NHS, and we acknowledge that there are pressures on the national health service. There are always extra pressures on the NHS during the winter, but, of course, we have at the moment those added pressures of the ageing population and the growing complex needs of the population. He also refers to the British Red Cross’s term, “humanitarian crisis.” I have to say to him that I think we have all seen humanitarian crises around the world, and to use that description of a national health service that last year saw 2.5 million more people treated in accident and emergency than six years ago was irresponsible and overblown.

Jeremy Corbyn: Some 1.8 million people had to wait longer than four hours in A&E departments last year. The Prime Minister might not like what the Red Cross said, but on the same day the British Medical Association said that “conditions in hospitals across the country are reaching a dangerous level.”

The Royal College of Nursing has said that NHS conditions are the worst ever. The Royal College of Physicians has told the Prime Minister that the NHS is “under-funded, under-doctored and overstretched.”

If she will not listen to the Red Cross, who will she listen to?

The Prime Minister: I have said to the right hon. Gentleman that I of course acknowledge that there are pressures on the national health service. The Government have put extra funding into the national health service. The fact is that we are seeing more people being treated in our NHS: 2,500 more people are treated within four hours every day in the national health service because of the Government putting in extra funding and because of the hard work of medical professionals in our national health service. It is not just a question of targets for the health service, although we continue to have a commitment to the four-hour target, as the Health Secretary has made clear. It is a question of making sure that people are provided with the appropriate care for them, and the best possible care for them in their circumstances.

Jeremy Corbyn: The right hon. Lady seems to be in some degree of denial about this. She will not listen to professional organisations that have spent their whole lifetimes doing their best for the NHS, but will she listen to Sian, who works for the NHS?

She has a 22-month-old nephew. He went into hospital, but there was no bed. He was treated on two plastic chairs pushed together with a blanket. Sian says that “one of the nurses told my sister that it’s always like this nowadays”. She says to us all: ‘Surely we should strive to do better than this.”

Do the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary think that is an acceptable way to treat a 22-month-old child in need of help?
The Prime Minister: I accept that there have been a small number of incidents in which unacceptable practices have taken place. We do not want those things to happen, but what matters is how you deal with them, which is why it is so important that the NHS looks into the issues when unacceptable incidents have taken place and learns lessons from them. I come back to the point that I was making earlier: the right hon. Gentleman talks about the hard-working healthcare professionals, like Sian, in the national health service, and indeed we should be grateful for all those who are working in the NHS, but on the Tuesday after Christmas we saw the busiest day ever in the national health service, and over the few weeks around Christmas we saw the day on which more people were treated in accident and emergency within four hours than ever before. That is the reality of our national health service.

Jeremy Corbyn: We all thank NHS staff and we all praise NHS staff, but the Prime Minister’s Government are proposing, through sustainability and transformation, to cut one third of the beds in all our hospitals in the very near future. On Monday, she spoke about mental health and doing more to help people, particularly young people, with those conditions, which I welcome, except that last night the BBC revealed that, over five years, there had been an 89% increase in young people with mental health issues having to go to A&E departments. Does she not agree that the £1.25 billion committed to child and adolescent mental health in 2015 should have been ring-fenced rather than used as a resource to be raided to plug other holes in other budgets in the NHS?

The Prime Minister: If we look at what is happening with mental health treatment in the national health service, we see 1,400 more people every day accessing mental health services. When I spoke about this issue on Monday, I said that there is of course more for us to do—this is not a problem that will be resolved overnight. I have set out ways in which we will see an improvement in the services in relation to mental health, but it is about the appropriate care for the individual. As I mentioned earlier, that is not just about accident and emergency. When I was in Aldershot on Monday, I spoke to service users with mental health problems who said that they did not want to go to A&E. The provision of alternative services has meant that the A&E locally has seen its numbers stabilising rather than going up. It is about the appropriate care for the individual. We want to see that good practice spread across the whole country.

Jeremy Corbyn: Nobody wants people with mental health conditions to go to A&E departments—the A&E departments do not want them to go there. Under this Government, there are 6,000 fewer nurses and 400 fewer doctors working in mental health. It is obvious that these people will go somewhere to try to get help when they are in a desperate situation. Our NHS is under huge pressure. Much of that is caused by cuts to social care, which the Royal College of Physicians says “are pushing more people into our hospitals and trapping them there for longer.”

Will the Prime Minister do what my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) has called for and bring forward now the extra £700 million allocated in 2019 and put it into social care, so that we do not have this problem of people staying too long in hospital when they should be cared for by a social care system?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman asked me those questions in the last PMQs before Christmas. [Interruption.] He may find it difficult to believe that somebody will say the same thing that they said a few weeks ago, but we have put extra money into social care. In the medium term, we are ensuring that best practice is spread across the country. He talks about delayed discharges. Some local authorities, which work with their health service locally, have virtually no delayed discharges. Some 50%—half of the delayed discharges—are in only 24 local authority areas. What does that tell us? It tells us that it is about not just funding, but best practice. If he comes back to me and talks to me about funding again, he should think on this: we can only fund social care and the NHS if we have a strong economy, and we will only have that with the Conservatives.

Earlier this week, the Prime Minister said that she wanted to create a “shared society”. Well, we certainly have that: more people sharing hospital corridors on trolleys; more people sharing waiting areas in A&E departments; and more people sharing in the anxiety created by this Government. Our NHS is in crisis, but the Prime Minister is in denial. May I suggest to her that, on the economic question, she should cancel the corporate tax cuts, and spend the money where it is needed—on people in desperate need in social care and in our hospitals?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about a crisis. I suggest he listen to the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), a former Labour Health Minister, who said that, with Labour, “It’s always about ‘crisis...the NHS is on its knees’. We’ve got to be a bit more grown up about this.” And he talks to me about restoring the cuts in corporation tax. The Labour party has already spent that money eight times. The last thing the NHS needs is a cheque from Labour that bounces. The only way that we can ensure that we have funding for the national health service is with a strong economy. Yesterday, the right hon. Gentleman proved that he is not only incompetent, but that he would destroy our economy, and that would devastate our national health service.

Q4. Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Cyber-bullying, sexting and revenge pornography are part of British teenage life today; so is a rapid increase in mental health problems among our teenagers. How is the Prime Minister helping to tackle the pressures that teenagers face in Britain today?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. One of the things I spoke about, when I spoke about mental health on Monday, was trying to ensure that we can provide some better training for staff...
and teachers in schools to identify the early stages of mental health problems for young people, so that those problems can be addressed. Something like half of all mental health problems start before the age of 14, so this is a real issue that we need to address. We are going to look at how we can provide that training. We will also review the mental health services provided for young people to ensure that we can identify what is working and make sure that good practice is spread across the country.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): May I begin with a tribute to Father George Thompson, who died shortly before Christmas? He led a remarkable life as a teacher, as a priest and as the Scottish National party Member of Parliament for Galloway. We extend our sympathies to his family.

All of us in this House and across these islands care about the peace process and about the democratic institutions in Northern Ireland, so may I wish the Prime Minister well and the Taoiseach, the Northern Ireland Secretary and the political parties all the best in trying to resolve the serious political difficulties there? Will the Prime Minister tell us what the consequences will be if no agreement can be found?

The Prime Minister: First, may I join the right hon. Gentleman in offering condolences to the family and friends of the Rev. George Thompson, who, as he says, was the MP for Galloway between 1974 and 1979 and, I believe, was the first former MP in modern times to be ordained a Roman Catholic priest.

On the issue that the right hon. Gentleman raises about the political situation in Northern Ireland, we are obviously treating this with the utmost seriousness. As he will know, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the devolved authorities have said that, obviously, there are executives in place—that it is still the case that Ministers are in place—and that, therefore, there are executives in place—that we are still able to take the views of the Northern Ireland people.

Economy/Public Services (Staffordshire)

Q5. [908084] Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the (a) performance of the economy and (b) adequacy of provision of public services in Staffordshire; and if she will make a statement.

The Prime Minister: The fundamentals of the UK’s economy are strong, including in Staffordshire and the west Midlands. Employment in Staffordshire has risen by over 20,000 since 2010. We have protected schools and police budgets. We see more doctors and more nurses in the Burton hospitals trust. Of course, we are going further than this in the west midlands by giving new powers to the west Midlands with the devolution deal and with the election of a directly elected Mayor. I have to say that I think Andy Street, with his business and local experience, would be a very good Mayor for the west Midlands.

Michael Fabricant: I thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for that answer. Unemployment in my constituency—my beautiful Lichfield constituency—is around 0.7%, and that is fantastic, but I want it even lower. I found out that 24% of my constituents work in the area of the West Midlands Combined Authority, so can I press my right hon. Friend just a little further about what she thinks is needed in the West Midlands Combined Authority to improve employment still more?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, and, of course, I have had the advantage of having visited his beautiful constituency. But in relation to the midlands, we have a very strong ambition to make the Midlands engine for growth in the UK. That is why we have plans for the Midlands engine that demonstrate that, when we say we are going to build an economy that works for everyone, we actually mean it. In the autumn statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor confirmed things such as the £5 million for a Birmingham rail hub and a £250 million midlands engine investment fund, and we will shortly be publishing a strategy for the Midlands engine. But I repeat the point that I made: for the west Midlands, having the devolution deal, having the Mayor and having the right person elected as Mayor, who I think will be Andy Street, is absolutely crucial.

Engagements

Q2. [908081] Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. Sir Ivan Rogers, in his resignation letter, said that people may have to deliver messages to the Government that Ministers may find disagreeable. So here is a message that the Prime Minister may find disagreeable: her lack of priority for the single market is putting jobs in Scotland and the economy at risk. That means her Government are as
big a threat to the Union as the SNP. Her Government are not worthy of the trust of Scots, let alone their blind trust, so will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to apologise for threatening the Union and give a solemn promise to every single person in this country that they will not be a penny worse off after a Tory Brexit?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will be very well aware that I want to see the best possible trade deal for the United Kingdom with the EU and the best possible deal for trading with and operating within the single European market. When we enter the negotiations, obviously, that is one of the issues that I have said that I want to see, and we will be out there and be delivering on it. Unlike the sort of downplaying that the hon. Gentleman does about the approach that we are taking, I have to say that it is this Government who are ambitious for the opportunities that are available to this country once we leave the European Union.

Q6. [908087] Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Cheshire schools in areas of rurality and areas of high deprivation will receive some of the lowest per-pupil funding rates in the country under the new proposed funding formula. Does the Prime Minister agree that these discrepancies must be addressed to ensure that Eddisbury pupils get the best possible start in life?

The Prime Minister: I think everybody recognises that the way that schools have been funded in the past has been unfair and many pupils have been missing out. That is why I think it is right for us to look at bringing forward a new fair funding formula, making sure that funding is attached to children’s needs. Of course we recognise the particular issues of rural areas in this, and that is why, within the fair funding formula, additional funding for such schools has been included. But, of course, the Department for Education has this out for consultation at the moment, and I would urge my hon. Friend to make her representations as part of that consultation.

Q7. [908086] Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The Prime Minister, I am sure, will understand, despite the reassurances, that there are genuine and really serious concerns among staff across the NHS and the care system, and patients and their families, about the pressure that they are under. For that reason, MPs from her own party, from the Labour party and from my party have come together to call for the Government to establish an NHS and care convention to engage with the public, so that we can come up with a long-term settlement for the NHS and care. Would the Prime Minister be prepared to meet us to discuss it, so that she can hear our case?

The Prime Minister: I recognise, obviously, the interest and the attention that the right hon. Gentleman has given to these issues—of course, he is a former Health Minister—and I would be happy to meet him and others, as he suggests.

Q8. [908085] Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Dewsbury hospital A&E is set for a downgrade this year. Over Christmas, I had constituents who were waiting 20 hours for a bed in a facility that might not even exist next year. Will the Prime Minister please face reality and act now to stop this vital A&E service from disappearing?

The Prime Minister: What the hon. Lady is referring to, of course, is the plans that are being put forward at local level to consider—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise. I must say to the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) that if she were behaving like this in another public place she would probably be subject to an antisocial behaviour order.

The Prime Minister: I return to the point, Mr Speaker. Decisions about services in the local area are rightly taken by the local national health service, because we believe that it is local clinicians, and also local patients and leaders, who know what is best for their areas. So it is about trying to tailor the services to provide the best possible services for the needs of local people, modernising the care and facilities and making services appropriate to the local area. This trust has an extensive improvement plan to ensure that both hospitals within it can care for patients attending accident and emergency in as timely a way as possible.

Q9. [908088] Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): Next Thursday evening, I will host the first session of the Bedford community business school, free of charge and open to all, with 250 local people sharing a passion for entrepreneurship and learning tips about business from national and local business leaders. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that her forthcoming industrial strategy has at its heart the passion and the interest of Britain’s small business leaders and entrepreneurs?

The Prime Minister: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that commitment. What is important is that the industrial strategy will be looking to the economy of the future—what sort of economy we want in this country. Crucial to that will be the growth that is generated by entrepreneurs and by small businesses—by the very passion that he has spoken about. We want to see an environment in which those who can grow can emerge and develop to provide future jobs for people and contribute to the strength of our economy. That is what the industrial strategy is about; I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

Q10. [908091] Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): There can be nothing so distressing for a parent as the death of their child, particularly where that child has been murdered. That is what happened to the two ladies, one of them a constituent of mine, who set up Justice After Acquittal, successfully campaigning for voluntary national standards of support by the Crown Prosecution Service and by the police for the families of murder victims following an acquittal. Those standards are due to be launched here next Tuesday. Will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to the determination and energy with which they have campaigned for their cause, and will she continue to ensure, as she always has done, that the voices of the victims of crime and their families are always listened to?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. I am very happy to join him in paying tribute to these two campaigners. Indeed, I am sure that the whole House would want to pay tribute to the work
that they are doing. As he says, I remain committed to ensuring that the voices of victims are heard. That is what I did when I was Home Secretary, if we look at issues such as introducing new measures to tackle modern slavery, strengthening the Independent Police Complaints Commission and legislating in relation to police complaints and discipline systems to strengthen public confidence in policing, and a number of other actions that I took. I am very pleased to say that my right hon. Friend the current Home Secretary is taking that same passion to ensuring that the voices of the victims of crime are heard and is taking that forward.

Q10. [908089] Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Across the United Kingdom, many banks are accelerating their closure of local branches, with adverse effects on vulnerable and older people and adverse effects on the high street. The Royal Bank of Scotland is closing down branches across Scotland, including those at Juniper Green and Chesser in my constituency. Local convenience stores are taking the strain of processing bills and often face exorbitant bank charges for the privilege of doing so. Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss how we can realise a situation where banking across the UK services customers and the real economy?

The Prime Minister: The issue of bank branches and, indeed, of the accessibility of bank services is one that is for individual banks themselves to take and consider, and of course there are many ways in which people are now accessing bank services other than by going physically into an actual bank branch, but I will certainly look at the issue that the hon. and learned Lady has raised.

Q14. [908093] Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): Building a country that works for everyone means doing even more to tackle the economic and social deprivation that has come to afflict pockets of seaside towns such as Rhyl in my constituency. Will my right hon. Friend therefore support Growth Track 360, a locally developed plan to invest in rail infrastructure to help unlock the true potential of the north Wales and Mersey-Dee economic region as an integral part of the northern powerhouse, connected to the rest of the country via the proposed HS2 hub at Crewe?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the establishment of the north Wales and Mersey-Dee rail taskforce and the work that it is doing. The plan that my hon. Friend mentions sets out an ambitious programme of improvements for the area, and I am sure it will be of course the Conservative-led Government that introduced parity of esteem between mental and physical health, but as I said earlier, there is more for us to do in ensuring that appropriate care is available for people. I cited an example earlier of where I saw excellent work being done to provide care and support for people in the community, which was relieving pressure on accident and emergency, but also ensuring that people were getting the best possible care for them, and that is obviously what we want to see.

Q15. [908094] Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has raised awareness of the importance of child mental health this week, not least because 65% of young people requiring mental health support in south Warwickshire last year had to wait over 12 weeks before starting treatment. Will my right hon. Friend outline how the new proposals will improve our support network for such vulnerable young people?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, which was of course alluded to earlier in this session of Prime Minister’s questions. We are investing more in mental health than ever before—we are spending a record £11.4 billion a year—and it was of course the Prime Minister will say that these decisions are to be made locally, but will she at least say that she can understand the anxiety of expectant mums who face a 40-mile journey on difficult roads, which are often blocked, if they have a difficult birth?

The Prime Minister: The problems that are facing the health service in Cumbria are widely recognised, and I do understand the concerns of local people about the services that will be available for them. We have put robust national support in place to address some of the long-standing challenges in Cumbria, and we are developing a lasting plan to deliver the high-quality, sustainable services that patients rightly expect.

The hon. Gentleman is right that these specific decisions are being taken locally, and no final decisions have been taken. I recognise the concern that he has raised previously, particularly about services at West Cumberland hospital. There will be considerable involvement in taking those decisions, but as I say, we do recognise the local concerns about some of the long-standing challenges for health service provision in Cumbria.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I know from my career in medicine that the men and women of our East Midlands ambulance service do a brave and sterling job for the people of Sleaford and...
North Hykeham and others, saving people’s lives every day. East Midlands ambulance service responded to a total of 11,662 999 calls over the Christmas bank holiday weekend alone, 2,500 of which were in Lincolnshire. Will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to their dedication, particularly over the busy winter period, and tell the House what more the Government can do to support our ambulance services and improve response times in rural areas such as Sleaford and North Hykeham?

The Prime Minister: May I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and also for bringing her personal experience as a medical professional to this issue? I am very happy to join her in paying tribute to the men and women of the ambulance service for the dedication and commitment that they show. She asks what the Government have been doing. We recognise that ambulance services are very busy, which is why we see over 2,000 more paramedics now compared with 2010, and we are increasing paramedic training places by over 60% this year. Also, the Department of Health, NHS Employers and ambulance unions have agreed changes to the compensation for paramedics, potentially giving them a pay increase of up to £14,000 as they progress. We recognise the excellent work that they do.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): May I commend the Prime Minister for her considered statement last night and, indeed, for the words that she has given this afternoon? She knows our commitment to the institutions in Northern Ireland, but does she agree that nothing can be, or should be, gained from threatening the peace process, the progress that we have made or the institutions that we have fought so hard to sustain in Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments about the mental health announcements that I have made. I am sorry to hear of the particular difficulties that her constituent is experiencing and the distress that they have caused her. Of course, working tax credits provide support for low-income families in work and are designed to incentivise people to increase their working hours. With the new universal credit system, we will obviously have a system of benefits with single, streamlined payments that encourages work, but I am sure the Financial Secretary to the Treasury would be happy to look at the individual case that my right hon. Friend has raised and the issue that she has set out.
Green Investment Bank

12.40 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the sale of the Green Investment Bank.

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): The Government set out their plans for the sale of the Green Investment Bank in the document “Green Investment Bank: Sale of Shares” laid before Parliament on 3 March 2016. The Government intend to move the GIB into the private sector, so that it can increase its access to private capital and increase its green impact free from the constraints of Government ownership. Potential bidders are interested in the GIB precisely because of its green specialism. We are asking potential investors to confirm their commitment to GIB’s green values and investment principles, and how they propose to protect them, as part of their bids for the company. In addition, the Government have approved the creation of a special share, held by independent trustees, to protect GIB’s green purposes in future.

As I am sure the House will appreciate, the sale is commercially sensitive, so I cannot comment on the identity of any bidders or the discussions taking place between the Government and potential bidders. All parties have been required to sign confidence agreements that place strict restrictions on the disclosure of information. The restrictions apply both to bidders and the Government.

Caroline Lucas: I thank the Minister for his reply, but it gives very little reassurance, given that everybody knows who the preferred bidder is. The preferred bidder, Macquarie, has a very, very worrying and dubious track record. I am putting this question today with support from across the House.

This week, we heard that the Green Investment Bank stands on the brink not just of being flogged off but broken up, with its green purposes discarded. Founded in 2012, the GIB has been widely recognised as a true success story, kick-starting truly innovative low-carbon projects across the UK, yet the preferred bidder—Macquarie—not only has a dismal and terrible environmental record but an appalling track record of asset stripping. So why have the Government given preferred bidder status to this company? What assessment have the Government made of Macquarie’s record, given that in 2005 the board of the London stock exchange deemed Macquarie unfit to conduct a takeover?

Furthermore, research this week uncovered changes to the GIB’s corporate structure. Between 22 November and 1 December, 10 new companies were incorporated and registered to the GIB’s London offices. The changes suggest that Macquarie is planning to fundamentally hollow out the GIB. Why have the 10 new companies been set up? Will the Minister confirm whether the changes made at the end of last year were made at the behest of Macquarie? Why are the Government setting up a structure to invite in a property asset stripper? If the GIB has been restructured in such a way as to allow it to be stripped of its assets, how can the Government guarantee that the special share, supposed to protect the future of the GIB, will have the intended effect?

Is this not exactly the wrong time to be selling off the GIB, given that the Government have decided to embark on a new industrial strategy, which must, to be in accord with our own climate change commitments, have low-carbon projects at its core? Finally, will the Minister admit that this selling off could lead to the bank being fatally undermined as an enduring institution? Will he stop the killing off of the Green Investment Bank? Will he halt the sale process with immediate effect?

Mr Hurd: As I think the hon. Lady knows, she has asked a stream of questions to which I cannot give direct answers. She will also know, being an experienced Member, that I cannot comment publicly on the identity of bidders or the process under way, for the reasons I elaborated at the start. She draws a lot of conclusions from media speculation, on which it would be irresponsible for me to comment, but I will try to give her some reassurance, flowing back to the objectives behind the sale that I set out in my answer. It is precisely because we want the GIB to be able to do more, unfettered by the constraints of the state, that we are seeking to put it into the private sector.

The objectives that we set out in the sale could not have been clearer and have been discussed in the House, and they include clear objectives around securing value for money for the taxpayer, which must be our primary responsibility. We want to ensure that the GIB can be reclassified to the private sector, but we have also been clear that we want to move it into the private sector to enable the business to grow and continue as an institution that supports investment in the green economy. We are selling it as a going concern, and potential investors would have to buy into the company’s green business plan and project pipeline. These are the criteria that we have set and against which we are evaluating the proposals before us.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The GIB is a tremendous Conservative success story. It was devised by the Conservatives pre-2010, probably by my hon. Friend the Minister, and was introduced by a Conservative-led Government, and it has been a great catalyst for investment in the green economy—I am thinking, in particular, of the Galloper wind farm off the East Anglian coast. There is a concern, however, if the press stories regarding asset stripping and job losses are to be believed, that it will not be able to perform that role in the future. In that light, will he consider a pause in the process, so that we can ensure that the GIB continues to perform the great role it has played since 2012?

Mr Hurd: I agree with my hon. Friend’s opening comments about saluting what has been a great success story of the coalition—let us maintain the season of good will—but Conservative-led Government. It was the right thing to set up; it was we who did it; and it has been a great success, having mobilised £8 billion of private capital into a critical area of infrastructure, according to the last figures. I can, however, assure him—he is far too experienced to be drawn or influenced too much by media speculation—that we are not being naive in this process. We have set clear criteria for the sale. We have run a genuinely competitive process, and we are now evaluating the proposals before us, through the lens of the criteria we have set, which include value for money and reclassification. We are selling a going
concern, and what we want to hear about are forward plans for a dynamic, ongoing concern seeking to mobilise more private capital into the green economy. He knows as well as anyone in the House that we need to mobilise a lot of private sector capital to get the clean energy we need.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I hope the Minister would agree that the GIB is a great British success story—he has already said as much—but let us put the record straight: it is also a Labour success story, having first appeared in our 2010 manifesto, and I am glad that the coalition Government took it up. If it is a success story, however, why are they selling it off? Is it simply a case of “public good, private bad”? That is what we think on the Opposition Benches, but Conservatives think it is “private good, public bad”. I am telling the House, quite simply, that from the assessment of Macquarie and what we have seen of it, we see that it has a history of asset stripping, so how exactly will the Minister protect this valuable public institution from having its assets sold off? That is a very fair question.

We know that the Government had planned to hold a share in the bank, which would have helped to maintain its green purposes, but new evidence has shown that Macquarie has already set up new companies that will control the GIB’s major assets. Will the Minister elaborate on the purpose of those companies and what oversight the Government will have of them once the sale goes through? The Prime Minister told us that the industrial strategy would be at the heart of her Government, yet the Government are now selling off an institution that has succeeded, from scratch and against the odds, in attracting capital for our green infrastructure on commercial lines. The Minister has already been out manoeuvred by Macquarie bank and, frankly, we do not have much confidence that it will not happen again. Will the Government agree to stop the sale of the Green Investment Bank today until such time as its green purpose and core assets can be genuinely protected? If the Minister will not, does he accept that the GIB’s fate rests on his shoulders?

Mr Hurd: I will pass over the bizarre claim that the GIB is a Labour success story by virtue of its simply being mentioned in a 2010 manifesto, with nothing done for 13 years in government prior to that. This meant that in 2010, we started with far too low levels of clean energy in this country—a situation transformed by the coalition Government.

Again, I caution Members against making assumptions on the basis of speculation in the media, and I am not going to comment on that or identify any bidders.

The hon. Gentleman reflects the different view across the House about the benefits and values of the private sector. He should be aware, holding the position that he does, that we need to mobilise a huge amount of private capital. It is private capital, not public capital, that is going to make the difference when it comes to the big shift in infrastructure. What he misses is the critical role that the state has played in setting up the GIB to correct a market failure.

The fact that we have run a competitive process and that private sector bidders have come up and said, “We want to buy this as a going concern because of its green specialism,” indicates that the market failure has, to a large extent, been corrected. The fact that this institution has mobilised billions of pounds of private capital into this critically important area of infrastructure is a success story. Our whole instinct now is that because we want it to do more, it will do more and be an even more successful institution in the private sector as a going concern.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Government have always been clear that the GIB was designed with a view to a possible transfer to the private sector, so will the Minister assure the House that the purpose of the GIB is, and will remain, green investment? I know that the Minister is dedicated to environmental issues, so will he also assure us that we will stick to our laudable manifesto pledge of leaving the environment in a better situation than we found it?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for her positive observation, and I pay tribute to her record and her absolute integrity and authenticity on protection of the environment and climate change, which are well respected across the House. I can give her this assurance. We have put before Parliament the whole procedure for protecting the green purpose of the GIB through the special share arrangements. It will be held by an independent company and it will have the power to approve or reject any proposed changes to the GIB’s green purposes. This is going to be set in company law. The five trustees were announced on 31 October 2016, selected through a genuinely independent process. If my hon. Friend looks at the names, she will see that they are independent and extremely credible. That is the mechanism that we have set out. I return to the point about the objectives of the sale. We want this to go into the private sector, so that it can do more of what it is doing—unfettered by the inevitable restrictions that the state has to put on it at this stage.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for putting it. We support it wholeheartedly. The Minister has repeatedly said that he wants to see more money raised through this, but it will not happen if the assets are stripped from the company and taken abroad. Also, this is happening at precisely the worst possible time. There are reports that we will see a 90% fall in renewables investment. That must be addressed, and the GIB should be the vehicle for doing that.

What assurances can the Minister provide that capital from existing assets will be reinvested in green projects in the UK? How will the golden share work when it comes to subsidiaries and, in particular, to having a say over asset sales? What reassurances can he give us that the headquarters in Edinburgh will continue? How will the Government ensure that the shortfall in investment in renewables will be met? Finally, in the light of the forthcoming industrial strategy and emissions reduction plan, will the Minister pause this sale, so that Parliament can properly look at these and see what role the GIB can play in that process?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman quite rightly talks about the need for investment in renewables, but it would be nice if he could give more recognition of the extraordinary progress this country has made in respect of the profound transition to clean energy and the fact
that we have generated more electricity from renewable energy than from coal this year, which is a pivotal moment in our history. Investment continues to flow, and the GIB has played and I am sure will continue to play a very important role as a catalyst for all that.

I understand that the hon. Gentleman seeks reassurances and share his sentiments, but this is part of our process of evaluating the proposals before us against the criteria transparently set out and agreed through the House. It is through that lens that we now evaluate the proposals, which obviously includes attitudes to the workforce and sensitivities around jobs in Scotland. This is all part of the criteria and is, as I say, the lens through which we look at the proposals. Beyond that, I cannot say much because of confidentiality, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will respect that.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): For the Opposition business spokesman to make the sweeping generalisation that “private is bad” is, I find, an appalling indictment, which provides evidence of why millions of private sector workers cannot rely on the Opposition. When the Minister looks at the golden share, will he consider whether some guarantees could be provided for future investment and in relation to the existing portfolio, perhaps for the first couple of years during the transfer to any bidder?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for that constructive observation. He is quite right in his first point—“public good, private bad” could not have been clearer from the Opposition. When the Minister looks at the golden share, will he consider whether some guarantees could be provided for future investment and in relation to the existing portfolio, perhaps for the first couple of years during the transfer to any bidder?

Mr Hurd: [Interruption.]

Huw Merriman: Will the Minister update the House on the response to the cross-party agreement that the Opposition Front Bench have been very clear about the criteria we are setting for this public sector bid. I come back to the point that we have set out the mechanisms; I think they are robust, and Parliament agreed that they were. As for so-called asset stripping and the freedom to sell assets, let us not get ourselves into a position in which we view holding assets for ever as a good in itself. I do not think we have set ourselves into a position in which we view holding assets for ever as a good in itself. I do not think we would want that for the GIB under its current structure. The management of the organisation has to be free to manage a portfolio. As a Government, we have to be practical about the limitations we would place on a private sector bid. I come back to the point that we have been very clear about the criteria we are setting for this sale, and we are looking at proposals by taking a holistic view of those criteria, which include the need for reassurance about the forward plans for the organisation and the level of ambition for mobilising private sector capital into this critical area of clean infrastructure.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): In the interests of consensus, we can agree that there was cross-party support for the Green Investment Bank right from the get-go. I would say to the Minister that there is also cross-party concern about this sale—and I could mention Lord Barker, who was a Minister in the last Parliament, Vince Cable and of course people on the Labour side. Is not the key question for the Minister and the Secretary of State this one? They promised a new approach to industrial strategy with a new Department, by contrast with their predecessors who did not even use the phrase “industrial strategy”. The question to the Minister is: what has changed since they took over? If there is a moment to prove commitment to the new industrial strategy, it is this one in respect of their plans for the GIB.

Mr Hurd: The right hon. Gentleman may be right about the cross-party agreement on the need for a GIB; the difference is that we did it, and he did not. His party had plenty of opportunity to do it. He talks about the need for a continued commitment to investment in renewables, and I think we have shown that. In fact, one of the most decisive steps this Department has taken in the short time we have been in power is the announcement of the new contract for difference auctions, which will be the next stage of support for the more mature renewable tech choice. There is no issue about this Government’s commitment to the low-carbon economy and the green infrastructure that needs to underpin it. The Secretary of State could not have been clearer about that. Where I think there is a divergence of view is that the Labour party seems to think that state ownership is a good in itself, whereas in this situation we feel we have moved on from that. When it comes to this very important organisation, which has done a great job, we want to liberate it so that it can do more in future. It is partly through that lens that we are looking at the proposals before us.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the test—the proof of the pudding—lies not in how many existing assets of a given kind are owned, but in whether there will be a greater or smaller amount of investment in renewable and other green energy projects in the future? Does he agree that this privatisation will prove to have been a success if investment in new projects increases as a result?

Mr Hurd: I am delighted to respond to that question from my right hon. Friend, who was, in many respects, the guardian angel of the coalition Government, and who was intricately involved in the deliberations that led to the establishment of the Green Investment Bank. He is absolutely right, and he has made a fundamental point. We should not necessarily judge the bank on the basis of what it is at the moment; this is about what it can become, about levels of future investment and about commitment to the green purpose of the organisation. I do not think that the Government could have been clearer about the priority that we attach to those considerations. This is about the future.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): May I give the Minister another opportunity to answer the question that I asked him in the Select Committee yesterday? How can he reconcile insisting on preserving the green purposes of the bank and preventing asset stripping from a new buyer with satisfying the classifications of the Office for National Statistics in respect of public sector control and balance-sheet requirements post disposal?

Mr Hurd: I have great respect for the Chairman of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, and we had a useful exchange about this issue yesterday, but he is again making assumptions about asset stripping. He is aware of the structure that we have established,
having doubtless been involved in the parliamentary debate about it. There is a great deal of concern on both sides of the House about protecting the integrity of the green purpose of the GIB, which is why we have gone through the process—which I think is robust—of setting up what is effectively a green share, along with the mechanism for its governance. That system was, I think, agreed to by Parliament and was introduced formally with the protection of corporate law.

I return, however, to the human motive of those who want to buy this organisation, which is to enable it to grow and do more. It is the authenticity, sincerity and integrity of those proposals that we are now evaluating.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): I am sure the Minister shares my slight amusement at the Opposition’s argument that we can believe everything we read in the press about the Green Investment Bank, given that they spent all yesterday afternoon arguing that we cannot believe everything we read in the press. Does he agree that the Green Investment Bank was set up to deal with a market failure, that the fact that private investors are now keen to come in demonstrates the purpose it has served and, in particular, that without the restrictions imposed by EU state aid it can deliver more investment, not less?

**Mr Hurd**: My hon. Friend has made—much more eloquently than I have so far succeeded in doing—exactly the fundamental point that we are trying to convey. The test of an organisation that was set up to correct a market failure is whether that failure has indeed been corrected. We believe that it has, and our view is supported by the large amounts of private sector investment that are flowing into green infrastructure in the United Kingdom and around the world. What we must do now is ensure that the GIB is free and unfettered by the state, so that it can do more.

**Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): The Environmental Audit Committee’s report on the sale of the bank stated that Ministers had rushed to privatise it without consultation or proper consideration of the alternatives, and that either it should continue to exist as a low-carbon investor or its sale should not proceed. Taxpayers do not want a repeat of the Royal Mail debacle, when a public asset was sold off at £1.4 billion below its true value, and they do not want this landmark British institution to be sold off to an asset stripper.

Is it not extraordinary that the bank’s assets were restructured in November? Can the Minister tell us whether that was done at the request of the UK Shareholder Executive, to facilitate its sale to the preferred bidder?

**Mr Hurd**: I do not believe that that was the case at all, although I understand the points that the hon. Lady has made. Like any other Government, we have a responsibility to deliver value for money to taxpayers, and we are very conscious of the need for this deal, if it materialises, to present itself well to the public whom we serve and represent. That is why, as one would expect, value for money is at the top of our list of criteria. We are embarking on a very good process, and we are setting ourselves very high standards for the presentation of the deal.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): I remind the Minister that during the passage of the Bill that became the Enterprise Act 2016, the Government rejected a Labour amendment that would have guaranteed the green purpose of the bank. Will he give an assurance today? After privatisation, will the bank be free to invest in fracking projects?

**Mr Hurd**: Let me respond to the hon. Gentleman’s substantive point about the protection of the green purpose. If he doubts the integrity of the mechanism that we have established, that is fine, but I think Parliament has recognised that it is a robust mechanism, whereby the green purpose is set in the articles of association and any change must to be given effect by an affirmative resolution of the trustees. It is worth our noting the integrity of those people: James Curran MBE, Trevor Hutchings, Tushita Ranchan, Robin Lord Teverson—a very public sceptic of this process—and Peter Young. That is a very good group of people, selected by a rigorously independent process to safeguard the integrity of the green purpose, which is a priority for the Government.

**Luciana Berger** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): We were told that we were to have the greenest Government ever, but the failed green deal collapsed, investment in renewable sources has been slashed, and we have slipped in the world rankings for investment in the low-carbon economy. If the Minister is not persuaded by the moral and environmental reasons why supporting the green economy is vital, will he consider, as a matter of urgency, the financial and economic reasons why it is crucial for us to invest in it, and will he then reverse his decision on the Green Investment Bank?

**Mr Hurd**: The hon. Lady is flogging rather an old horse, and, if I may say so, that is completely misplaced. Significant investment is being made in clean energy in this country and around the world. Indeed, with the Hinkley deal, the Government made one of the biggest commitments in the world to low-carbon energy. There is no question about our commitment to the transition to a low-carbon economy and a clean energy structure, and we are well along the track. I would add that we inherited an arrangement whereby we were operating on far too low a base in terms of renewable energy. It was a coalition Government led by Conservatives who changed that.

**Alex Salmond** (Gordon) (SNP): The Minister refused to name the bidders for the Green Investment Bank, but went on to tell us that private companies were saying that they wanted to buy the bank because of its success. Will the Minister tell us which private companies were saying that, or did he make up the quotation?

**Mr Hurd**: The right hon. Gentleman is extremely experienced, and I am not sure what part of a confidentiality agreement he does not understand. As I have said, the Government’s criteria could not be clearer: we are selling a going concern, and we are not interested in proposals that do not respect that.

**Mr Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover) (Lab): When are the Government going to learn the lessons of the past when it comes to selling off public assets? I was here when Mrs Thatcher decided to sell off not only electricity but
gas, and then, finally, water. She said we were going to be a British share-owning democracy; that was the phrase. If we look at the list now, we find that some of those companies are owned in Germany and some are owned in France—and Macquarie, in Australia, bought the Birmingham toll road in a flash under a Tory Government.

Today we are being given another lecture on how the Minister will preserve the identity of the Green Investment Bank. History tells us that that is not possible. The bank will go to those who are bidding for it, and they will not be just in Britain. We are in the process of leaving the EU, and the chances are that somebody in the EU will be buying up British assets—although maybe not this one. Why don’t you learn the lessons?

Mr Hurd: Of course, one of the lessons of privatisation can be seen in the record levels of investment that have flowed into those organisations since they were privatised. I respect the hon. Gentleman’s experience, and I respect his sincerity and integrity, but I think he is totally wrong. All I will say is that I have a strong instinct that he would like British Telecom still to be a public company. I will leave it at that.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Minister is being very dismissive about speculation in the press. However, in the Financial Times the former Business Secretary, Vince Cable, has expressed concern about asset stripping, which he thinks was Macquarie’s objective, and Ed Davey, the former Energy and Climate Change Secretary, has said he considers it unlikely that the golden share would give Ministers enough clout to influence the bank’s investment strategy. Does the Minister not think that those two people—who, after all, were very much involved in the setting up of the bank—should be taken seriously and that we should act on their concerns?

Mr Hurd: Let me assure the hon. Lady that I take seriously all the concerns expressed by politicians past and present. It is important that through this urgent question the concerns that people have go from this House to potential bidders. I absolutely respect that and the individuals she mentions, but she says I am dismissing media speculation. I am not; I am just not commenting on it, because Ministers should not.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for reminding the House of the involvement of Liberal Democrats in initiating the Green Investment Bank. Can the Minister address the point raised by Sir Vince Cable in a letter to the Secretary of State that he remains unconvinced that the golden share will prevent the asset stripping of the company and therefore the original intentions of the green bank at its inception will be under threat?

Mr Hurd: There was a whole set of arrangements under which the special share solution was reached. It was debated through Parliament and settled through that process. My personal view is that it is a robust mechanism in itself, given its legal underpinning and the integrity and independence of the people selected to be the trustees and guardians of the process. I also come back to the fundamental point about the motivation of people who might want to buy this organisation, and the lens, criteria and disciplines we will have in evaluating their proposals and deciding whether or not to go ahead.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I, along with many colleagues, fought for the headquarters of the GIB to come to Edinburgh, where it now has more than 50 staff. Can the Minister tell us how many of those 50 staff will remain in Edinburgh after privatisation?

Many people have mentioned Vince Cable, but the legacy of Vince Cable as Business Secretary is the botched privatisation of Royal Mail, and that is why people have concerns about the GIB. The reason why we have concerns about the sale of assets is that by its nature the GIB invests in projects that the market will not touch, and therefore when those projects come on-stream they are much more profitable than normal projects, and if a preferred bidder then sells them off, they will sell them at great profit at the taxpayer’s expense.

Mr Hurd: I recognise the importance of the GIB to Edinburgh and have agreed to meet with the Members of Parliament for that area to discuss this process. It was entirely the right decision to locate part of the organisation there, and jobs are a part of what we want to hear from bidders; we want to hear about commitment to staff and the ongoing organisation.

As the hon. Gentleman has mentioned staff, let me place on record—I hope this is shared by Members across the House—the Government’s admiration and respect for the senior management team and all staff at the GIB, led by Lord Smith and Shaun Kingsbury, not just for what they have achieved in a relatively short period, but for the professionalism with which they have conducted themselves during this process.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The GIB has made substantial investments in Wales, most recently at Parc Adfer on Deeside in partnership with five local authorities. That model works pretty well. What guarantees can the Minister give that the new owners will continue to invest in that sort of way, and invest in the regions and nations of the UK rather than abroad, or possibly even in the golden south-east?

Mr Hurd: I return again to the main point about the questions we ask of bidders and the criteria we set. We want to achieve value for money; we are selling an ongoing concern, and we are determined to protect the integrity of the green purpose of the organisation, so we want to hear plans for the mobilisation of future investment and future capital. If models are working, I am sure that any bidders that are professional organisations that view the GIB as a business will have regard to them. That is what we want to hear from bidders, and we are at the point in the process where we are evaluating that. I am afraid I cannot say a great deal more beyond that.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): For the sake of transparency, can the Minister tell the House whether the GIB will be able to invest in fracking in the future?
Mr Hurd: The GIB will be required under this process to continue to respect the green purpose of the organisation, as set out in the articles of association. The degree to which investment proposals fit those criteria is a judgment to be made by management and the trustees that we have set up to be independent guardians of this process.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): When Vince Cable was legislating for the GIB, we got assurances that it would operate throughout the UK and support projects in Northern Ireland, and, importantly, would not be precluded from supporting cross-border projects. In fairness, one of its first investments was in Northern Ireland, and indeed in my constituency. However, many of us are concerned that the quality of its investments, reach and support will be lost in this sell-off. The Minister talks about integrity but that is not something people associate readily with the preferred bidder.

Mr Hurd: I am not going to comment on either the identity, character or values of any bidder at this stage, but I join the hon. Gentleman in recognising the good work done and the approach taken by the GIB in making sure its investments are spread across the country. I come back to the point that the motivation for our wanting the GIB to be in the private sector is to enable the business to grow and continue as an institution supporting investment in the UK green economy—the reference to the UK there is important.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I have been listening to the Minister rewrite the history of this Government’s appalling record in this area since 2010, but the GIB is the one success story, and it did have cross-party support. It does a magnificent job in supporting risky businesses that the rest of the market will not invest in. Without breaking any confidences around the ongoing negotiations, what guarantees can he give to this House that such risky investments will continue and that green investment will be in as good a state as now, or even better, in five years?

Mr Hurd: I am forced to repeat myself again. We have set up, in a process agreed through Parliament, a mechanism for protecting the integrity of the green purpose of the organisation. Beyond that, because we are serious about selling the bank as a going concern and want to see proceeds from the sale which investment proposals fit those criteria is a judgment to be made by management and the trustees that we have set up to be independent guardians of this process and the safeguards we have set up, which are protected in law and also by the criteria we have set in evaluating any bids. An important part of that is the forward intention and the intention to mobilise private capital in future.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Given Brexit and the uncertainty around it, is it not risky to sell the GIB at this time? How does the Minister envisage the Government ensuring that money will be available for the new innovative technologies that will be very important for areas such as mine in Hull and the Humber?

Mr Hurd: With respect to the hon. Lady, I am not entirely sure why Brexit is relevant to this process or to the decisions underpinning it. I agree 110% with her fundamental point about the need to invest in energy innovation, which is why our Department has a £500 million spending review portfolio dedicated to energy innovation that sits in a wider system of budgetary support for energy efficiency. The point she makes is entirely the right one: if we are to achieve what we want to achieve in decarbonisation and the transition to abundant sources of affordable low-carbon energy, we have to continue to innovate. The Government have a role in that, which is why budgetary support is available for it.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Green Investment Bank employs 55 people at its head office in my constituency. When it was set up in 2012, the then Business Secretary, Vince Cable, said: “Edinburgh has a lot going for it, both in terms of its asset management and finance sectors...also its proximity to green energy activity”.

He also said that choosing Edinburgh supported what he described as the “wider narrative” of binding Scotland into the UK in the run-up to the independence referendum.

Mr Hurd: I extend to the hon. and learned Lady the same offer that I made to a colleague earlier. Of course I will meet any colleagues whose constituencies may be affected by this process.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My question relates to the bidding process. What is the Minister’s view of the Macquarie bank, the potential bidder also known as the “cuff-linked buccaneers”? What is his opinion of the bank’s recent activity as the owner of Thames Water when it shipped off hundreds of millions in dividend payments to investors, paid minimal taxes and made disappointing investment in the network?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Lady has made her point, and she will know what point I am going to make. I cannot possibly comment on the identity of any bidder at this stage.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that, if green investments are as profitable, sound and attractive as their supporters have claimed in the House today, there should be no concern about the introduction of private finance for such projects? Indeed,
given the pressure on the public purse at the moment, is he not surprised that the House is not welcoming another source of funding for these activities?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the increased attractiveness of investment in renewable energy and low-carbon infrastructure. Governments in the UK and around the world have helped to facilitate that investment over the years and have seen dramatic falls in the cost of those technologies and the cost of the capital attached to them, making them a more investable proposition. This helps to reinforce our argument that this is the right time to liberate the GIB from state control to enable it to play a bigger part in the market.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The Aldersgate Group has highlighted the fact that the strength of the Green Investment Bank is that it has supported innovative projects throughout the UK that help us not only to tackle climate change but to drive down costs in the NHS and local government through energy efficiency. Will the Government heed the warning of the former Conservative Energy Minister, Lord Barker, that the bank is heading for break-up? Will they halt the sale to ensure that the bank remains a single public institution that is one step ahead of the market in the green projects that it backs?

Mr Hurd: Lord Barker is a good friend of mine for whom I have great respect. I would like to reassure him and, I hope, the House that the Government are not being naive. We are very clear about the criteria we have set, and we are in the process of a robust and rigorous evaluation of the proposals against those criteria.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The Minister has been very clear that the creation of a special share in the governance arrangements will protect the integrity of the bank’s green purpose and future investments, but may I press him for a little more detail on precisely how that special share would prevent successful bidders—Macquarie or others—from offloading current projects?

Mr Hurd: I want to make two points on that. First, the special share is being set up to protect the integrity of the green purpose, which is set out in the articles of association. It is there for all to read. Any proposed changes would need to be approved by the trustees, who have been selected independently. That is the mechanism involved. Secondly, I made the point earlier that I do not think it is sensible for investment institutions to hold on to assets forever. Part of their role is to manage a portfolio, and if they get attractive offers to divest assets we expect them to look at those offers seriously. We are interested in the plans for future investment, and in what this organisation could become under private ownership. That is what we are evaluating.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The Minister was right to say that there was cross-party support for the Green Investment Bank. There was, however, no such cross-party support—or support in Scotland—for the removal of support for carbon capture and wind energy. The fact that his party’s policies have been so disastrous in Scotland might explain why it does not do so well with the electorate there. Will he absolutely commit to all the projects that the Green Investment Bank has invested in—totalling hundreds of millions of pounds in Scotland—and assure us that, regardless of who the buyer is, they will continue?

Mr Hurd: I dispute the hon. Lady’s analysis. This country has made enormous progress in the shift to clean energy, and Scotland has been a big part of that. I point her to the recent commitment to the next round of contract for difference auctions and to the fact that last year I think we generated 25% of our energy from renewable sources. If she looks at the starting point of 2010, I think her argument falls away. On her point about continued investment in Scotland, I repeat what I have already said to colleagues.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): When taken alongside the cuts to renewable energy and the abolition of the Department of Energy and Climate Change last year, does not the sell-off of the Green Investment Bank show that the Government are no longer committed to being a world leader on climate change and sustainability?

Mr Hurd: No. I am afraid that that is total nonsense. If the hon. Lady wants proof points on that, I can tell her that one of the first actions of this Department, within days of the new Government being formed, was to put into law the fifth carbon budget. I am sure that she knows the detail of that, so she will know how ambitious it is. That was not the action of a Government who are shirking their responsibilities in relation to Britain’s role in mitigating climate change.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Is the Minister seeking assurances that 100% of the return on any sales of existing assets will be reinvested in green energy in the UK?

Mr Hurd: I think I have laboured to exhaustion the point that one of our priorities is to protect the integrity of the green purpose of the organisation. What we want to hear from bidders is their plan for future investment.
Point of Order

1.27 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Attorney General is making a speech today—indeed, he might already have made it—that will apparently pave the way for more military drone strikes against jihadis. This looks like, smells like and walks like a policy announcement. You, Mr Speaker, will be aware of the concerns that have been expressed in the House about the use of drones, about the lack of parliamentary scrutiny of their use and terms of engagement and about the risk—acknowledged by the Attorney General—of civilian casualties associated with their deployment. Given the controversial nature of drones, do you agree that any step change in their use—in other words, a policy shift—should be raised and debated in this House, not trailed in a speech?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his courtesy in giving me notice of his intention to raise this point of order. I certainly share his view that significant policy announcements by the Government should first be made in this House rather than outside it. I am not familiar with the contents of the Attorney General’s speech today, and I am not in a position to pronounce on whether it amounts to such an announcement of policy change. That said, the right hon. Gentleman has made his concern clear, and it will no doubt have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench. He can be sure that it will be conveyed to the relevant Ministers. The fairest thing I can say is: let us await events. I might add that as the right hon. Gentleman is a former Deputy Leader of the House, he will be well aware of—and personally closely familiar with—the instruments available for Back-Bench scrutiny of the Executive in this place.

Guardianship (Missing Persons)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.29 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a bill to make provision about the property and affairs of missing persons; and for connected purposes.

Sooner or later, all parents come to a certain realisation: our children are gradually slipping away from us—first crawling, then toddling, then running. The gentle, guiding hand is no longer needed as, with great delight, they discover the trick of balancing on two wheels and there they go pedalling off down the lane. There is that first day at school and then, a few years later, their hand starts to slip from ours when they get anywhere near the school gates. The teenage bedroom years are spent in self-imposed solitary confinement. Then comes the day when they cram all their stuff into the boot of the car and are off to university or the first job or to move into their first home.

All are bittersweet moments for most parents, because most of us know that our children will return. That is not so for Mr and Mrs Lawrence, parents of Claudia, a missing person since 18 March 2009—nearly eight years ago. We can never imagine the rising panic of those first minutes, hours and days when they realised something was wrong. Increasingly frantic calls and prayers go unanswered. Voicemails are never retrieved. Days turn into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years. Claudia’s fate is still unknown and still the subject of a police investigation. Many false hopes have been raised over the years. A lead? A prosecution? Nothing. Hopes raised; hopes dashed.

When a person disappears with no explanation, all the unanswered questions and difficult emotions leave their friends and family an unbelievable amount to cope with. Such desperate situations are worsened by the need to pick up the pieces of their lives, such as paying the mortgage, the rent, the car loan or insurance. Data protection and financial services contract law currently prevent even the closest relative from dealing with their finances. Mr Lawrence told me:

“Banks, insurance companies, mortgage lenders, all say, ‘We can’t accept your instructions, as you’re not our customer.’”

He went on to say:

“You’re at your lowest ebb and you have to fight all these problems... it’s terribly distressing.”

I believe that the vast majority of Members join this House because they want a better world for all our children, but there are some problems that we will never be able to solve. The flaws of mankind will always exist. Our police forces cannot prevent and solve all crimes, but we can help by easing the burden in a small but important way.

Under current English and Welsh law, when a person disappears their property is effectively left ownerless. No one has the legal authority to protect it on their behalf. That can lead to assets depreciating and property falling into disrepair and leaves those left behind without access to the resources that the missing person would have provided. The creation of a new status of guardian...
of the property and affairs of a missing person will fill that void and provide a sensible and helpful solution to the practical and financial difficulties faced by families and others following a disappearance.

The core of the proposal is that the court will have power to appoint a guardian on the application of a person with sufficient interest in the property and affairs of someone who is missing. The Bill provides that the person will generally have to have been missing for at least 90 days and that the guardian will take control of the property and financial affairs of the missing person and will have authority to act on behalf of the missing person. The guardian will be able to use the property of the missing person to help those left behind, will be accountable for his or her actions and will be supervised by the Office of the Public Guardian. The terms of the appointment will be for a period of up to four years but will be renewable by application to the court. The small fee involved will be payable by the missing person’s estate, so there will be little or no cost to the taxpayer. Crucially, the guardian will be required to act in the best interests of the missing person.

The proposals draw on the precedents of systems used in other countries, particularly certain states in Australia, and for deputies appointed under the Mental Capacity Act 2005. Many of us have benefited from similar powers in other difficult circumstances, such as when someone passes away or when someone close to us is no longer able to manage their own affairs due to dementia or other mental capacity issues. Quite simply, this Bill fills a gap in the law that few people know exists.

There are some 4,000 missing-people occurrences every year, and I thank everyone connected to Missing People, a support and campaign organisation, many of whom are involved because they have lost a loved one. I offer particular thanks to Mr and Mrs Lawrence, who have a deep connection with my constituency and have championed the cause of guardianship even though it can no longer help their situation. I am also grateful to Members from across the House and from the other place who have pledged their support for this motion, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) and for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) and the hon. Member for York Central (Rachel Maskell), who have done so much work on this topic already.

Missing People has many tragic stories of loved ones lost and those left behind having their hearts broken: husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and children. This is possibly one of those all too rare occasions when Members can make a huge difference simply by supporting this straightforward Bill.

I am grateful to the Justice Committee, for the work of the all-party parliamentary group on runaway and missing children and adults, and, crucially, to Ministers, who have pledged their full support for the Bill. All I respectfully ask for is the support of all hon. Members to guarantee the Bill’s passage through the House and into legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Kevin Hollinrake, Ann Coffey, Julian Sturdy, Christian Matheson, Sir David Amess, Christina Rees, Nigel Adams, David Warburton, Liz Saville Roberts, Rebecca Pow, Amanda Solloway and Dr Philippa Whitford present the Bill.

Kevin Hollinrake accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 February, and to be printed (Bill 120).
Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend makes her point eloquently and represents her constituents powerfully, as she always does in this place. I hope the Secretary of State will respond to some of those points.

Robert Flello: The Royal Stoke in my city is under intense pressure. No doubt, we will hear shortly from the Secretary of State that that is winter pressure. Winter has not really started. We have not really had a winter, yet we have been under this pressure for a few weeks but for months. The whole NHS system is broken. That is the problem that we really face.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: If I may, I will make a little progress. I promise to try to give way to as many hon. Members as possible.

I assure the Secretary of State that I will pass on the names of the trusts and hospitals that I highlighted, so perhaps he can look into them. Let us be absolutely clear that these desperate stories are not the words of politicians trying to score political points but are the honest, heartfelt, considered testimonies of doctors and clinicians on the frontline in our hospitals. They simply want to do the very best for their patients. Indeed, many clinicians want to speak out but feel that they cannot, which is why the remarks were made anonymously.

According to reports on the BBC’s “You and Yours”, the Prime Minister has sent instructions to hospital trust chiefs telling them not to speak out. I would be grateful if the Secretary of State verified those block to get into A&E. Major incidents were declared in A&E. Major incidents were declared in A&E. Major incidents were declared in A&E. Major incidents were declared in A&E because they were too full. Will the hon. Gentleman accept that this is not a new problem?

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): There is unprecedented pressure in Wirral, too. As recently as last week A&E attendances and GP referrals were massively up. Unprecedentedly, 84 additional beds are being laid on, and they are now full. Last week, all elective in-patient appointments were cancelled and ambulance turnaround times reached up to five hours. At Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister did not seem to think that there is a crisis in the NHS. If this is not a crisis, can my hon. Friend tell us what is?
raising these matters on behalf of our constituents, we are failing in our responsibility as Members of Parliament. We must never forget that this is not just about the staff in our NHS; it is about patients and their safety, which must always be our absolute priority.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for kindly giving way and for his important remarks. I echo his point that this is about patients across the country. My constituent’s mother, Angela, has been waiting for an acute mental health bed for more than a week. She was taken in an ambulance to A&E, but she could not be treated locally in Liverpool because the department was full. She was treated for the physical effects of her mental health condition in an ambulance and sent home. Her family are devastated and are concerned about her condition. Her story is one of countless stories across the country, and we need to recollect and focus on those stories today.

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend speaks passionately, as she always does, on behalf of her constituents and, more broadly, on mental health provision. Again, I hope the Secretary of State will respond to her on the specifics of that case.

My hon. Friend talks about patient care, and she is absolutely right. All of us, or at least many of us, in this House will have been getting stories from constituents telling us of their recent experiences in hospitals. I have been given a few, and I will share some heart-breaking examples with the House. Again, I will not reveal the names of trusts and hospitals, but I will pass them on to the Secretary of State after the debate.

Example No. 1 is of a mum of four children under 10 years old who has a secondary tumour in her liver. She was due to go into hospital this Thursday to have the tumour removed. Her surgery has been delayed for at least two weeks, so that the hospital could cope with the winter crisis and because no beds are available. She has not yet been given a new date.

Someone else got in touch with me this morning. Their wife has been on the waiting list for a knee replacement since April last year. An appointment for early December was cancelled owing to the hospital being on black alert. A few weeks later, the hospital phoned with an appointment for today, which was cancelled yesterday.

Again, these patients are not trying to score political points or to politicise matters. They are decent, hard-working people who are simply desperate for something to be done.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Conservative Members care deeply about patients. I personally follow up on the individual stories and challenges experienced by my constituents, but the hon. Gentleman has surely seen the guidance this week from NHS Providers, which is not always a friend of the Government, that said that we need to be careful when extrapolating from individual incidents in hospitals that are under particular pressure and implying that they constitute a wider trend. Yes, times are tough in the NHS, and there are winter pressures, but he should not make inappropriate use of individual stories.

Jonathan Ashworth: The hon. Lady should be careful. I will be charitable, but she would not want to give the impression that she is dismissing the stories and examples that I am highlighting. NHS Providers has continually warned of the chronic underfunding of the NHS under this Government, and it has continually warned that, head for head, spending in this country will fall next year. If she wants to quote NHS Providers, she should quote all the facts from NHS Providers.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is telling some shocking stories. Was he as shocked as I was to hear Government Members shouting at and heckling the Leader of the Opposition during Prime Minister’s questions? They shouted, “What about Wales?” Does my hon. Friend agree that there is actually a stark contrast in Wales? Welsh Labour is delivering 6% more funding than in England for the NHS and social care. We have brand new hospitals, including in my constituency, and an £80 million new treatment fund was announced yesterday to allow better access to treatments.

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about Wales. As a Member for Cardiff, he understands what is happening in the Welsh health service. I wish Conservative Members understood that better.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but I will then make some progress.

Mr Clarke: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that every winter, for as long as I can recall, we have had a winter crisis in the NHS? It usually happens after Christmas. In winter the demands on the service become unpredictable, infections spread and the NHS starts losing staff. There are bound to be parts of the system that come under very real strain, and no one is trying to minimise the fact that they do. Apart from just producing this year’s crop of stories of very unfortunate incidents in various places, does he have any policy proposal at all, apart from simply spending more money wherever the reports are coming from?

Jonathan Ashworth: I am very grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, who is a very experienced parliamentarian, for his intervention, but he will know that this is one of the worst winters for probably 20 years. He casually suggests that this happens every year, but I remember the years of a Labour Government when it did not happen. I remember the years of a Labour Government when we went further than the financial settlements he delivered as Chancellor of the Exchequer and were more than doubling the money going into the NHS—and tripling it in cash terms.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: If I may, I would like to make a bit of progress. I promise my hon. Friends, and indeed Conservative Members, that I will try to give way as much as possible, but I am very aware that many Members have put in to speak.
We are all becoming familiar—far too familiar perhaps—with the grim statistics: in December, 50 of the 152 English hospital trusts called for urgent action to cope with demand; the number of patients being turned away from A&E and sent to other hospitals is at a record high; A&E departments have turned patients away more than 140 times; and 15 hospitals ran out of beds in one day in December. Last night, the BBC revealed that leaked documents from NHS Improvement showed that there were more than 18,000 trolley waits of four hours or more; that almost a quarter of patients waited longer than four hours in A&E last week, with just one hospital—just one—hitting its target; and that since the start of December, hospitals have seen only 82.3% of patients who attended A&E within the four-hour target. We will return to the four-hour target in a few moments.

Ministers can try to deny what is going on, but they cannot deny these facts about what is happening this winter in the NHS on their watch. We know that what happens in the NHS in the winter is a signifier of a wider crisis, because across the piece bed occupancy levels now routinely exceed the recommended maximum level of 85%—often to levels higher than 95%. As I have said, the NHS is going through the largest financial squeeze in its history. Indeed, the former Secretary of State, Lord Lansley, said that five years of NHS austerity had been planned for, but having 10 years of it was never expected. We have seen £4.6 billion cut from social care budgets—

**Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con)** rose—

**Jonathan Ashworth**: I will give way in a moment. As the King’s Fund said, the reason there is a problem is quite simply because there is a “mismatch between funding and activity” affecting our hospitals. The response of Ministers, from the Prime Minister downwards, has been one of utter complacency. The Secretary of State told “Sky News” on Monday that things had only been “falling over in a couple of places”.

When he came to the House on Monday to make his statement, he did not commit to extra emergency funding for social care and he did not promise that the financial settlements would be reassessed in the March Budget. It is worse than that, because while he was making his statement, his spin doctors were telling the Health Service Journal—this on the day when the winter crisis is leading the news and he is making a statement in the House—and letting it be known that there is “no prospect” of “additional funding to support emergency care any time before the next election.”

So there is nothing for social care, nothing for emergency care, nothing to tackle understaffing and nothing to tackle underfunding—well thank you very much. What did we get as a response? We got a downgrade of the four-hour A&E target.

**The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt) indicated dissent.**

**Jonathan Ashworth**: The Secretary of State shakes his head and says, “Nonsense”, but let me remind him of what he said in the House on Monday:

“we need to have an honest discussion with the public about the purpose of A&E departments.”

He began by saying he wanted to provoke a discussion. He has certainly provoked a backlash, not least by blaming the public, it seems, for turning up at A&E departments. He went on to say that the four-hour target

“is a promise to sort out all urgent health problems within four hours”,

but he added a little clarification, continuing:

“but not all health problems, however minor.”—[Official Report, 9 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 38.]

That is what he said in the House, and now we have seen the letter from NHS Improvement to trusts a few weeks ago, which talks of “broadening our oversight of A&E”.

On the four-hour standard, it said that it believed

“there is merit in broadening our oversight approach, beyond a single metric”.

So in the interests of that discussion the Secretary of State wants to engage in, perhaps he can answer our questions, although I know he avoided the questions on Sky yesterday. Does he recall that in 2015, when he asked Sir Bruce Keogh to review these matters on waiting times, Sir Bruce said:

“The A&E standard has been an important means of ensuring people who need it get rapid access to urgent and emergency care and we must not lose this focus”?

**Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con)** rose—

**Jonathan Ashworth**: I will give way in a few moments. Sir Bruce continued:

“I do not consider that there is a case for changing the 4 hour standard at this time.”

Does the Secretary of State still agree with Bruce Keogh? If he does, why did he make his remarks on Monday about needing to have a discussion about the future of the A&E standard?

**Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con)** rose—

**Jonathan Ashworth**: I will give way in a few moments.

If the Secretary of State wants to lead a discussion about the future of the four-hour A&E standard, will he tell us what discussions he has had with the Royal College of Emergency Medicine? It argues that the four-hour standard is a vital measure of performance and safety, and believes the standard should apply to at least 95% of all patients attending emergency departments. If he says he is still committed to that four-hour standard, is he still committed to maintaining it at 95%?

**Robert Flello**: Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Jonathan Ashworth**: My hon. Friend has had one bite of the cherry, so if he does not mind I shall make a little progress and then I will do my best to get as many people in as possible.

Does the Secretary of State agree—

**Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con)** rose—

**Jonathan Ashworth**: I will give way in a few moments.
Does the Secretary of State agree that the four-hour standard is a reasonable proxy for patient safety? Does he agree that every breach of the four-hour standard can be regarded as a potentially elevated risk?

Seema Kennedy: If the hon. Gentleman were to read the Government amendment, he would see that the Secretary of State says he “supports and endorses” the 95% target for A&E waiting times.

Jonathan Ashworth: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the work she is doing on tackling loneliness. I know that all Labour Members very much appreciate the work she is doing on that, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). The Government amendment is conspicuous in not referring to all patients.

The Secretary of State did distinguish between “urgent” and “minor”[ Interruption. ] The hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) says I should get a haircut. Did he say that? No? I beg his pardon, but he heckles so much it is sometimes difficult to hear what he is saying. Can the Secretary of State tell us how he would define the difference between urgent and minor care for instances relating to this four-hour standard? Can he tell us what will be the minimum severity of physical injury or other medical problem which will be needed for a patient to qualify for access to an A&E?

How will we determine these new access standards? How quickly will they be available? Will patients with visible injuries be exempt from a new triage system? If so, which injuries will qualify? If the Secretary of State is not moving away from this four-hour standard, he needs to clarify matters urgently, because the impression has been given that he is doing so.[ Interruption. ] Not by me, but by his own remarks in the House on Monday. If he is not moving away from that standard, will he guarantee that he will not shift away at all from it throughout this Parliament and that it will remain at its current rate?

Mr Harper: I, too, was in the Chamber on Monday and I listened carefully to the Secretary of State then. He was challenged by the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) on the target and was asked whether he was watering it down. He said explicitly that “far from watering down” he was recommitting the Government to it. He was generous to the Labour party in saying that it was one of the best things the NHS did. I think that was very clear.

Jonathan Ashworth: Let me say to the former Chief Whip that the Secretary of State said that “we need to be clear that it is a promise to sort out all urgent health problems within four hours, but not all health problems, however minor.”—[Official Report, 9 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 38.]

The Secretary of State did not need to come to the House to make those remarks and set these various horses running, so the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) should make his objections not to me, but to the Secretary of State—

Several hon. Members rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I am going to move on a little. If the Secretary of State is not abandoning the four-hour standard, as he insists he is not, we look forward to hearing him make that absolutely clear. He also said and has implied that we need to educate the public better, so that they do not turn up at A&E departments.

That was the implication of his remarks on Monday. Will he tell us how he is going to do that? What will be the cost implications of explaining to the public that they must not turn up at A&E departments? Are we expecting to see a large advertising campaign? Will the cost fall on local authorities’ public health budgets, which have already been cut? Will local authorities be given more resources for this new public education campaign?

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point. The key similarity is that back in 1997, when Labour took over, the health service was in crisis, and it is again today. Is not part of the problem that people are having to go to A&E because they cannot get in to see their GP?

Jonathan Ashworth: Absolutely. It is so difficult to get to a GP, which is why there are all these pressures on our A&Es. Of course, it is only going to get worse, because this year we are going to see cuts to community pharmacies—3,000 will be lost from our towns and streets because of the cuts that are being pursued. Let us not forget that the figure of 3,000 community pharmacies being lost was what the previous Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), told MPs.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way one last time, but then I really must make some progress.

Mrs Main: I led a debate in Westminster Hall this morning on pharmacies and integrated services in the NHS, and not one Back-Bench Labour MP could be bothered to take part—not one!

Jonathan Ashworth: Labour MPs have been raising these matters in this House for weeks, including at urgent questions and in Opposition day debates.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I presume what the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) meant to say was that two Back-Bench Labour Members took part in the debate—I was one of them. Does my hon. Friend agree that the point about community pharmacies, GPs and investment in social care is that they save the Government money? That is why they should invest in them now to take pressure off A&Es.
Jonathan Ashworth: I thank my hon. Friend for correcting the record about that debate in Westminster Hall.

The Secretary of State denies that he is going to water down the A&E target; we welcome that, but we will watch carefully to ensure that he does not sneakily water it down throughout the remaining years of the Parliament. Will he tell us what he expects to happen next as we go through the winter? Weather warnings have been issued, and we could be heading for a cold snap. Will he update us on what urgent preparations he is putting in place to ensure that the NHS can cope? Is the NHS prepared for a flu outbreak, and what is his assessment of whether overstretched hospitals will be able to cope if there is one? It appears that, so far, Ministers have been burying their heads in the sand, but that will no longer do.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) both made the point that the issues in the NHS are historical. On Radio 4 this morning the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) said he accepted that the previous Labour Government had not spent the right amount of money on social care. Will the hon. Gentleman accept that these issues are historical—they are not new—and that Labour does not have all the answers?

Jonathan Ashworth: The hon. Lady refers to history; under this Government the NHS is going through the largest financial squeeze in its history. When we had a Labour Government, we more than doubled investment into the NHS.

Tom Pursglove: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: Because he is a Member from the east Midlands, I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman from Corby.

Tom Pursglove: I agree with the shadow Secretary of State that we need to have an honest debate, so does he accept that he stood on a general election manifesto that would have seen Labour spend billions less on our national health service? Will he set out for the House exactly what NHS services he would be spending less on now?

Jonathan Ashworth: We stood on a manifesto that would have delivered more doctors and nurses for our NHS; the hon. Gentleman stood on a manifesto that said the Conservatives would cut the deficit and not the NHS. They are cutting the NHS and failing on the deficit.

I have a few direct questions for the Secretary of State about Royal Worcestershire hospital. I was grateful for his remarks on Monday, but I want to press him further. It has been reported that NHS England was warned of a bed crisis as early as 22 December. Will he update the House on what urgent meetings he is having on Royal Worcestershire? When will we be closer to knowing the outcome of an inquiry? In that context, there is a proposal in the sustainability and transformation plan for the Worcestershire area for a significant reduction in the number of acute beds. The Secretary of State will say that these are local plans and so on, but in the context of the issues in Worcestershire, will he comment on whether he thinks that is the right proposal to follow?

On STPs more generally, the NHS is going through a winter crisis, and it is about to go through another top-down reorganisation—[Interruption.] Someone says it is bottom-up, but it is not; we know it is coming from the top. Those making the STPs are being told that they have to fill a financial gap of £21.764 billion—that is the reality that STPs throughout the country now have to face. We have seen the plans, so we know that is going to mean a number of community hospitals being closed, a number of A&Es being downgraded, and acute beds being lost.

In places such as Devon, where the STP talks of an over-reliance on hospital beds, the implication is that beds will be lost. Closures and downgrades are being considered throughout Somerset, with their priority list of vulnerable services including maternity and paediatrics. In London, a city with the very worst health inequalities, the STPs are expected to deliver better health outcomes for the city’s growing 10 million residents with £4.3 billion less to spend. Will the Secretary of State explain to the House how he expects the NHS to perform in future winters, when we have a growing elderly population and STPs are pursuing multibillion-pound cuts to beds, A&Es and wider services?

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I was recently briefed by an excellent and well-respected local GP and a clinical psychiatrist, who were the authors of our county’s STP. Will the shadow Secretary of State explain how on earth they are responsible for a top-down reorganisation?

Jonathan Ashworth: Because they were being told by NHS England, which was in turn told by the Secretary of State.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) mentioned infections spreading in the NHS. Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the infection that is spreading on the Government Benches? It is the infection of arrogance, complacency and being completely out of touch with the patients and their families who are suffering under the current crisis. We are witnessing inaction on an epic scale.

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend makes his point extremely well, although I would not want to be so mean about the Secretary of State—[HON. MEMBERS: “Go on!”] No, I am not going to be mean about the Secretary of State.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): In the past few moments, we have heard the ludicrous suggestion that Labour did not deliver on either spending or performance, but in fact our track record was excellent. That is not just my opinion; the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, said in 2011:

“I refuse to go back to the days when people had to wait for hours on end to be seen in A&E, or months and months to have surgery done. So let me be absolutely clear: we won’t.”
He knew that Labour had a good record and that the NHS used to be good; why will these Tories not admit it?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Indeed, I remember, when we were in government, shadow Health Secretaries standing at this Dispatch Box opposing every penny piece of money that Labour was putting into the NHS. I remember a shadow Health Secretary, who now sits in the Cabinet as the Secretary of State for International Trade, standing at this Dispatch Box and saying that the A&E target was “indecent.” That was the Tories’ attitude when we were in government, so it is no wonder that we are sceptical about the Government’s intentions for the A&E target when we look at their history.

Henry Smith: The shadow Secretary of State is talking about the Labour record on the NHS. Does he recall Labour closing not only maternity at Crawley hospital, but accident and emergency in 2005?

Jonathan Ashworth: I do not have the details of the Sussex STP to hand, but presumably if it contains any suggested closures the hon. Gentleman will be campaigning against them and knocking on the door of the Secretary of State, if those remarks are an indication of his point of view on these matters.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is saying that everything was rosy under Labour, but he should remember that it was 10 years ago when the scandal at Mid Staffs broke, in which hundreds more elderly patients died than was projected. It was a terrible scandal and he should remember that. What our shadow team was doing at the time was holding the Labour Government to account.

Jonathan Ashworth: I take all deaths in hospitals seriously. My commitment to patient safety is unwavering. I will continue to raise matters, whether it is at Royal Worcestershire or elsewhere, but not in a partisan way with the Secretary of State—[Interruption.] I was not being partisan when I was asking questions about the Royal Worcestershire. The Government Whip, the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), really needs to calm down. I will raise these matters, because that is the responsible thing to do. It is unbecoming to play politics with patients in that way.

Culpability for the state that the NHS is in today lies at the door of Downing Street. The Government promised to protect the NHS and to cut the deficit, and they have not done so. The Government waste billions, pushing the NHS in the direction of fragmentation and greater outsourcing, while ignoring the ever-lengthening queues of the sick and the elderly in all our constituencies.

Yesterday, we saw the Secretary of State on Sky losing his ministerial car and being chased down the street. It was his whole approach laid bare: not a clue where he is going: nothing to say; and not facing up to the problems. Last year, he blamed the junior doctors. On Monday, he blamed the patients. Today, he blames Simon Stevens. Tomorrow, he will blame the weather. It is time that the Health Secretary started pointing the finger at himself and not at everybody else. The NHS is in crisis, and Ministers are in denial. We say to the Government, on behalf of patients, their families and NHS staff, please get a grip. I commend our motion to the House.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” in line 1 to the end and add: “commends NHS staff for their hard work in ensuring record numbers of patients are being seen in A&E; supports and endorses the target for 95 per cent of patients using A&E to be seen and discharged or admitted within four hours; welcomes the Government’s support for the Five Year Forward View, the NHS’s own plan to reduce pressure on hospitals by expanding community provision; notes that improvements to 111 and ensuring evening and weekend access to GPs, already covering 17 million people, will further help to relieve that pressure; and believes that funding for the NHS and social care is underpinned by the maintenance of a strong economy, which under this administration is now the fastest growing in the G7.”

I thank the shadow Health Secretary for bringing this afternoon’s debate to the House. He is right to draw attention to the pressures in the NHS, but, regrettably, I will have to spend much of my time correcting some totally inaccurate assertions that he has made, and that is a shame. This is an important debate for our constituents—for his and for mine—and for the NHS. The country deserves a proper debate, but that is difficult when we are given misinformation at a time when the NHS is under sustained pressure.

I am also very pleased to see the Leader of the Opposition in his place. I think that he has become rather a fan of my parliamentary appearances—[Interruption.] It is a Jeremy thing, he says—if only. I wish to address one part of my speech to him, because it is an area of policy for which he is perhaps more personally responsible.

Winter is always a challenging period, and I want to repeat the thanks of the shadow Health Secretary and the thanks that I gave on Monday to NHS staff. According to NHS Improvement, on the Tuesday after Christmas the NHS had its busiest day ever. Earlier in December, it treated a record number of patients within four hours. Overall, as the Prime Minister said this morning, we are seeing 2,500 more patients within the four-hour standard every single day compared with what happened in 2010. As we discussed on Monday, the NHS made record numbers of preparations for this winter, because it is always a difficult time, including having 3,000 more nurses and 1,600 more doctors in full-time employment.

Let me address what the shadow Health Secretary said with regard to Worcestershire. I met colleagues from Worcestershire on Monday. A huge number of actions are now being taken, but we must say right up front that it is totally unacceptable for anyone to wait 35 hours on a trolley and that we expect the hospital to ensure that that does not happen again. There are plans in place to open additional bed capacity this week. We have already had capacity made available by Worcester Community Trust to support the flow. The trust has deployed its chief operating officer on the task of facilitating discharges. The trust is in special measures, so we have a big management change, and a new chief executive will be starting later on in the spring.
What is wrong with what the shadow Health Secretary has just said is the suggestion that winter problems are entirely unusual. As my right hon. and learned Friend for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said, the NHS had difficult winters in 1999, 2008, and 2009. He remembers difficult winters from his time as Health Secretary, but there are things that are different today. One of them is that, compared with six years ago, we have 340,000 more over-80s, many of whom are highly vulnerable or have dementia. We know that when people of that age go to an A&E at this time of year, there is an 80% chance that they will be admitted to hospital.

Derek Twigg: The Secretary of State talks about correcting the points that have been made so that the House has the right information. May I repeat the question that I asked him on Monday? What are the latest figures—he should have them up to this week—for the number of people who could be discharged but have to remain in hospital because there is no community support available for them? Can he give us that figure now? He said that he would write to me, but he must know that figure now.

Mr Hunt: Last year, on average, it involved around 7,000 beds, which is far too many. That is why the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government announced in December a new package of support worth around £400 million—

Derek Twigg rose—

Mr Hunt: Let me answer the hon. Gentleman’s question. I said that I would write to him, and I will do so. He may have noticed that there are other issues that we are dealing with, which is why I may not have had time to sign the letter. The £400 million extra for local authorities over the next two years will make a significant difference and he should recognise that.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): I am attending this debate because there will be constituents in Bedford and Kent who are concerned about the headlines that they have read. I am pleased that the Secretary of State will correct some of the points that have been made. What our constituents want to know is what is being done, or what should be done. I listened for 33 minutes to the shadow Secretary of State—the Labour spokesman on the NHS—on this issue, and there was not a single new idea other than spending money. Will my right hon. Friend please provide some practical answers to the problems that are being raised in the papers?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, which is why I will be talking later about our solutions to these problems.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hunt: I will give way, but first I want to make some progress.

I want to talk about something else that is different in our A&E departments today compared with six years ago. Although we are sticking to the four-hour target, we also insist on much higher standards of safety and quality.

On Monday, I congratulated Labour on the introduction of the four-hour target—I support it—but we should also remember that four years after that standard was introduced, we started to see some horrific problems at Mid Staffs, many of which were in the A&E department. Some were caused because people thought they would be fired if they missed the target. Robert Francis said that the failures at Mid Staffs were “in part the consequence of allowing a focus on reaching national access targets.”

Therefore, although we retain targets, we will not allow them to be followed slavishly in a way that damages patient care.

Derek Twigg: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Hunt: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman. There are many other Members who want to intervene.

That is why we have a new inspection regime that makes it harder to cut corners in the way that used to happen when beds were not being washed, there was poor infection control and ambulances were being used as waiting rooms.

Toby Perkins: I am grateful to the Health Secretary for outlining some of the steps that he is taking in the face of this immediate emergency. Does he also recognise that the major cause of the problems in A&E is simply a lack of staff? Consequently, does he regret the huge cuts to training budgets in 2010, 2011 and 2012, which are having a real impact now on the number of nurses and doctors in our NHS?

Mr Hunt: I agree that staff numbers are critical, but we have, since 2010, 1,500 more doctors in our A&E departments and 600 more consultants. Across the NHS, we have more than 11,000 additional doctors, so we do recognise the pressures that the NHS faces. Indeed, we have 1,600 more doctors than this time last year, so we are doing a great deal to solve the problem.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to learn best practice in the NHS? The hospitals that manage to integrate health and social care, such as those in Wigan and Salford which have managed to create those beds, are providing examples of best practice from which the whole NHS can learn.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is a mistake in this debate to try—as I understand Opposition parties want to do—to boil this all down to the issue of Government funding when there is actually a lot of variability in the country. At this time of year, which is always difficult, some hospitals are doing superbly well in extremely challenging circumstances. We have just heard about some of the hospitals that are doing well, and there are a number of them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hunt: I will give way to as many people as I can, but I also want to address the substantive points made by the shadow Health Secretary. He talked about the four-hour target. In his motion and his speech, he made
the totally spurious suggestion that we are not committed to that target. I remind him what my right hon. Friend the former Chief Whip quoted me as saying on Monday. I did not just commit the Government to the target; I said that it was one of the best things that the NHS does. However, I also said that we need to find different ways to offer treatment to people who do not need to be in A&E. It is hardly rocket science. When there is pressure in A&E, it is sensible—indeed, I would argue that it is the duty of the Health Secretary—to suggest that people who can relieve pressure on A&E by using other facilities do so.

**Henry Smith**: Just yesterday at Crawley hospital, an acute care unit was opened, which is designed precisely to ensure that people who do not need to attend A&E are properly directed to the most appropriate care, which is good for them as individual patients and good for the whole system.

**Mr Hunt**: That is absolutely right. To back up my hon. Friend’s point, yesterday’s OECD report said that in Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Italy and Portugal, at least 20% of A&E visits are inappropriate. NHS England’s figure is up to 30%, which is why we need the public’s help to relieve pressure and that is what I meant when I talked about an honest discussion.

**Luciana Berger**: The Secretary of State told us just a moment ago that there are now over 300,000 more people over the age of 80. Surely he would have known that information from census and Office for National Statistics data when his Government took over seven years ago, so why is it that we are now seeing on the front pages of our newspapers that one in four of our A&E wards is unsafe and that we have so many challenges across the country, including in my constituency?

**Mr Hunt**: We did know that information and that is why we thought it was totally irresponsible to want to cut the NHS budget in 2010, and not to back the NHS’s own plan in 2015. As a result, we have 11,000 more doctors. In the hon. Lady’s local hospital, 243 more people are being treated within four hours every single day.

**Owen Smith** (Pontypridd) (Lab): We have to persuade those people not in medical emergencies to use other parts of the system to get the help they need. I did not actually say that, but I will tell the House who did. It was the then Labour Health Minister in Wales, Mark Drakeford, in January 2015. Frankly, when the NHS is under such pressure, it is totally irresponsible for the Labour party to criticise the Health Secretary in England for saying exactly the same thing that a Labour Health Minister in Wales also says.

**Owen Smith**: Will the Secretary of State give way to a Welshman?

**Mr Hunt**: I would be privileged and honoured to give way to a Welshman.

**Owen Smith**: The Secretary of State has sowed confusion in the House and in the country on this question this week, and he is doing so again today. If he is saying the same as my friend the former Health Minister in Wales—that we want to divert people who do not need to go to A&E from doing so—I am sure that everybody in this House would support him. But we suspect that he is saying that the four-hour wait target will be disappplied to some people turning up to A&E, and that is the downgrading he is talking about. If that is the case, the Secretary of State should come clean, and he should be clear about whose job it will be to disapply the target to some people with minor ailments.

**Mr Hunt**: I did not say that because we are not going to do it. As we have had an intervention from a Welshman, let me tell the hon. Gentleman a rather inconvenient truth about what is happening in Wales. Last year, A&E performance in Wales was 10% lower than in England, and Wales has not hit the A&E target for eight years. We will not let that happen in England.

I noticed that the shadow Health Secretary quoted a number of people, but one that he did not quote was the Royal College of Emergency Medicine. I wonder whether that was because of what it said about Wales this week. It said:

“Emergency care in Wales is in a state of crisis...Performance is as bad, if not worse, as England, in some areas.”

There we have it: in the areas in which Labour is in control, these problems are worse.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Hunt**: Let me make my point. I do not say that to make a political point, but to show that it is patently ridiculous to try to play politics when there are winter pressures in the NHS. This happens in the whole NHS—in Wales as well as in England.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Hunt**: I want to make some progress but I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who is a serving nurse.

**Maria Caulfield**: May I reiterate the Secretary of State’s point about the four-hour target? During the Labour Government, I was working in the NHS. Significant pressure was put on us by managers to meet the four-hour target, negating clinical need. Patients were often prioritised according to meeting the target, rather than by clinical need. That was a disgrace.

**Mr Hunt**: That is exactly the problem we had with Mid Staffs. We had a culture in the NHS where people were hitting the target and missing the point. Although targets are important management tools in all organisations, it is important that they are followed in a sensible way that puts the interests of patients first.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Hunt**: I would just like to make another point about Wales while we have the privilege of having someone here who aspired to lead the Labour party, as the current leader of the Labour party is no longer in his place.

"We have to persuade those people not in medical emergencies to use other parts of the system to get the help they need"
Something that Wales and England have in common is the need to ensure that, if we want alternatives to A&E, people are able to see their GPs. I have said many times that people wait too long to see their GPs. In all honesty, I think that the GP contract changes in 2004 were a disaster. The result was that 90% of GPs opted out of out-of-hours care. But we have been putting that right. Now 17 million people in England—about 30% of the population—have access to weekend and evening GP appointments. More than that, we have committed to a 14% real-terms increase in the GP budget by the end of this Parliament. That is an extra £2.4 billion and we expect that to mean an extra 5,000 doctors working in general practice.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I can see Wales from my constituency, to continue the theme. I received an email this morning from a very distressed senior NHS manager, who says:

“I truly despair that there will not be an NHS this time next year”—[Interruption:]
You need to listen on the Government Benches, and understand what your Secretary of State is doing to the health service. I will give a precis of what my constituent is talking about.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. The hon. Lady will resume her seat. First, when she says “you”, she is addressing the Chair. Secondly, she is making an intervention. There are 33 Members who wish to speak in this very important debate. If she can keep her intervention very brief, I will let her continue.

Margaret Greenwood: Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. I should not have used the word “you.”

My constituent has written to me saying:

“The NHS is in crisis, the government knows this, CCGs have failed, foundation trusts are failing. GPs are on their knees. So they’re”—

the Government—

“handing it back to local areas and saying, ‘you fix it, and by the way there’s no money.’ It’s a whole system reorganisation”,

and there is no money.

Mr Hunt: All I would say is that I hope that people in the NHS do not listen too much to what the Labour party says about the state of the NHS and that they listen to what the Government are saying, which gives a much more accurate picture, as I will go on to explain.

Neil Coyle: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Hunt: I will make some progress before giving way again.

The second part of the motion talks about funding. There is no doubt at all that we will need to look after 1 million more over-65s in five years’ time and we will need to continue to increase investment in the NHS and social care system. That is happening with an extra £3.8 billion going into the NHS this year. Can I just remind Labour Members that that is £1.3 billion more than they promised when they stood for election last year? I just say this: it is not enough to talk about extra funding—you have to actually deliver it. Labour Members have to answer to their constituents as to why, for two elections in a row, they have promised less money for the NHS than the Conservatives, and why, in the one area where they are responsible for the NHS, they have cut funding.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): The Secretary of State is taking exactly the right, measured tone, which was absent earlier in the debate. We recognise that many trusts are under financial pressures, but some of these situations are historic, and in my area they reflect very poor private finance initiative contracts, which were thrust on them in a Gordon Brown sleight of hand.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right. What we did not hear from the Labour party is that, in 2010, we inherited a £70 billion PFI overhang, which is making it incredibly difficult for hospitals to recruit enough staff, because they are having to pay so much money to financiers.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): An example of how we are spending money practically on the ground to make sure patients get a better deal is in Lincolnshire, where, because there is a shortage of GPs, the local health authority is offering £20,000 as a golden hello to new GPs. Is that not the way to manage resources, to attract the best medical talent into our areas and to help ensure that patients get the best care?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I talked about these issues when I visited her in her constituency. The truth is that, to solve this problem, we are going to have to have a dramatic increase in the number of people working in general practice, which is why we are funding the second biggest increase in the number of GPs in the NHS’s history.

It is a great shame that the Leader of the Opposition is not here, because this is the bit that I wanted to address to him—his proposal to put extra funding into the NHS by scrapping the corporation tax cuts. That reveals, I am afraid, a fundamental misunderstanding of how we fund the NHS. Corporation taxes are being cut so that we can boost jobs, strengthen the economy and fund the NHS. The reason we have been able to protect and increase funding in the NHS in the last six years, when the Labour party was not willing to do so, is precisely that we have created 2 million jobs and given this country the fastest growing economy in the G7, and that is even more important post-Brexit. To risk that growth, which is what the Labour party’s proposal would do, would not just risk funding for the NHS, but be dangerous for the economy and mortally dangerous for the NHS.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I just want to understand exactly what the Secretary of State was saying on Monday about the four-hour A&E target. Is it conceivable that some of the people who are currently within the A&E target will, at some stage, fall outside the A&E target?

Mr Hunt: I am committed to people using A&Es falling within the four-hour target, but I also think that we need to be much more effective at diverting people who do not need to go to A&E to other places, as is happening in Wales, as is happening in Scotland and which, frankly, is the only sensible thing to do.
However, going back to the funding issue, I just want to make this point: for all the heat in this Chamber in debates on the NHS, probably the biggest difference between the two sides of the House is not on NHS policy but on the ability to deliver the strong economy that the NHS needs to give it the funding that it requires. I am afraid that the proposals in the motion today reveal that divide even more starkly.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hunt: I will give way on funding one more time.

Mr Harper: We had the debate at the election about the need for a strong economy to pay for the NHS, and the public decided that the Conservative party won that argument. May I give my right hon. Friend another example, from yesterday, from his friend Jeremy—the Leader of the Opposition? He proposed to cap high pay, but the top 1% of taxpayers pay 27% of income tax revenues. That proposal would cut the funding available to the NHS and damage the services that hard-working members of staff produce.

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend is right. That is the worst kind of gesture politics, because it may get the Leader of the Opposition a few votes or a few more Momentum supporters, but it would damage the NHS.

Helen Whately: Does my right hon. Friend agree that Opposition Members, rather than making meaningless and totally unfunded promises of more money for the NHS, contrary to their manifesto back in 2015, would do better to recognise demographic changes, such as the ageing population, and the need for the NHS to change, and support the locally developed plans for change in the national health service—the sustainability and transformation plans?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I think people in the country will find it hugely ironic that the party that spent so much energy in the last Parliament campaigning against top-down reorganisations is now campaigning against locally driven changes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hunt: I will give way a couple more times, and then I am going to conclude my comments.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): As the Government often point out, they want to hand decisions to local groups, but could the Secretary of State explain to worried patients in the south and west of Cumbria why local health services are suggesting the changes to A&E in the west and potentially the south? I know he has spent a lot of time looking at this area.

Mr Hunt: First, I would like to use this moment to congratulate the hon. Gentleman’s local trust on coming out of special measures last year and on the progress it is making. In a way, that is the answer to his point. His local trust was in special measures, and North Cumbria is still in special measures. We had some profound worries about patient care in both trusts, and we still do in the North Cumbria trust. That is why the status quo is not an option, but we understand the concerns of his constituents and many others about some of the proposals being made.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What does the Secretary of State make of the talk among professionals at the moment about the potential for a flu epidemic? What does he make of the comments by the doctor who wrote to me on Sunday saying that she is extremely concerned that staff are too busy to isolate patients who are coming in—who need oxygen—so that others do not potentially catch flu?

Mr Hunt: There is a concern at the moment about a growth in respiratory infections, and that is causing capacity constraints. We are watching what is happening on flu very carefully, but we have a record 13 million people vaccinated against flu, and I hope that that will put the NHS in a good position.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Money is of course important, but may I support the Health Secretary in not viewing these issues solely through that lens? My local trust, Sherwood Forest, which has some of the worst finances of any trust in the country—almost all due to a PFI deal signed by Gordon Brown—is actually improving. It is under pressure this winter, but the management have said it is definitely not in crisis. That is an example of a trust improving due to quality management, reform and good-quality processes.

Mr Hunt: That is absolutely the point, and the last point I want to make before concluding on funding is that we miss a trick—I think the shadow Health Secretary is in some ways more reasonable than his leader on these issues, which is probably terminal for his career—if we say that this is just about money. We forget the debate we went through on schools in this country 20 years ago, when there was, again, a debate about money, but we realised that the issue is actually also about standards and quality. That is what has happened in Sherwood Forest, and I congratulate the trust. It is important that we do not let debates about funding eclipse that very important progress that we need to make on standards.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con) rose—

Mr Hunt: I am going to conclude now because lots of people want to come in. I am afraid.

The shadow Health Secretary’s central claim—these are his words—was that the culpability for what is happening in the NHS “lies at the door of Downing Street”. I owe it to the country and this House to set the record straight on this Government’s record on the NHS. It is not just the fact that there are 11,000 more nurses and 11,000 more doctors; not just the fact that, on cancer, we are starting treatment for 130 more people every single day, and have record cancer survival rates; not just the fact that we have 1,400 more people getting mental health treatment every day and some of the highest dementia diagnosis rates in the world; and not just the fact that we are doing 5,000 more operations every day and that, despite those 5,000 more operations every day, MRSA rates have halved. We have an NHS with more doctors and more nurses, and despite difficult winters, with patients saying they have never been treated more safely and with more dignity and more respect.
Next year the NHS will be 70 years old. This Government’s vision is simple: we want it to offer the safest, highest quality care anywhere in the world. When we have difficult winters and an ageing population, of course that makes things more challenging, but it also makes us more determined. It means that we are backing the NHS’s plan; it means more GPs and better mental health provision; and it means an NHS turning heads in the 21st century just as it did when it was founded in the 20th century.

2.40 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Here we are again debating the NHS. [Interruption.] I am all on my own because obviously this is predominantly a crisis in NHS England, not a crisis in NHS Scotland, as I will discuss as we go on.

The problem is that we are talking about patients who are suffering—who may suffer from more infections, as we have heard. We are talking about staff who are in tears and who are desperate, and who feel that they cannot deliver the care they would expect to deliver. This is not just a matter of isolated stories of “Joe from Wiltshire” and “Mike from Leeds”: it is happening on a major scale. We hear from NHS Improvement that only one trust out of 152 met the four-hour target in December, and only nine made it to over 90%. Fifty out of 152 trusts declared a black or red situation over December, and there were 158 diversions of ambulances over that time. This is not just about normal winter pressures. It is not what the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who is an A&E nurse, and people like me and other medics in the Chamber have seen in our careers—it is a really bad winter. Yet we have not had bitter weather and we have not had a flu epidemic.

The most recent four-hour data were published in October, when NHS England managed to achieve the four-hour target for 83.7% of the time. That is 5% down on the same time in the previous year, and it compares with 93.9% in Scotland. Scotland managed 93.5% in Christmas week. We have our challenges in Scotland, but the crisis is not the same as what is being discussed here.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the hon. Lady confirm, though, that throughout the whole of 2016, which includes winter, summer, autumn and spring, the Scottish Government’s A&E target was met in only seven out of the 52 weeks?

Dr Whitford: I would be delighted to agree with that, but NHS England did not make it over 90% at any point in 2016, so perhaps the right hon. Gentleman might want to check the NHS England figures before having a punt at me.

NHS England is performing 8% to 10% lower than NHS Scotland, which has been the top performing of the nations for the past 19 months. We have not done that by magic. We face exactly the same ageing population, exactly the same increased demand and complexity, and exactly the same—indeed, often worse—shortages of doctors as NHS England does, because of our rurality. We are not using a different measure—we use exactly the same measure—but the data show that there is a significant difference, and it is being maintained.

The Secretary of State is right: winter is always challenging. Summer is often busier for attendances at A&E, because the kids are on the trampolines and people go out and do silly things, but hospitals are under pressure in winter because of the nature of admissions—the people who go to A&E are sicker, older and more complicated. However, we have not seen any summer respite in NHS England. The worst performance in the summer was 80.8%; the best was 86.4%. NHS England is under pressure in the summer, and when winter is added on top of that, it is no wonder that we are talking about the situations that doctors, nurses, patients and relatives are describing to us.

My first health debate after my maiden speech in this House was an Opposition day debate on the four-hour target. At the time, I commented, and still maintain, that this target is not a stick for each party to hit each other over the head with, but it is a thermometer to take the temperature of the acute service, and it does that really well, because it measures not just people coming in through the front door but how they are moving through the hospital and out the other end. At the moment, the system is completely overheated. The comments about this not being anything unusual but just a normal winter, and everyone whingeing, show that the Government are not recognising the problem. The first step to dealing with any problem is to recognise it, because then we can look at how we want to tackle it.

Victoria Atkins: I remind the hon. Lady of the point the Prime Minister made in Prime Minister’s questions, which is that on the Tuesday after Christmas, A&E received the highest number of visitors it has ever received in its history. Does that not show the challenges facing the NHS both nationally and locally? These are extraordinary figures, and the Secretary of State is very much doing his best to help the NHS, with the professionals, to deal with them.

Dr Whitford: I totally accept that the NHS has been under inordinate pressure with, absolutely, the busiest day in its history, but given an ageing population that has been discussed for years, we should have been able to see this coming.

If, in the next couple of months, we get a massive flu epidemic, we are going to see things keel over. We have already had debates in this Chamber about STPs taking more beds away. I totally agree with the Secretary of State that part of the issue is that patients could be seen somewhere else. However, it is not a matter of changing the four-hour target and saying to someone who turns up, “You’re not going to count;” it is simply a matter of providing better alternatives. If we provide better alternatives, people will go to them. The House has discussed community pharmacy use, and it has been recognised that the minor ailments services we have in Scotland can deal with 5% to 10% of those patients. We have co-located out-of-hours GP units beside our A&Es, so someone is very easily sent along the corridor or into the next-door building if they need a GP and not A&E.

If they turn up at A&E and just keep sitting there, eventually someone will see them, and we should not blame them for that.
Toby Perkins: The hon. Lady is right to say that we have an ageing population but that is predictable. Does she think it is also significant that in 2008 the UK was spending about the same as all the major EU nations, whereas the OECD now says that we are spending considerably less than most of the other major nations? Is that not actually causing this problem?

Dr Whitford: Money is not the only problem. I accept that part of it is about how things are done. The Secretary of State talks about variations and many hospitals performing well, but, as I said, only one trust is meeting the target and only nine are at over 90%, so it is not that the majority are doing well and a few are failing.

The ability to look at how we deliver the NHS is crucial, but change costs money. We must therefore invest in our alternatives so that our community services and primary care services can step up and step down to take the pressure off. One of the concerns about the STPs is that because people do not have enough money, a lot of them start by thinking that they will shut an A&E, shut a couple of wards, or shut community beds—even though those are what we need more of—to fund change in primary and social care. Then the system will fall over. We need to have double running and develop our alternatives and then we will gradually be able to send the patients there.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I always enjoy listening to the hon. Lady’s well-informed remarks. I agree that most people do not want to go to A&E if they can avoid it. Does she agree that part of the problem is that when people phone general practices, they tend not to be offered an appointment that they can get to see the doctor within a reasonable timeframe, or that they are closely associated, which particularly applies to people with chronic and long-term conditions? As today’s National Audit Office report makes clear, we need to address that as a matter of urgency. Paradoxically, seven-day-a-week general practice may militate against being able to provide people with such continuity of care during core hours.

Dr Whitford: Many doctors in general practice would accept the argument for having access to a GP on Saturday morning, particularly for people who are otherwise at work. However, someone who cannot see their favourite doctor is very unlikely to go to A&E and wait eight hours to see a doctor they have never seen before in their life. This is not about that; this is about the fact that people feel they cannot find an alternative. If it takes three or four weeks to get any appointment with their GP and they do not yet have a community pharmacy offering such a service, they will eventually end up at A&E. It is therefore the service of last resort for people who go there and just stay there. We have to develop alternatives first, but as the hon. Gentleman says, no one in their right mind would choose to go and wait four hours in A&E if they could be seen in half an hour in a community pharmacy.

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady is being very generous in giving way. I have to disagree with her, because winter pressures and the pressures we are seeing at the moment tend to involve not people with short-term, self-limiting conditions, but the chronically sick. Those people in particular, and with good reason, want to have a relationship with a particular practitioner who understands their needs and their family context. That is surely the essence of general practice.

Dr Whitford: I totally agree, but in fact the chance that their doctor will be on duty would actually be lower on a Saturday morning or a Sunday afternoon. One of the things we have done in Scotland with SPARRA—Scottish patients at risk of readmission and admission—data is to identify that 40% of admissions involve 5% of the patients. Those patients are all automatically flagged and will get a double appointment no matter what they ring up about, because it will not just be a case of a chest infection or a urine infection, but of having to look at all their other comorbidities.

That is the challenge we face; it is not a catastrophe of people living longer. All of us in the House with a medical background will remember that that was definitely the point of why we went into medicine, and it is the point of the NHS. However, we are not ageing very well. From about 40 or 50 onwards, people start to accumulate conditions that they may not have survived in the past, so that by the time they are 70 they have four or five comorbidities that make it a challenge to treat even something quite simple. My colleagues and friends who are still working on the frontline say that it is a question not just of numbers, but of complexity. Someone may come in with what sounds like an easy issue, but given their diabetes, renal failure and previous heart attack, it is in fact a complex issue.

That is part of the problem we face, and we need to look forward to prepare for it. We need to think about designing STPs around older people, not around young people who can come in and have an operation as a day case and then go away, because that is not what we are facing. Older people need longer in hospital, even medically, before they reach the point of being able to go home. It takes them a couple of days longer to be strong enough to do so. They probably live alone and do not have family near them, so they will need a degree of convalescent support and they may need social care. That is really where the nub of the problem lies. Social care funding has gone down, and therefore more people are stuck in hospital or more people end up in hospital who did not actually need to be there in the first place.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): On the frailties of older people, does the hon. Lady think that just as Scotland led the way with St Ninian’s primary school in Stirling introducing the daily mile, there is something we could learn from countries, such as Andorra, that have a real focus on exercise for older people, so that they are a lot less frail in their 70s and 80s?

Dr Whitford: The whole prevention and public health message is crucial, and that is one of our other challenges. I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for no longer talking about a figure of £10 billion, because the increase in the Department of Health’s budget is actually £4.5 billion. Part of that relates to the reduction in public health funding, just at a time when we need to move it on to a totally different scale. Whether that is children or, indeed, adults doing the daily mile—perhaps we should run up
to Trafalgar Square and back every lunchtime, which I am sure would do us all a power of good—we need to invest in such preventive measures. One of my points is that when we end up desperate—patching up how the NHS runs, or dealing with illnesses we did not bother to prevent—we always end up spending more money.

Graham Evans: The hon. Lady knows how much I respect her and what she says. As the chairman of the all-party group on running, I endorse the daily mile and respect her and what she says. As the chairman of the all-party group on running, I endorse the daily mile and respect her and what she says. As the chairman of the all-party group on running, I endorse the daily mile and respect her and what she says. As the chairman of the all-party group on running, I endorse the daily mile and respect her and what she says.

Dr Whitford: The whole issue comes down to sustainability, which is obviously the idea behind the sustainability and transformation plans. As those who have heard me speak about STPs will know, I support the idea in principle. The idea is to go back to place-based planning on an integrated basis for a community. The difference in Scotland is that we have focused on integration. We got rid of hospital trusts in 2004, and we got rid of primary care trusts in the late 2000s—in 2009 or 2010. Since April 2014, we have set up integration joint boards, where a bag of money from the NHS and a bag of money from the local authority are put on the table and a group sit around it and work out the best way to deal with the interface and to support social care. Anyone in the Chamber or elsewhere with family members who have been stuck in hospital will know that people get into a bickering situation: Mrs Bloggs is in a bed so the local authority is instead busy with her curtains and who is not considered safe because she is leaving the gas on. Such boards get rid of all that perverse obstruction.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an important point, and I welcome the tone that she, unlike the shadow Secretary of State, has brought to this debate. She makes the point that the integration of care—social and health—is important, but does she agree that, with further devolution to the sub-regions and major cities in England, there is a huge opportunity to move forward that agenda south of the border?

Dr Whitford: The whole idea of STPs is to go back to areas. We simply have geographical health boards—the only layer we have—so we are not wasting huge amounts of money on having layers and layers, which could be integrated. For an STP to work it must make sense geographically, which might be a county or something bigger or smaller. I think that they should be put on a statutory footing. We have 211 CCGs. There will be an average of six CCGs for every STP, so that is a waste of layers, and it will be very difficult to integrate.

One of the biggest differences is that, in 2004, we got rid of the purchaser-provider split. In the past 25 years, there has been no evidence of any clinical benefit from the purchaser-provider split. The internal market or, as it now is, the external market. It is estimated that the costs of running that market are between £5 billion and £10 billion a year. That money does not actually go to healthcare, but on bidding, tendering, administration or profits. We cannot have an overnight change, but if we simply made a principled decision to work our way back to having the NHS as the main provider of public health treatment and to integrate care through the STPs, we could reach a point of sustainability.

As I said earlier, we must protect things such as community hospitals and community services and, indeed, invest in them. Our health board has rebuilt three cottage hospitals as modern hospitals, because that is where we should put an older person who is on their own and has a chest infection, who just needs a few days of antibiotics, TLC and decent feeding. We do not want them in big acute hospitals; we want them to be close to home. The danger is that under the STPs people will see community hospitals as easy to get rid of, but that is an efficiency saving only if it gets rid of inefficiency. If we slash and burn, we will end up spending more money in the end.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Much of what the hon. Lady says is music to my ears as somebody who is campaigning to save their local general hospital. May I thank her for, as ever, eloquently expressing issues that face us all, no matter where we come from and who we are. Does she agree that having good healthcare data for clinicians enables patients to be put through the system seamlessly? Many individuals do not realise that their data do not go from their GP into acute care and then back into social care. If we could improve that—I make a plug for my private Member’s Bill on Friday—it would help patients.
Dr Whitford: I would not say that we are super IT wizards in Scotland, but we did not get involved in care.data, which unfortunately is a black shadow over the whole issue of NHS data in England, and now all our referrals are electronic, so nothing goes in the post. All our letters back are also electronic—I dock my dictation machine during a clinic, and when I finish I sit and check it, and the letters go off. After a Friday morning bad news clinic, the letters are on their way by 2 o’clock. A GP can email my colleagues and say, “I don’t know whether you need to see this person.” I have heard clinicians here in England say, “No, we can’t email about a patient.” Unfortunately, the wrong move that was made on care.data has ended up holding people back.

Our GPs in Scotland use a care summary. If they have a palliative care patient who has been accepted as being in terminal care, that patient’s care summary will be put on the out-of-hours system. If there is a call about the person, the doctor who goes to see them knows that they will not be throwing them in an ambulance but will be keeping them comfortable. The discussion has already been had, and the aim is for them to be at home. England has to gain the ability not just to analyse data at a later point but to share information as a first step.

In finishing off my speech—[Interruption.] I am sorry if I was taking too long for an hon. Lady at the back of the Opposition Benches. Integration is the key, and it is possible to get it through the STPs—but only if they are designed around patients, safety and services, rather than just starting with the bottom line and working backwards.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the next speaker, it will be obvious to colleagues that a great many Members wish to speak this afternoon and that although the debate has advanced a long way in time, it has not advanced very far in the number of Members called. We therefore now have to have a time limit of 10 minutes. [Interruption.] I can see that there is some surprise about that; it is 10 minutes for the moment, but anyone who can do any arithmetic will be aware that it will have to be reduced later, so I suggest that Members start working on their speeches now.

3.5 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I will try to be mindful of those comments, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I follow the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), my colleague on the Health Committee. As always, she made thoughtful and thought-provoking comments, and I would like to endorse her points and expand on some of them.

First, I thank NHS and care staff. We have heard that they are facing unprecedented demand over the winter, but it is not just winter pressures that they face now—the pressures extend into the summer. As we have heard, that is not just about numbers but about the complexity of conditions and the frailty of those presenting to our accident and emergency departments. The Health Committee heard in its recent inquiry that the trusts that are most successful in getting close to the four-hour target are those that see it as an entire-system issue, and in which both health and care staff contribute to the effort, not as a tick-box exercise but because they recognise that it is fundamentally about patient safety and the quality of patients’ experiences. That is why the four-hour target matters, and the Secretary of State is right to endorse it.

The Secretary of State is also right that we sometimes need to be more nuanced about our targets and that he needs to be open to listening to what clinicians are telling him about how we can improve the way in which targets are applied. It would be a great shame if we in this House prevented those sensible discussions from taking place because of political furore. I urge him to continue to have them and to take advice and listen to clinicians about how we can improve the use of targets, but he is absolutely right in being clear that he will keep the four-hour target.

We must talk about this as a whole-system issue. Accident and emergency is a barometer of wider system pressures, as has been pointed out, and I want to focus my remarks on the integration of health and social care.

I agree with colleagues throughout the House who have called for a convention on reviewing funding as a whole-system issue. We have heard that next year is the 70th birthday of the NHS, and what could be a better present than politicians changing the debate and the way in which we talk about the funding of health and social care, so that we do so in a collaborative manner that works towards the right solution for our patients? The consequences of our not doing that would be profound for our constituents, who would not thank us for not being prepared to put aside party differences and work towards the right solution.

Ultimately, this issue is about a demographic change that we are simply not preparing for adequately. In the case of the pension age, we recognised that there had to be a different debate given the change in longevity. Over the decade to 2015, we saw a 31% increase in the number of people living to 85 and older. Of course, that is a cause for celebration, but there has not been a matching increase in disease-free life expectancy.

I welcome the Prime Minister’s focus on tackling inequality, but unfortunately we are not making sufficient progress on that, either. In her very first speech in the job, she talked about tackling the “burning injustice” of health inequality. We in this House have a role in doing that together in a consensual manner.

Norman Lamb: I very much agree with the hon. Lady. Does she share my welcome for the Prime Minister’s response today in which she stated that she was prepared to meet us and other Members of Parliament from across the House and my hope that it might start a more constructive approach?

Dr Wollaston: Absolutely. It was extraordinarily encouraging to hear the Prime Minister say that she was prepared to consider that and to meet Members from across the House. I urge colleagues who feel that this is a better way forward to sign up to it, speak to their party Whips and make it clear that it has widespread support.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I wonder, on this vital issue, whether the hon. Lady wants to say something about what her own party did on the
two previous times we tried to get important cross-party working on health and social care: it made it an election issue, producing posters about a “death tax”; and on the second occasion the Secretary of State just walked away from the talks.

Dr Wollaston: I am afraid that that intervention is exactly not the kind of debate we want to be having. Let us look to the future. We are in a different part of the electoral cycle. I accept the hon. Lady’s comments—I was still an NHS clinician when that happened and, like many of those working in health or social care, I looked at the yah-boo debate in this place and thought that surely there had to be a better way—but I ask her to put them aside and to look to the future rather than backwards, otherwise we will not get anywhere. I think our constituents want us, as politicians, to recognise the scale of the challenge and to get to grips with it.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Looking to the future, does the hon. Lady not agree that there should be a new funding settlement for the NHS and social care budgets that brings both together? At the moment, there have been cuts of £4.6 billion.

Dr Wollaston: That is exactly what I am hoping. We must end the silos of health and social care. We should stop thinking about money as a social care pound or a health pound, and instead think about a patient pound and a taxpayer pound, and how we get the very best from that.

That brings me on to a point I would like to raise directly with the Secretary of State. There is an example of where this has happened: in my constituency, Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust has formed an ICO—an integrated care organisation. Across health and care, passionate people recognised the benefits and sweated blood to get the organisation off the ground. Torbay’s integration is talked about not just nationally but internationally as a recognised way of doing this better. I regret to say, however, that because of the scale of the financial pressure on the ICO, we are now hearing that next year the NHS will be pulling out of the risk-sharing agreement.

That is totally unacceptable. I hope the Secretary of State will meet me to discuss the pressures facing the ICO, which has achieved exactly what we are talking about in this debate. It is able to pool finances better through risk sharing and to work together to get people out of hospital who do not need to be there more rapidly than happens in other areas. It can put people from social care into hospitals to see how we can speed up that process. Unfortunately, if that risk-share falls apart, one of the key pillars of how we want to improve the flow through hospitals and out the other end will break down. Part of the reason, as I understand it, is that unless the control totals are met the funding it hopes to use to improve the facilities in the A&E department will be at risk. The challenge for Torbay is not how it works together to get people out of hospital; it is the facilities at the front door, and it could do so much to improve the facilities. We have the odd paradox whereby we could end up improving A&E infrastructure but worsening the ability of the system to respond at the point where we are trying to get people cared for in the community.

A certain degree of financial challenge can have the effect of bringing health and social care organisations to work more closely together because they know it makes sense, but when unrealistic targets are set it can go the other way. It can start to mean that people have to retreat to protect their budget silos. I hope that the Secretary of State will look closely at what is happening and meet me to discuss whether we cannot just get this back on track for next year. I am confident that the local authority and the NHS staff across the CCG and the provider trust will continue to work together—they have an extraordinary tradition of doing so—but there are threats, which I hope can be addressed. This is about the entire flow from the front door right the way through to getting people cared for back at home.

More widely, we now have more than 1 million people in communities who are unable to receive the care they need. Mears, the prime provider in my area, is in special measures. These are financial issues. Yes, there is much that the NHS can do that is not about money—we know there is a lot of variation that cannot be explained by financial challenge and demographic changes alone—but finance and the workforce inevitably are the key challenges we have to face, and we have to work together across all political parties to resolve them.

In closing, I would like to raise with the Secretary of State the front page of today’s Times, which is extraordinarily disappointing. This is the second time a major national newspaper has reported briefing against the chief executive of the NHS, Simon Stevens. I invite the Secretary of State or the Minister closing the debate unequivocally to support the chief executive of the NHS. When the chief executive appears before the Health Committee and I, as the Chair of the Committee, ask him to respond to questions, I expect him to be truthful and transparent in his answers. He should be commended for doing so and not find himself the subject of negative briefings. I therefore invite the Minister unequivocally to support him and ask for this to stop.

3.16 pm

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): The debate so far has shown the huge level of concern from the public and NHS staff about the crisis in the NHS and social care. The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) reflected some of the views of the Select Committee, but I ask all Government Members to take those concerns seriously and not to dismiss them. All hon. Members must surely be receiving representations from staff and patients about what is happening locally.

I want to pay tribute to all the health and social care staff in Doncaster, in particular those at Doncaster royal infirmary whose work I have seen at first hand. I know how dedicated and committed they are to caring for patients in these most difficult of circumstances. At the end of December, they had managed to achieve 90% against the 95% target and had good ambulance handover times, as well as good support from the council and community partners, but they are facing real pressures and they are fearful about the pressures still to come, especially if, as predicted, there is a cold spell. That is why the mixed messages from the Secretary of State have been extremely damaging.

I was a Health Minister for four years and had responsibility for emergency care. I know how important it is to work with NHS staff to help to implement
targets, and not to give the impression that the NHS is somehow giving up on those targets. The lead from the top is incredibly important. There has always been controversy about targets, but as a Health Minister I visited many, many A&E departments. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the A&E target led to improved care for patients and that it reduced waiting times dramatically. The evidence is clear: it shows that that is what happened. One striking thing about those visits was seeing how consultants, nurses, ambulance teams and all members of the healthcare team worked together. For example, they would work out protocols so that emergency nurse practitioners could take over some of the work previously done by consultants, to ease the burden and share the work among the team. Triaging—seeing who needed urgent treatment by a consultant and who could be seen by a nurse practitioner—became the norm.

I would ask staff, “Is the target getting in the way, or is it helping?”; and invariably the answer would come back, “It helps us to work together more effectively.” I vividly remember a nurse practitioner saying, “Please don’t abandon the target, because it is making the consultants sit down with us and look at the whole team.” For patients, the difference was crucial, as it was for practitioners’ working lives, because they were not having to see patients who had been sitting around for hours and were feeling thoroughly depressed and demoralised. That made a difference to the healthcare team as well, because it improved their working life as well as patient care.

Dr Murrison: Does the right hon. Lady agree that it is not so much meeting the target that is important as getting patients seen expeditiously and well? There is not an A&E department in this country that does not want to improve its position in the league table of response times. The difference that now applies, and which perhaps did not apply quite so much when she was a Minister, is that the level of informatics and comparison is much improved. I suggest to her, ever so gently, that while the four-hour target was important when she was a Minister, its importance has degraded over time, because everybody is trying to see patients more quickly.

Dame Rosie Winterton: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. The four-hour target led to much better diagnoses and much improved provision of the type of treatment that people needed, as well as better interaction with communities. And I want to come on to that point because the Secretary of State has been trying—perhaps the hon. Gentleman is guilty of this as well—to separate the target for A&E departments from what happens outside, whereas I see the importance of putting the two together. Providing alternative treatment, which is perhaps part of what the hon. Gentleman was getting at, means having proper support in the community. It was bringing those two things together that made it possible to achieve the target, so it was a driver.

Maria Caulfield: In my experience of trying to meet the four-hour target, it is often—or was in the past—prioritised over everything else, including patient care and clinical need. It was sometimes abused, with huge pressure put on staff to meet the target, and as a result patient care suffered. I saw that myself.

Dame Rosie Winterton: It is always important to look at the feedback from clinicians, and I did that as a Health Minister. It started during my time as a Minister, and I remember that we had constantly to consider whether there was a clinical reason for reducing the 95% target. It became clear that some patients needed longer to be assessed owing to their particular condition. In such cases, I could see why the target might need to be reduced, but that was based on clinical need. By contrast, the impression given last week was, “My goodness! We’re going to have to cope with some winter pressures. Let’s reduce the target in order to meet it,” rather than there being an assessment of clinical need. That sent completely the wrong message to the NHS. I think it was the wrong thing to do.

I want briefly to set out some areas in which we can bring the community input together with what is happening in emergency departments to reduce some of the pressures. The first point was that made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), who spoke from the Front Bench. Good social care is vital to ensuring that people do not end up in A&E. I have previously raised problems with the Government’s current proposition to, in a sense, move responsibility for raising money to local councils. That is particularly unfair in areas such as mine, which simply cannot raise the same amount of money through a council precept as better-off areas can. It simply does not work. We need it probably more than any other area, but we will be less able to raise the money.

On shortages, I have been talking to senior NHS staff in Doncaster, and there are real problems with emergency care staffing. They tell me that although more doctors are being trained—I accept that—it will take years for them to come through. The single most effective step we can take to ease pressure on A&E departments is immediately to increase funding for social care, because it would keep people out of A&E departments, and it could be done straightaway. The personnel are out there; the Government just need to increase the funding, as my hon. Friend said from the Front Bench.

We also have to look seriously at the problem of GP shortages. As others have said, if patients are waiting three weeks to get an appointment with a GP, they are bound to end up in A&E. This needs to be addressed very quickly, with proper forward looks at exactly where the gaps are in GP services. I have said before that PCTs—now clinical commissioning groups—or NHS England should be able to take over practices and employ salaried GPs. That would make a huge difference.

Furthermore, on community pharmacies, if people are confident that going to a pharmacy will save them a visit to A&E, again that will relieve pressure on the system. I hope, therefore, that the Minister will assure us that he is looking seriously at the community pharmacy forward view, which sets out how pharmacies can be integrated into the NHS and social care.

Briefly on mental health, the Prime Minister answered a question today about mental health and the crises that people can get into, which mean that they end up in...
A&E. She talked, in particular, about young people. I urge the Minister to consider the role that educational psychologists can play in children's mental health and in keeping them out of A&E.

It was my experience as a Health Minister that we needed people on the ground locally to help organisations across the spectrum—local government through to social care, pharmacies, GPs and ambulances—to work with A&E departments, yet the £2 billion reorganisation that removed PCTs and strategic health authorities has made it much more difficult to drive through the necessary changes. I hope, therefore, that the Minister will look very seriously at what has happened, because local knowledge can be vital.

On the basis of the Secretary of State's contributions, it seemed that he was trying to use every excuse not to face up to the reality of what is happening. I think that sends a terrible message to NHS staff. I hope that, as a result of today's debate, the concerns raised will be taken on board by Ministers and the Secretary of State and that they will come back to us with a proper plan that recognises the problems and offers real solutions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The House was right to assume that 10 minutes per person is unsustainable. After the next speaker, I shall reduce the time limit to seven minutes. The House will be glad to know, however, that the time limit remains 10 minutes for Sir Simon Burns.

3.29 pm

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I certainly welcome today's debate and the opportunity to discuss an issue that is extremely important to all hon. Members in all parts of the House. During recent weeks, there has been a significant problem because of the increasing number of people needing services at A&E and from local health services. I would like to pay tribute to the magnificent work, often in very difficult circumstances, that doctors, nurses, consultants, ancillary staff and people in general practice carry out on a day-to-day basis—not simply during a winter crisis period, but throughout the year—looking after people to the best of their abilities.

My own hospital, Broomfield hospital in Chelmsford, is doing a fantastic job, in difficult circumstances, to provide the best possible care in good times and in more difficult times. As a constituency MP, I am certainly aware that there have been some problems for some of my constituents over the last week or so, because of the demand and the pressure.

We have to look at what we can do to move forward in a positive—not a partisan, politicised—way to make sure that our constituents get the best treatments possible. There is no point in just shouting. As the Chair of the Health Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), said, it is no good engaging in yah-boo politics. We have to be mature and come up with sensible suggestions.

Funding is, of course, a key issue. I am extremely proud of this Government's record and commitment to funding the NHS over the last seven years and their commitments for the next three to four years. We made sure when we came into office, at a time of austerity when Departments' budgets were cut, that the Health Department's budget was one of the few to be protected, so that we got a real-terms increase in funding every year we were in power—albeit, I accept, a modest real-terms increase. It nevertheless showed our commitment and our intent to invest in improving the national health service.

I am also proud of the fact that I and all my right hon. and hon. Friends fought the last general election on a commitment that over the five-year period of this Parliament, we were going to increase NHS funding substantially—to what has turned out to be to the tune of £10 billion. That is more, I say in a very gentle way, than was on offer to the country from certain other parties. I am pleased, too, that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Minister of State have been planning for any potential strains of demand during this winter period with the provision of £400 million to local health economies and other measures such as the vaccination programme, a preventive health measure that has got a record number of 13 million people vaccinated to try to offset some of the potential health problems that can flow during a winter period. That is using foresight and planning to try to minimise problems, while at the same time providing funding to back up their actions. That is what a responsible Department of Health should do and has done.

Now, people can demand as much money as they like for the health service, but my argument is this. Yes, the health service does need extra money—year in, year out—but it should not just be thrown at an issue. A far bigger part of the equation is building on the performance, standards and quality of care that the health service will provide to our constituents.

Dr Mathias: I entirely agree with what my right hon. Friend is saying about the increased resources, but does he not agree with me that we now need more resources for integrated health and social care and that this is the time to stop using the NHS as a political football and engage in a cross-party review?

Sir Simon Burns: I certainly agree that, under the leadership of the Department of Health, we should work with anyone and everyone to come up with a solution.

I was the Social Care Minister in the late 1990s, before we left office. Integrating health and social care was then at a very early, formative stage, and the ambitions were immense and tremendous. I am afraid that the reality has not matched the ambitious nature of what was being said in the 1990s, which is why I was particularly interested by the comments of my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Totnes. Yes, we must think about that, but what we must also think about—let me push the funding element to one side for the moment—is building on the work of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, particularly his investment in patient safety, the raising of standards, dignity for patients in our hospitals and throughout the health system, and the cutting out of waste and inefficiencies.

In 2010, when I was at the Department of Health for the second time, we had the Nicholson challenge, which was to save £20 billion over three or four years by
[Sir Simon Burns]
cutting out waste and sharing best practice to improve the quality of care. I know from a debate that we had just before Christmas that the NHS achieved £19.4 billion of those savings. The beauty of that was not just that it created greater effectiveness and efficiency in the delivery of healthcare and the sharing of best practice, but that the Treasury did not receive £19.4 billion with which it could do as it wished. The £19.4 billion was reinvested in patient care.

Dr Whitford: Was not a significant proportion of that saving due to wage freezes for NHS medical and nursing staff? That is not something that can easily be repeated.

Sir Simon Burns: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. There was a wage freeze for those who were earning more than £20,000 a year, but that was in keeping with the policy throughout the public sector, which included Ministers and other Members of Parliament.

The important point is that it was possible to achieve that saving by a variety of means. One of them was a pay freeze, but others were improving the delivery of service, cutting out inefficiencies and ineffective ways of operating and getting rid of nearly 20,000 surplus managers, so that the NHS could concentrate on enabling clinicians, nurses, ancillary workers and everyone else to work on patient care. That is the right way forward, and we cannot give up on it. We must continue to think about where we can make savings.

Dr Murrison: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Simon Burns: I am afraid not, because I am about to finish.

Much has been said about the STP programme. We have an STP in Mid and South Essex, and I strongly support it, because it is completely focused on improving and enhancing the quality of accident and emergency care. What annoys me is that people wish to politicise it for grubby political reasons. [Interruption.] Funnily enough, I am not talking about Opposition Members.

Our STP involves three hospitals with three A&E departments. Not one of those departments is to be closed under the proposals, yet as soon as they were published, and on the assumption—correct, I suspect—that most people had not read them, word went out that my local A&E department was to be closed down by the Department of Health because of this nasty Government’s proposals to save money. The exact opposite was the case. If one read the document, one could see that all three A&Es are remaining open.

What will happen is building on what happens now. If someone has a heart attack, they are immediately taken to Basildon hospital, because that is the specialist for cardiothoracic treatment. If someone needs treatment for burns or plastic surgery, they come to Broomfield hospital in Chelmsford, because it has one of the finest units in the whole of Europe. If someone has a head injury, they will go down to Romford in the east of London, because that is the specialist area for people with head injuries. If I had any of those conditions, I would want—and I would want for my constituents—the best possible treatment from the best experts available. That is what is happening and that is going to be built on, enhanced and improved. That is an improvement.

That is not a cut; that is not taking away services from local communities. Those people who have an agenda and want to play politics will tell people anything in the hope that they believe it, or to frighten them by trying to discredit the work of the NHS.

I am pleased we have had the opportunity to discuss this matter. It is very tricky, and there is no simple answer—what is happening is not unique; we frequently have winter crises, particularly because of the ageing population and the increasing demands on health services in recent years—but we must not lose sight of the fact that we have an NHS and a Government who are determined to improve further and enhance the quality of care and the safety and standards of care for all our constituents, aided and abetted by a first-class workforce who are often working under very difficult circumstances.
service. Once they are closed, it will be far too late. The Government should act now. They should not go ahead with those cuts, which will have a dramatic effect in Liverpool and elsewhere in the country.

I also ask hon. Members to think a little more about what is happening in social care. In Liverpool, we are facing a major crisis in social care, as local authority funding has been cut severely and is to be cut again. Liverpool City Council’s budget has already been cut by 58%, and £90 million of further savings have been demanded over the next three years—half of that to be achieved in the next year. One result of that has been a severe reduction in social care provision: 40,000 social care packages have been reduced to 9,000, and there are many more cuts in the pipeline.

Providing social care is essential not just to enable people to leave hospital when they are healthy enough to do so—although that is important—but to enable them to live a constructive life. Many people are now fearful of possible cuts to their social care packages. They believe that they will be unable to lead a reasonable life in their own home if their essential services are cut. I ask the Government to think again about what they are doing. They tell us that the better care fund is an answer, but that is simply not the case. In Liverpool, £39 million has been proposed for the social care fund for the coming years, but that will simply scratch the surface of the problem. In poor areas such as Liverpool where it is difficult to raise money, a 1% increase in the council tax would raise only £1.4 million. Neither of those measures, either singly or put together, will address the looming and very real crisis in social care. I urge the Government to look again at this, rather than offering platitudes about other funding being available. That funding is not there, and there are no plans for it to be there. A new approach needs to be taken to this urgently; something needs to be done.

The subject of mental health has been raised by a number of Members. I should like to mention two instances from my constituency. The first involves someone who can live a reasonable life at home with some assistance, but that assistance has now been withdrawn. Among other things, it involved helping the person to open letters to deal with normal queries, but that has now gone and she is facing great problems.

The second example involves Mr B, who faces very serious mental health conditions. Indeed, he has an incapacitating condition, which means that he cannot work. He was promised specialist help at the Tuke Centre in York, but that offer was withdrawn because it was made in error. That is unforgivable. I have followed this through, and Mr B was promised local treatment, although it was unclear whether that treatment would be appropriate. However, that treatment is not now being offered in the way that was previously suggested. I have followed that up, but 14 months on from the time when Mr B was first offered help for his incapacitating and extremely serious mental health condition, nothing has happened. That is simply not good enough, and I shall be pursuing the matter further.

Those are just two illustrations of how the cruel cuts in mental health services are affecting individuals. I agree that we should perhaps look more generally at funding for our national health service, but the crisis in local services is happening today. The Government are responsible now, and they must act.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman). I am sorry that the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) is no longer in her place. I particularly enjoyed her remarks, in which she set out a number of constructive policy suggestions, drawing on experience in Scotland, and suggested that we could reflect on them and improve the situation here.

It was disappointing to hear not a single policy suggestion in the shadow Secretary of State’s 33-minute contribution. He might reflect on that because the debate will not move forward otherwise.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire drew upon her clinical experience, but I also enjoyed the contribution of the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton) who, after a period of enforced silence as Opposition Chief Whip, drew upon her ministerial experience, demonstrating the value of ex-Ministers contributing from the Back Benches and bringing something to the debate.

I have reflected on the Labour motion before us today, which specifically talks about the four-hour target and funding issues, which I will touch on in my inevitably brief speech. As I said in an earlier intervention, I was in the House on Monday when the Secretary of State was clear in what he said and I do not understand why Labour Members fail to see that. He did not in any way water down the target. The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) challenged him and the Secretary of State specifically “recommitted the Government” to the target. He was actually generous in paying tribute to the Labour Government for having introduced it, saying that it was “one of the best things about the NHS”—[Official Report, 9 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 46]—and in no way resiled from it.

Indeed, I think the shadow Secretary of State said in his remarks that the Secretary of State had somehow talked about ensuring that the target applied only to those with urgent health problems and that he had somehow said that secretly outside the House. However, I have looked carefully at the Secretary of State’s oral statement, given in the House just two days ago, and he was explicit about ensuring that the four-hour standard related to urgent health problems. He specifically referenced Professor Keith Willett, NHS England’s medical director for acute care, and said that “no country in the world has a”—four-hour—“standard for all health problems”—[Official Report, 9 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 38].

The target is for urgent health problems, and if we are to protect vulnerable patients, that is what we need to ensure—it is incredibly valuable.

The motion also relates to social care funding, so I want to talk about the charge that the Opposition keep making about local authority decisions. It is entirely true that the coalition Government had to make savings from local government budgets in the previous Parliament owing to the previous Labour Government’s lack of preparation following the dramatic financial crisis. We inherited a budget deficit of 11% and had to make such savings, but local councils had choices in the decisions
they made about where the cuts fell. Gloucestershire County Council prioritised spending on adult social care, stating that it was the single most important service that it delivered. The budget related not only to older people; a third of it went on provision for adults with disabilities, including learning disabilities. The council protected that budget in cash terms, which is one reason why we are one of the best performers in the region and have low delayed patient discharge from the acute sector. While I do not pretend that there are no problems—of course there are challenges—the hard-working health and social care staff do an excellent job.

Toby Perkins: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, but his comments about local government are ludicrous. The cuts that local government faced were far greater than those to any Department. The Government cannot introduce that level of cuts and then say to local government, “You have to decide what you cut.” Of course that was going to lead to social care cuts.

Mr Harper: The point that I was making is that my local authority also faced significant cuts and had to make choices. It chose to prioritise adult social care as the single most important service that it delivered, so it had to make difficult cuts in other areas. However, the choice to put adult social care at the top of the list of priorities was the right choice six years ago and remains the right choice today. If councils chose to put adult social care at the bottom of their list, that was not the right decision.

There is no acute A&E department in my constituency, but it is served by A&E departments in Gloucester and Cheltenham. I visited the new chief executive at Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and met some of the staff in the A&E department—the hospital has had its challenges—and she is working hard with her management team on turning around the performance of A&E, which has not been up to scratch. I talked to her about the processes they are putting in place and I am confident that, with the hospital’s hard-working staff and improved leadership, they will be able to hit the targets that the Government have asked them to meet.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I joined Gloucestershire police on a night shift last Saturday, and I went to Gloucestershire royal hospital A&E, too. I saw professional and compassionate staff offering care in no doubt pressured circumstances. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the current STP process in Gloucestershire must be the occasion to enhance capacity elsewhere in the county and that that must include bolstering and enhancing A&E provision at Cheltenham general hospital?

Mr Harper: The whole point of the STP process is to ensure that we have capacity across the health sector. One important thing that the Secretary of State talked about is the other changes to the health and social care system—indeed, that is mentioned in the Prime Minister’s amendment, which is why I will support it. In that I agree completely with the Chair of the Select Committee. We have to look at the two things together.

Unlike what the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) said, in Gloucestershire we are lucky to have a single CCG and a single county council, which work well together with lots of joint working, and they increasingly want to bring health and social care together. That is exactly what the Chair of the Select Committee said, it is the right thing to do and it is what the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said is being done in Scotland to help deliver a better service.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) is right that, the more we can improve capacity in the system to ensure that people can access primary care where they need it and can access social care where they need it, we will take pressure off the accident and emergency system. Indeed, when I visited the A&E department, it had a good triage system in place, with general practitioners based in the department to ensure that people with conditions that can be treated by general practice are signposted and treated in an appropriate setting, rather than damaging the service’s ability properly to deliver acute care to those who really need it. We need to consider such steps, going forward.

Dr Murrison: Would those people fall within the four-hour target? That lies at the heart of the debate. Should the four-hour target cover both urgent and more elective problems that people present to casualty departments?

Mr Harper: I do not know the detail of how the statistics are measured, but the important thing is to ensure that people who walk through the front door of an A&E department but who do not need urgent care receive care in the appropriate setting and are properly signposted, whether to community pharmacies, general practice or the information services that the NHS provides online or on the telephone. It is about making sure that people go to the right setting. The Government acknowledge that that is not perfect at the moment, and they are doing a lot of work to improve it in the future.

Finally, the Government’s moves to devolve spending power and decision making to local areas, particularly given what will happen in Greater Manchester, to bring health and social care together is the way forward, and I have certainly encouraged my local authority, as I leads the formulation of our devolution proposals, to make an ambitious ask of the Government on health. I hope the Government will look at that very seriously in the months ahead.

3.58 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I do not know the collective noun for Government Chief Whips and Opposition Chief Whips, but I believe it is a crop of Whips. Anyway, it is an honour to follow two esteemed former Chief Whips.

I begin on a slightly less happy note by quoting from an educational psychologist who wrote to me this week:

“I and my colleagues are frequently overwhelmed, frustrated and in disbelief about the amount of work we need to manage the difficulties in working across services because of cuts and
changes to policy. Everyone is perpetually exhausted and burnt out. When we’re not at work because of training, illness or leave we feel simultaneously guilty and relieved.”

Her email went on to describe how she is the only clinical psychologist on duty in the whole of a very busy inner-London constituency.

I wish to comment briefly on the juncture between primary and secondary care, and on acute care. In the past 18 months, many of us have had the experience of fighting for a general practitioner’s service. The Westbury clinic, which lies just between my constituency and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), has been quite a battleground in the past 12 months. He and I have had to really fight for basic GP services for our constituents. I believe this situation is replicated across the country, and it is obviously what is leading to the build-up of individuals; as the Secretary of State has said, we have so many people turning up to A&E who probably could be seen by a GP but simply cannot get an appointment.

Robert Flello: One problem we face in Stoke-on-Trent is that we are about half a dozen GPs away from the whole GP system collapsing, because as GPs are retiring or leaving for other reasons, their patients are then going to the ever-smaller number of GPs that there are. Two GPs are due to retire shortly, but if we lose half a dozen the whole GP system in Stoke-on-Trent is liable to collapse completely. What will that do to A&E?

Catherine West: That leads to an individual patient waiting 35 hours on a trolley to be seen, as happened this weekend. I know that a number of Members have made this point, but it bears repeating: it is disgraceful that staff are blamed when this is going wrong, given that the responsibility clearly lies with politicians—with the Government. I was upset to see that today’s front page of The Times blames the senior civil servant at the heart of the NHS, as this is really down to poor Government planning.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): On the subject of poor planning, I am sure that my hon. Friend will, like the rest of the House, have heard James O’Brien speaking on LBC yesterday describing his experience of having conjunctivitis over the Christmas holiday and having to go to a community pharmacist because he could not get a doctor’s appointment and did not want to go to A&E. Is this not the maddest time ever to be considering closing thousands of community pharmacies? Is this not the time when we should be supporting them, not closing them?

Catherine West: I do not know whether a Brexit-fever madness took over, but there was a moment when cutting community pharmacies seemed like the right thing to do. Clearly, it was the wrong thing to do at such a crucial time, particularly given the impact of the illnesses to which we all fall prey during the winter months.

In my earlier intervention, I asked the Secretary of State about the flu epidemic. He assured me on the number of vaccinations, and I am assured that people have been vaccinated against seasonal flu. However, let me return to the point I was making. I understand that there has been quite an increase in the number of young people getting the flu, so we are not talking about people in the herd group who would have been advised to be inoculated against it. When people, tragically, get the flu they suffer, and doctors do not have time to isolate those individual cases. That creates a real risk, given how busy staff are, that that flu could become an epidemic. Having given us assurances today, I hope the Secretary of State will take that point up further with chief executives of acute trusts.

I want to give colleagues an idea of what is happening on social care. In 2010, I was a council leader and we had a social care budget for children—this is nothing to do with schools, just children—of £102 million. The same local authority now, in a busy London area, has for 2017-18 got a budget of £46 million. If someone is really telling me that the needs are half as much as they were in 2010 or that somehow families need less help and support, which is what children’s social care provides, I would be very surprised. A cut from £102 million to £46 million in 2017-18 is deeply worrying for the children who are in desperate need of social care.

Adult social care is equally worrying. The Secretary of State told us on Monday that we should not worry because £600 million is going into social care. I would not worry, except that I happen to know that, between 2010 and 2015, £4.8 billion was taken out. Anyone who has even key stage 2 maths will know that that does not add up. If £4.8 billion is taken out over a five-year Parliament, putting in £600 million 18 months later is not going to help.

I feel sorry for councils. If they increase tax, that is quite unpopular, but if they do not the Government blame them for not wanting to sort out the social care crisis. Even where the precept does bring the local authority quite a lot of money, the amounts raised do not help in the longer term because they just go towards a short-term fix—we are not actually fixing the problem that we need to be looking at: we need more homes in which older people can live comfortably, have fewer falls and accidents, be warmer so that they are not suffering from fuel poverty, and stay out of A&E.

It is all about long-term planning, but we have built hardly any new homes, even for older folk. If we did so we could start a chain and enable their families to move into their old homes, thereby solving another problem. We have reached a crisis in which older folk can live comfortably, have fewer falls and accidents, be warmer so that they are not suffering from fuel poverty, and stay out of A&E.

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Last year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham and I had a debate on mental health in this very Chamber, which was followed by a meeting of Members of Parliament from the local sub-region. We were very worried about people suffering from mental health problems, for whom there is currently a perfect storm. First, there have been benefits cuts. We are now in our seventh year of austerity, and there is no doubt that people with mental health problems have been right at the bottom of the pile. Secondly, we have seen cuts to supported housing and all the programmes that helped people suffering with mental health problems to keep their tenancies. That is all being cut, so people have no one to support them, which is part of the reason they fall ill. Thirdly, we have seen cuts to the
number of nurses. There are fewer mental health nurses in the system than there were two years ago and, of course, fewer beds.

A constituent came to see me at my surgery in November to say that he had fallen ill with a mental health problem. He was very surprised because he had never suffered in such a way before and was amazed by the poor care he received, in part because no one was available to diagnose him properly. He spent more than 24 hours in a padded cell, with no explanation and no indication of what sort of service he could expect. There were so few beds that he was sent about 20 miles away to be cared for at another hospital, leading to a great deal of stress and worry for his family.

The whole health system is in crisis and needs our urgent attention. Despite all the demands, political and otherwise, that the Brexit process is going to create, I hope we will not forget not only the most vulnerable—those who have been caused, I otherwise; that the Brexit process is going to create, I hope we will not forget not only the most vulnerable—those with mental health problems or in social care and so on—but our basic, universal NHS for all.

4.8 pm

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I begin by objecting to the exaggerated language used over the weekend by Mike Adamson, the chief executive of the British Red Cross. What he said does a huge disservice to our hard-working healthcare professionals in the NHS. Such language was ill-thought-out, sloppy and irresponsible. The Red Cross does some fantastic work, as I am sure both sides of the House agree, but as a registered charity it is legally obliged to be apolitical. If Mike Adamson cannot remain neutral, I suggest that he examines his position carefully.

As a member of the Health Committee and chair and co-founder of the patient safety all-party group, healthcare is extremely important to me, and I am proud to be a Conservative Member of Parliament under this Government. It is thanks to this Government and this Health Secretary that NHS funding is at record levels.

The Government are committed to delivering a seven-day NHS and to expanding access to GP surgeries and hospital-based consultants at evenings and weekends. This winter, the NHS has made more extensive preparations than ever before. As the Secretary of State mentioned earlier, in the run-up to the winter period, there were over 1,600 more doctors and 3,000 more nurses than just a year ago. That is a record of which to be proud, and it would not have been achieved had we had the Opposition party running our national health service.

As chair of the patient safety APPG, I am pleased to say that the Government have introduced a new Ofsted-style inspection regime for the Care Quality Commission to improve patient safety. Hospital infections have been halved since 2010, with the level of MRSA down by virtually 50% and clostridium difficile by more than 50%. It is this Health Secretary who has taken the lead on this issue and put patients at the heart of the NHS.

Record numbers of people are being treated in our NHS and there are pressures on the service, but it is not this Conservative Government who are a threat to the NHS. If we look at the appalling situation of the NHS in Labour-controlled Wales, we will see that funding is being cut. As the latest statistics show, the NHS in Wales is failing to meet the four-hour A&E targets by a wide margin. It is clear to see who is rarely the defender of our national health service and who would cut investment.

In conclusion, it is this Government who are increasing spending on our NHS, who are focusing on improving patient safety and who are dedicated to providing the best possible service.

4.11 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I am grateful for this opportunity to raise some of the serious concerns that have been caused by this Government’s refusal to fully fund our NHS. The Government are running out of places to cut corners to save money on the NHS. They are showing a lack of respect and compassion as they fail to provide the healthcare that people need and deserve. Those who need care at home are having to make do with 15-minute flying visits.

We have seen the pressure in A&E departments building over the past six years and yet every year we reach a winter crisis that is somehow a surprise to the Government. We have seen an increase in A&E waiting times, with more than 1.8 million people waiting more than four hours in 2015–16—an increase of over 400% since 2010.

Bed-blocking is increasing as our underfunded social care services struggle to deal with demand. We have seen an increase in the number of patients waiting on trolleys to be treated or admitted, and an increase in the number of hospitals running out of beds. We are also about to see a 12% cut to community pharmacies, which will lead to the closure or reduction in services of our local pharmacies. The time it takes to get a GP appointment is also increasing.

This is not the most complex of problems. If we want a proper functioning full person-centred care system that works with compassion and treats those in need professionally and efficiently, this Government must fund it.

Alex Chalk: In 2015, the head of the NHS, Sir Simon Stevens, said that the NHS needed £8 billion. It was this party that committed to fund it; the Labour party did not. If the hon. Lady is so keen on funding the NHS, why did the Labour party not pledge to do so back in 2015?

Naz Shah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

Let me turn now to pharmacies. This Government fail to grasp the fact that cuts to one service will have a direct impact on another. Let me be clear: only two months ago, I stood on the Floor of this House to condemn the proposed 12% cut to community pharmacies, which could mean the closure of 25% of the 42 pharmacies in my Bradford West constituency. That highlights the short-sighted approach taken by this Government. They are attacking all forms of primary healthcare and frontline services on which people rely.

If the figures are correct, nearly 30% of people who attended A&E services in Bradford royal infirmary over the past month could have been treated elsewhere for minor ailments. Many of them could go to their local pharmacy, through our local ailments scheme, or see their GP. What is the Government’s long-term approach to these systemic issues if they continue to water down...
primary care services? All we will see is an increase in the number of visitors unnecessarily attending A&E and an increase in the problems faced by those needing access to services.

The impact of the reduction in GP services is the same. Only a few months ago, I campaigned with the local community to save Manningham health practice. The proposal was temporarily put on hold, although we still have fears. Thankfully, we managed to prevent that centre from being closed down in the short term, but others in my constituency are at risk. Many other MPs have GP surgeries in their constituencies that face uncertain futures due to the funding restraints. This paints a picture not only of the underfunding of primary care services, but of a strategy that simply does not work together. Even a simple understanding of healthcare provision would allow us to see that if we decrease NHS services in one sector, there is an impact on the rest of it and an increased pressure on other service providers. But this Government continue to underfund and cut funding to all aspects of frontline services, and they expect the quality of care to remain the same. Where is the long-term planning that will ensure that people get access to the care that they deserve and are entitled to?

The Government’s strategy is the same when it comes to local government social care funding. The cuts to local social care funding have been dramatic. As many other hon. Members have highlighted, nearly £4.6 billion has been taken out of the social care sector since 2010, mainly through local government funding cuts. My district of Bradford has just had to announce that it will be taking out of the social care sector since 2010, mainly through local government funding cuts. The authority is trying to be innovative and trying to find ways to ensure that there is no effect on frontline care by putting its resources into prevention. For me, the Government still fail to recognise the impact of deprivation on care needs. In one of the four most deprived constituencies, health issues go hand in hand with deprivation. The cuts to local government funding make that even more evident. It is not the work of our exceptional healthcare staff that has caused this crisis. It is the reduction in funding and the short-term strategy of this Government that are responsible. It is time for them to wake up and provide the healthcare provision people deserve.

4.17 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Many of my constituents are extremely fortunate to be served by Luton and Dunstable hospital—the hospital that was name-checked twice by the Secretary of State in his statement on Monday. One thing it does extremely well is its excellent streaming process in A&E, with good alternatives when A&E provision is not appropriate. That has helped the hospital to provide very high standards. I am also fortunate that my constituents’ social care is provided by Central Bedfordshire Council, which has been extremely innovative in building extra care court provision for older people. I visited those provisions, which are hugely popular and in central locations. They are much cheaper than residential care and provide a much better living environment for older people. That is exactly the sort of thing that we need a lot more of across the country. Those are two examples of really good individual practice within the NHS and social care. We need to be much better at spreading that good practice across the whole country.

It is worth putting on the record that since this time last year, we have more than 1,600 more doctors and 3,100 more hospital nurses. Since 2010, we have over 11,000 more doctors and 11,000 more nurses. The proportion of patients harmed by the NHS fell by more than a third between 2012 and 2015, and cases of infection are 50% lower than they were one year ago, which is a tremendous achievement. Health spending in England is actually 1% higher than the OECD average and the UK is spending more on long-term care as a percentage of GDP than Germany, Canada and the USA. The King’s Fund has said that STPs are the “best hope” for the future of the NHS in England, and Chris Hopson, the head of NHS Providers, has said that the system as a whole is doing “slightly better” than this time last year.

All that is dependent on having a strong economy, and I would argue that the Conservative party has demonstrated its competence in running the economy. Of course, I am not complacent, and I recognise that there is, in a sense, an arms race between the extra provision I am proud the Government have put in and the increasing demands on the NHS.

One issue that continually disappoints me is that we do not have enough of a focus on quality in these debates—they are always about funding. However, I draw attention again to the “Getting it Right First Time” initiative brought in by the Government just before Christmas, which is projected to save £1.5 billion that could be redirected back towards frontline patient care across 18 specialties. That will result in fewer infections and fewer revision operations, and we are using the data to shine a spotlight on variability, which is absolutely key for our constituents.

On mental health and the very welcome statement by the Prime Minister on Monday, I was delighted to hear the emphasis on first aid for mental health—something that will take place in our schools. However, as important, if not more important, is the issue of keeping fit for mental health. What do we all need to do to maintain good mental health? The Mental Health Foundation says we need to talk about our feelings, eat well, keep in touch with family and friends, take a break, accept who we are, keep active, drink sensibly, ask for help, do something we are good at and care for others. I do not think those 10 pointers from the Mental Health Foundation are as well known as they should be, so I am pleased to have put them on the record. It is crucial that we all look after our mental health, and that will help to reduce the stigma in this area.

Another issue I am passionate about is doing something about obesity, because although we have a national health service, we do not do enough to keep our fellow citizens healthy. I would like to see more emphasis placed on the excellent work of Dr Susan Jebb, an academic at the University of Oxford. She published an article in The Lancet just before Christmas showing that where GPs offered obese patients a referral to 12 weekly one-hour sessions, there was a significant reduction in the patients’ obesity.

Stephen Pound: I am sure the hon. Gentleman, like me, is a regular reader of the Daily Mail, and he will have noticed the proposal in yesterday’s paper that people who are obese, heavy smokers or even, God
[Stephen Pound]

forbid, both should be denied medical treatment until they lose weight or stop the filthy habit of smoking. Would he like to recommend to those on his Front Bench the adoption of that policy?

Andrew Selous: What I am focusing on is what we can do to keep ourselves healthy and to reduce the demands on the NHS by behaving responsibly, and that is what I want to put the emphasis on.

That is important because a quarter of adults are obese, as are 14% of children between the ages of two and 15, and 18% of children in lower income households. Those figures should shame us all, and that is why I intervened on the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and mentioned the daily mile, which was brought in by St Ninian’s Primary School in Stirling. We need to see more of that and, frankly, a strengthened obesity policy.

My daily newspaper at the moment is the China Daily—it happens to be delivered free to my office. I was intrigued to see that students at universities in China actually have to take a physical fitness test lasting 50 minutes at the beginning of each new semester or they will not be given a graduation certificate. I am not necessarily suggesting that we introduce that here, but we should look around the world to see what other countries are doing to promote the health of their populations—to keep them fit and healthy—and to reduce the pressure on health services.

At the other end of the age spectrum, we need to do a lot more to keep older people fit and healthy, as many of the issues with social care would be greatly lessened if older people were able to stay healthier into later life. I am proud to be associated with the Buzzards 50+ organisation in my constituency, which helps older people to take regular exercise at our local leisure centres. In Andorra, which I mentioned earlier, that is normal for the whole population. Older people in their 70s and 80s will regularly take part in water aerobics classes and go to the gym. When a BBC correspondent went there a few years ago, women in their 70s taking part in these exercises said, “There’s no point in spending your retirement shut up at home. What’s more important than keeping yourself fit? If you don’t keep your body moving, you won’t keep your mind in shape.” Frankly, we need a lot more of that type of activity in our own country to lessen the pressures on our social care system.

4.25 pm

Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): We have heard from Conservative Members about the so-called annual winter crisis, as though the situation we are in at the moment has always existed. Well, there have been crises in the past, but nothing like on the scale that we have seen recently. We are hearing about corridors being redirected and bed occupancies being well over the 85% recommended level, and in many cases well over 95%. We have heard about the £4.6 billion of cuts in social care funding. Already, while it has not been made explicit, we are hearing talk of downgrading the four-hour A&E wait. In Preston, as I know myself, it is difficult to get GP appointments. If I ring and ask to see the doctor I want to see, I am often told that I will have to wait two to three hours—I mean weeks—to see that doctor. It probably will be two to three hours, at the very least, if I go to the hospital and it is a serious case. It is no wonder A&E is in crisis.

A whole cohort of doctors in their mid-to-late 50s are looking forward to retirement. The number of doctors has increased, as we heard from the Health Secretary today, but that increase is nowhere near matching the number of doctors who are leaving the service or going to work elsewhere.

On the social care sector, we have seen tens of millions of pounds of Government cuts forced on Lancashire County Council. That is leaving the elderly vulnerable and more likely to have accidents at home, putting pressure on A&E as well. The mental health services—the Cinderella services—continue not to get the support they deserve. Since the closure of the acute mental health ward in Royal Preston hospital, the Avondale unit, I have seen mental health patients being decanted around Lancashire because they cannot get the care and support that they need in Preston.

Over a five-month period to August last year, we saw a 16% increase in attendance at A&E at Royal Preston hospital. Over the same period, average daily patient attendance increased from 217 per day to 255 per day. A small percentage of that increase was due to the closure of Chorley and South Ribble hospital’s A&E. I am sure that if the Deputy Speaker, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr Hoyle), were here, he would echo what I have said. However, it is not all due to the closure of Chorley’s A&E. Many patients who would have gone to Chorley are now attending the A&E in Wigan, or elsewhere. The Government should not be allowing wards to close when the demand is so high. The daily average for the number of ambulance arrivals has increased from 68 to 91, according to the North West Ambulance Service. In the meantime, a return to a 24-hour accident and emergency service at Chorley hospital has been ruled out. At best, there will be a 12-hour A&E service sometime later this month.

Preston has one of the 134 of 138 A&E departments up and down the country in which 95% of patients are not seen within four hours. I believe it is an absolute disgrace that only four A&E in the country are meeting the four-hour standard. It is testimony to the cuts and austerity being forced on the NHS and local government social services departments up and down the country.

I call on the Government to increase spending on social care and to fund the NHS further in this year’s Budget as a matter of urgency.
I am proud that the Government are committed to the NHS, and that as we enter the winter period we have nearly 1,800 more doctors and nearly 3,000 more hospital nurses than we had a year ago. We have launched the largest ever flu vaccine programme and allocated £400 million to local health systems for winter preparedness, and we have bolstered support outside A&E with 12,000 additional GP sessions over the festive period. Of course, there is and always will be more to do, but I believe that we are rising to the challenge and will continue to do so. I am sure that the Secretary of State and his team will continue to rise to that challenge as well.

4.35 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I do not intend to take too long, because I am mindful of the fact that the motion refers largely to NHS England, but I am goaded to speak by the repeated references by the current Secretary of State, the previous Prime Minister and the current Prime Minister to the relative performance of the NHS in Wales. I want to take a few minutes to set the record straight and give a clearer illustration of the relative performance of the two NHS systems.

Before I do that, I want to reflect on the interesting, thoughtful speech that the Prime Minister gave earlier this week about her desire to create a “shared society”, as she put it, in Britain. I read the speech, as many Members did, and felt that it set out precisely what all Governments ought to be doing at all times. In one passage, the Prime Minister said:

“That is why I believe that...the central challenge of our times is to overcome division and bring our country together.”

She said that she wanted to create “a society that respects the bonds that we share as a union of people and nations.”

I completely agree with her about that, but I find it impossible to reconcile that stated objective and rhetoric with how she and, in particular, her predecessor have sought to divide this country on the NHS. They have illegitimately demeaned the performance of the NHS in Wales, demoralised its staff and destroyed confidence and faith in it among Welsh citizens. With a few statistics, I hope to illustrate how misleading some of the representations in recent years have been.

The first statistic is that the previous Prime Minister referred to the NHS in Wales in a disparaging fashion 37 times, on every occasion as a political attempt to mitigate against criticism of the NHS in England. That broke the important bonds between different parts of the UK. I will state a few of the facts. The entire budget of the country is about £750 billion, so 16% of that is spent on the NHS. That is 48% of all spending of that is spent on the NHS. That is 48% of all spending by the Government in Wales. The difference between the NHS in Wales than in England per head or in percentage...
terms. We have heard that three times today already. The truth is that in 2010 the Welsh Government, with the lower headroom that I have mentioned, chose to reduce spending on the NHS by 1% compared with the previous year. In England, there was flat cash spending. That 1% reduction was made to increase and prioritise spending on education in Wales. Since then, we have seen successive rounds of investment by the Welsh Government: £80 million was announced this week for a new treatment fund; last week, there was £40 million for capital spending. It is now broadly comparable in percentage terms. In fact, last year in Wales we spent £2,026 per head, while England spent £2,028. The difference is negligible. If we add health and social care together, we find that Wales spent 6% more per head than England. These are the realities of the comparative spending.

What has this given us in outputs? There are some things that the Welsh NHS does worse. In Wales, we wait longer for some diagnostic treatment. There is a need to spend more on more MRI scanners and CT scanners. Part of the issue, however, relates to an older and sicker post-industrial population, rural sparsity and a lesser ability to attract people to some of the more far-flung hospitals—all perfectly explicable and reasonable. In England, over the past nine months, we have seen the biggest rise in waiting lists for nine years.

In other areas, Wales does well. On the crucial eight-minute ambulance response time, 77% of calls meet it in Wales, against only 67% in England. Most would agree that the 62-day cancer treatment target is vital, but in England it is consistently missed. In England, on average, 81% of people are treated within the target time; in Wales, the figure is currently 86%. There are other areas I could turn to. A&E is the crucial area we are looking at today. In Wales, 83% of patients are currently seen within the four-hour target. In England, the figure is 88%. There are 150 A&E departments in England and only six or seven in Wales, so this is another completely ludicrous and, in many respects, meaningless statistical comparison. Thirty seven of the 150 A&E departments in England are below the Welsh average. Several of the Welsh trusts are up at the 95% or 98% mark. This is a further illustration of how meaningless, misleading and frankly abusive it has been of the Tories to use the Welsh NHS as a stick to score political points.

In conclusion, the truth about the Welsh NHS is that it performs excellently in some areas and that it could be improved in others. As the OECD said, in a 10-year study of all the healthcare systems across the country, no one part of Britain performs demonstrably better or worse than any other. That is the truth about the differences between our NHS in this country. The Minister, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State need to remember that they are Ministers for the whole United Kingdom, not just England. Their duty is to increase the bonds of solidarity, not destroy them.

4.42 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): This has been an absolutely first-rate debate, with a number of extremely fine contributions. I was particularly taken, as ever, by the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the Chairman of the Select Committee. She rightly pointed out that we are all living longer, which is a great thing, but that unfortunately our healthy lives are not expanding. This causes real problems for A&E, which has to deal with that. Although we talk about large numbers of people passing through A&E departments—they are dealing with more people all the time—the truth of the matter is that it is those with chronic long-term and complicated conditions who tend to assume the lion's share of A&E resources and those of the rest of the secondary care system. As we get older, there will be more and more of such cases. We need to prepare for them.

We also need to mitigate against those cases. One thing that has not been discussed very much this afternoon is prevention and public health: our need to ensure that we deal with things that are avoidable. The Prime Minister, in her excellent speech on Monday on the shared society, rightly said:

“We live in a country where if you’re born poor, you will die on average 9 years earlier than others.”

That is absolutely appalling and we should all be ashamed. Half that health inequality is due to tobacco consumption. Someone in a manual occupation is far more likely to be a smoker or to smoke more than a professional or managerial person. We have to be serious about controlling the scourge of tobacco. I encourage Ministers to produce the tobacco control plan, which is now overdue, as soon as possible, as we need to deal with this issue. I hope that the plan will contain some helpful remarks on the tobacco duty escalator and the licensing of retailers and involve serious conversations with supermarkets. The aim must be to reduce the availability of tobacco, reduce consumption and therefore reduce the burden of diseases that are affecting our NHS and having appalling consequences for citizens.

I very much support the Government’s amendment to the motion. I was not present when the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who speaks for the SNP, was speaking about community hospitals. I am sorry about that, because community hospitals are particularly important to me and I would have liked to respond to some of her remarks. I have community hospitals in my area. In particular, there is one serving my constituency at Shaftesbury that is threatened with bed closures under the STP. We need to be very careful about short-term funding cuts that might appear expedient, when we have not properly costed the service. Providing that the case mix is right—and traditionally case mixes have been pretty appalling in the NHS—community hospital beds can provide a cost-effective means of treating people, particularly the elderly, in a setting close to their homes rather than in large acute hospitals, which are the wrong places for elderly sick people. Community hospitals can deal quite effectively with some of the delayed discharge problems currently afflicting our system. As Members of Parliament, we are all sometimes faced with the political choice of whether to oppose, for our own expediency, the closure or reorganisation of services. I have faced that in my constituency. I was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) say that sometimes we need to be brave when approaching such matters.

If we want to drive up standards and outcomes in our NHS, we will have to look increasingly at specialist centres, which will inevitably mean service reconfiguration and probably some closures. That will be disagreeable to many colleagues, but specialist centres certainly improve
standards and outcomes for things such as cancer, strokes and heart attacks, and that implies regional and sub-regional services. I would not be one to oppose a closure, reorganisation or reconfiguration for its own sake. We have always to understand that resources are finite and that we need to get the best service and outcomes for the money available.

I say gently to the Minister that we need to look at funding. He will be aware of the campaign by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), which I support, in relation to a commission or convention. It seems a non-partisan way of trying to approach the very difficult conundrum of how we will fund the NHS going forward. I commend it to the Minister. I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister say at lunchtime that she was prepared to meet colleagues concerned about the issue to see whether this proposal could be a productive and helpful way forward. We do not spend as much on the NHS as we need to. That is the bottom line. It is no good people saying we spend 1% above the OECD average. That is not good enough, given that the OECD includes countries with which most people in this country would not wish to be compared. As the Government of the day make clear over the next several years, we need to close the gap with the EU 15, particularly with countries such as Germany, France and the Netherlands, whose outcomes are much better than ours. It is no coincidence that they spend much more on healthcare.

Today, the chief executive of the NHS is being examined by the Public Accounts Committee. I hope he will be examined on the £22 billion efficiency measures that he felt might be achievable in the five year forward view. Two years in and it is clear that those savings will not be met—they never were going to be met. We need to determine how we are going to make up the delta—the difference—between the efficiency measures that the NHS can reasonably achieve and those projected two years ago.

I want to finish by congratulating the Minister and the Government on achieving what they have. We have heard how things have improved in recent years, particularly in relation to such things as activity and hospital infections, but there is much more to do. In particular, I hope he will look closely at the funding issue.

4.50 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): This is a vital issue, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) on bringing it before the House. The pressures on our national health service have a multitude of causes. Many of them are societal: whoever was in power would be dealing with an ageing population, limited financial resources and global competition for skills. However, many aspects of the crisis have a political origin, and the Government cannot continue to avert their eyes from that.

In my contribution today, I want to talk about my own experience of the pressures that our NHS staff, and particularly those in A&E, are facing and ask Members to walk a mile in the shoes of those who are on the frontline, making life-and-death decisions every single day. My exposure to these pressures is both professional and personal. Professionally, in common with many other MPs, I have recently spent time in the A&E department of my local hospital, the Chesterfield royal, shadowing staff on the watch.

I have said that my exposure to these issues was also a personal one. Last year, on Friday 15 July, my father died of an aneurysm. Four days earlier, he had been sent home from the A&E department at Coventry and Warwickshire hospital with what a vascular surgeon described at my father’s inquest as “classical aneurysm symptoms”. With a history of vascular problems and a previous near-fatal aneurysm, he presented at the hospital’s A&E department, suffering extreme pain in his right groin, radiating to side and back. He was described as being confused and uncommunicative. Yet, after five hours in A&E, he was sent home in a taxi. Four days later, he died in my arms.

Although individual mistakes by an experienced and, I believe, respected A&E registrar were clearly made in this case, what was particularly haunting was his response to questions during the inquest about why my father was sent home. He recounted the pressures in the A&E department that day, and said that it was non-stop and particularly busy on that Friday afternoon, so that from one case to another, he was constantly having to decide, as he did most days, which sick patients, all of whom needed to be in a hospital bed, to send home this time. He said:

“There simply aren’t enough beds for those who need to be in them, so every day we have to make these choices. I probably sent home 5 people that day who should have been in a hospital bed, but those are the choices we are left with, when there aren’t enough beds”.

He asked if my father minded going home and when he did not object, he stuck him in a cab.

These pressures and these life-or-death decisions are not unique to that registrar or that hospital. Dr Stephen Hitchin, an out-of-hours doctor and an A&E doctor at Chesterfield royal said:

“Chesterfield Royal Hospital have confirmed to the CCG today that they are experiencing SEVERE pressure (RED STATUS) in A&E. Emergency Management Unit, Clinical Decision Unit and critical care beds…This has come from a toxic combination of underinvestment, social care cuts, staff cuts, poor planning and GP surgery shortages. This is a failure of policy from this Government plain & simple. They are to blame & must take responsibility & action to correct this crisis”.

Another consultant said:

“The only thing keeping the wheels even vaguely on is a grim determination and professionalism. Any good will to the system was eroded months ago. The government have thought that Emergency Departments can just soak up exploitation and abuse ad infinitum but we can’t. We have exceeded ‘acceptable tolerances’ long ago.”

If that is the experience of people working within the system, how can we be surprised when it leads to personal catastrophes? How can we be surprised when doctors on whom we have spent tens of thousands of pounds to train, take the expensive training and move to other countries where they feel they are better appreciated? The experiences of those consultants and registrars were echoed by those I met when shadowing the A&E department at Chesterfield royal. Other issues emerged. Certainly there were people in the A&E department who were not urgent cases and should have been at their GP. When I asked one of them why he had come to A&E, he said it was because he had been trying to get a doctor’s appointment for three days at his GP surgery and just could not get one.
The scale of the GP crisis is adding to our A&E crisis, not just because people present who should be seeing a GP, but because problems that could have been sorted out or identified if they were seen early enough escalate without access to primary care. The Government must take responsibility. The cuts in training budgets in 2010-11 and 2011-12 were catastrophic for the provision of the next generation of staff, and we are now reaping the full cost of that decision. Quite apart from the ethics of having to rely on overseas staff to keep our NHS sustainable and the impact that has on health services in developing countries, it is crazy that, at a time of a global shortage of trained medical staff, the Government deliberately cut off the flow of new home-grown recruits.

The story is similar in nursing. In 2010-11, 25,525 students enrolled on a nursing degree course, but owing to budget cuts, that number had been reduced by nearly 15% within two years of a Tory Government, and even now it is more than 10% down. The staff shortages have also led to a ballooning of agency costs: in the past two years, an additional £2 billion has been spent on agency staff. More and more money is being spent on extra staff and not, as it should be, on patient care.

We need to remind ourselves that things were different under a Labour Government. A Labour Government led to record NHS satisfaction levels, achievement of the 98% waiting target, a sustainable GP and A&E system, and, in the words of the King’s Fund, the most efficient health service in the world. The Labour Government led to much higher patient expectations, but the cuts in the poorest areas on our health service, we experienced his first life-threatening aneurysm on holiday again, our spending is now “significantly below” theirs. I am ashamed to say that I am grateful that my father received in Munich saved his life and gave us, his family, three more years with him. I regret that the same could not be said of our NHS last year.

We have it in our hands to make our NHS once again a service admired around the world. Although the challenges that it faces are substantial, they are also predictable. If the Government had listened to those who questioned their cuts in training, the impact of pension reforms on GP retention, the impact of GP shortages on A&E departments and the impact of care cuts in the poorest areas on our health service, we would not be facing the crisis that we face today. The call for further action on A&E waiting times and investment in our care system cannot be ignored.

The Government seem to be presiding over the managed decline of our NHS, but the scale of this crisis will engulf them if action is not taken now. It means old people struggling to cope; it means the disabled being left in their homes rather than being able to take advantage of things that we all take for granted; and it means people being sent home from A&E departments to die. We must do better.

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4.57 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): There is no NHS A&E waiting crisis in my constituency, because there is no A&E unit. It was closed a dozen years ago by the then Labour Government, and people who need to access emergency services must now travel nearly 10 miles on single-carriageway roads to East Surrey hospital. That is the legacy of the Labour Government in my constituency.

I am pleased to say that since 2010 services have been returning to Crawley hospital as a direct consequence of the protection and, indeed, enhancement of the health budget to which the Government have committed themselves, and to which they are still committed. I know that this is often dismissed by the Labour Opposition and by others, but it is quite significant that the NHS asked for an additional £8 billion for the coming period and the Conservative Government are delivering £10 billion of extra investment. That has a very real effect.

I do not deny that there are huge pressures on our health service. As many Members have pointed out today, we have an ageing and a growing population. It is fortunate that people are living longer because new drugs are available to treat conditions that were previously not very treatable, but that puts additional pressure on the health service, although, in a way, those are nice problems to have.

We should not use this issue as some sort of political tit-for-tat. Concern for the health service and our wellbeing is felt by us all, both for ourselves and, of course, for our families and loved ones. I think that, when discussing how to address the increasing health needs of our nation, we should focus on constructive arguments rather than the political point-scoring of which we have heard so much today. I have to say that, as other Members have mentioned, in the 33 minutes of the shadow Health spokesman’s speech we did not hear a single policy suggestion on how under a Labour Administration there would be a different approach to the NHS.

I am delighted to say that Crawley this week celebrates the 70th anniversary of being designated a new town. One of the most disastrous decisions in those 70 years was the loss of the A&E in 2005, although, as I have said, some services are returning. Just yesterday, a new clinical assessment unit was opened that seeks to do precisely what we have been discussing: take pressure off A&E whereby those who should not be treated in an emergency environment are triaged and signposted to better support services. That unit is to be welcomed. In recent years, a new 24-hour, seven-day-a-week urgent care centre opened in Crawley hospital as well as an out-of-hours GP surgery. As we strive to achieve that 24/7 NHS, all these steps are ways we can better serve patients and relieve pressure on emergency care in the whole system, which almost every winter comes under additional strain.

I will support the Government amendment this evening, because we need to recognise the hard work done by our NHS staff and the additional investment. This is not just about funding, however; it is also about the way we deliver healthcare in an acute setting when people present.

Finally, I want to touch on social care, because, of course, health and social care are inextricably interlinked. We have an ageing population, as many Members have mentioned, and it has increasing health needs. One of the areas of increased health need is dementia, and I am pleased to say Crawley was one of the first designated dementia-friendly towns. That is not just a label; it means multi-agency working between health and local
authorities, and indeed the voluntary and private sector, to ensure those with dementia are better supported. I am delighted to announce that recently a new ward, the Piper ward, was opened in Crawley hospital. It is a dementia-friendly ward specifically to better treat the health and social care needs of our elderly population.

I could say much more in this debate, which is of importance not just today but throughout this Parliament, but as we have limited time I will let other Members contribute, too.

5.3 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): First, may I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) for his incredibly moving speech?

People are dying—literally. We are no longer saying people will die unnecessarily; we are now in the present tense, and we are hearing horror stories from around the country of people dying on hospital trolleys and at home waiting for ambulances to arrive. These are lives that could have been saved had it not been for this crisis.

People are dying in hospitals undetected by overworked nurses and other members of our amazing medical staff. A constituent of mine went to visit her grandad in hospital and, very sadly, found him dead in his bed on the ward. The overworked nurses had missed the fact that he was at the end of his life and had passed away. He died alone while his relatives were at home, unaware of how seriously ill he was.

I am bemused to hear Member after Member on the Government Benches standing up to defend the Government, when the facts are absolutely clear. They seem to be in severe denial. How can this be normal? How can the Government sit back and say that the solution is to discard the waiting time target? It is not new; it is the same from all my constituents who come to me with their horrendous experiences. The doctors, nurses and other healthcare staff are doing absolutely everything they can. They are on their knees.

Another constituent of mine arrived at A&E just last week, only to be told that she would have to wait at least 10 hours to see a doctor. That is not good enough. We are one of the richest nations in the world. It transpired that she had sepsis, a potentially fatal illness, and it is only because an overworked and stressed triage nurse recognised her symptoms and immediately instigated treatment that she is alive today and is able to tell me her horrendous story. Her treatment was started in the hospital corridor, where she sat on a chair while on an intravenous drip, because there were no beds available, not only in that hospital but in any of the neighbouring hospitals in the trust.

The theme is the same from all my constituents who come to me with their horrendous experiences. The doctors, nurses and other healthcare staff are doing absolutely everything they can. They are on their knees. No one wants to blame them, because they can see that what is being asked of them is far beyond what anyone would ever be asked to do in any other profession, but they can all see that the system is at breaking point. Instead of berating the Red Cross for suggesting that our NHS is in the midst of a humanitarian crisis, let us stop for a moment and think about why it had to use that term. Let us talk about what we can do.

We owe our incredible junior doctors so much, and they have been treated appallingly recently. A friend of mine recently attended an outpatient appointment at our local hospital and mentioned to the overworked junior doctor that I was an MP. He pleaded with her to tell me how bad things were, how overworked they were, how the NHS was crumbling around us, and how he and his colleagues could not perform to the best of their abilities due to the horrendous pressure they were under. He talked about working 12 to 14-hour shifts with a 10-minute break. He told her that he loved his job, saying that it was a vocation, never just a job. He said that he was proud of this country and its national health service, and that the only thing that kept him working here instead of fleeing abroad, as many of his friends had done, was that he cared so much for his NHS.

When is the Secretary of State going to stand up and take responsibility for what is going on? People are waiting hours for ambulances and waiting for hours in A&E. They are being treated on trolleys in seminar rooms and in corridors. Where does this end? We are already seeing the creeping privatisation of our NHS, with companies such as the dreadful Virgin Care putting profits before patients. Perhaps the end goal is for us to move to an American-style system where people are literally dying on the streets and where someone turns up at A&E and the first question is, “Have you got insurance, and can you prove it?”

My constituency is served by two hospitals: Dewsbury and district hospital and Huddersfield royal infirmary. Both are due to be downgraded, losing vital services and beds as their respective trusts struggle to meet the financial pressures that have been placed on them. One of the hospitals that is supposed to pick up the resulting demand from the downgrades, Pinderfields hospital in Wakefield, was last week warning people against attending its A&E, and this is before the downgrades have even taken place. I am in absolutely no doubt that if the downgrades go ahead, lives will be lost. I plead with the Ministers and the Secretary of State to stop those downgrades now and to bring forward the much-needed funds that could save the lives of my constituents. It was interesting to hear the Prime Minister refer to those hospitals today at Prime Minister’s questions. She said that there were two hospitals in the trust. Perhaps someone could pass on to her the fact that there are three.

I have quoted Nye Bevan, the founder of our great national health service, before, but I feel that this is more relevant today than ever. He said:

“The NHS will last as long as there are folk left with the faith to fight for it.”

As those on the Conservative Benches appear to have lost faith and stopped fighting, it is our duty on the Labour Benches, now more than ever, to step up that fight. I would not like to speculate about when a Government Member last set foot in an NHS hospital outside of an official visit—[Interruption.]

Henry Smith: Between Christmas and new year.

Paula Sherriff: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Perhaps he should show some more empathy for the patients who are waiting on trolleys for up to 10 hours just to be seen. One thing I know for sure is
that many thousands of my constituents rely on such services every day and the message from them is unequivocal: the NHS needs funds, and needs them now.

I was admonished by Mr Speaker today for berating the Prime Minister during PMQs, but let me be absolutely clear: I will continue to do that while this mismanagement of our national health service is ongoing. I will never, ever stop fighting for our NHS.

5.10 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I appreciate the opportunity to speak in this debate. For the record, the last time I was in an NHS hospital was when I was working a night shift on Saturday. I declare an interest in that I am a nurse who has worked during this year’s winter crisis, but I have also worked during winter for the past 20 years.

James Heappey: I apologise for intervening so early in my hon. Friend’s speech, but the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) is too busy congratulating himself from the Opposition Benches.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will not.

James Heappey: I appreciate the opportunity to speak in this debate. For the record, the last time I was in an NHS hospital was when I was working a night shift on Saturday. I declare an interest in that I am a nurse who has worked during this year’s winter crisis, but I have also worked during winter for the past 20 years.

James Heappey: I apologise for intervening so early in my hon. Friend’s speech, but the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) is too busy congratulating herself on her own speech to note that my hon. Friend was working in an NHS hospital on Saturday night.

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend, but that is obviously not of interest to Labour Members. I have been a nurse for over 20 years and have seen 20 years’ worth of winter crises. They are not unusual. There is no doubt that there is more pressure this year than ever before—we have heard about record numbers of people attending A&E—but there have been winter crises under many previous Governments. It was not unusual when I worked in A&E for patients to be treated in corridors or on chairs—wherever there was space. It was not unusual for ambulances to be queued up around the block, waiting for hours to unload patients—[Interruption. ] I still work in the NHS and disagree with the chuntering from the Opposition Benches.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will not. I must make progress and others want to speak.

It was not unusual for my hospital to declare a major incident because we could not take any more patients. It was not unusual for us to take on the extra work when neighbouring hospitals declared major incidents. The truth hurts, but that is what has happened over my 20 years of working in the NHS and what has happened over the past few days of this winter crisis. It outrageous for Labour Members to suggest that it is something new. They are in denial if they believe that it has not been happening for many years.

The Labour Government was so fixated on the four-hour rule that managers used to bully us and tell us which patients would get a bed based not on clinical need, but on the need to meet a target that was about to expire. I want to tell the House a story. One night I was working in a busy A&E when an elderly gentleman was admitted. He had fallen at home and broken his hip and had to be put in a trolley in the middle of a busy corridor. The four-hour target was looming, and at three and a half hours he called out to me and said, “Nurse, I desperately need to go to the toilet.” I had no cubicle to put that man in. He could not get off his trolley owing to his broken hip. The best that I could do under that Labour Government was to wheel a curtain around him and he went to the toilet there in the middle of a busy hospital corridor, with his war medals on his chest. Now, he got to a ward within four hours—his target was met—but that was not good care. If Labour Members think that it was and think that this is a new problem, they have buried their heads in the sand.

Dr Allin-Khan: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will not.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If the hon. Lady wants to give way, she will. Unfortunately, she is not, but Members cannot just stand there—two at once—shouting all the time. It is recognised that if a Member is to give way, they will, but it is up to them.

Maria Caulfield: These problems are not new. I have also worked in out-patient settings where A&E targets have had an impact on patients waiting for elective surgery. The sheer determination to meet those targets due to pressure from the Labour Government led to patients with breast cancer having their elective operations cancelled time after time owing to emergency admissions. I had to tell a young mum, whose mastectomy operation following breast cancer had been cancelled three times while her young family were waiting for Christmas, that the only bed we had left was in a post-natal ward, where she woke up and recovered from her operation next to young mums learning to breastfeed. That was in an attempt to meet four-hour targets, so do not tell me that services have reduced. Targets were met, but staff were put under severe pressure not with quality of care but with targets in mind. I make no apologies in making that clear.

I am a supporter of four-hour targets. I was enthusiastic when they were introduced as a way of monitoring performance and improving the service, but they became the absolute king, above everything else. I congratulate the Secretary of State on introducing the consideration of outcomes. What happens to a patient when they are admitted? If they have to stay for four and a half hours to avoid admission or to get full care, what is the problem with that? If they can leave within two hours because they have been adequately treated, fantastic, but we should not be held to account by an arbitrary four-hour rule that has no clinical significance. I support the four-hour rule, but there are other measures that we also need to be aware of and that should be treated with equal status to the four-hour target.

Of course money is important. As our ageing population and our ability to treat more patients grows, we will need more funding for both healthcare and social care. It is worth noting that the trusts either side of my constituency receive the same funding and look after the same types and numbers of people. One is in special measures, is unable to deal with its discharges, has queues and is unable to meet its four-hour targets; the other, five miles along the coast, is rated outstanding, does not have the same pressures or four-hour waits and is able to discharge its patients speedily. There is something
about what happens to the money, as well as about how much the money amounts to.

Labour did put huge amounts of money into the NHS over the years, but much of it was squandered—£10 billion on a failed IT project that never saw the light of day, and PFI deals that are still costing the NHS £2 billion a year. How much could be done with that £2 billion?

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will take one brief intervention.

Dr Poulter: I commend my hon. Friend for making a balanced speech and for rightly saying that meeting targets does not necessarily equate to delivering good healthcare, although they do have their place. Does she agree that one of the biggest challenges is the consistent inability of a number of A&Es across the country to recruit middle-grade doctors? That is one of the biggest problems that has not been addressed to date.

Maria Caulfield: I absolutely agree that there is a problem in recruiting staff, particularly in the south-east—including in my constituency—in all healthcare professions because it is an expensive place to live. I agree that there is an issue with recruitment, but if we are to move forward, we need to work in a more cross-party way. Continually using four-hour targets as a stick to beat the Government does nothing for cross-party working, so we need to stop the political cheap shots and recognise that money is not always the solution—it is about how the money is spent and the difference it can make. This also has to be clinically led. We can work together as politicians, but if we do not work with healthcare professionals, in both primary care and secondary care, I fear that we will be sitting here again in the years to come to talk about another winter crisis.

5.18 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I join many others in commending those who work in our NHS and in our care system, including the hon. Members for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) and for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) both of whom continue to work in the NHS, I think without payment—[Interruption.] Not any longer. It is important that we acknowledge that many people in the NHS are working under incredible strain, and we owe them a debt of real gratitude.

I make it clear that I support the Labour motion, and I recognise the importance of access standards in our health service. After arriving here in 2001, my first Westminster Hall debate was on waiting time standards in Norfolk for orthopaedic cases. People in those days were sometimes waiting three years for treatment. So the waiting time standards that were introduced dramatically changed people’s experience of healthcare, and we should celebrate that. But it is also right to say that sometimes the standards distort behaviour, and those distortions need to be addressed, as the hon. Member for Lewes made clear. Another example to cite is that of the ambulance standards, where I am concerned about a very serious distortion of behaviour, which often causes enormous frustration for paramedics, who are also working under ludicrous amounts of pressure.

The other point I wish to make on access standards is that although I totally applaud the Labour Government for introducing them, they did not introduce them for mental health. That is why we now have to complete the picture. This Government have confirmed that they accept in full the Paul Farmer taskforce report on mental health, but it includes the proposal to roll out comprehensive maximum waiting time standards in mental health, so that someone with mental ill health has exactly the same right as anyone else to get access to good-quality, evidence-based treatment on a timely basis. We put this in an amendment that we tabled for this debate but which was not selected, but I urge the Government, as they have accepted that report, to make sure it is now implemented. The current situation amounts to a discrimination in the health service; how can we possibly justify the fact that someone with mental ill health does not have the right to timely treatment that other people enjoy? We have to end that discrimination.

The final thing I wish to address relates to the question I asked the Prime Minister today. I asked her to meet a group of cross-party MPs who are proposing that the Government establish what we are calling an NHS and care convention. We feel that is an opportunity to engage with the public in a mature debate about the scale of the challenge we all face. We can trade insults across this Chamber, but we all know in our heart of hearts that the system is under unsustainable pressure—that is the truth of it, and we know it. At some point, as the hon. Member for Lewes conceded, we will need extra resources in the future, so let us plan now. Let us get everybody on board and get cross-party support, because sometimes, just as we saw with Adair Turner in the last decade under the Labour Government, we need a process to unlock a problem that ordinary partisan politics has not been able to resolve.

I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister agreed today to meet a group of us who are making this call. We have also set up a petition on the Parliament website, so that any member of the public can join this call. I urge hon. Members from across this House who support this call to join in, because not only is it in the Government’s political interest to do this, but it is fundamentally in the interests of the citizens of this country that we in this House collectively address an enormous existential challenge to the NHS and the care system. We surely cannot tolerate more than 1 million older people not getting access to the care and support they need. I do not want to live in a country where someone’s access to care and support in old age depends on whether they can pay for it, but we are at genuine risk of slipping towards that situation. If we all believe that that is not tolerable, we have a duty to act. We must be prepared to act together, not just trade insults at each other. There is a real opportunity now to do what the public are desperately pleading for us to do: bury our differences and work together to achieve a long-term, sustainable settlement for the NHS and the care system.

5.23 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): There is no doubt in my mind that the meaningful integration of health and social care is the most important issue facing the NHS today. The most productive way to address the issue of
bed-blocking is by integrating services, pooling resources, and dramatically raising the profile of and support for community health professionals and care and support providers. We often hear of the problems facing the health services, but I am going to try to concentrate on the solutions.

Last November, I set up a local inquiry, identifying a number of people across the constituency and getting them together to investigate what health and social care could and should look like in west Cornwall—this is all part of the STP process in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. Together we are asking that question of representatives of health and social care providers. We are talking to GPs, NHS providers and managers, health campaigners, care providers, day-care managers, pharmacists, mental health clinicians, hospital matrons, Age UK and others. I am even including my predecessor in the discussions. All the clinicians we have met have identified savings that can be made through integration that they believe would improve patient care.

The results of the local inquiry will set out clear recommendations to be considered as part of the sustainability and planning process in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly; however, it is clear from the evidence we have heard that extra funding will be required to implement the planned transformation. The health services in Cornwall and on the Isles of Scilly already have a deficit that runs into tens of millions of pounds. Delivering rural health services is an expensive and underfunded exercise in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, and we in that part of the country long for a fair funding agreement for health and social care. People in my constituency agree that we must integrate health and social care. They also agree that extra funds are urgently needed to fund that integration.

In the autumn statement, the Chancellor confirmed Government plans to continue to increase the tax allowance threshold for workers. I completely agree with efforts to lower the tax burden, but my constituents have asked me to look at how we might raise taxes to help the integration of health and social care. On that basis, would the Government consider pausing the increase announced in the autumn statement and using the revenue generated to fund the transformation of integrated services? That could provide just shy of £6 billion over the rest of the Parliament to help health and social care providers to make the improvements they need and to reduce costs in the long run, while improving patient care.

One example of where extra funding would have dramatic results is if the pay and support for care and support workers was increased. In west Cornwall, some community care workers are paid as little as £7.20 per hour, yet they do incredibly important work in keeping people at home and in safe and good conditions. Because of such low pay and the pressure on care workers, we struggle to recruit and retain such valuable employees. Were we to look at pausing the increase in the tax allowance threshold for just a short time, the money saved could help to integrate the services to which we are all committed, thereby helping to make the savings and improvements in patient care that we all want to see.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The Government say that their success regime for the NHS in Cumbria is about transforming health and social care to create a “centre of excellence for integrated health and social care provision in rural, remote and dispersed communities.” That sounds fantastic—it sounds like exactly what we need. If that is the case, though, why are local people are so concerned about the actual proposals that there is a petition for a vote of no confidence in the regime? Why did the Secretary of State himself say earlier in the debate that he has profound concerns about the quality of care in Cumbria?

West Cumbria is set to see rapid population growth, owing to the proposed nuclear new build at Moorside, alongside proposed coal mining and tidal energy projects. There are concerns that none of this is being taken into account. Nevertheless, I shall focus on my particular concerns about the proposals for maternity services and community hospitals.

First, on maternity, the highly skilled and experienced midwives in west Cumbria have told me that the success regime’s preferred maternity option is not their preferred option. The idea behind the success regime is to “bring more care closer to home”, with a model that would “ensure provision of safe, high quality care and provide a first class experience”.

But the midwives ask how that can be achieved through the proposals to change maternity care at West Cumberland hospital when the success regime’s preferred option sees the choice of birthplace removed from hundreds of women and would potentially see severe delays in women and babies receiving life-saving assistance. The clinical outcomes and satisfaction rates at West Cumberland hospital under the current maternity care system are excellent and show that safe, high-quality care is being provided. The proposed changes would bring inequality, preventing fair access to maternity services across the county, and discriminate against west Cumbrian women who would no longer have a choice in maternity care, particularly those who are vulnerable owing to deprivation and social isolation.

The proposals will mean that around 700 additional women will deliver their babies at Carlisle every year, but where will they be cared for? The Cumberland infirmary in Carlisle already struggles with its current workload. West Cumbrian mothers need proper answers on this. In addition, a proposed new garden village is to be built south of Carlisle with 12,000 new homes. How on earth is the Cumberland infirmary expected to cope?

I am particularly disappointed that there is no option in the current consultation document to keep beds at Maryport and Wigton community hospitals. All the proposals remove all the beds at those hospitals. This will be particularly difficult for the relatives of patients who are having end-of-life care, because they may be elderly and have their own medical conditions. With no transport of their own, travelling to visit family members can be particularly arduous.

Both hospitals serve areas with considerable deprivation and very poor local transport links. Patients and families in Maryport may have to travel to the community...
hospitals or the acute hospitals. Journey times would be long with poor bus links, making it difficult for elderly and disabled people.

The people of Maryport feel very strongly about the changes and have run a passionate campaign to show people involved in the success regime just how much the community hospital means to them and how it is an integral part of the local community. They are deeply upset at the removal of the beds.

It is imperative that all services are delivered as close to people’s homes as possible. This must include the retention of beds at all our community hospitals and the retention of consultant-led maternity services at West Cumberland hospital.

I shall finish with a very personal experience, which relates in particular to beds in community hospitals. Not long before Christmas, my father was taken seriously ill. We managed to get him transferred from the acute hospital to his local community hospital, which was within walking distance of his home. He knew the staff and the district nurse who came to see him. When it became clear that he was at the end of his life, we tried very hard to get him moved home—we had a hospital bed set up in the living room. Unfortunately, the move was not possible. However, unlike the experience of my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), my father had a good death in his community hospital. All my constituents should have the same opportunity that my family had. We were able to be with my father at the local community hospital where he knew the staff and the district nurse who came to see him. If we remove palliative care from our community hospitals, we will be making a terrible mistake.

5.33 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The Wells constituency faces some real challenges in healthcare. We have an ageing population, and demand for the local NHS is growing rapidly. There is no doubt that our primary healthcare system is under considerable strain, as is our adult social care system. Our hospitals, too, face record demand. However, to call this a crisis does a disservice to those in the clinical commissioning group and our local hospital trust who have worked so hard to prepare for the incredible challenges that they face this winter.

Demand in the four A&Es that serve my constituency was significantly higher in the week between Christmas and the new year than in the same week the previous year. In two A&Es, demand almost doubled. I know that the A&E staff had to work extraordinarily hard to meet that demand and I know, too, from some constituents who contacted me that some people were not seen within the time that they might expect. However, I have heard from others who arrived at A&E expecting bedlam, only to be seen in well under four hours. Indeed, during last year’s Christmas recess, I spent the early hours of Christmas eve in Weston general hospital’s A&E with my then three-year-old. Like this year, the Labour Front Benches were claiming crisis, yet I saw some incredible clinicians doing an incredible job well within the required timelines. Moreover, an outpatient appointment needed in the week between Christmas and new year was easily arranged and kept. My personal experience is just one of the millions of experiences within our NHS each year, but I highlight it because if we are to have an honest, factual debate about our health system, we should caution against the emotion of individual experiences, for there will always be at least one that illustrates whatever point we seek to make.

Further into the hospital system, three of the four hospitals that serve the Wells constituency had more beds available in the last week of 2016 and the first week of 2017 than they did in the corresponding period in the previous year. Although occupancy at Taunton and Yeovil was 81% and 82% respectively last week, it is true that occupancy in Bath was 93%, and in Weston-super-Mare 100%. Make no mistake: occupancy levels such as those are a cause for real concern. But it is also important to note that although things are tight, so far the trusts are managing. However, I know that in all four of those hospitals, particularly in Weston, far too many beds are blocked by those who would be discharged if care at home could be arranged.

The Government have made more money available for adult social care and have given councils greater flexibility to increase council tax in the interim, but Somerset County Council and our local NHS organisations are justifiably still very concerned. I encourage the Government to look again at the local government funding settlement and adjust it to ensure that the funding gap between urban and rural areas does not widen and that funding for adult social care clearly and fully reflects the places in the country where the demographic is most top-heavy and where rurality increases the costs of delivering that support.

Finally there is the challenge that we face locally in primary healthcare. Local practices have assured me that anyone requiring an emergency appointment is seen on the day. However, it is true that my constituents are too often expected to wait a week or more if they ask to see their regular GP. Quite understandably for those with longstanding and complex health issues, they expect to see the doctor they know, so these waits are unacceptable, but it is wrong to connect the waits solely with funding. The greater challenge in Somerset is not the primary healthcare budget, which has risen for each of the past three years, but our ability to recruit new GPs.

The Secretary of State has worked hard to deliver more GPs into the whole system, but now rural CCGs such as Somerset’s will need to look at what initiatives could be developed to encourage new GPs to ply their trade in rural general practice. Furthermore, we must listen to and support those responsible for our STPs. We have called again and again for politicians to keep our noses out of NHS planning. Now that we have and local clinicians are now at the helm, the Opposition dismiss their work as well because it is politically expedient to do so.

The STP in Somerset has been written by people who really know their craft. When I asked them whether they would have written the plan as it is, even if there were no resource constraints, they told me that they would. They say that the demand has changed and that the thinking on public health has changed, and they tell me that the clinical view of how and where people should recover after they have been in hospital has changed too. Things will change still further over the years ahead.

Some of the things that the STP proposes are very challenging to me and some will be very unpopular with the community I serve, but the analysis is based on an
expertise that far outstrips mine, so unless I am being
implied now to reassert the supremacy of politicians
in these matters—we have, after all, apparently had
enough of experts—I think we owe it to the clinicians
empowered to now design and run our local healthcare
systems to scrutinise, of course, and to support them.
Moreover, those clinicians deserve to do that work
without the partisan hullabaloo being stirred up by the
Opposition. Our inboxes give us a great feel for how
things are. Our conversations with constituents, clinicians
and patient participation groups, such as the one in
Cheddar that I will see tomorrow night, shape that view,
too. To claim that all is perfect right now is not true, but
to claim that there is a crisis is not true either. Our
population and the practice of medicine are changing.
This debate needs to happen—not in a partisan furore,
but in an honest, constructive and supportive way.

5.40 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I was going
to speak about the effects of cuts to health and social
care funding on hospitals and healthcare in the south-west,
but all the things I wanted to say have been eloquently
said by other hon. Members. So, in keeping with other
speeches I have made recently, I have decided not to
repeat what has already been said, to scrub all that from
my speech and to talk about something completely
different: the health consequences of loneliness in older
people; the impact of funding cuts to NHS and social
care systems on loneliness; and the impact of older
people’s loneliness, in turn, on the healthcare system.

In the run-up to Christmas, I was regularly blinking
back tears on the underground whenever I saw the
advert from Age UK, which I am sure many hon.
Members will have seen, which had the slogan, “No one
should have no one at Christmas”. For Members who
might not remember it, it looked something like the Age
UK report “No one should have no one”, which I have
here and which I re-read yesterday. It was published in
December last year and is about loneliness in old age.
Reading that report brought home to me just how much
loneliness affects older people and how funding cuts
that may appear small and insignificant can have a
cumulative effect on older people.

A constituent illustrated that to me recently when she
came to talk to me about her worries for the older
people she cares for as a very low-paid care assistant.
She was not complaining about her pay, by the way—I
am just making that observation. She told me that she
regularly stays well beyond her low-paid hours because
she feels the people she is working with need her. That is
partly because they have greater care needs than can be
dealt with in the time allowed, and because they are
lonely. As I said, she was not complaining, but if we
starve social care of funding, such people will be subsidising
the health and social care system. She is doing that
voluntarily, but things should not be left to chance like
that.

The Age UK report mentions the survey that it
carried out of 1,000 GP practices as part of its campaign
in 2013 to end loneliness, which found that nearly
90% of GP practices felt that some patients were coming
in because they were lonely. The report also points out
that funding cuts mean that meals on wheels, day centres,
libraries, community centres, lunch clubs and public
toilets have been cut or closed in recent years. It points
out that all that decreases the opportunities for older
people to get out, socialise, take care of their health, eat
well and exercise, which increases their loneliness and
isolation and damages their health.

What does that have to do with chronic serious
illnesses? Age UK carried out an evidence-based review
for its loneliness report, and it found that chronic
loneliness increases the risk of serious illnesses such as
diabetes, stroke, depression and dementia, as well as
making it much harder for people to get out and receive
help or do things that might prevent those conditions
from getting worse, such as exercise or having a good diet.

I pay tribute today to all the people across the country
who give their time as volunteers, staff and fundraisers
for charities such as Age UK nationally and locally, and
in Bristol, for Bristol Ageing Better, which does so
much to combat loneliness in older people.

Let me read one example from the Age UK report:

“Arthur’s son was worried that his health was deteriorating
because of the many hours he was spending alone in his flat in
sheltered accommodation. He was unwilling to participate in
group activities because of difficulties hearing. He had had a
busy social life, but most of his friends had died...Age UK introduced
him to Paul, who had had to retire early after an accident and was
feeling increasingly isolated...They play dominoes and cribbage.
They dissect the latest football match and reminisce about their
time in the building trade—swapping funny stories of mishaps
and adventures. Paul has provided Arthur with good company
and a ‘link’ back to the job he loved. Arthur has helped restore
Paul's sense of purpose and self-worth.”

That example and the many others in the report show
just how much work on loneliness can help to improve
older people’s health and to reduce the costs on our
health and social care system.

It is vital for the Secretary of State to address what
the CEOs and staff in NHS hospitals and primary care
in my area have told me about the impact that cuts to
social care have on delaying discharge from hospital,
and I hope that he does so. I also want the Minister to
tell us exactly how he and the Secretary of State are
going to lead the way in providing us with a fully
integrated and fully funded health and social care and
mental healthcare service.

I want us all to read Age UK’s report and follow the
recommendations that it makes for MPs, among others.
It asks Members of Parliament to

“Find out...about loneliness among older people in your
constituency...raise awareness...Become an Age Champion”,
and to encourage our own political parties to do more.
It asks us to

“Take steps to put loneliness in later life on the Government’s
agenda”—

I hereby do that—

“and hold them to account for progress”,

which I will continue to do. It asks us to

“Make the case for investment in local community resources to
support sustainable, long term action to help lonely older people,
wherever they may be.”

I urge the Government to take note of that. Finally, it
asks us to

“Support the work of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness”,

which is launching shortly. I would like us all to take
those words to heart.
Maidstone is coping pretty well right now, but at the same time there may be a case for that and for greater transparency, but that is for another day.

We talked earlier about money. There is no question but that this issue is partly about the need for more funding and more staff, but the Government are doing exactly that: they are giving the NHS more money and investing in significant increases in the workforce. However, money is not the whole answer. If the NHS just continued doing all it does in the way that it does without any change, we would find ourselves with a system that was unaffordable and that used a proportion of GDP for which there would not be public support. We know that we have an ageing population—people are living longer and have multiple complex conditions—and that high-cost treatments are becoming available that people want, so the NHS itself recognises that this is not just about more money but about changing the way in which services are delivered.

Such changes are being worked on and are actually happening at the moment. Earlier today, I spoke to the hospital trust chief executive who is the lead for the Kent and Medway sustainability and transformation plan. STPs have come up several times today. As I have seen, under him and the group around him, there has been a coming together across Kent and Medway of NHS organisations that have not tended to work closely together. The coming together of the NHS and social services is so important, so necessary and so right if we are to work out how to provide a better health service in a more sustainable way. We need to break down the barriers between organisations, as it just does not make sense to have a split between the NHS and social care in who provides what. We should look at how we can genuinely move care out of acute hospitals and closer to home, which we know is good for patients. It is exactly what the hon. Member for Workington hoped for her father and what we wanted for my grandmother as she neared the end of her life.

We need to enable people to be looked after closer to home or preferably at home, and to improve prevention and—I feel particularly strongly about this—mental health care. The Prime Minister has taken a personal lead on mental healthcare with her announcements on Monday. In the light of the pressure on A&E, I particularly value the commitment to psychiatric liaison in A&E departments, which we know is helpful in the prevention of suicide, is good for people who go to A&E with mental health problems and helps A&E look after the people who need to be seen for physical health problems. I welcome the fact that my area of Kent is looking at bringing that forward and having psychiatric liaison in all A&E by 2018. Really important work is therefore going on at local level.

I encourage Labour Members not to make the knee-jerk or even tear-jerk speeches that some have made, but to take a longer view of the situation. That would help us to have a more mature conversation about what the NHS needs and to talk about policies and concrete proposals, rather than just about having more money, to solve the problems. It would also enable us to get behind what the NHS is doing at local level, where the NHS and local authorities are coming together to draw up plans across their areas for better care for patients in an affordable and sustainable way.
5.54 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): After four years of having responsibility for the national health service, the Secretary of State for Health has declared: “We need to have an honest discussion with the public about the purpose of A&E departments”.

We, who have seen his work from this House, and those who have felt the effects of his work on the frontline know exactly what he means: “Let me tell you why everyone is to blame except for me.”

Earlier this week, the Secretary of State told the UK that nearly one in three visits to accident and emergency do not need to be made. That was his reasoning for weakening the target that every patient should be seen within four hours. That target applies only to people whose condition is serious and urgent enough, so I find staggering the sheer hubris of those comments, the avoidance of accountability in that decision and the danger inherent in both. As an A&E specialist doctor, I have treated patients who arrive in A&E with what seem like minor injuries or illnesses but develop into much more serious and life-threatening issues. The fact that the Secretary of State, both in his words and in that decision, is telling the people of the UK that they should self-diagnose before heading to A&E could have disastrous consequences, for which he would be responsible.

What if, because of the Secretary of State’s words, patients decided to stay at home after a serious bang on the head that turns out to be a life-threatening bleed to the brain? What about a potentially deteriorating case of pneumonia that is not serious enough to warrant being in A&E but eventually results in somebody becoming severely septic and dying?

As a citizen of this country and a patient of the NHS, I find the Secretary of State’s refusal to accept responsibility for the state of A&E departments deplorable. Instead, he blames patients for visits that “do not need to be made”. However, patients do not go to A&E for fun. They go because they are ill and cannot get a doctor’s appointment for two weeks. We have heard today from Members on both sides of the House who have taken their own young children to A&E. Did they do so for fun, or because they felt there was a need for their child to be treated? People go to A&E because their GP does not have resources at their practice, in some cases for something as simple as handing out crutches. They go to A&E because there is something wrong and they are worried sick and simply desperate to speak to somebody professional about their health.

Victoria Atkins: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Allin-Khan: No, I will not. [ Interruption. ]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Let us just calm it down. Government Members did not give way before, and let us not get into the habit of shouting at each other. Let us have a nice, sensible debate.

Dr Allin-Khan: Many people who go to A&E know that they should not be there. I have had elderly patients saying to me, “I’m so sorry, doctor, for wasting your time.” But what other option are the Government leaving them? That is what we are debating today. The Secretary of State wants an honest conversation—well, let us have it. Let us talk about the impact that the current state of the national health service, which he has been in charge of for four years, is having on accident and emergency departments and throughout hospitals in this country. Let us talk about rock-bottom staff morale. Let us talk about the breakdown of marriages, a rise in depression among staff and the fact that waiting times are not the responsibility of patients. They are not to blame.

Rising waiting times are the Secretary of State’s responsibility, yet he blames them on the number of people going to A&E since the target was set. It is his responsibility to lead a national health service that can meet the needs of its people, but again he pleads innocence. He says that no other countries have such stringent targets, suggesting that it is unfair that we do. The meeting of the A&E target in particular, not watered down but in full, is what establishes the NHS as the best health service in the world, and one that we can, should and would be proud of under a Labour Government.

After all, emergency departments’ ability to meet the four-hour target is directly related to the health of the NHS itself. It is simple: more people go to A&E when they have no other options available.

Sue Hayman: On those options, the use of A&E in my area of Cumbria is entirely down to the lack of GPs. With so many GPs reaching retirement age, the situation is only going to become more acute. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to tackle this matter urgently?

Dr Allin-Khan: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. She makes an eloquent point about the lack of GPs and the problems we will face when more retire. Three GPs in my constituency contacted me this week to say that they had been offered jobs that were subsequently retracted due to financial pressures.

The Secretary of State pleads innocence. He says no other countries have such stringent targets. We should not compare ourselves to the worst; we should be leading as the best. The explosion of waiting times is his failure and a sign of the dangerous erosion of one of the country’s greatest institutions. As we saw last week when the British Red Cross had to be drafted in to our hospitals, our NHS is in crisis. Yet instead of listening to doctors and fixing the systemic problems they have created, our Government are repackaging the A&E four-hour target to try to save face and take attention away from the real challenges: the challenge of social care packages not being in place, prohibiting flow through A&E departments; the lack of access to GPs across the country, making A&E the only resort; the chronic underfunding and significant cuts in funding at local authority level; doctors and nurses being forced to miss breaks, as we heard earlier today, and working 14 hours, some without a break, sleep-deprived and unsafe to practise clinical work; and an NHS staff who do not feel supported, encouraged or motivated by the Government. None of these things will be addressed by a watered down four-hour target.

Having spoken to the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, those working on the frontline at all levels, and those who are training our junior doctors, I would like to put forward questions for the Secretary of State to think about. Why has it been decided that the four-hour target will now be downgraded? Who has been consulted on that? Which body said it would be beneficial to
patients and A&E staff across the trusts? How will he define major and minor health problems? How are doctors and nurses magically meant to know, at first sight without proper assessment, whether it is a major or minor health problem? Who is responsible if a seemingly minor condition is actually life-threatening? Will it be him? Who will be responsible? How will the Government explain that we will be going back to the days when patients could wait over 12 hours if they were not considered ill enough?

The Secretary of State must recognise the impact of this systemic crisis on A&E rooms across the country in his words and in this decision. In downgrading the target, the Secretary of State does neither, instead placing blame on patients and putting patients at risk. Let me tell it straight: I have been an A&E specialist doctor under a Labour Government and under a Conservative Government. There has been a change under this Government—and for sure it has not been for the better.

6.3 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): There have been very many excellent and constructive contributions to this debate. I welcome the valuable input from those who have real life experience in the NHS. In particular, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) on her excellent speech. It was very disappointing indeed to see an Opposition Member behave with such disrespect for a fellow Member during that speech. We all owe a debt of gratitude to those on the frontline. None of them would thank us for reducing this debate to an ill-tempered party political act of posturing.

I know there are many sensible Opposition Members who fully understand that no complex problem is ever solved by just increasing funding in response to ever-increasing demand. There are some very strong Opposition Members who want to work in a constructive fashion with Members across the House to tackle the challenges our NHS faces. I welcome that. The right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) is one such sensible Member. She made a point earlier this week, on the BBC Radio 4 programme “Westminster Hour”, that it is not even electorally advantageous for the Labour party to treat the NHS in the way it so often does—we have just heard an example of it. It is for the benefit of all our constituents that we must all encourage a more constructive approach.

The four-hour target was introduced for those with urgent health problems. I am sure that all Members agree that those in need should get access to care as soon as possible, and not find their needs eclipsed by someone with a minor ailment just because targets must be met. The Secretary of State has spoken this week about his commitment to protecting the four-hour promise for those who need it, and he is absolutely right to say this, because today, if we talk to those who work in our local A&Es, as all Members do regularly, they often say that there are people going to A&E who do not need to do so, and clinicians will express the desire to be able to prioritise need, rather than simply meeting targets.

As a constituency MP, I fully understand that it can be incredibly difficult to see a GP when one wants to, and it can be equally difficult to navigate the system—ringing at the right moment to get an appointment on the right day—but the answer is not simply to circumnavigate the system and turn up at A&E to get fast-tracked irrespective of need. We should not be encouraging the expectation that whatever the ailment, no matter what the demands on A&E staff, if someone goes to A&E, they will get seen within four hours. If people are going to A&E who do not need to be there, why are we offering them the four-hour service?

I would be grateful if the Minister told us more about what can be done to tackle this issue. Perhaps he could mention what proposals there are for GPs in A&E or different mechanisms for triaging or managing the expectations of our constituents. What matters most is that those in need get access to the appropriate treatment as soon as possible. That is what the target is for. It must be about safety for those with critical and urgent health conditions.

We must never lose sight, either, of the fact that our health and wellbeing are often dependent on our lifestyle, and with the right help and support we can all make the right choices to help us live healthy and happy lives. Diet, stress management, sleep hygiene, exercise, alcohol use and smoking are all key determinants of our physical and mental health and wellbeing. I would like a much greater emphasis to be placed on self-care and self-help, because we can all play our part and because no amount of funding will ever compensate for a lack of self-care.

Yes, we need to take a grown-up and honest approach to this incredibly important issue, which matters to all of us who have spoken so passionately today—I respect the passion of all Members on both sides of the House—but we must avoid falling into the trap that some have fallen into today of approaching this debate in a way that lets ourselves and the House down and does not benefit those we most wish to assist. So, yes, let us keep on exploring a sensible and collaborative approach, as articulated so eloquently by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), who has echoed the sentiments of others and is doing excellent work in working together across the House. None of us should ever play politics with the NHS; it matters far too much for simple games.

6.8 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan). I have not heard her speak before, and I look forward to hearing many more speeches from her in the future, but I completely disagree with her implication that we are letting ourselves, the House and our constituents down by standing up and championing health services in our constituencies. It is an essential part of our work and the reason many of us sought election to this place, particularly those such as my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), who has such relevant experience of this subject and made a tremendous speech. I listened with great interest to what she had to say, and I think that Ministers ought to be doing the same.

We have had a lot of debate about whether the NHS is in crisis and whether it is a humanitarian crisis, an ordinary crisis or a winter crisis. I looked the word up and found that a crisis is “a period of intense difficulty or danger”, which strikes me as a good description of where the NHS is today. Intense difficulty is what I am seeing in my local hospital, and it is what my constituents are coming to tell me about.
I have been an MP for nearly seven years, and I keep track of the topics people come to talk to me about in my local surgeries. I am sure many of us do that; it is not hard to do. Someone comes to see me every week either about an experience at the hospital or, more often still, because of an experience in adult social care. That is not something that has occurred suddenly over the last few weeks; it has been growing over time. I would say that the crisis we are witnessing today has been long predicted and is something that we have all felt happening over time.

The Government have chosen—they made a decision—not to act to prevent the worsening of the crisis, which is why there is such anger on the Opposition Benches. When a quarter of patients wait longer than four hours in A&E, that is a crisis. I do not really care whether they are there with an minor ailment or a more serious one, because four hours is too long to wait. The fact that people are there with minor ailments is a very clear demonstration of the problems that exist elsewhere in the system.

When people cannot get a GP appointment they sometimes phone 111, and, more often than not, they will be directed to A&E. I think we need a selection of services available at a central point, whereby if people need a GP, they can see a GP; if they need a practice nurse, they can see a practice nurse; and if they need to be admitted, they can be admitted.

Victoria Atkins: In an effort to reassure her colleagues, I want to ask a genuine question—one that I would have asked the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan). What impact does the hon. Lady believe the 2004 GP contract has had on out-of-hours care? This seems to be the nub of many of the issues discussed this afternoon.

Jenny Chapman: The GP contract was changed in 2004, but I did not notice the sort of issues that we face today until far more recently. I am not a scientist or a doctor, but I understand cause and effect, and it does not ring true to say that something that happened six years prior to the change in government can be blamed for something that is happening six years after the change in government. I am not saying that there were no consequences, but I believe that ample opportunity has been provided to put measures in place that would have prevented us from being where we are now.

The hon. Lady’s intervention leads me nicely to my next point, which is about the Secretary of State. I had not intended to speak today, but I was so frustrated listening to him on the “Today” programme, trying to blame anybody but himself, that I decided to do so. He has a pattern. The first thing he does is blame the Labour Government, who were in government until 2010. His party has been in government since then, but he will blame Labour for anything he possibly can. He will find something that happened, perhaps at a particular trust and say that that is why something has gone wrong today. If that does not work and cannot be evidenced, he will say, “Well, that particular trust is a basket case. It is the trust’s fault or the fault of the local managers and local clinicians who have not organised themselves right.” If that does not work, he will blame the public, and tell them that they are going to the wrong place, accessing their care in a way that he does not think they should. He might call them “frequent flyers” or point to a problem that is the public’s fault. He will say, “They do not look after themselves properly; it is clearly their fault.” If that does not work, he will blame the local council, and I think that is the worst thing that I have heard him do—blame the local authority.

My local authority has prioritised adult social care, but the pressures are not going away. They are going to get worse and more difficult to manage—and it is running out of things to cut. It is closing our central library in Darlington and making other hideous cuts, and I do not know where the next round will come from.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I am sure the hon. Lady agrees that it is incumbent on us all to discuss the future of our NHS and our healthcare services responsibly. Does she not accept that when the Secretary of State is talking about where people go for their services, it is not a question of blame? We ought to move away from that blame culture. However, there is a benefit in trying to educate people. If their illnesses are not best served by A&E departments and are best served elsewhere, they ought to realise that they should go elsewhere. That would help us all. It would help the people who are seeking the services, and it would help the people who are providing them.

Jenny Chapman: Yes indeed, so why does the hon. Gentleman not say that to his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State? He is the one who is blaming people, not me. I should welcome a programme that involved explaining to people and making it easier for members of the public, including me, to decide where we should go when we need assistance.

One solution that the Government have come up with seems to involve watering down the four-hour target, although, interestingly, not even Conservative Members seem to be able to agree on—or explain—what change will be made, or even whether there will be a change. Their other solution is to close A&E departments, and, as part of the STP, the A&E department at Darlington memorial hospital is one of those that may be downgraded or closed. I do not think the local community will accept that. Part of our purpose in doing our job is to give a voice to local communities, but, so far, our local community has been completely shut out of the STP process. We would not have even known what was contained in the plan had it not been leaked by Hartlepool Borough Council on its website. That is a shocking way in which to conduct a dialogue with a local community.

In parallel with the STP process is the Better Health programme, which started about three years ago and which operates in the region that contains my constituency. I was shocked to discover from responses to parliamentary questions that local health managers had spent £4.6 million that could and should have been spent on frontline health services for my constituents on a consultation on whether or not to downgrade A&E. I could have spent that money a great deal better, and I could also have told those health managers what the local population thinks about the proposal. They are very angry and
upset about it, and it is right for us to express such anger, disappointment, outrage and fears for safety in the House.

Many Members have spoken about their families and relatives today. My hon. Friends the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) and for Workington (Sue Hayman) spoke about their fathers. My dad died in 1994. He had had a heart condition. He was 48, and I was 20. Since then, I have taken a keen interest in cardiac health and services for people with heart disease. I was shocked to find that, before 1997, it was not uncommon for people to die while waiting for heart treatment and that people would often wait 18 months. The Labour Government changed that: we made it a matter of weeks, and we saved countless lives as a consequence.

When people say that the Labour party did not do a good job with the NHS, and when Conservative Members try to imply that we have a fake, dewy-eyed, sentimental attachment to the NHS, they are completely wrong to do so. We will fight for the NHS. We created it, but we also did a good job running it in government. We saved lives, cut waiting times and introduced targets, and that made a difference. It made things better for patients. We will never stop making that case, in the House and outside.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that this is rather unfair on those who have waited all day and have not yet spoken, but some Members have taken much more than seven minutes, and I must now reduce the time limit to five minutes.

6.19 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I pay tribute to all who work in our national health service and welcome this important debate. I hear the Secretary of State not blaming, but looking for solutions; that is what we should be about. I have called for an honest debate about the NHS since I came to this place. With rising expectations and an ageing population, the private sector has been in use in the NHS since 1948. If we are going to get more bang for our buck, we should perhaps look at parts of the private sector, to be able to enhance what we give patients through these critical periods.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the need for a grown-up debate about integration and about learning from best practice. Does she share my concern that as Labour Members fan the flames of their artificial indignation, all they are doing is proving yet again that they are either unwilling, ill-equipped or ideologically—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Thank you. Jo Churchill.

Jo Churchill: I agree in that since we last debated this with the Opposition on 23 November, apart from asking for £700 million to be brought forward, they have put forward very little in the way of tangible plans. We are talking about everybody here, and just slinging bows and arrows across the Chamber will not get us to the solution we need.

If this is about money, why do some areas do better than others? It is actually about the allocation of resources and good leadership. I have received three letters about good healthcare. A resident in my constituency saw the GP on 28 October, the consultant on 8 November, and had their operation on the 29th. That was at my district general hospital that used the private facility locally to enhance the patient experience.

We need a long-term solution. I am pleased that the Prime Minister has spoken about tackling the difficulties of mental health. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) has championed that and shares a mental health trust with me. I am pleased to see that another 49,000 people are being treated for cancer—that is something that I came to this place to champion—and another 822,000 people are receiving specialist cancer treatment. We have seen huge increases in demand, and we need to admit that we cannot just carry on. There have been advances in drugs, but we need to take into account comorbidities and an ageing population.

We need to understand what is wrong, and we will do that by having better data throughout the system. The Richmond Group wrote in support of my private Member’s Bill that information held in healthcare records has a huge potential to provide better care and improve health...
service delivery within the service. Paramedics have asked me for better access to data so that, when they find someone on the floor, they will know what needs they are on and what the most beneficial treatment would be. GPs want their information to flow through the system to help social care and the hospital sector. Pharmacies need to be able to read and write, and those working in social care need to be able to look at someone’s pathway. Patient outcomes should be the thing that we are all talking about, but we have to make decisions. At the centre of all this, we need to support those colleagues who are working above and beyond at this time. We need to behave in a grown-up, responsible way, just as they are, in caring for our NHS.

6.26 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The fact that an organisation as highly respected as the Red Cross should describe our NHS as facing a “humanitarian crisis” is absolutely shocking. It goes to the heart of this Government’s failure to provide a reliable, properly resourced national health service free at the point of need. That should be a source of shame for the Government. Reports last week that two patients died on trolleys in corridors—one having waited 35 hours to be seen—are truly shocking. Can this really be the face of the NHS in England in 2017? Under the Tories, it seems that it is. The Health Secretary responded by suggesting that the four-hour target should apply only to the most urgent cases and that it was estimated that 30% of patients in A&E did not really need to be there. In other words, he blamed patients and suggested a downgrade of A&E services. He should hang his head in shame.

It is this Tory Government who have decided to cut funding to the health service, asking it to make savings of £22 billion. In Cheshire and Merseyside, the NHS has to find savings of £1 billion. Wirral clinical commissioning group calculates that it will have a £12 million deficit for the year 2015-16, nearly a third higher than the original £9 million forecast, but NHS England has asked it to maintain the forecast at £9 million. I would be interested to hear why this curious request has been made. Patients in Wirral West are concerned about the impact that these savings—or cuts—will have at Arrowe Park hospital and in general practice, and they are right to be concerned. The biggest financial squeeze in the history of the NHS is putting services at risk.

Let us be clear: there is nothing inevitable about these Tory cuts. This is a political decision and it is being used to drive through changes including the introduction of accountable care organisations, borrowing a model from America where such organisations are used to deliver private insurance-based healthcare. An NHS manager from my constituency has written to me saying:

“The STPs and national policy are currently pushing for a redesign of services—primary care at scale and a move to make system-wide organisations. The real punch line is there is no funding to make these changes. Locally there is talk about an Accountable Care Organisation for Wirral—meetings of senior managers across health and social care are being held on almost a weekly basis to create a roadmap for this to happen. With no money with which to do it. Having fragmented services and finally recognised the failure and destruction caused by the faux ‘internal market’ in the NHS, they are now making services use what pitiful resources they have to try and put it all back together. I truly despair that there will not be an NHS this time next year.”

That is a stark warning and a damning indictment of the Government’s failure. The Secretary of State should be addressing the crisis by giving the NHS and social care the funding they need, to make up for this crisis of the Government’s own making around access to GP appointments, a failure to train enough nursing staff, a failure to fund social care, and cuts to community pharmacies when communities need them most.

I have long been aware of the Tories’ agenda for the national health service. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 opened it up to the private sector, so that profit-hungry companies can cherry-pick the work that they want to deliver and allowed NHS hospitals to give half their beds to private patients. I believe that this Government and previous Tory Governments are seeking to move us to a two-tier system in which those who can afford to do so have private health insurance and the rest are left with a bargain-basement NHS. The arc of NHS history during the Tories’ time in office since the Thatcher period shows this, and we now appear to be reaching the end game.

The Government are cutting the supply of healthcare in the public sector to create demand in the private sector. The Secretary of State may believe in an ideological drive to introduce a system in which the individual pays their own way through individual private insurance—he is of course entitled to that view—but that is an entirely different concept from a national health service, of which Labour Members are so proud. He must be honest about that. In the process of trying to transfer us to a two-tier, insurance-based model, did he not pause to think about the human suffering he would unleash in the process? Patients wait for hours on trolleys while anxious relatives watch on helplessly, and dedicated staff are stressed out day after day.

Now is the time for a decision. It is not too late for the Government to review their approach. They can face the facts and admit to themselves that English people want a state-managed, state-funded national health service that is free at the point of use and paid for through direct taxation—just like the one created after the second world war by a Labour Government with such vision and which became the envy of the world. The Government should swallow their ideological pride and say, “Okay, we get it. We will fund the national health service.” Anything less will be a betrayal of all that the NHS stands for.

6.30 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): We need to look afresh at the entire health and social care pathway, which is why I am delighted to be able to contribute today. From visiting the pharmacist, to attending a GP appointment, to spending time in hospital, whether planned or through A&E, to being able to reside beforehand and afterwards at home or in a care home, we need to find the most efficient and dignified way to treat and look after people. We must avoid using one treatment centre as a default option—that is not the best option either for the individual or for the public purse—because it is the only one available owing to difficulties with individual funding pots, opening hours or lack of access to better forms of provision. We must also be encouraged to speak freely about the pressures in the system and to
provide ideas. It has frustrated me for years that anyone who thinks aloud about ideas that could change health and social care for the better is denigrated as seeking to harm it when the opposite is true.

To that end, I listened with interest to the Secretary of State’s interview on Radio 4 on Monday morning. It struck me as measured and thoughtful about new ideas. I was particularly interested in the suggestion about how we could deliver more capacity in the GP system, because an increasing number of people attending A&E are neither accident victims nor in need of emergency treatment; they do, however, need some form of medical intervention, as the Secretary of State mentioned. It was then thoroughly depressing to read the Secretary of State’s words taken out of context. I hope that he will continue to think outside the box and that all Members will recognise the benefits of his so doing.

Speaking of ideas, I have the following suggestions for each of the treatment centres in the health pathway, starting with pharmacies. In the event that we have too many pharmacy clusters, I completely agree with the need to ensure that they are spread out across the country, with the money saved being recycled. At the same time, we should find ways to help pharmacies deliver more interventions to free up capacity at GP surgeries. We must do more to signpost patients to pharmacies before they go to their GP. A recent report costed common ailment treatment in community pharmacies at £29 a patient. The cost rises to £82 for GP practices and to £147 for A&E. Treatment results across all three were equally good. The research estimated that 5% of GP consultations for common ailments could be managed by community pharmacies, equating to more than 18 million GP consultations that could be diverted.

I was buoyed by the Secretary of State’s suggestion that more GPs should be placed in A&E departments and in care homes. The new NHS pilot requiring GPs to undertake weekly ward rounds in care homes is the right type of thinking to prevent emergency treatment in our hospitals. I welcome GP surgeries opening on Sundays, but surely only one surgery in each area needs to be open. I do not believe that having all GP surgeries open seven days a week is a good use of scarce resources, in the same way that Government funding of two pharmacies across the road from each other is not a good use of such resources.

I have long taken the view that we need to find ways to free up our GPs’ time, so that they can focus on the patients who need them most. There are too many wasted or cancelled appointments because the service is free. If there was a cost to unjustifiably failing to keep an appointment, it may demonstrate how precious this resource is—just as NHS dentists would charge for a missed appointment when I was younger.

Some of the reforms of pharmacies and GPs are designed to ensure that patients only attend A&E if they have had an accident or in an emergency, which is clearly not the case for some who are now attending. We are also facing demand for hospital places because of a need to reform the way we look after an ageing population.

Time does not allow me to talk about social care, which is so important in my constituency, but the Government’s delivery of more social care funding before Christmas is welcome. However, it is crucial that we question the operating model in social care. The NHS benefits from a national funding programme, but social care is largely the responsibility of local authorities and local rate payers in areas where retirement rates may be high but employment and council tax receipts are not. We have to think radically to ensure that we get the best out of our health and social care system. To do so will not only make resources stretch further but will deliver innovation that improves the lives of the sick and infirm, who are most in need of our care.

6.35 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Two days ago, the Health Secretary read out a statement in this Chamber on the crisis in our NHS. His answer to his Government’s failure to meet A&E waiting time targets is to downgrade those targets, rather than seeking to take any action to treat the malaise at the heart of our NHS.

The Health Secretary heaped praise on our hard-working and dedicated NHS staff—praise they richly deserve—but it will ring hollow with many of them. I speak from years of experience working in the NHS as a clinical scientist with staff of all grades, skills and experience. The simple truth is that NHS staff are demoralised, and, as I said two days ago, they continue to work with care and compassion in spite of, not because of, his action.

Since that statement, I have been inundated by NHS staff wanting to tell me their stories: of how the service they were once proud to work in is now in perpetual crisis; of the strain of wanting to do their best for their patients but being prevented from doing so because of short staffing, overcrowding, delayed discharges and underfunding; of the emails they get from Ministers demanding to know what they will do about the failure to meet targets; and of their listening to the same Ministers telling the public that the NHS does not have a problem.

Health managers are saying that we have a perfect storm of ageing patients who need more care just at the time when social care has been cut to the bone, leaving hospitals to pick up the pieces. An A&E doctor at Manchester royal infirmary told me:

“Crisis is the new normal”.

The doctor said that it has become usual to have 10 patients waiting in a corridor.

In my constituency of Heywood and Middleton, the Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust has just been the subject of a damning report revealing appalling neglect in maternity care that led to the avoidable deaths of mothers and babies. The trust had the most 12-hour A&E waits in October and the second most cancelled urgent operations in November. In December, it was forced to divert ambulances 14 times in total, one of the highest figures in the country.

Social care across Greater Manchester faces collapse. That is borne out by the delayed discharge figures for Greater Manchester, which doubled in the year to October. Greater Manchester asked for £200 million for social care in the autumn statement, but the issue was not even mentioned. Some see Greater Manchester’s devolved healthcare system as a solution, but even its chief officer, Jon Rouse, says that although devolution can help closer working it is not “magic dust”.
I remind the Health Secretary of the NHS constitution for England, which was updated in October 2015 and establishes the principles and values of the NHS in England. It sets out rights to which patients, the public and staff are entitled, and it sets out pledges that the NHS has committed to achieve. Enshrined in the constitution is the patient’s right to be cared for in a clean, safe, secure and suitable environment and their right to be protected from abuse and neglect—in other words, not to have to wait in an A&E corridor.

Patients and the public have the right to be involved in the planning of healthcare services, in changes to the way that healthcare services are provided and in decisions affecting the operation of those services. For NHS staff, one of the pledges is to engage staff in decisions that affect them and the services they provide, yet I see precious little evidence of staff, patients or the public having any input into the 44 STPs covering the regions of England, which appear to have been drawn up behind closed doors and are shrouded in secrecy. Their impact on healthcare in our regions could be huge, but where is the public involvement?

Patients are being failed on this Government’s watch and their rights to safe care are being neglected. All the Health Secretary has for NHS staff is the occasional flurry of warm words, yet the war he waged over the junior doctors’ contract showed his real attitude towards NHS staff. Nye Bevan said:

“no government that attempts to destroy the Health Service can hope to command the support of the British people.”

That is from Bevan’s book of essays “In place of Fear”. Sadly, the current Health Secretary has managed to achieve “replacing the fear”.

6.40 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I want to start by paying tribute to our hard-working staff in the NHS and those in the care sector. The best way to thank those staff would be by giving them the resources they need to do the job we want them to do.

I welcome the contributions made by hon. Members today, particularly the moving contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), who bravely told us about the personal catastrophe for him and his family when his father was sent home from a pressured A&E, sadly to die from an aneurysm. My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) was able to tell us about the happy death her father had with the end-of-life care at the local community hospital.

The hon. Members for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) both emphasised the complexity and frailty of patients needing care in the winter months. We should remember that in terms of the scale of pressures facing the NHS. Both those Members supported the four-hour target for A&E as a barometer of the wider system pressures in the NHS: a measure of how the system is managing to process those frail and complex patients. My right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton), as a former Minister for emergency care, urged the Government not to give the NHS the impression of giving up on the four-hour target, as that sends the wrong message. At our NHS leaders’ summit yesterday, we heard a real concern that, for instance, parents might be discouraged from taking their children to A&E.

Conservative Members have cited both Simon Stevens and Chris Hopson in support of their claims on NHS funding, but I would like to update them, because in the House this afternoon Simon Stevens said that “we got less than we asked for” and that the Government are “stretching it to say the NHS... got more”.

He also said that it does not help anybody to pretend there are not financial gaps. Chris Hopson, of NHS Providers, said:

“No, we don’t believe the NHS has got all the money it needs” and that the NHS is not sustainable on current funding.

I turn now to the pressures on the NHS caused by social care. The crisis in our hospitals has been made much worse by the Government’s continued failure to fund social care properly. The care crisis is caused by insufficient funding in the face of growing demand, and Ministers have ignored warnings from a wide group of doctors and from leaders and professionals in the health and care sectors. The Government failed to produce a single penny of extra funding for social care in the autumn settlement. Then they told us that extra funding was being made available for social care in the local government funding settlement, but this was not the extra funding so desperately needed from central Government—what Ministers did was to shift the burden on to council tax payers. That was made worse by the fact that the £240 million adult social care grant was actually money recycled within local government budgets, from the new homes bonus. One third of councils will be worse off as a result of this settlement; my own local authority, Salford, will have £2.3 million less in its budgets. This is not a boost to social care.

What health and social care leaders had pleaded for was for Ministers to bring forward funding promised for 2019 to address the current crisis in social care, and that is what today’s motion proposes. That would provide some breathing space, which is needed because the lack of social care means that thousands of older people are stuck in hospital waiting for a care package in their own home. That was the most common cause of delayed discharges caused by social care. More than a third of the record 200,000 delayed days most recently reported were due to lack of social care. Being stuck in hospital not only affects patient morale and mobility; it increases the risk of the patient getting hospital-acquired infections. The major impact, though, is the knock-on effect on people in A&E who are waiting for a bed for an emergency admission.

Health Ministers like to blame local authorities for the lack of social care, but there are problems with that. When NHS chief executive, Simon Stevens, gave evidence to the Communities and Local Government Committee’s recent inquiry into social care, he was asked by the Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), what extra resources would be needed if every local authority performed as well on delayed discharge as the best local authority. He said:

“Even having sorted that out, if we have a widening gap between the availability of social care and the rising number of frail old people, that is going to show up as extra pressure on them, their families, carers and of course the NHS.”
Of course we want to reach a position where the best practice in tackling delays is spread throughout the country, but Ministers have to start to reflect on what their Government have done through the cuts they have inflicted on local authority budgets. Figures from the Local Government Association show that the hardest hit local authority has had cuts to its budget of 53% over the past five years; the average cut is 39%.

The budget cut for Surrey was at the lower end of the scale, at 29%. Even so, the cabinet member for social care in Surrey, Councillor Mel Few, wrote a letter to The Guardian about the issues faced by his local authority. He said:

“The Care Quality Commission is not the only organisation with worries about inadequate adult social care funding and the impact on already clogged-up hospitals.”

He went on to say that although the social care precept was “a welcome move, it falls many millions of pounds short of what is needed now—let alone in two decades.”

I suggest that the Health Secretary and the Chancellor talk to social care leaders such as Councillor Few to understand the needs that they see in local communities and the impact of the lack of social care on NHS hospitals. Ministers have been warned and warned about the impact of cuts on social care, but they have ignored those warnings. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine has said that emergency care is “on its knees...mainly due to a lack of investment in both social and acute health care beds”.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Barbara Keeley: No, I will not.

The BBC has reported that last week there were 18,000 trolley waits—that is, people waiting on a trolley in a hospital corridor—of more than four hours, and there were 485 cases of patients waiting more than 12 hours. My hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Mr Hendrick) rightly said that we do not even know the figures for patients waiting in corridors, or being treated and waiting on a chair because of a lack of trolleys.

The figures do not tell us about the misery for patients and their family members waiting with them. Last night, a senior A&E consultant said on “ITV News” that patients can be left with absolutely no dignity during these waits. He said:

“We have got patients with severe illnesses on chairs receiving drips, antibiotics, medications, and patients with cardiac problems on chairs because there are no trolleys for them to go on to.”

The senior doctor talked about patients who were left unable to move off their trolleys or who were stuck on chairs and about a lack of shutters and blinds, meaning that patients can be left in full view of others while they are being treated. He also reported that some patients were incontinent in front of relatives and strangers because hospital staff could not reach them in time. He said:

“Patients have absolutely no dignity left.”

That is what the lack of social care and acute beds can lead to. How would any of us feel if that was our relative?

The situation may get worse with the expected cold weather, when more major incidents may be declared and more hospitals are put on black alert—the most severe warning level, which means that they cannot cope with the number of patients.

Downgrading the four-hour waiting time target for A&E misses the point that the problems in emergency departments are a symptom of a much wider problem. As has been discussed in the debate, that four-hour target is a proxy for patient safety. It is miserable for a sick patient to lose their dignity through being incontinent during a trolley wait in a hospital corridor. It is also miserable and frightening for a vulnerable patient to be discharged in the middle of the night to a cold home with no care package. That is why we repeat in the motion our call for the Government to bring forward £700 million of the funding promised to social care in 2019 to help the NHS and social care systems to cope with the extra pressures this winter. We are also calling for a new, improved settlement for the NHS and social care to be included in the Budget in March, so that we avoid this sort of crisis in future.

Staff in emergency departments are at the sharp end of saving lives. Many other NHS staff save lives, too, but A&E staff are so directly on the frontline. Whether they are working in people’s homes or in care or nursing homes, care staff make a huge difference to the lives of millions of older and vulnerable people, people with disabilities and people with mental health conditions. Those should be the best jobs in the UK, but without the right investment in the funding they need, the people doing them feel undervalued and overstretched.

I urge Members to vote for the motion tonight.

6.49 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) and to be able to close this debate. I thank all 34 hon. Members for their contributions, some of whom—mostly those on the Government Benches—managed to rise above party politics and make some constructive comments.

I join my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in thanking the 2.7 million staff working in our NHS and social care system. As the Prime Minister said earlier, we recognise that they have never worked harder to keep patients safe, with A&Es across the country seeing a record number of patients within four hours in one day last month.

Regrettably, after five and a half hours of debate and criticism from Labour Members, we have heard little, if anything, about how to provide solutions to the challenges that our A&Es face.

Once again, the Opposition have touted more funding as their only answer to solve public sector challenges. In fact, they have pledged to raise corporation tax eight times, promising an unspecified amount from an unspecified source. That will not help our NHS and it will not fool the public. There is much that we can do to protect the system and ensure a sustainable future, but it is this Government who have plans in place to get through this extremely challenging period and sustain the NHS for the future.

The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), spoke for about three quarters of an hour without making a single suggestion about how to solve the problems that face...
the NHS—not one. He should have stayed to listen—he may have done and I apologise if I did not pay enough attention to his presence in the Chamber.

The former Health Minister, the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton), asked specifically for community pharmacists to be paid for providing minor ailments services. I am pleased to be able to tell her that that is precisely what we are doing. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), was discussing that only this morning in Westminster Hall, and I regret to say that not a single Labour Member was present to hear what he had to say.

Order. Surely the House wants to hear the Minister after this long debate—with courtesy.

Mr Dunne: We have heard a number of comments from Opposition Members—I am pleased to say that they were outnumbered in this Opposition day debate by Government Members—rehearsing some tired phrases to mislead the public over alleged increasing independent provision in the health service and also misrepresenting what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was saying in his remarks about A&E targets. Having said that, I wish to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), who is in his place, and the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), both of whom showed considerable personal courage in explaining the circumstances surrounding the death of each of their fathers, and they did so in an entirely honourable and sensible way, and I am grateful to them for sharing that experience.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on managing to get her son into hospital to have his appendix treated on Boxing day. As she said, that showed that that service was working well.

The Opposition sought to take the moral high ground in this debate. The hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) challenged Government Members on whether they had visited hospitals over the Christmas period other than on an official visit. Her position was completely punctured by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) who pointed out that she was doing a night shift between Christmas and New Year in her role as a nurse—she was not on an official visit.

There have been some impressive contributions. I thank the Chair of the Select Committee on Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), who was supportive of a more nuanced target for A&E, and for her calm and generally constructive comments, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) for his support for the success regime in Essex and for pointing out that it is not closing any of the three A&E departments in the hospitals there. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), who made a very thoughtful speech and welcomed the opening of an assessment unit in Crawley to help to relieve pressure on the A&Es nearby. Finally, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) for another thoughtful contribution from the Back Benches.

Of course, the Conservative party and the Government recognise that our NHS faces the immediate pressures of the colder weather and the wider pressures of an ageing and growing population. There were nearly 9 million more visits last year to our A&Es compared with 2002-03—the year before the four-hour commitment was made. That is more than 2 million A&E attendances every month, and our emergency departments are now seeing, within the four-hour target, 2,500 more people every single day compared with 2010.

Luciana Berger: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Dunne: I will not give way. The hon. Lady did not give way and I have a very short time left in which to speak.

Compared to when the Conservative party came into office in May 2010, in 2015-16 there were 2.4 million more A&E attendances. That is in the context of a much busier NHS overall. The NHS is delivering 5.9 million more diagnostic tests. Some 822,000 more people are seen by a specialist for suspected cancer and 49,000 more patients start treatment for cancer every year compared with the year before we came to office. It is therefore the case that a Government of any colour would be faced with the same problems, but it is this Government who have committed to funding the NHS’s own plan for a sustainable future. Had we followed Labour’s plans, the NHS would have £1.3 billion a year less, which is equivalent to 13,000 fewer doctors or 30,000 fewer nurses.

We remain committed to the vital four-hour A&E promise for those patients who need to be there. We are proud to be the only country in the world to commit to all patients that we will sort out any urgent health need within four hours. Only three other countries—New Zealand, Australia and Canada—have similar national standards, but none of theirs is as stringent as ours.

Today it is the Conservative party that is the party of the NHS. That is why we pledged more than Labour did and why we are delivering more funding with a higher proportion of total Government spending going into health in each year since 2010. Funding for the NHS will rise in real terms by £13 billion by 2020-21 compared with 2014-15. That sum is front-loaded with £6 billion being delivered by the end of this year, as the NHS asked for. It was this Government who established an independent NHS with an independent chief executive. It was this NHS that came up with its own plan and we were the only party to back it. We agree that the NHS and social care face huge pressure and, yes, there is more for us as a Government to do. However, we entered winter with a more comprehensive plan than ever before, and we have confidence that plans are in place to cope with the current pressures we face—winter, A&E and delayed discharges—and to sustain the system for the future.

I conclude by saying a huge thank you to the 1.3 million staff in the NHS and the 1.4 million people who provide social care. They are the ones who continue to make this possible. We are aware of the pressures they are under, especially during winter. We have increased the number of doctors and nurses, as the Secretary of State said earlier, especially in A&E, and we have launched plans to recruit more doctors and nurses. Without them, we would not have a national health service that provides such a high level of care.
Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Question put accordingly (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 209, Noes 295.

Division No. 122) [6.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrasums, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Mr David
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Natalie
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria
Debono, Thangam
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Mr Peter
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan

Levell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmod, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCarty, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
Mclnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Murray, Ian
Olney, Sarah
Omm, Melanie
Onurenah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Penneycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Pugh, John
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rothenram, Steve

Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Owen
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and Nick Smith

NOES

Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Sir Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrages, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
11 JANUARY 2017

That this House commends NHS staff for their hard work in ensuring record numbers of patients are being seen in A&E; supports and endorses the target for 95 per cent of patients using A&E to be seen and discharged or admitted within four hours; and notes that the A& Overshoot is in significant part due to the rapid growth in attendances at A&Es being driven by the rise in mental health presentations, the rise in emergency presentations for problems related to drug and alcohol misuse and an increase in the number of patients presenting with mental health crises.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)), that the proposed words be there added.

Question accordingly negatived.

Tellers for the Noes:

Tellers for the Ayes:

Andrew Griffiths
Christopher Pincher and Andrew Griffiths

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved, That this House commends NHS staff for their hard work in ensuring record numbers of patients are being seen in A&E; supports and endorses the target for 95 per cent of patients using A&E to be seen and discharged or admitted within four hours;
welcomes the Government’s support for the Five Year Forward View, the NHS’s own plan to reduce pressure on hospitals by expanding community provision; notes that improvements to 111 and ensuring evening and weekend access to GPs, already covering 17 million people, will further help to relieve that pressure; and believes that funding for the NHS and social care is underpinned by the maintenance of a strong economy, which under this administration is now the fastest growing in the G7.

Margaret Greenwood: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. If Members wish to have conversations, they should go somewhere else. The hon. Lady is making a point of order.

Margaret Greenwood: The Minister told the House that there were no Labour Back Benchers in this morning’s debate on community pharmacies. In fact, he has inadvertently misled the House in that regard, because I was in Westminster Hall and I spoke in the debate, as was my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), who also spoke in the debate. I just wanted to put the record straight.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I understand the hon. Lady’s point of order. It is not a matter for the Chair, but I understand why she wished to make the point.

Mr Dunne rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: It looks as though the Minister would like to say something further to that point of order.

Mr Dunne: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. To give the House complete clarity, I understand that two Labour Back Benchers were present and made minor interventions in the Westminster Hall debate, but there were no speeches or substantive contributions by those Labour Members.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the House is grateful to the Minister for clarifying what he said in his speech, and to the hon. Lady for clarifying the position. The matter is now closed.

**Business without Debate**

**DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

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

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

That the draft Combined Authorities (Mayors) (Filling of Vacancies) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 28 November, be approved.—[Christopher Pincher.]

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 18 January (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

That the draft Combined Authorities (Mayoral Elections) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 28 November, be approved.—(Christopher Pincher.)

Question agreed to.

**PETITIONS**

7.15 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I rise to present a petition of 2,000 residents of Wakefield on the future of the King Street health centre in my constituency, whose GP service is under threat of being withdrawn—a very important issue for my constituents.

The petition states that the petitioners request the House of Commons to urge the Government and Wakefield Clinical Commissioning Group to take all necessary steps to ensure that King Street Health Centre remains open and has the current contract for GP-led services extended to allow Wakefield residents continued access to health care.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Wakefield, declares that King Street Health Centre is a vital service for Wakefield, and helps to ease the pressures on local GP surgeries, pharmacies, and Pinderfields Hospital; further that Wakefield Clinical Commissioning Group is reviewing the future of the GP-led services at King Street Health Centre, as the contract is up for renewal in March 2017; further that the petitioners are concerned that closure or removal of services from King Street Health Centre would put at risk the future of the King Street Walk-in Service, which shares the same facilities, staff and building; and further that 1955 persons have signed an online petition in similar terms. The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government and Wakefield Clinical Commissioning Group to take all necessary steps to ensure that King Street Health Centre remains open and has the current contract for GP-led services extended to allow Wakefield residents continued access to health care.]

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[PO020001]

**Boat Moorings on the River Avon**

7.16 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con):

My petition comes from dozens of residents of Saltford in Somerset.

The petition states:

The Humble Petition of residents of Saltford, Sheweth,

That the petitioners would prefer the inhabitants of some boats moored on the River Avon in Mead Lane to refrain from staying for long periods of time.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House ask Her Majesty’s Government to consider the opinions of local residents and other boat owners in this regard.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

[PO02002]
A&E Provision: Shropshire and Mid-Wales

*Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.— (Christopher Pincher.)*

7.17 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): In the previous Parliament, we took action to empower local doctors, surgeons and clinicians to think about the optimum way of providing hospital services under ever-changing circumstances, namely the demographic and other changes that are taking place in our society. That was the right step to take. Rather than remote civil servants in Whitehall making those decisions, we wanted to ensure that the people at the coalface provided those services—people who already provide services to our constituents; people with medical expertise; people who have dedicated their lives to improving the care and safety of others. We wanted to empower them to make those decisions.

I stand by the decision that we took, but I want to tell the Minister this evening about some of the practical problems that have ensued in Shropshire as a result of that devolution of power. I do so because I believe in the process and want to ensure that it is retained and protected for future programmes.

We have two hospitals in Shropshire: one in Shrewsbury and one in Telford. They do not just look after the people in those two towns; they look after all the people throughout the whole of Shropshire and mid-Wales. I am not going to go into all the specifics of the Future Fit programme with the Minister, as I and the other Shropshire MPs have briefed him repeatedly about the process over the past few days, weeks and months. However, I would like to thank, in a genuine and heartfelt way, the 300 surgeons, doctors, GPs and medical consultants in our community in Shropshire, who, despite the extraordinary pressures they face already in their day-to-day work in the NHS, have been able to dedicate themselves to and persevere with, despite the many problems and obstacles in their way, coming up with the Future Fit proposals for a reconfiguration of accident and emergency services in Shropshire and mid-Wales. A decision has been achieved after three years and £3 million spent, and still we lose out. At the end of the day, it should not be about winning or losing—that is the biggest problem.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) has talked about the pillow fight that has gone on between Shrewsbury and Telford ever since he became an MP. Over the past 11 years, I have lost more sleepless nights over the constant fighting between Shrewsbury and Telford about hospital services than over anything else. At the end of the day, we are one county and we must fight collectively as one county for all the people of Shropshire, and of course for our friends across the border in Wales.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on landing this debate. He is absolutely right. This bickering between Shrewsbury and Telford has dogged my nearly 20 years in Parliament. I thoroughly back Future Fit because it provides a solution that benefits everybody. I like the idea that the two existing A&Es carry on doing 80% of their current work, albeit—possibly—having been renamed as urgent care centres, while we get a £300 million emergency care centre. Some of my rural areas look to Shrewsbury, some look to Telford, but we will also gain from urgent care centres being built in the rural areas. What is utterly exasperating for my constituents is this indecision. We have had three years and £3 million spent, and still no decision. I am delighted that the Minister is listening so carefully and I very much hope that at the end of the debate we will have a clear recommendation for a decisive mechanism to deliver the will of the local commissions.

Daniel Kawczynski: I could not agree with my right hon. Friend more, and I pay tribute to him for the work he has done on this over the last few years.
I would like the Minister to intervene to ensure that the process allows for a decision. In our case, all six members of the Shropshire CCG voted for the proposals and all six members in Telford voted against.

I am very concerned—I want him to take this away—about this. What sort of a process is it when we can get a tie? There needs to be a casting vote or perhaps some independent third party who can arbitrate in such a hotly contested issue where the two local CCGs cannot come to an agreement. So I would like to hear from him on that.

I appeal to constituents from the whole of Shropshire and mid Wales to lobby Telford Council, to get behind the concept of us all working together, as my right hon. Friend said, and to lobby the Government more effectively for more resources, rather than fighting one another in a rather parochial way over where these services are going to be. Let us not forget how close these two hospitals are to one another. We are not talking about 50 miles, 30 miles or 20 miles. Somebody might correct me if I am wrong, but I think they are only 13 miles apart. We ought to be thinking about how to improve and modernise the provision of healthcare for all the people of Shropshire and mid-Wales and listening to the proposals of the medical experts, who have done so much work to put these proposals together.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this debate forward. Both my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) and I represent seats in Powys, in mid-Wales, which, as he said, does not have a general hospital. It is one of the few councils not to have one. We rely heavily on both Telford and Shrewsbury, certainly in the top end of my constituency. I appeal to the Minister: our constituents are very concerned. Even though health is devolved in Wales, many of our constituents travel across the border, and for them this is a vital issue.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right. In fact, my colleague from just across the border, my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies), always joins us at our meetings with our hospital trust. We almost think of him as a Salopian. [HON. MEMBERS: “Steady!”] Not quite, but he does so much to represent his constituents in Wales, who already have to travel long distances to get to the Royal Shrewsbury hospital. He might correct me if I am wrong, but I think that some of them, from the extreme west of his constituency, already have to travel for over an hour to access A&E services in Shrewsbury. So any movement even further away from Shrewsbury would be completely unacceptable to his constituents.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I come from a peripheral position, further to the west of Montgomeryshire. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and stress the importance of getting this right, because it has an impact further to the west. If this issue is not resolved, it will impact on the capacity of my district general hospital in Aberystwyth to serve the people of mid-Wales as well. It is crucial to address this issue.

Daniel Kawczynski: I concur with the hon. Gentleman, and I am grateful for his intervention.

I shall start to end because I want to give the Minister as much time as possible to answer these questions. Let us not forget that if we get this right, it could result in an investment of £300 million into the NHS in Shropshire. I do not know about all my colleagues—I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire has been an MP for longer than me—but I certainly do not remember a time during my 11 years as an MP when we have had such an investment in the local NHS. As I say, if we get this right, we could see an investment of £300 million in Shropshire to implement these changes.

I know that there is more work to be done to secure this money. I know that more work will have to be done in innovative ways, both locally and nationally, to secure all the funding. If we do not sort ourselves out, however, we are going to get further and further behind, while other areas in the United Kingdom—this is not an issue peculiar to Shropshire—that are going through this process in a more cordial and mutually effective way are going to jump the queue, and Shropshire will be left right at the end. I am not prepared to see that happen.

Finally, Telford Council would obviously have us believe that as part of this programme, women and children’s services have to be moved from Telford to Shrewsbury, because the main A&E will need to have women’s and children’s services next to the main A&E provider at the Royal Shrewsbury hospital. The council says—this is an important point—that because these services were moved from Shrewsbury to Telford a few years ago, such a move would lead to the waste of £28 million. It repeatedly talks about this through the local media. No, no, no. It is not a waste. The building will be used for other purposes, and all the equipment in it, which is easily portable, will be moved to Royal Shrewsbury hospital. So I refute any proposal that there has been a waste of the £28 million invested in women’s and children’s services because of the changes that will take place.

Lucy Allan: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way on that incredibly important point. Will he accept that the brand-new women’s and children’s unit in Telford has been there only since 2015 when it was opened and that the proposal to close it is of huge concern to all my constituents? I am sure he will understand why that is.

Daniel Kawczynski: I do understand that concern, and the previous chief executive of the trust responsible for those changes is, I believe, now working in Qatar. It caused a great deal of controversy at the time. Of course, the Government, Ministers and Future Fit will have to do more to alleviate those concerns, but at the end of the day, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire has stated, a decision has to be made.

With that, I end my speech and thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

7.33 pm

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak on what is the most important and concerning issue in my constituency over recent years—and it is certainly particularly acute at this moment. I would love to make
several points and make a full speech at some stage, but
on this occasion, I shall restrict myself to making just
three points that I hope the Minister will address.

First, I emphasise the importance of the title chosen
for the debate: A&E Provision: Shropshire and Mid-Wales.
We so often assume that health is devolved, but the
reality is that it is a devolved form of government, but it
is not independence. The position is that in much of
Wales, the system and the financial arrangements between
the Governments allow for people to come to Shropshire.
Nearly all Montgomeryshire’s patients who want secondary
care, elective care and emergency care go to Shropshire.
We depend absolutely on Shropshire, so I am hugely
grateful that this debate is about Shropshire and mid-Wales.

My second point concerns the position of A&E units
throughout Britain. We know perfectly well what the
problem is: too many people are going to A&E without
what we think of as reasons to need emergency treatment.
We know that about 20% of the people who go to the
A&E units in Shropshire should be going to the emergency
centre because their conditions are life-threatening, with
the remaining 80% going to the two centres in Telford
and Shrewsbury. They will still effectively be A&E units,
but they may well be referred to as urgent care centres.
We know that that system will work.

This is my final point. Our two clinical commissioning
groups set up a Future Fit programme board to make
recommendations. It spent three years and £2 million—it
could have been £3 million—producing a report which
made it clear that the emergency centre should be based
at Shrewsbury. It was a huge shock to my constituents
when that recommendation was not accepted. Everyone
is flabbergasted. I merely ask the Minister to give us
some idea of how we can move forward from the shambles
that is putting the interests and the care of my
constituents—who are already having to travel for an
hour to Shrewsbury for treatment—at the centre of the
plans for Shropshire. That is vital to us. I hope the Minister
will tell us how we can provide safe care for the people
of Shropshire and the people of mid-Wales, which is
our duty.

7.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health
(David Mowat): In the few minutes available I shall give
the House a recap, describing the process that we have
undergone, the impasse that we have reached, and what
it has been suggested we do to bring about a decision. I
agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury
and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) that it is important
for us to make that decision and to get it right. The
provision of better A&E services for the whole county
in a way that works for everyone should not be the
divisive issue that it has become.

First, however, I think it appropriate to reflect on the
2.7 million people who work in the NHS and the
care system and to acknowledge and congratulate them
on the work that they do. Today, as every day, some
2 million people have used A&E services across the
country. Let me also say that my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham has worked diligently
on this issue, as have other Members, including my hon.
Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan). I know
that it is difficult for them to get this right for their
constituents.

At the beginning of his speech, my hon. Friend the
Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham made the important
point that, ultimately, this must be a local decision. It is
not a decision for Ministers, and it will not be imposed.
It will be made by the local governance bodies that have
been established, notwithstanding the present impasse.

Let me summarise what has been happening. This is a
tale of two CCGs and a hospital trust providing services
across Shropshire—in Ludlow, Bridgnorth, Oswestry,
and Shrewsbury—and, indeed, in mid-Wales, including
Powys. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for
Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) that we need to get
this right for the people of Wales as well. The process
has been going on for a long time, but the driver for
change is not financial. We are finding it increasingly
difficult to staff the two A&E centres in Telford and
Shrewsbury. Rotas are not being filled, and it is feared
that unless we find a robust solution, there will be safety
issues and it will not be possible to keep the centres
open for as long as we want.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and
Atcham observed that this was not a new issue, and that
is certainly true. I understand that it is being discussed
locally and that projects have been reviewing it since
about 2005 without a solution being found. The Future
Fit project was set up in 2013. As has been said, the
process ended at the end of last year with a preferred
option, which was, in broad terms, that emergency
care should be centralised in Shrewsbury, with urgent care
continuing to be in both locations. I heard it said in the
debate earlier that that would mean most patients would
continue to be served closer to where they are, either at
Telford or Shrewsbury.

On the governance issue, the report of the Future Fit
process was voted on by members of the two CCGs,
who have broadly a 50% share in that decision, and the
result was a tie. Indeed, Telford CCG raised concerns
with that, there will be an appraisal, or review of the
decision and to stick by it. I think everybody in the
debate earlier that that would mean most patients would
continue to be served closer to where they are, either at
Telford or Shrewsbury.

I understand that at the end of December an editorial
in the Shrewsbury Star—

Daniel Kawczynski: Shropshire Star.

David Mowat: Sorry, an editorial in the Shropshire
Star—it is not a newspaper I read—made the point
that we now need to get this right; we need to make a
decision and to stick by it. I think everybody in the
 Chamber would agree with that, with the caveat that in
the end it has to be a local decision. There are very real
battle lines here; I think my hon. Friend the Member for
Telford met the Secretary of State yesterday on this
with other Members and council leaders.

What is the proposed way forward? My briefing from
the CCGs is that a week today there will be a meeting at
which the intention is that two things happen. The joint
committee will be reconstituted and an independent
chair appointed who will have a casting vote. In parallel
with that, there will be an appraisal, or review of the
appraisal process, that Future Fit takes, with the intent
to address the concerns raised by Telford about whether

[David Mowat]
it was robust. At the end of the review—depending on the outcome, I guess—there will be a new vote with a view to potentially having a majority on one side or the other and therefore there will be a local direction. That is my understanding of the way forward.

Mr Paterson: It is tremendous news that there will be a mechanism that will give us the ability to come up with a clear answer. Does the Minister have any idea of the timescale for this new process?

David Mowat: I have been advised that the timescale is in the order of eight to 12 weeks, but it remains a local decision. That is what we hope and expect to be the case.

In finalising my comments, I want to make a couple of observations.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am pleased with the Minister’s announcement; hopefully we will see a conclusion to this. May I appeal to him to take an active interest in the process in these eight to 12 weeks because the integrity of this devolution of power is at stake unless we empower the clinicians to take the decisions we have ultimately empowered them to take?

David Mowat: I am happy to agree to that, although I should have said at the start of my remarks that in the normal course of events this debate would have been answered by my ministerial colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), as he is the Minister with this responsibility, although he is not independent on this, so it is appropriate that I answer for the Government.

Once the decision has been taken and a consultation occurs, a component of the proposal will require capital. Various numbers have been floated around, one of which is £300 million. I do not believe that NHS England has yet confirmed that that capital is available, so there is a hurdle to be overcome once a local decision has been taken. I do not want to raise expectations that the process will necessarily be straightforward. This is the way in which the process will occur, as I am sure colleagues would expect. If, as a result of that stage, capital is awarded, there is the potential for those on either side of this discussion to take the configuration proposal to the independent reconfiguration panel. That is always the case in such processes, and the panel can accept or not accept what has been suggested. That is the normal process in the NHS.

I want to make one final point to all my colleagues, who are so keen to get this right for their constituents in Telford and in Shrewsbury. I ask them to remember that the NHS is not just about bricks and mortar. We often have discussions about the bricks and mortar, but I want gently to point out to right hon. and hon. Members that there are other things that they should be holding their clinical commissioning groups to account for. They should be looking at cancer performance, cancer survival rates and maternity performance, for example. There are many aspects of the NHS that are not about bricks and mortar, and it is important that Members should recognise that when we debate these matters.

Question put and agreed to.

7.46 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Thursday 12 January 2017

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Network Rail

1. Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Ministers of the Scottish Government on further devolution of Network Rail. [908115]

5. Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Ministers of the Scottish Government on further devolution of Network Rail. [908119]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I met the Minister for Transport and the Islands in the Scottish Government, Humza Yousaf, in October last year. I welcome working together to improve services for rail passengers within the current devolution settlement.

Peter Grant: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer, but can he explain why the Government are happy to devolve responsibility for maintenance and indeed the Scottish Government to influence how Scotland showed that Network Rail’s original cost estimates were unreliable. Does the Minister agree that, especially when projects overrun by hundreds of millions of pounds, those who commission the work should have the power to hold Network Rail to account?

Paul Maynard: I reiterate the point that with the new devolution settlement within Network Rail and the Scottish Government co-operating with each other, the Scottish route director delivers those infrastructure projects.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): A report commissioned by Transport Scotland showed that Network Rail’s original cost estimates for Scottish projects were unreliable. Does the Minister agree that, especially when projects overrun by hundreds of millions of pounds, those who commission the work should have the power to hold Network Rail to account?

Paul Maynard: I reiterate the point that with the new devolution settlement within Network Rail and the Scottish Government co-operating with each other, the Scottish route director delivers those infrastructure projects.

Paul Maynard: I return to how I started my answer and remind the hon. Gentleman that we had a lengthy discussion about what was contained in the Smith commission. This did not emerge from that commission, so we are not taking it forward.

Southeastern Rail

2. Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What plans he has to improve services for passengers on Southeastern rail. [908116]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): We will launch the formal consultation on proposals for the new Southeastern franchise in February. I hope that people across the franchise area will participate in it, enabling my Department and the team working within the franchise to make informed decisions about the specification for the next franchise, particularly regarding how we expand capacity for passengers.

Matthew Pennycook: Not only are my constituents of all political persuasions disgusted by the manner in which the Secretary of State has politicised this issue, but they have absolutely no confidence in his proposed solution for the Southeastern franchise. A previous attempt to merely involve Transport for London in the design of Southern’s 2009 to 2015 franchise failed because that did not involve its proven concession model for suburban rail services, so can the Secretary of State tell us why on earth he thinks that repeating this failed approach will deliver much-needed improvements for Southeastern passengers?
Chris Grayling: There has been no politicisation of this discussion. This decision was taken after the Mayor’s business plan was analysed across government, and after discussions with neighbouring authorities and people who know the route. The truth is that the Mayor’s proposals offered no extra capacity for passengers but a whole lot of uncosted, unfunded promises. They also involved a very substantial top-down reorganisation. The approach we have chosen is the same one that we have taken for Northern and in the midlands, which is to create a partnership to develop a franchise that will work for all passengers in Kent and south-east London to deliver the capacity that we need.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I support the Transport Secretary on that. My constituents in Kent are deeply concerned that, for too long, London has acted as a selfish city seeking to benefit itself at the expense of the people of Kent and the other home counties. It is not right for London to act like a “Hunger Games”-style capital seeking to capitalise on the needs of long-suffering passengers. It is interesting that the Mayor could offer no proposals to expand capacity on these routes. I intend to bring forward proposals that do offer expanded capacity for passengers on those routes.

Chris Grayling: I assure my hon. Friend that I have every intention of doing so. This is a partnership arrangement that brings together London, Kent County Council and my Department to do the right thing for passengers. It is interesting that the Mayor could offer no proposals to expand capacity on these routes. I intend to bring forward proposals that do offer expanded capacity for passengers on those routes.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The Secretary of State’s leaked letter reveals that he reneged on the suburban rail agreement because of his obsession with keeping services “out of the clutches” of a potential Labour Mayor—those are his words. He has put party politics ahead of passengers and clearly prefers to see trains running late than running on time under Labour. Will he now agree to an independent assessment of the proposal by a respected figure outside his Department, given yesterday’s revelations of conflicting commercial interests, to restore credibility to the process and ensure proper consideration of the needs of long-suffering passengers?

Chris Grayling: I cannot believe what I have just heard from the hon. Gentleman. He talks about putting party politics before passengers in the week when the Leader of the Opposition said that he would join a picket line to perpetuate the unnecessary strikes on Southern rail that are causing so much damage to passengers. I will not take the hon. Gentleman seriously until I hear him condemning those strikes and telling the workers to go back to work.

Cross-border Transport

3. Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): What recent discussions has he had with Ministers of the Welsh Government on cross-border transport. [908117]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently met the Welsh Government’s Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure, Mr Ken Skates. Their positive and useful discussion recognised the importance of cross-border transport and our commitment to deliver improvements, such as the investment we are making in the Halton curve.

Ian C. Lucas: The investment by the Welsh Government of £43 million in the Wrexham to Chester line, mainly in England, will lead to a partial dualling of that line by April this year. What more will it take to persuade the UK Conservative Government to match the Welsh Government’s investment by investing in more transport infrastructure in that region, for which an unanswerable case has been made?

Andrew Jones: The Government are already investing significantly in our rail network—more than at any point since the Victorian era. The Mersey Dee rail taskforce has produced its growth prospectus—Growth Track 360—and it is working with the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). I understand that it is now prioritising its objectives, and we will continue to work closely with it.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): The case for reopening the station at Bristol Road, Stonehouse, has been well argued and firmly established. Does the Minister agree that that is exactly the kind of initiative we need to enhance links between Wales, Gloucestershire and the south-west of England?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point, and I agree with him.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The Minister mentioned the Halton curve; he will know that it is an important part of the cross-border links between my constituency and Wales. Will he confirm that the project is on time, and tell us the date on which it will be completed?

Andrew Jones: I will check the latest information and write to the hon. Gentleman. My understanding is that it is exactly on time.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): As the Minister knows, the Operation Stack relief lorry park is vital for cross-border transport links between Kent and the continent. The owner of Westenhanger castle has been actively seeking a meeting with the Department for the past six weeks to discuss accessing the compensation package that he has agreed with Highways England, in return for which he will withdraw his application for a judicial review against the park. Will the Minister urge one of his ministerial colleagues to meet me and the owner of Westenhanger castle so that we can resolve this matter and get on with building the lorry park?

Mr Speaker: Focusing on cross-border matters relating to Wales would help.

Andrew Jones: That was a very entrepreneurial question, Mr Speaker. I can certainly confirm to my hon. Friend that the roads Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), will indeed meet him.
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Government could do something about the cross-border position between the Rhondda valley and the upper Afan valley because they still own the tunnel that was used by the train from Treherbert down to Swansea. Will the Government please make sure that I can have the meeting with the Secretary of State for which I have been asking for several weeks to come up with innovative ideas so that this can become a major new cycle track?

Andrew Jones: I am afraid that my local knowledge of those tunnels has not kept pace with the hon. Gentleman. All I can say is that I have heard his point and will take it forward with my colleagues.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Six lines radiate out from Chester, two of which are cross-border lines, hence the “360” in Growth Track 360. Chester is recognised as a pinch point within that rail network, hence the “360” in Growth Track 360. Chester is the centre in Teesport, and I look forward to doing so.

Andrew Jones: It is always delightful to visit the city of Chester, and I look forward to doing so.

Transport Infrastructure: Teesside

4. Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What recent investment his Department has made in transport infrastructure in Teesside. [908118]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The Tees valley is benefitting from the Government’s significant investment in transport infrastructure across the country. Most recently, we have agreed to fund the Tees valley authorities to develop their plans for a new Tees crossing and to improve connectivity from Teesport to the A1.

Tom Blenkinsop: I thank the Minister for his reply. Last week we received the welcome news that Tesco will be basing all its non-food warehousing at its existing centre in Teesport. Given that economic and employment boost for Teesside, will the Minister reciprocate by pledging full backing and funding for the A66 and a second Tees crossing, as called for by the Teesside combined authority?

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor committed to dualling the A66 in last year’s autumn statement. On the new Tees crossing, we have provided funding to take the business case to the next stage. We will happily work with the area’s local authorities. I recognise the importance of Teesport to the local economy and the value that a new Tees crossing would provide, so I am very keen to see that take shape.

High Speed 2: Costs

6. Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): What recent estimate he has made of the cost to date of High Speed 2. [908120]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I am committed to managing the cost of HS2 and ensuring maximum value for the taxpayer. Total expenditure on HS2 in the period from 2009-10 to 2015-16 was £1.4 billion, of which £450 million was spent on land and property. The rest has ensured that HS2 is on track for delivery, and includes money for developing the scheme design, consulting affected communities, bringing the High Speed Rail (London – West Midlands) Bill to Parliament and developing HS2 Ltd. Figures for the current financial year will be available in the summer.

Mrs Gillan: The cost of HS2 is not just to the taxpayer but to those it affects. The House of Lords Select Committee on the HS2 Bill has recommended amending it to ensure that HS2 Ltd does not have a blanket power to compulsorily purchase land for regeneration or development, and to provide that it must limit its land acquisitions to what is needed for the scheme, particularly in relation to clause 48. As you know only too well, Mr Speaker, farmers, landowners and communities have been blighted for years by the scheme, and the threat of further compulsory purchase orders is truly worrying. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that he will accept the Committee’s important and very welcome recommendation on clause 48 and alleviate the anxiety of those affected by this project?

Chris Grayling: First, on behalf of the Government, I thank all members of the House of Lords Select Committee for their work over the past few months. Indeed, I thank those who served on the equivalent Committee in this House, for whom this was a long and arduous task. We are carefully considering the Lords recommendations and we will publish our response shortly. If my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I will save my detailed response for that publication, but I am looking extremely carefully at the recommendation to which she referred.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am sure the Secretary of State is aware that, with regard to the option to have a station in the centre of Sheffield, there is currently no money to get trains out of the station and north to Leeds, and there is no money to increase the station’s capacity at the southern end to get better connectivity to trans-Pennine trains. There is even no money to electrify the line between Sheffield station and the main HS2 route. Does this not increasingly look like a cut-price option? Will he agree to meet local MPs and councillors, and other interested parties, to discuss these matters?

Chris Grayling: May I start by wishing the hon. Gentleman a happy birthday? [HON. MEMBERS: “For tomorrow.”] For tomorrow. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), has indeed been involved in such discussions, but I remind the hon. Gentleman that the original proposal for a station at Meadowhall was opposed by the city council, which wanted the route to pass through the city centre. It is in response to pressure from within Sheffield that we have revisited those original plans, but I assure him that those discussions will continue.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that although the costs of the project need to be kept under control, the economic benefits it will
bring to areas such as Long Eaton in my constituency will far outweigh some of the costs that we are talking about today?

Chris Grayling: This is one of the key aspects of the development of this project, so my hon. Friend makes an important point. What is happening in the area around Long Eaton, and the new development of a station and surrounding facilities at Toton, will make a huge difference to her area. As she knows, we have been discussing how best to make sure that we get the right solution for Long Eaton, but we will continue to work for her constituents to reflect in the final design what works best for them.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Given what will be the eye-wateringly huge final costs of HS2, surely it makes sense to maximise the use of this asset, so will the Secretary of State tell us whether the line will be used 24 hours a day, seven days a week? If not, will the otherwise wasted capacity be used for freight—and if not, why not?

Chris Grayling: Of course the whole point about HS2 is that it releases capacity on the existing west coast main line for freight. As a result, I see the potential for significant increases in freight across the west coast main line area. As for timetabling, that is matter for those who decide what is the best commercial proposition for that route, but we expect, and are planning for, very intensive use of the route across a wide variety of destinations, including Stoke-on-Trent.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend’s last answer worries me slightly. Lichfield suffers all the disadvantages of having the line go through it and no station, because it is too small. I was hoping that he would say that the freeing up of capacity would mean that the west coast main line could have more trains stopping at Lichfield Trent Valley, but is that now not going to be the case, because the line will be blocked up with freight?

Chris Grayling: No, I think there will be room for both. The benefit of HS2 is that it provides an opportunity for more commuter trains, more intermediate trains and more services to places that do not currently receive them. By taking the fast trains off the west coast main line—trains that go straight up to places such as Manchester and Liverpool—more opportunity is provided for better services in places such as Lichfield and the Trent valley, which the current mix of services makes it difficult to achieve.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, you and the Minister will remember that when I said that the cost of HS2 would soar past £60 billion I was mocked, but it is now past £60 billion and rising. The chief executive has quit and the people in my constituency would like this folly to be stopped now, with the money—£60 billion and rising—put into saving the health service and into our local government, which is going bankrupt.

Chris Grayling: I hate to disappoint the hon. Gentleman but actually the plans for HS2 have been widely welcomed across the north of England. The project will make a significant difference to the economy of his region. The point I would make to him about cost is that one reason why we are spending more money than is spent on equivalent lines in some other countries is because we are spending money on amelioration measures that minimise the impact on the environment.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): As well as updating the costs of the project, may I urge my right hon. Friend to update the economic benefits to communities such as mine in Milton Keynes, which, as he says, will benefit from a significant increase in commuter and inter-city traffic as a result of the release of capacity on the west coast line?

Chris Grayling: We will continue to provide information about the benefits of this project, but my hon. Friend is right to say that in places such as Milton Keynes—it is one of our most important growth areas, and it will need more commuter services north to south and east to west—the introduction of HS2 will make it possible to deliver a much better service for his constituents and others.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The Adam Smith Institute has warned that HS2 could end up costing up to £80 billion, which would equate to nine times more per mile than comparable high-speed tracks in France. How can the Government assure the public that the already sky-high costs of this project are not going to spiral even further out of control?

Chris Grayling: As I said, this is a choice; we want not only to deliver high-quality infrastructure for the future, but to do so in a way that is environmentally sensitive. That means spending money on tunnels, cuttings and things that other countries would perhaps choose not to do. I want to retain a careful stewardship of Britain’s green and pleasant land while delivering what we need for the future, and that is what we are doing.

Access for All

7. Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of progress on delivery of Access for All projects by Network Rail.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): Since 2014, the Access for All programme has completed accessible routes at 25 stations, with 12 more currently in construction, and a further 52 at various stages of design and development.

Nigel Mills: The Minister will understand the real anger in Alfreton at the further delays in the Access for All programme at the station there, where many passengers still cannot use the southbound platform. Can he at least reassure them that the station will be prioritised in the next block of funding, so that the improvements are done in 2019?

Paul Maynard: We had to delay 26 Access for All projects into control period 6, one of which was, unfortunately, Alfreton, because the project there was less developed than others we were considering. Nevertheless, I can reassure my hon. Friend that I am
making it clear to Network Rail that I expect the improvements to be delivered early in control period 6, after 2019.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister recognise the importance of the maximum number of people being able to use our rail services? Why are schemes such as Access for All seen as expendable?

Paul Maynard: I certainly do not agree that they are regarded as expendable. We have reached a point at which roughly 70% of passenger journeys are from step-free access stations, of which there are roughly 450 throughout the network. The hon. Lady wrote to me regarding a station in her constituency, and I have asked my officials to look into that more closely to make sure we fully understand what has occurred there. I hope to reply to her soon.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The McNulty report said that the rail industry had to do more to operate efficiently and bring down costs. Will the Minister say what he is doing to persuade the rail industry to do that in relation to step-free access, so that it can be extended to more stations, such as New Barnet?

Paul Maynard: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. When we are looking at improving our accessibility projects throughout the network, we need to ensure that the solutions we come up with are cost-effective but not gold-plated. I am sure that when she was in my role she found what I find now, which is that sometimes projects come before us the cost of which can scarcely be justified and that the same outcome can be achieved much more cheaply.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Confusion and frustration abound in the Lawrence Hill area of my constituency, in relation to step-free access and other disability access improvements to the Lawrence Hill station. Local people have been frustrated by the works there, and rumours abound that they are being cancelled, postponed or just stopped. Will the Minister agree to meet me and visit Lawrence Hill station to talk to local residents about the situation? Preferably, he could clear the matter up right now.

Paul Maynard: I am not familiar with the exact details for that station, but I am more than happy to meet the hon. Lady to discover what is occurring there.

Rail: Accessibility

8. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What progress is being made on ensuring that trains and stations are fully accessible to disabled people. [908123]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): We are committed to improving accessibility on the rail network. Roughly 70% of train fleets operating passenger services currently meet modern accessibility standards, with work on the remaining vehicles due to be completed by 2020.

Kerry McCarthy: A moment ago, I was engrossed in the answer to the question asked by my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), as that issue also affects my constituency. I very much hope that we make progress on the Lawrence Hill and Stapleton Road stations.

On accessibility on trains, the Minister will be aware of the recent case of the Team GB Paralympian, Anne Wafula Strike. It was very brave of her to come forward and speak about what must have been a humiliating experience when no disabled-access toilet was available on the train. What is the Minister doing to ensure that situations like that do not occur and that disabled people are treated with respect?

Paul Maynard: I am glad that the hon. Lady brings up that case. I am sure she shared the same sentiments that I am sure every Member felt on reading that story: it was simply unacceptable. We have made it clear to CrossCountry, through officials, that it was not good enough, and I will reiterate that when I next speak to the company. More importantly, I want to ensure that we meet our target of every rail carriage, including the toilets, being fully accessible by 2020. In situations in which the accessible toilet is out of order, for whatever reason, either that carriage must be taken out of service or, if that would have unacceptable service consequences, any individual on the train who might need the accessible toilet must be made aware of the situation before boarding and thereby have the chance to make alternative arrangements.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Money was secured more than three years ago for step-free access, not only for disabled people but for all people, at Garforth train station. Network Rail has been stalling and delaying. I have secured a commitment to the printing of a poster advertising that the work will happen by May, but may I urge my hon. Friend to speak to Network Rail to get the work done as soon as possible? The money has been in place for three years; delays are not necessary.

Paul Maynard: I am more than happy to discuss the matter further with my hon. Friend. My initial understanding at this stage is that the works at Garforth, as indeed with many on the trans-Pennine routes, are interlinked with the upgrades we are planning on the trans-Pennine network. I am happy to have a further discussion with him.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): Last Friday, a disabled wheelchair user, Sandra Nighy, on Southern was left stranded on the train platform in the freezing cold for two hours because there was no one to help her to the train despite booking assistance 48 hours in advance. She was on an unmanned station, and the trains that passed her by were driver-only with no on-board supervisor. The law is absolutely clear: train operating companies must provide reasonable access for disabled passengers. Does the Minister agree that the failure to do so strips disabled passengers of their dignity and of their right to travel and breaches the Disability Discrimination Act 1995?

Paul Maynard: I am glad that the hon. Lady raises that case. When I heard about it, my interpretation was that, in this case, Southern had not applied the policies that it said were in place for all disabled passengers. The issue
is that the situation was far worse because the lady in question booked through Passenger Assist, so the company had plenty of notice that she was on her way. However, under the unions' proposals, that train would have been cancelled in the first place and unable to depart.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Access for so many disabled and particularly elderly passengers is dependent on advice that can be had from ticket offices. In that respect, can the Minister give me any reassurance about proposals to close the ticket office in God's own town of New Milton?

**Paul Maynard:** I am not specifically familiar with proposals in New Milton. But I see no reason why we should have fewer people employed in our stations over the coming years, but the roles that they discharge need to be broadened out to involve helping more passengers, not fewer.

**Penalty Fares**

9. **Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of the use of the Strategic Rail Authority's penalty fare rules 2002 by train operating companies on staff meeting revenue targets; and if he will make a statement.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport** (Paul Maynard): Train operators are permitted to use penalty fare schemes to deter fare evasion, while allowing inspectors to apply discretion when dealing with passengers. In December 2016, the Department announced planned improvements to the penalty fares regime by including a new third stage independent appeals panel. This and all existing appeals bodies will be independent of train operators and owning groups.

**Will Quince:** I thank the Minister for that response. Does he agree that train operating companies should not be putting their staff under undue pressure to issue penalty fares? Will he commit to look at the rules to ensure that discretion is always an option where appropriate?

**Paul Maynard:** I understand the point that my hon. Friend seeks to make. Although revenue protection is very important on our railways, so, too, is proportionality and discretion, hence the changes that I have made not just to the appeals regime, but to the fares and ticketing action plan that I announced last month. For example, those who forget their railcards now have more option to ensure that they are not unfairly penalised. I am more than happy to meet him to discuss his concerns further.

**Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): Ticketless travel and fare dodging is one of many issues on the Chase line. I experienced it at first hand when I joined the London Midland revenue protection team last month. The £20 penalty is insufficient to deter fare dodging. Will my hon. Friend agree to review penalty fares, so that they do become an effective deterrent?

**Paul Maynard:** I am more than aware of the sterling work that my hon. Friend has done to further the cause of revenue protection by checking tickets on the Chase line, on which I congratulate her. She is quite right that there are concerns within the industry that the penalty fares are set too low. At the moment, I am focusing on reviewing the appeals system to make sure that it is fair and proportionate, and discretion has a role to play. I will keep penalty fares under review.

**Wales and Borders: Rail Franchise**

10. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What his plans are for the next rail franchise for Wales and Borders; and if he will make a statement.

**The Secretary of State for Transport** (Chris Grayling): It has been agreed in principle that Welsh Government Ministers will procure and manage the next Wales and Borders rail franchise. My Department is working closely with the Welsh Government to ensure the appropriate transfer of the necessary powers. However, I want to make it absolutely clear that, as part of those arrangements, we are ensuring that the train services and stations used by passengers in England are protected and, importantly, treated consistently with those in Wales, both during this procurement process and across the whole life of the franchise.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** That is a very welcome answer from the Secretary of State. We have briefed him about the extraordinary overcrowding on Arriva trains over the past few years, particularly in the summer months—with the windows sealed and a lot of people cramming into the carriages, it has been intolerable. Will he ensure that the next franchise accommodates the levels required for passengers to travel safely and more services from Shrewsbury to Birmingham airport?

**Chris Grayling:** I am aware of the capacity issues on the Wales and the Borders franchise and, indeed, on the CrossCountry franchise. One of the challenges, owing to the rapid growth in recent years, is that there are not enough diesel trains to go around at the moment. I had the great pleasure of being at Newton Aycliffe in County Durham for the launch of the first new hybrid train to be manufactured there. That will open up the opportunity for us to deliver significant change to rolling stock across our network, and will enable us to address many of the overcrowding challenges to which my hon. Friend refers.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will be aware that he decided last October to devolve the cross-border franchise to the Welsh Government, but current legislation does not allow a public sector organisation to bid for the new franchise. Will he think again and allow public sector organisations the ability to bid for the franchise, to allow the public the best possible service when it begins?

**Chris Grayling:** The Labour party is keen on renationalising our railways. What I would remind it is that if its policies were implemented we would lose the ability to deliver the new trains that are being delivered right across this country, paid for by private sector investment. What Labour Members are calling for is turning back the clock and having older trains on our network. I am afraid that that is not my view.
Rail Franchising: Public Sector

11. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): What plans he has for the future role of the public sector as a result of the development of rail franchising policy. [908128]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):** Franchising has been instrumental in improving the railways for passengers and as part of the enormous growth in rail usage since privatisation 20 years ago. Our approach to rail reform is about delivering an improved service for passengers through better teamwork between Network Rail and passenger rail franchises, and making Network Rail more customer focused by giving more power to its local route managers.

**Clive Efford:** We now know that the Secretary of State is putting politics before the interests of passengers, and he is taking a dogmatic approach by ignoring what could improve our railway system. He has refused to allow the Mayor of London to take over suburban services, in spite of the fact that his predecessor thought that that was a good idea. The public are in favour of public ownership: 58% of people polled by Transport for London are in favour of the Mayor having greater control over suburban services and only 14% support his position. Is it not time that public ownership of our railways was considered by the Government, and are not the public in favour of it?

**Chris Grayling:** It is hardly a surprise that Conservative Members for constituencies outside London have doubts about a Labour Mayor inside London running local services, particularly when the Mayor delivered a business plan that did not offer improved capacity and was founded on a lot of uncosted promises. So far from this Mayor, we have seen a fare freeze that was not a fare freeze and a London of no rail strikes with a rail strike last Monday. I do not take the Mayor’s promises at face value, I am afraid. We have taken a partnership approach that also listens to the people of Kent, who are equally important in this franchise and said they should be equal partners with the people of London in designing it.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): In 1993, the public sector British Rail withdrew services on the Cleethorpes to Sheffiled line, making it a Saturdays-only service, which means that people in Gainsborough, Brigg and such towns cannot get to Cleethorpes to enjoy all that it has to offer. As yet, the private sector has not seen fit to restore that service to six days a week. Will the Secretary of State or one of his Ministers meet me and Members for neighbouring constituencies to discuss the issue?

**Chris Grayling:** We are always happy to talk to my hon. Friend, who remains a doughty champion of his constituency, but he is right to make the point that if we turned the clock back 30 or 40 years to the days of British Rail, the debate in the House today would be about line closures, station closures and a reduction in services. Today, the issues are overcrowding due to numbers rising so fast, new stations, improved facilities and new trains. That is the difference between the policies we have followed and the policies Labour Members want to follow.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The Government’s franchising policy lies in tatters, with desperate attempts to retrofit contracts to protect operators’ profits and, as revealed yesterday, National Express taking the money and running, selling the c2c franchise to the Italian state. The Secretary of State’s director of passenger services awarded the disastrous Southern franchise, while owning shares in the company and advising the winner bidder. The country has had enough of these sleazy deals. Is it not way past time for franchising to be scrapped and the UK rail industry to be revitalised through public ownership?

**Chris Grayling:** The clock ticks ever backwards. The Opposition do not want inward investment or private sector investment in our railways, but, of course, we still do not hear from them any words on behalf of passengers about the strikes. The Labour party takes money from the rail unions and defends them when they are on strike, no matter what the inconvenience to passengers is. The Opposition are a disgrace. They should stand up and say that these strikes should stop. I will say one thing about the Mayor of London: at least he had the wit and wisdom this week to say that the strikes are wrong. I hear nothing from the hon. Gentleman about the strikes being wrong.

Ultra-low Emission Vehicles

12. **Craig Whittaker** (Calder Valley) (Con): What progress has been made in encouraging the use of ultra-low emission vehicles. [908129]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes) rose—**

Mr Speaker: Ah, we are blessed.

Mr Hayes: Mr Speaker, I waited to rise to build excited anticipation. We want the UK to be the world leader in the take-up and manufacture of ultra-low emission vehicles. Last year, more ultra-low emission vehicles were sold in the UK than in any other country in Europe.

**Craig Whittaker:** The British built Nissan Leaf continues to be one of the most popular electric cars in the world, but what are the Government doing to support the uptake of other types of vehicles?

Mr Hayes: Like Cicero, we believe that the good of the people is the chief law, so it is for public wellbeing that we want to see low emissions from all types of vehicles. Just yesterday, I announced the results of the low emission freight and logistics trial, which will see the Government providing no less than £24 million to help place about 300 low and zero-emission vehicles into commercial fleets across the UK.

Mr Speaker: One rather wonders whether the results of the trial were communicated to the right hon. Gentleman’s hero, Cicero.

**Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): The Minister says that he wants to see emissions reduced in all types of vehicles, so will he explain to the House why just 160,000 of the polluting cheat devices in Volkswagen.
Mr Hayes: Indeed. Was it not Ronald Reagan who said that the future does not belong to the faint-hearted? We must be big-hearted and far-sighted in respect of electric vehicles, and that does mean more charging points. We will create a regulatory regime sufficient to provide those charging points and, therefore, to assure the public doubts to which my hon. Friend has drawn the House’s attention.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady is right. Volkswagen needs to do more, which is why I am going to meet its representatives at the beginning of next week to tell them exactly that. I insisted that the company paid £1.1 million, which we received on Christmas eve. I demanded it as a Christmas present—because that was the money that taxpayers had to spend as a result of the emissions scandal.

Mr Hayes: To start with—road safety is a concern of the whole House. My hon. Friend was right to mention the tragedy that he did.

Charging points are vital. One of the great challenges for industry and Government is to ensure that there are adequate numbers of charging points across the whole country. That particularly applies in rural areas such as the one I represent. There may be a need for legislative change to that effect, and we are considering that. We are introducing a modern transport Bill, in which we will address the issue of charging points.

Nick Smith: Will any Volkswagen executives face criminal damages here for the diesel emissions scandal?

Mr Hayes: I hold no candle for those businesses that do not do right by consumers or, by the way, by their workers. The actions that have taken place in the United States, which I guess is what the hon. Gentleman is referring to and the actions that are being considered by Volkswagen customers oblige the Government to think again about what further steps we can take, and we are doing so. I have not ruled out a further investigation. I will discuss that with the Secretary of State and raise it with Volkswagen at the meeting I described.

Steve Double: Constituents tell me that one of the barriers to their buying electric vehicles is the complexity and variety of public charging facilities, which require them to carry numerous cards and forms of payment. Does the Minister have any plans to bring some regulation to this market to simplify it and make it more accessible and to encourage more people to purchase electric cars?

Mr Hayes: Yes. I am actually on the same page as the hon. Lady. By the way, I am glad we have moved on from the belligerent bombast of earlier—I do not think it did the Opposition any favours—and she makes her case reasonably. There is a case for further steps. That is partly about the retrofit described earlier by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), it is partly about the payment of taxpayer money I described, and it is partly about the consumer. We should consider further steps and, having considered them, take them as and when necessary.

Road Infrastructure and Capacity: North-West

14. Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of road infrastructure and capacity in the north-west.

[908131]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): The Government recently published three strategic studies into long-standing transport challenges in the north-west and have committed to major investment based on the findings. Highways England’s route strategies —by the way, I set up Highways England on my last visit to the Department—have assessed the performance of the strategic roads network and the pressures it faces. Three strategic studies relate to the north-west. Refreshed
versions, drawing on the evidence submitted by local stakeholders last year, will be published, and I think they should be published soon, so let us make it March—we will publish them then.

Conor McKinnon: In 2014, the roads investment strategy proposed nine new projects in the north-west, but, to date, the plans for just one of them have been announced, while the Government spend six times more on transport infrastructure in London than in the north. How does the Minister think the whole northern powerhouse thing is going, because, when it comes to transport, like much else, the plans for the north-west but in his constituency, and he does not want to tell us about it.

Mr Hayes: I do not think that is typical of the hon. Gentleman—at least, I hope it is not—because he is being ungenerous and, to some degree, might I say, not admitting all he knows. For surely he will know of the A570 linkway, valued at £3.2 million—that is in St Helens, by the way. He will know of the Windle Island junction improvements, valued at £3.2 million—again in St Helens. He will also know of the Newton-le-Willows interchange, valued at £14.4 million. We are not only acting in the north-west but in his constituency, and he does not want to tell us about it.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. This question is about the north-west of England. I am not a geographer, but I say to the hon. Lady that last time I looked, it seemed to me that Taunton Deane was rather a long way from the north-west of England.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): It is the surface of the roads in the north-west within the existing infrastructure that worries me; it is a bit like driving on the surface of the moon at times. Where county councils fail to tackle the problem of the plague of potholes that besets motorists in the north-west, will the Minister be imaginative and look at ways whereby district councils could bid for the money that the Government make available so that they can tackle this problem?

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend is right that the noise and disturbance from poor road surfaces has a significant effect on the journeys of those who use cars and trucks. As he knows, I have been in the north-west in a vehicle with him—an open-top vehicle, I hasten to add—waving to his constituents. I know how important road surfaces are, so I will certainly look at his suggestion, not only for the north-west but across the whole nation.

Topical Questions

T1. [908105] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): As you will be aware, Mr Speaker, I have said in this House and elsewhere that I am very committed to improving the transport situation in the south-west, and I am pleased today to announce a new phase in our £7 billion plan for that region. We are launching the next stage of the formal consultation on a major upgrade to the A303—the main A road into Devon and Cornwall. This involves the development of the 1.8-mile tunnel past Stonehenge, which will protect that world heritage site from traffic, reduce local congestion, and speed up journeys to and from the region. We will now be talking to local people to the west of that tunnel about precisely which route it should take around the village immediately to the left. In addition, we are committed to upgrading the remaining sections of the A303 between the M3 and the M5 to dual carriageway. The next step will be public consultations on the A303 Sparkford to Ilchester and A358 Taunton to Southfields schemes that will come very shortly.

Tom Pursglove: A 79-year-old constituent has been repeatedly refused car hire contracts by leading rental companies. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of any restrictions that are being placed on OAPs by these rental companies?

Chris Grayling: I understand my hon. Friend’s concern. This is a very difficult issue. The Equality Act 2010 provides general protection against age discrimination for people of all ages, but there is an exemption for a person conducting an assessment of risk for the purposes of providing a financial service to another person. My Department has not made the assessment that my hon. Friend describes, but I encourage his constituent to contact the British Vehicle Rental and Leasing Association, which should be able to help him in identifying a suitable provider.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): An icy chill is about to descend on parts of the country. That is not an impending DEF meeting; it is not; it is of course the impending weather front. Will the Secretary of State tell us about the state of preparations for gritting our roads in the coming days? What discussions has he had with his colleagues and those in local government to ensure that at least our roads run more smoothly than our railways?

Chris Grayling: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that there was no icy chill last time I visited Cambridge, when he and I were there for the first bit of work, albeit a rather small bit of work with a spade, on the A14 project, which will make a big difference to Cambridge. My ministerial team and I have had detailed discussions about this in recent weeks, and the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), has been in regular contact with local authorities. We have in this country, if not a salt mountain, plenty of salt and plenty of grit. We estimate that we have what is necessary to cope with the winter ahead, but we will obviously keep that under review.

Daniel Zeichner: I thank the Secretary of State; let us hope that we are well prepared. Taking him back to the time just before Christmas, given that soon after his visit to Cambridge he told the Evening Standard that cycle lanes cause problems for road users, will he clarify exactly who he thinks road users are? While he is thinking about cyclists—a helpful clue—could he explain why it is taking such an extraordinarily long time to produce a cycling and walking investment strategy?

Chris Grayling: Cyclists use cycle lanes, and motorists and other road users use the roads alongside them. That is fairly straightforward, to be honest. If the hon. Gentleman is eagerly anticipating our cycling and walking strategy, he does not have long to wait.
The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): It does not surprise me that my right hon. Friend has drawn attention to my rapturously received report to which I refer. It is an excellent piece of work, (Paul Maynard), sets out the possibilities for UK ports to become free ports, post-Brexit? 

Mr Speaker: Almost as stylish and elegant as the right hon. Gentleman, I do not doubt.

Mr Speaker: Let’s hear from the fella.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about hybrid tram-trains and I will look into it. As far as I am aware, the project is on track and on schedule, but I am particularly keen to understand the lessons that can be learned from it, to make sure that any projects elsewhere are done properly and to time.

Mr John Hayes: I have with me the report to which my hon. Friend refers. It is an excellent piece of work, and I have already arranged to meet its author. I initiated the maritime growth study when I was last in the Department, but it is time to refresh that. It must be a living document. As part of that exercise, we will consider the role of ports now that we are freed from the clutches of the European Union. My ambitions are, as ever, measured and modest: I seek nothing more than for the UK to become free ports, post-Brexit?

T4. [908108] Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Ministers will be aware of the comments in Public Health England’s recent alcohol evidence review that drinking alcohol up to England’s drink-drive limit increases the risks of fatal accidents by 13 times. We have the highest drink-drive limit of any country in Europe and there is a danger that any country in Europe which reduced the limit as a matter of urgency, in line with the views of the Police Federation, the RAC, the House of Lords, the Fire Brigades Union and 77% of the public?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): We have no plans to review the drink-drive limit. The level of 80 mg per 100 ml of blood is one of the highest ones, but no country has a better record than us on road safety and improving performance in tackling drink-driving. Taken together, it is the combination of the right limit and enforcement and the cultural belief that drink-driving is wrong that makes progress.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Before Christmas, a parent at Morley Primary School in my constituency was badly injured when driving in the school’s vicinity, because another car was going too fast, which is a regular occurrence. I have consistently requested that the county council change the speed limit and move the signs—only move them—but it consistently refuses to do so because, it says, nobody has been killed yet. I do not want a child, parent or anybody else to be killed. Is there any way that the Minister can change the criteria by which councils decide to change such speed limits?

Mr Speaker: Let’s hear from the fella.

Andrew Jones: Local authorities already have the powers to introduce lower speed limits where they think it is appropriate. I think that that should apply especially around schools. The decision does not have to be a reactive one—waiting until something happens—and it is inappropriate to think in such a way. I suggest that I write to the Highways Authority in Derbyshire to highlight the powers that it already has. My right hon. Friend the Minister responsible for roads will visit my hon. Friend’s constituency and I will discuss how to avoid that.

Chris Grayling: I think we are some way away from that. Discussions have to take place between our Government and the European Union on arrangements post-Brexit. They will take place, and we will inform the House of progress on the matter in due course.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): A start has been made in the first road investment strategy on upgrading the A47 from Lowestoft to the A1. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm that he will work with me and other East Anglian colleagues on the second road investment strategy to ensure that this good work continues.

Mr John Hayes: My hon. Friend will know that we managed to achieve what he wanted in respect of the bridge in his constituency, but he is right that we need to do more in respect of RIS2. To his customary eloquence and commitment he has added prophetic powers, because...
just this morning I am writing to all the colleagues he
describes inviting them to participate in that process.
This will be for the people and shaped by the people’s
representatives.

T8. [908114] Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway)
(SNP): The A75 in my constituency benefits from
Euro-route designation. Will the Secretary of State
assure my constituents that he will support the continued
designation of Euro-routes after the UK leaves the
European Union?

Chris Grayling: I have to confess that I have never
heard anyone in this country, north or south of the
border, refer to an A road in the United Kingdom as a
Euro-route. If they cease to be Euro-routes after we
leave the European Union, I suspect that we will be able
to count the number of people who miss that on the
fingers of one hand.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I declare
an interest as a daily commuter on the east coast main
line, which is a very well run strategic route. Service
outages, infrequent as they are, can be very disruptive.
May I ask the Minister to prevail on train operating
companies and Network Rail to improve communications
with passengers in real time, to ensure that passengers
are made aware of these problems and can make alternative
arrangements as necessary?

Paul Maynard: It is entirely right to say that passenger
information during disruption is something that all
train operating companies and Network Rail need to
improve. Not only do we need a single source of information
that is consistent, but it needs to provide the most
up-to-date information. It is not acceptable for people
who have checked their phones on leaving home and
thought that their train was on time to find, by the time
they get to the station, that the train has been cancelled.
That is not good enough.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Will the Secretary
of State reject the new proposal of a spur line from HS2
in the constituency of Bolsover between Hilcote and
Morton? Not only will it cut the Blackwell council in
two, but it will destroy scores of houses in the village of
Newton. Will he have a look at the letter I have sent
him, in order to pacify the people of Blackwell about
this mad idea?

Chris Grayling: Of course I will. I have taken a close
interest in the eastern leg, and I have been up and down
most of the route myself. I am very keen that we deliver
the economic benefits, but that we do so in the way that
works best for local communities. I am happy to take a
look at the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It has
been yet another week of misery for hundreds of thousands
of passengers on Southern rail. Given that the unions
have received guarantees on jobs, on pay and—from the
independent rail safety regulator—on safety, would the
Government now support Conservative proposals to
limit strikes, or at least the impact of strikes, via legislation?

Chris Grayling: There is a lot of interest in the matter,
and a lot of calls have been made for such measures to
be taken. We are considering carefully how we approach
future issues. Of course, nothing in legislative terms
would solve the current dispute. I think my hon. Friend
will join me in expressing the disappointment of
Conservative Members about the fact that we have not
heard from the Opposition today one word of regret or
condemnation, and not one call for the unions to go
back to work. They just do not care.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The RAC
has estimated that drivers have been over-charged by
hundreds of millions of pounds owing to over-zealous
enforcement by private car parks. Requiring operators
to sign up to accredited trade associations would help
to stop that type of behaviour. Does the Secretary of
State agree that having all companies sign up would
ensure that their business models were based on fair
treatment of the motorist?

Andrew Jones: I will happily look into the matter that
the hon. Lady raises. It is actually the responsibility of
the Department for Communities and Local Government,
but I will take it up with my ministerial colleagues.

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): In view
of the increasing number of passengers and employees
using Stansted airport, the growth of the Cambridge
biomedical campus, the prospect of Crossrail 2, the
announcement of major housing developments and the
welcome prospect of new, high-performance trains, what
plans has my hon. Friend for increasing track capacity
on the West Anglia line to take advantage of those
factors?

Paul Maynard: My right hon. Friend is right to raise
all those factors. He will know of the important work
that the taskforce has done. We are also looking at
timetabling, to which I hope he can make substantial
contribution. He is right to raise the matter and we are
looking at it very closely. Control period 6 announcements
are on the way and I hope that his concerns will be
reflected in them.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): This
time two years ago, when the Blackpool North electrification
scheme faced delays and the rail Minister was a Back
Bencher, he rightly demanded answers from Ministers.
There is now real concern that the electrification of the
midland main line will be further postponed or even
cancelled north of Corby and Kettering. Will the Minister
provide the House with the clarity that he sought for his
constituency and give an unequivocal assurance that this
key Conservative manifesto promise will not be
broken?

Paul Maynard: We are continuing to work towards the
key outputs that matter most to passengers. I recognise
the importance of the network, and my right hon.
Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan)
will work on a cross-party basis to identify the key
regional priorities that we want to be reflected in the
new franchise. I look forward to working with the hon.
Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood).

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): In Broxtowe, there is
widespread and cross-party support for HS2. Of course,
we get the east midlands hub at Toton, but there is still
concern about the route. Will my right hon. Friend
assure residents in Trowell, Strelley Village and Nuthall
that their voices will be listened to and that, if necessary, changes to the route will be made without affecting the timetable for delivery?

Chris Grayling: I can absolutely give my right hon. Friend that commitment, as I did to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) a moment ago. The route will bring huge benefits to the east midlands and to Yorkshire, including the areas around Sheffield, but I want to make it clear that we will be as thoughtful and careful as we can about the detail of the route. The reason for the consultation is that it gives us a chance to listen to those views, and we will.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Mr Speaker, you will be aware of the Vauxhall car fire scandal. Last month, I hosted in the House of Commons around 25 people who had been affected, and heard about traumatised children and how the incidents led to increases in insurance excesses and cost families thousands of pounds. Will a Minister agree to meet not me—I am not interested in meeting Ministers myself—but the families of those affected?

Andrew Jones: I am aware of the issue and the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency is taking action with Vauxhall to remedy the situation. I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and some of the families affected.

Mr Speaker: Finally, Mr Nuttall.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend provide an update on the progress of plans for a new cross-Pennine road link?

Chris Grayling: As my hon. Friend will know, we have recently announced plans to dual the A66. We are currently waiting for the conclusion of the work on the potential for a trans-Pennine tunnel. I give my hon. Friend an absolute assurance that whether or not it is recommended that that work go ahead, our commitment to delivering trans-Pennine improvements will not be affected in any way by the outcome of that study.
Business of the House

10.39 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The business for the next week is as follows:

Monday 16 January—Second Reading of the National Citizen Service Bill [Lords].

Tuesday 17 January—Opposition day (18th allotted day). There will be a debate entitled “Impact of leaving the EU on the rural economy”, followed by a debate entitled “Impact of Department for Work and Pensions policies on low income households”. Both debates will arise on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party.

Wednesday 18 January—General debate on exiting the EU and security, law enforcement and criminal justice.

Thursday 19 January—Debate on a motion relating to Kashmir, followed by a general debate on Holocaust Memorial Day 2017. Both debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 20 January—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 23 January will include:

Monday 23 January—Second Reading of the Local Government Finance Bill.

Tuesday 24 January—Consideration of Lords amendments followed by a motion relating to the charter for budget responsibility.

Wednesday 25 January—Opposition day (19th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

Thursday 26 January—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 27 January—Private Members’ Bills.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 19 January will be:

Thursday 19 January—General debate on decommissioning of in vitro fertilisation and other NHS fertility services.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business, although I am concerned that it appears we are not going to rise for the summer recess. We still do not have a date. I warn everyone to be prepared to work through the summer. I wish Members and staff a very happy new year. We are going to need all the wisdom and strength we can get for the task ahead.

Following on from your remarks, Mr Speaker, hon. Members have raised with me the issue of extending the time for Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions. Never before has the reasonable voice of Britain been so needed in international affairs. Questions could just be extended by an hour. We have excellent diplomats with institutional memory who can make a big difference in the world.

May I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to two reports from the Procedure Committee that may have got lost in the Christmas revelry? The press release for the report published on 18 October had the headline: “Procedure Committee rails against handouts and talked out ‘Private Member’s Bill’”. Sadly, there was a further incident on Friday 16 December, in relation to a private Member’s Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford), when one speech took one hour and 17 minutes. The vote, with 133 Ayes to 2 Noes, showed the will of the House to be clearly in favour of the Bill. It cannot be right, therefore, that Members who wanted to speak in favour of the Bill could not do so.

One of the report’s recommendations is that you, Mr Speaker, invoke Standing Order 47, which would put a time limit on the consideration of private Members’ Bills. Since I have been in the House, this Standing Order has been used in every single debate apart from on Fridays. In a letter to the Clerk of the House, the Chair of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), indicates that that change may need a resolution of the House. A further report of the Procedure Committee, on 14 December 2016, recommended the use of Welsh at Westminster in the Welsh Grand Committee. This was suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), who indicated to me that it is cheaper to do that here. The Official Reporters say there would be no problem with that. Rather than eat into Back-Bench time, could those two resolutions be taken together in Government time?

We need clarification on the waiting time target. Is it for urgent or non-urgent cases? Earlier this week on a radio programme, the Secretary of State for Health said that Simons Stevens is running the NHS. May we have confirmation that it is the Secretary of State who is running the NHS? We had the bizarre scene of the Secretary of State running down the road. I thought he was doing his 30 minutes’ activity as required by the Health Department, but he then jumped into his car. Having served on the Health Committee for five years, I know about the chaos of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. In an unprecedented move, the passage of the Bill was paused by the then Prime Minister. The shadow Secretary of State for Health has written to the Secretary of State for Health with 25 questions. Will the Leader of the House provide those answers within the target time?

Returning to Brexit, a report before Christmas from the other place, “Brexit: financial services”, confirmed that London was ranked as the leading financial services sector in the world and called for a transition period to protect jobs. Page 3, paragraph 2, in the summary of a report by the Environmental Audit Committee, states:

“The Prime Minister has indicated that the UK is likely to leave the single European market and the Customs Union.”

I had not understood that to be settled Government policy. That is why we need these proper debates. The EAC calls for a new environmental protection Act while negotiations are ongoing and a list of zombie legislation—legislation transposed into British law but not updated. It is possible that the confusion has arisen because the Departments have proliferated like amoebae. It cannot be right that, according to figures from the House of Commons Library in December 2016, the Department for Exiting the European Union has only 300 staff, while the Department for International Trade has 2,709 staff. DExEU is getting £94 million a year, while £26 million
is going to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and DIT, but DIT has taken staff from the FCO. We need clarity.

We, Her Majesty’s Opposition, have a proposal. In view of the judgment about to be handed down by the Supreme Court on the triggering of article 50 at the end of March, the Leader of the House should consider a review of what each Department does, because the British public will never forgive this Government if they see people dying on trolleys while vanity Departments are set up to keep hon. Members inside the tent rather than outside it. That task before us is enormous, but we need to remember the reasons we joined the EU and why there was a vote to leave. That way, all views can be respected and we can negotiate from a position that protects jobs, workers’ rights, the environment and our security. We need to do what is best for the UK, not base our approach on the rhetoric of the campaign and a clueless Government.

Mr Lidington: I join the hon. Lady in wishing you, Mr Speaker, and House of Commons staff a happy new year.

The hon. Lady mentioned the duration of Foreign Office questions. I accept that there is a great deal of demand from Members across the House to put questions to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and his team, but in fairness I think she will acknowledge that there have also been several opportunities to question Foreign Office Ministers when they have volunteered oral statements, responded to urgent questions, spoken at Backbench Business Committee debates here, as is happening again later today and next week, on Kashmir, and in Westminster Hall. It has always been the case, since I have been in the House, that the allocation of time for questions between different Departments has been a matter for discussion within the usual channels. If the Opposition want to put forward ideas, obviously the Government will look at them, but in fairness one has to say that if time were added to Foreign Office questions, it would have to be subtracted from some other House business, and that needs to be weighed in the balance too.

On the Procedure Committee, the very last thing I would accuse my hon. Friend for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) of is ranting. Whether I have agreed with him or not on particular issues, he has always expressed his views in a civilised manner, and the Government will respond to the Committee’s report in the way we do to other Select Committee reports.

The hon. Lady made various points about exiting the EU. On article 50 and the changes within Whitehall, we must not underestimate the reality that the decision the electorate took in the referendum represented a profound and far-reaching change to the policies pursued by successive Governments and to the character of the UK’s international relationships, which for half a century have been built very much around our membership—whether aspiring to it or operating within it—of the EU. It seems perfectly reasonable that, in those circumstances, there should be a reconfiguration of resources and Departments in Whitehall to deal with the complex task of handling the negotiations that lie before us. It is not just the Department for Exiting the European Union that is involved. Many Departments throughout the Government are also involved, at ministerial and official level. On the question of the single market and the customs union, let me repeat what the Prime Minister has often said: one of the core objectives of our negotiation will be to achieve the best possible freedom for British companies to continue to operate within, and trade with, the single European market.

The hon. Lady’s request for an early reply to the questions asked by her hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) will obviously have been noted by the Ministers concerned, and I will ensure that it is properly reported to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health. As for waiting time targets, the Secretary of State made very clear during yesterday’s debate that we continued to be committed to the four-hour target, and that we took pride in it.

It is worth noting that despite the pressures being experienced this winter, NHS staff, through their immense professionalism and hard work, have been treating record numbers of patients at A&E departments in hospitals throughout the United Kingdom. It is also the case, however, that NHS England’s director of acute care has estimated that about 30% of the people who currently present themselves at A&E departments really ought to be seen elsewhere in the NHS, or might even benefit from self-treatment at home. It seems sensible for us to think actively—in terms of national policy but also, critically, in terms of local NHS organisations—about how we can provide alternative sources of advice and routes to treatment for people who do not actually need specific A&E services.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Government must be applauded for making it a manifesto promise to leave the environment in a better state than the one in which we found it. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the environment, on the potential opportunities presented to us to become world leaders on the issue, and on the technologies related to it—for example, the tidal lagoon technology that is mentioned in the press this morning? If we are to deliver more for less, increasing productivity and resilience in line with our industrial strategy, the environment must become a cornerstone of our social and economic thinking.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I cannot offer an early debate in Government time, although she may find that this is a subject in which the Backbench Business Committee takes an interest; alternatively, there may be an opportunity for a 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall. However, I think that the Government will want to pay close attention to the report that has been published today by our former colleague Charles Hendry. I hope the House will welcome the news that last year was the first year on record in which more electricity in this country was generated from renewables than from coal: that was a good step forward.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week’s business.

I wish you, Mr Speaker, all hon. Members, and all the staff who serve us so well a happy new year. It is a new year in which there is now a maximum of 10 weeks before the Government trigger article 50, as is their
intention, but we still do not have a Scooby about what type of article 50 and Brexit plan they have in mind for us. The only Government who have attempted to come up with any Brexit solution are the Scottish Government, who are endeavouring to stay in line with the views of the people of Scotland. Will the Leader of the House tell us what type of debates we shall have on the triggering of article 50, and will he confirm that, regardless of what happens in the Supreme Court, the House will have a vote and a say on what will be the biggest single decision that the country will undertake?

After yesterday’s extraordinary press conference in the United States and what might or might not have happened in that Russian hotel room—I do not want to focus on that—may we have a debate on fake news in this country? I remember the days before fake news was cool, when we were told weapons of mass destruction could reach the United Kingdom within 45 minutes. We are also told by some news organisations that this Government are competent and know what they are going to be doing in terms of Brexit. So may we have a debate about fake news in this country?

Can the Leader of the House tell us what exactly is going on with English votes for English laws, because it seems that nobody wants it anymore? We had another English Legislative Grand Committee on Monday. The bells went on, the House was adjourned, the bells went on again, the House was back in session—the mace went down, the mace went up—and not one word was said. This is now beginning to embarrass this House; this is now beginning to make this House look extremely foolish. When will this bizarre and unnecessary practice end?

Mr Lidington: On the hon. Gentleman’s final point, if the EVEL rules are operating in an uncontroversial and consensual manner, that is something the entire House ought to welcome. If that means the Scottish National party is accommodating itself to the need for English Members to have the final say on laws relating to England which in Scotland relate to policies devolved to the Scottish Parliament, that is a good thing.

The hon. Gentleman asked about article 50. The Prime Minister has said that the Government will publish a dividend setting out our negotiating objectives before we come to trigger article 50 later this year. As the hon. Gentleman will know, it has been widely reported that the Prime Minister also intends to make a speech on this subject in the next few weeks. Clearly the character of any parliamentary proceedings on article 50 will depend to some extent on the Supreme Court judgment.

On the hon. Gentleman’s comments about the media, clearly what is said in the United States is a matter for the people of the United States. While all of us from time to time have reasons to complain about the character or accuracy of various news reports or articles in the press, that is a fact of life in a free society, and I would always want to err on the side of saying that there should be many and discordant voices without the state interfering in what is said by either broadcast or written media. That is the better way to proceed, and the sort of attempts we sometimes have to intimidate individual journalists, as we saw shamefully in the closing weeks of the referendum campaign in Scotland in 2014, when individual journalists were singled out for attack, is not something in which any Member of the House should take pride.
debate on critical infrastructure that can benefit business and communities? An example is the Chickenhall link road, which will be a game-changer for the Solent area and for Southampton airport. We should look at business and communities in a holistic way.

Mr Lidington: I think pretty well every Member of the House would agree with the points that my hon. Friend makes. That is why the Chancellor’s inclusion in his autumn statement of £23 billion of expenditure on infrastructure, including transport infrastructure and broadband, is so important.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): When may we have a debate on early-day motion 852?

That this House congratulates the Welsh Government on the introduction of presumed consent for organ donation in Wales; notes that 39 lives have been saved in the past year; is concerned that the UK has one of the lowest rates of organ donation consent in Europe; notes the UK target to increase organ donation consent rates to 80 per cent by 2020; and further notes the model successes of presumed consent in Wales which could be replicated across the UK to increase numbers of organs available for donation.

The motion draws attention to the huge success of the presumed consent to organ transplant in Wales. May I also urge the Government to support the private Member’s Bill that will be presented on Monday that calls for the advantages of presumed consent to be spread to the rest of the United Kingdom? We now know that this is a practical law that is popular with the public and saves many lives.

Mr Lidington: I cannot promise a debate in Government time, but the private Member’s Bill to which the hon. Gentleman refers will provide an opportunity for further debate on the subject. There might also be opportunities for a debate through the Backbench Business Committee or in Westminster Hall.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): In considering its budgets for next year, Labour-led North East Lincolnshire Council is considering the closure of Cleethorpes library, a much-loved local facility. Will the Leader of the House arrange a debate on the value of libraries to local communities?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend might like to seek an Adjournment debate on the issue of Cleethorpes library. I am sure that he and his constituents will be urging the council to look seriously at its priorities and at how to ensure that library services can continue to be provided to the people of Cleethorpes. The provision of library services is clearly the objective that must be sustained.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I hope the Leader of the House agrees that future generations of British people will be very unforgiving if this generation of politicians allows a catastrophic failure to damage or destroy this House in any way, in the knowledge that we did nothing about it now. Will he update the House on when he intends to timetable a debate on the Joint Committee’s recommendations for refurbishment of the Palace of Westminster?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman served on the Joint Committee that made that recommendation. I hope that we can bring this to a debate and get a decision as soon as possible.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I simply do not wish to await any longer. The voice of Shipley must be heard.

Philip Davies: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for highlighting the fact that my nomination for membership of the Women and Equalities Committee was so popular that nobody wanted to oppose me.

May I have a debate on the outrageous plans of Jockey Club Racecourses to close Kempton Park racecourse? If Jockey Club Racecourses is not about the protection of racecourses and the heritage of British racing, Lord knows what on earth it is about. If the closure had been proposed by Arena Racing Company, members of the Jockey Club would have been the first to complain, particularly given that Kempton Park is a profitable racecourse. May we have a debate to find out what this House can do to stop these outrageous plans, which will be a hammer blow to national hunt racing in this country and will concrete over a huge swathe of the area’s greenbelt, too?

Mr Lidington: As my hon. Friend will understand, this site is ultimately a matter for the Jockey Club, on the one hand—the Jockey Club has a royal charter that obliges it to act for the long-term good of British racing—and the local planning authorities, on the other, but I completely understand his point. I understand not only the importance of Kempton Park to the horseracing industry but the importance of horseracing both as a source of great pleasure to millions of British people but as an industry for this country. Whatever decisions are ultimately taken about Kempton Park, I hope that we will continue to ensure that the horseracing industry thrives, generates jobs and continues to bring great enjoyment and pleasure to so many people.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I will endeavour to behave on this occasion, Mr Speaker. Well over a year ago I told the House that there is not a single NHS dentist available in my constituency and that the incidence of child tooth decay is five times the national average. Indeed, I understand that my constituency is one of the worst in the country, if not the worst, for dentist provision. Indeed, I understand not only the importance of Kempton Park to the horseracing industry but the importance of horseracing both as a source of great pleasure to millions of British people but as an industry for this country. Whatever decisions are ultimately taken about Kempton Park, I hope that we will continue to ensure that the horseracing industry thrives, generates jobs and continues to bring great enjoyment and pleasure to so many people.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady says that she had a meeting a few weeks ago, before Christmas, with the Minister concerned, but I will ask the Department of Health to follow up in writing on the outcome of the meeting.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): As we all know, our country is about to go into its most important negotiations in decades, with consequences for generations to come,
yet the three big issues—these issues divide within parties, not just across the House—of the single market, free movement and the customs union have still not been debated in this place. Some think that that verges on being disgraceful. Will the Leader of the House please now assure the House that we will debate those issues, and not only for the obvious reasons but in order to bring together everybody in this country, however they voted in the referendum—as the Prime Minister quite properly said in her new year’s message that she seeks to do—so that we get the very best deal for everybody and for as long as we possibly can?

Mr Lidington: There will of course be further debates, both general debates on exiting the European Union and others on that matter, as we approach the decision on article 50 and, I am very confident, in the months that follow that. My hon. Friend might also like to know, although this will not satisfy her demand for a debate, that in the next fortnight we will have both Home Office questions, which would cover the free movement issue, and questions to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, on 26 January.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): May we have a debate on what constitutes a crisis in accident and emergency in the national health service? The Prime Minister and the Health Secretary refuse to accept that there is a crisis, but the Welsh Tories say that there is a crisis in A&E in Wales, and the Health Secretary says that the English figures are better than those for Wales but fails to point out that, on the basis of what was released this morning, the Scottish figures are 5% better than those in England. May we have that debate on the definition of what represents “a crisis” before the Government fiddle the figures in their response to patients suffering?

Mr Lidington: We have had both a statement and a lengthy exchange of questions to and answers from the Health Secretary on Monday, and then we had a full day’s debate in the Labour party’s time yesterday on this subject, when all these issues were thoroughly aired. I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that he ought not to be too complacent about the situation in Scotland, given that the latest figures I have seen show that NHS Scotland was meeting only one of eight key targets and that one in 12 hospital bed days in Scotland were being lost because of delayed discharges.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): In wishing happy new year to the Leader of the House, may I say that I hope 2017 is as good for the United Kingdom as 2016 was? In relation to business next week or perhaps the week after—or perhaps even the week after that—will he guarantee that when the Supreme Court makes its decision a Minister will come to the House to give a statement? Will he also agree that no prior comment will be made to the media before this House is informed of what the Government are thinking?

Mr Lidington: We do not yet know the timing of the Supreme Court decision, which makes it slightly difficult for me to give the firm assurance that my hon. Friend wants. Let there be no doubt: the Government will want to come—and I suspect, Mr Speaker, that you will insist that the Government come—to Parliament at the earliest opportunity to explain their response to the judgment.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): First, may I wish you a happy Kiss a Ginger Day, Mr Speaker? [Laughter.] I am sure you can look it up!

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) rightly raised a serious question about the Committee report, which was produced 18 weeks ago, on the future of the Palace of Westminster. It is now becoming irresponsible that we have not yet had a debate, because a fire in one of the 98 risers in this building would spread very rapidly; if asbestos in any part of this building were discovered it could lead to the closing of this building immediately and indefinitely; and any problem with the 1880s sewerage at the bottom of the building could also close it immediately. Will the Leader of the House therefore make sure that we get on with this immediately, because we are running unnecessary costs and unnecessary risks?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman summarises the points that were made at much greater length in the Committee’s report about the very real challenges in managing risks that there are with the Palace of Westminster building. As I said to the hon. Member for North Antrim, I would hope that we can have a debate as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: This Kiss a Ginger activity is probably perfectly lawful but I have no plans to partake of it myself. It strikes me as a very rum business altogether; as colleagues can probably tell, I have not the slightest idea about what the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) was prating, so the matter had to be Googled for me.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Yesterday, the European Commission took the retrograde decision to restore GSP plus—generalised system of preferences plus—trade status to Sri Lanka. The Commission withdrew that status in 2010 because of concerns about human rights abuses by the Sri Lankan Government. Despite that Government not yet complying with United Nations Human Rights Council resolution 31, and a damning report from the UN Committee Against Torture, the decision has been made. It has still to go through the European Parliament, but may we have a debate in this House to consider the European Commission’s bad decision, which I know is a matter of concern to Members from both sides of the House?

Mr Lidington: I encourage my hon. Friend to apply to the Backbench Business Committee for that debate. I am sure he will acknowledge that the British Government have always been in the front rank of those pressing not only for an end to human rights abuses under the previous Sri Lankan Government, but subsequently for reconciliation and peace-building in Sri Lanka. That was symbolised by the visit by the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, to Jaffna and the north of Sri Lanka during the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference a year or so ago. The British Government’s support for reconciliation and respect for human rights in Sri Lanka is real and continuing.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to all those who contribute to and work in food banks—such as The Gate in Alloa and Broke Not
Broken in Kinross in my constituency—throughout the country, particularly over the Christmas period when demand was so high? May we please have a debate in Government time about the worrying and increasing rise in the use of food banks, which all evidence suggests is a direct result of the Government’s attitude to and policies in respect of social security?

Mr Lidington: I agree that we should pay tribute to those who organise and work in food banks. Only since 2010 have Department for Work and Pensions offices been formally encouraged to refer to food banks people in a family crisis and in urgent need; previously, that was forbidden. People use food banks for complex reasons. First, if the hon. Lady looks at the figures she will see that the number of people receiving the key benefits who are subject to a sanction in any one month is very small, and there is not a neat relationship between that and the use of food banks. Secondly, I wish she would acknowledge that the Government’s decision to establish and then increase the national living wage has led to the biggest pay rise for the lowest-paid workers in this country on record.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I gently point out to the House that a further 33 right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye? Colleagues know that my normal practice is to facilitate everyone who wishes to take part in the business question, and I am keen to sustain that record, but they should be aware that the debate on Yemen is heavily subscribed and some priority has also to be attached to that. In short, we need short questions and short answers if I am not to leave colleagues disappointed.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May we have a debate on Government support for UK businesses to export? There has been a welcome increase in UK export finance facilities, but we lag behind other competitors on further support to get companies into markets and support for them when they are already there.

Mr Lidington: It is particularly important that we encourage more small and medium-sized businesses to take part in exports—they often do so through supply chains, rather than exporting directly. I shall flag up my hon. Friend’s focus on the subject to the Secretary of State for International Trade, although I suspect the Backbench Business Committee is the best way forward for him.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): Greater Manchester police are losing control of Rochdale town centre. Not enough priority is being given to policing begging, street drinking, antisocial behaviour and shoplifting. Surely that warrants a debate in Parliament.

Mr Lidington: Those are clearly matters primarily for the area commander, the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner in the hon. Gentleman’s area, but he might be lucky in securing a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate to make his points in more detail.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): In Labour’s la-la land, nuclear energy has no part to play in the UK’s nuclear energy mix. In fact, the Labour leader said: “I say no nuclear power, decommission the stations we’ve got”. May we have a debate sometime soon to establish which is the party of nuclear energy, as nuclear energy creates wealth, jobs and prosperity in Weaver Vale and elsewhere in the north-west of England?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that nuclear energy plays a critical role in ensuring that we have the right energy mix in the future. We have a key area for the nuclear sector in the north-west. Places such as Sellafield and Springfields provide high-quality, well-paid jobs in areas where they are much needed.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Can we have a debate in Government time on the cost of telephone calls to UK Government Departments, particularly in relation to yesterday’s revelation that the Home Office spousal visa helpline is £1.37 a minute over and above network charges? Is it not time that this telephone tax is ended by this Government?

Mr Lidington: I am not aware of the details, but I will ask the relevant Home Office Minister to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Next week, I will be speaking at an event about energy switching, or should I say lack of energy switching because the majority of consumers do not switch their energy supplier and get a poor deal. May we have a debate about what can be done to engage consumers, such as those in Cannock Chase, in this market?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Record numbers of people have been switching suppliers, but she is right to say that most people stick with the one that they happen to have. It is something that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is looking at very closely indeed to see what more can be done.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Women face intimidation on a daily basis as they enter the Mattock Lane Marie Stopes pregnancy clinic from protesters who weaponise rosary beads and use gruesome images of foetuses. The police say that existing public order legislation is insufficient to keep the pavement a safe space. Can we have a statement from the Government on establishing buffer zones so that women can be protected in their hour of need, as the group Sister Supporter advocates?

Mr Lidington: Any situation that involves balancing the right of people to assemble and demonstrate peacefully and the right of other people to go about their lawful business will, inevitably, require local police judgment of some sort. There are questions to the Home Secretary on Monday 23 January, which will give the hon. Lady the opportunity to put that point directly to Ministers.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I am saddened to have to inform the House that my constituent, Rolf Noskwith, passed away last week. Not only was Mr Noskwith a distinguished businessman and generous
Mr Liddington: I join my hon. Friend in expressing condolences to Mr Noskwith’s family and friends and to salute the vital and secret work that he and so many other men and women did at Bletchley Park during the second world war. They really are the unsung heroes of that period. My hon. Friend may wish to write formally to the House of Commons Commission about a memorial. She will be reassured to know that the Bletchley Park Trust has reconfigured the museum at Bletchley Park so that it is much more of a memorial than it has sometimes been in the past to the heroic work of those men and women.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): I understand that my private Member’s Bill is mentioned regularly in the House in business questions and that the Leader of the House’s response is that he is waiting for me to come forward with some costs. We are talking about a private Member’s Bill, which means that there is only me. The Leader of the House has an array of civil servants who are willing and able to provide those figures for him. However, if he wants to let me know in detail what exactly he wants, he can write to me, and I will be happy to provide it—I will try on my own—for him and his civil servants. He must accept that this is the will of this House and that Members, from every part of this country and from right across this House, gave up their Friday surgeries to be in the Chamber when the Bill was debated. Will he stop trying to prevent the passage of this Bill and let me know when he will put it into Committee and come forward with a money resolution?

Mr Liddington: The hon. Lady is sincere, as always, in speaking up for her private Member’s Bill, but it is also the case that the Bill was published, I think, only two or three days before it was introduced, and there was no memorandum of costs associated with it. Frankly, it is also the case—[Interruption.] She is sincere in her championship. The Bill is not exactly a disinterested initiative, but a deliberate effort to try to ensure that we have very unequal-sized constituencies. As I have said before, the Government are continuing to consider the financial implications of her Bill.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): May we please have a debate on immigration policy? That would give the Government the opportunity to explain what progress they are making on meeting the immigration target. Of course, it would give Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition an opportunity to explain what their policy is.

Mr Liddington: Yes; my hon. Friend will have an opportunity to pursue Home Office Ministers on Monday 23 January. I fear that, even during a whole day’s debate, getting a reliable policy out of the Leader of the Opposition might be beyond us.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): First, I wish the Leader of the House a happy new year and welcome the Hendry report on tidal energy.

May we have a debate in Government time on transmission lines? Low-carbon 21st-century energy comes from wind, civil nuclear and tidal power situated in coastal areas, which are sensitive. However, National Grid proposes only one system: pylons, which are 1950s technology. We want 21st-century technology for low-carbon energy. May we have a debate on National Grid and its role in disregarding the will of many communities?

Mr Liddington: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point that I know matters to a lot of people living in rural areas in particular, and coastal areas too. I would encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate. There are also questions next week to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which might give him an additional peg on which to hang those arguments.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): On Saturday, I took part in the Corby park run, which is brilliantly organised week in, week out by Paul Humphreys and his brilliant team. They are also fundraising for a new defibrillator in West Glebe Park. May we have a debate next week to recognise the enormous community contribution that park runs make across the country, and also to say a huge thank you to all those who give up their free time to organise them?

Mr Liddington: I cannot offer a debate in Government time. My hon. Friend is right to salute the importance of the park run movement as an entirely voluntary body that has energised, in more than one sense, thousands of people around the country to get more active and fitter in the way that every doctor would recommend. Also, as he says of Corby, it has helped to raise significant sums of money for charities.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Teachers at Whitehaven Academy in west Cumbria have been striking over the crumbling buildings and meagre resources. In 2010, the Government scrapped the Building Schools for the Future programme, under which Whitehaven Academy was to get significant funding. Netherhall and Millom schools are also waiting for funding. Will the Secretary of State for Education make a statement to the House about exactly how the Government are going to sort out this mess so that Cumbrian children can have the education they deserve?

Mr Liddington: I will ask the Education Secretary or one of her team to write to the hon. Lady about that particular issue. I am sure that the hon. Lady would welcome the fact that the national funding formula for schools will ensure a fairer distribution of available resources than has been the case in the past.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. In order to try to accommodate everybody, might I suggest that we now move to single-sentence questions and, of course, pithy replies?

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Mr Speaker, may I use your good offices to remind colleagues that we debate Holocaust Memorial Day next week? The book of commitment is open from Monday for two
weeks, thanks to your good offices, Mr Speaker, in the corridor between the Members’ Staircase and the Members’ Cloakroom.

I also ask that we have a statement following Sunday’s conference on the middle east in Paris. Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions went on far longer this week because the Government did not give a statement or respond to an urgent question on the subject. It would be far better to have a statement in Government time on the outcome of that conference.

Mr Lidington: It will be for Foreign Office Ministers to hear my hon. Friend’s comments and to decide whether they can offer a statement. I am sure that, as in previous years, many hon. Members from all parties will want to sign the Holocaust remembrance book.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Can we have a further debate on the crisis in social care? Today, Nottingham University hospitals have more than 200 patients who are medically safe to be discharged, but cannot be. Is it any wonder that Nottingham University hospital is on black alert yet again and that Nottinghamshire County Council is calling on the Government to take some action? When are the Government going to wake up to this crisis?

Mr Lidington: While it is undoubtedly true that there are pressures on the national health service and on social care at this time, the Government have acted through the better care fund and the social care precept and, most recently, by bringing forward £900 million of additional spending to give local authorities additional resources. It is also the case that there is a lot of local variation. More than half of the delayed discharges in our hospitals relate to just 24 local authorities, so it is also a case of disseminating best practice and embedding that everywhere in the country.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): Late last year, the Government confirmed that this House would be presented with a plan on how the Government will begin their process of exiting the European Union. Will my right hon. Friend outline the potential processes by which this House will be engaged on that plan?

Mr Lidington: I am sure that there will be opportunities for that plan to be debated here. I am sure, too, that when that is published, the relevant Select Committees will probably want to take a look at it. I do not think my hon. Friend will be disappointed regarding parliamentary scrutiny.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): A Government reason for the closure of Dungavel immigration removal centre is that it will lessen the use of police cells, yet it turns out that the Home Office does not hold information on how many times police cells are used. Can we have a debate in Government time about the farcical ongoing estate management reviews?

Mr Lidington: The current state of affairs regarding Dungavel is that the planning application for the new facility that would replace it was refused by Renfrewshire planning committee in November last year. Dungavel will remain open. Its future is dependent on a successful planning application for the new short-term holding facility.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Can we have a statement from the Foreign Secretary on his assessment of the credibility of the allegations made in the dossier about President-elect Trump? It is clear that the UK Government have a great deal of knowledge about these things. The dossier was written in the UK, and the UK Government have placed and lifted a D notice on the former MI6 officer who wrote the allegations. We had a warning before Christmas from the head of MI6 about hostile states attempting to subvert western democratic processes. Can we have a statement from the Foreign Secretary on what action he is taking to prevent us and our NATO allies from being subject to cyber-attacks and propaganda attacks from hostile states?

Mr Lidington: The Foreign Secretary and, indeed, the Prime Minister have repeatedly made clear their concerns about the cyber-capacity and cyber-tactics of Russia and other countries with regard to the interests of the United Kingdom. The hon. Lady will understand that I cannot go into details about these matters, but the issues are considered regularly by the National Security Council.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Can we have a statement from the Government about the increased role of the Ministry of Defence police in undertaking duties in civilian areas outside Faslane and Coulport, to establish who took the decision, why it was made, whether these officers are armed and under what chain of command they operate?

Mr Lidington: I was checking whether Defence questions were coming up next week, and since they are not, I will ask the relevant Defence Minister to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The Leader of the House is in denial. We need a debate, which needs to be led by the Prime Minister, so that we can ask her very pertinent questions about what she is doing about the NHS. For instance, Simon Stevens yesterday said that it was obviously “stretching” the truth to say that the NHS had got more than it had asked for, and we are spending less than other developed countries. Those are the types of issues we need to ask questions about, and that is why the Prime Minister needs to be here. The NHS is in crisis, and the Government are doing nothing about it.

Mr Lidington: The Government are actually meeting the spending commitment that the NHS wanted to support its plan. Yes, there are pressures—nobody denies that—but since 2010 we have seen significant increases in the number of doctors, nurses, diagnostic tests and A&E attendances and treatments. There is real improvement, and we should pay tribute to the NHS staff who are delivering that.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Can we have a debate about how the Government could take a more proactive role to preserve banking and post-

[Bob Blackman]
office services on our local high streets? In the space of two years, the Bank of Scotland has closed one branch in my constituency, and the Royal Bank of Scotland will have closed three. We have had announcements this week that four post offices are under threat across Scotland, and I am very conscious, given the experience in my constituency, of the burden falling on small convenience store managers and shop owners and of the lack of service to customers and small business.

Mr Lidington: My understanding is that the Post Office proposes that the Crown post offices that it closes will instead become sub-post offices, or sub-post offices on a franchise basis will continue in those communities. It is the provision of the service that seems to me to be important. It is right that there should be full consultation with local communities about any of these proposed closures, but it is also a reality that more and more of our constituencies are using online banking services, and that is bound to have an impact on the economic viability of branch networks.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Can we have an urgent statement from the energy Minister on the forthcoming industrial action in the nuclear industry, which is a direct result of the Government’s betrayal of workers in that industry, despite the amendments that the Opposition put down to the Enterprise Bill and despite the promises that were made at the time of privatisation?

Mr Lidington: I cannot offer the promise of a statement, but this may be something the hon. Gentleman wishes to seek an Adjournment debate on.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Following on from the question asked by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), can the postal services Minister give a statement on the Government’s role in the Post Office and its future? I received a letter this week saying that Morningside post office would be closed and franchised. It is a very profitable and well-used post office, and that closure should be stopped. Can we have a statement about what the Government are going to do about these closures?

Mr Lidington: There is, as with all such proposals, a process that the Post Office operates for consultation and decision. I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to use that opportunity on behalf of his constituents. However, it is also the case that the vast majority, some 97%, of the Post Office’s branches around the country are already operated on the basis that they are sub-post offices—indepenedent businesses with a post office franchise.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Can we have a statement on the unlawful implementation of various provisions of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, including its use regarding internet connection records and bulk personal data sets, following the ruling by the European Court of Justice that general and indiscriminate retention of emails and communications by Governments is illegal—a point made frequently and at length by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) and I during the Act’s progress through the House?

Mr Lidington: The Government are considering their response to that judgment, but it is certainly the view of those who serve us in the security and intelligence agencies that the ability to collect bulk data is of vital importance in the continuing battle against terrorism.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): May we have a debate on the excellent report by the Defence Committee on decision making in defence policy? In particular, it notes the lack of understanding of military strategy among key decision makers. May we have a debate on military strategy that will allow us to look at issues such as whether forward deployment of personnel represents deterrence or provocations?

Mr Lidington: We would welcome the possibility of a debate, perhaps through the Backbench Business Committee. The forward deployment of UK forces as part of NATO contingents in Estonia and in Poland is all about deterrence and solidarity with a NATO ally. NATO is an organisation that Clem Attlee and Ernie Bevin helped to create. I look forward to the day when we have a Labour leadership that again gives full-hearted support to NATO.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Government have talked out three out of four SNP private Members’ Bills, their treatment of the private Member’s Bill introduced by the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) is completely appalling, and their response to the Procedure Committee’s report is as inadequate as the system itself. They did accept, however, that there should be a change to Standing Orders to require private Members’ Bills to be published slightly earlier than currently. When will they give us time to debate that proposal?

Mr Lidington: We are looking at a number of proposed changes to Standing Orders, many of which have come from the Procedure Committee and some from other Committees of the House. It will probably be for the convenience of the House if we can find an opportunity to deal with all those as a block rather than considering them piecemeal, so that is the kind of arrangement I am hoping to secure.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I am very sorry to be called so late on Kiss a Ginger Day, Mr Speaker. We only get one day a year, after all—I am wondering whether you might be colour-blind.

May we have a debate on the future of our parks funding? Graves park in my constituency receives EU higher-level stewardship funding because of its high value regarding nature conservation, and the park’s budget has already been under serious pressure because of slashed local authority funding. I would be grateful if we could have a debate on this in Government time.

Mr Lidington: Questions to Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers next Thursday or questions to Communities and Local Government Ministers next Monday might provide an opportunity to raise that matter. Clearly the future of stewardship funding is one of the matters that the Government are considering in the context of the negotiations overall.
Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Dozens of my constituents in Blantyre have complained to me about being mis-sold solar panels by Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Systems under the Government’s green deal programme. By way of an answer to a written parliamentary question, I have learned that that company, which has since gone into liquidation, was sanctioned by the Government in November 2015 for breaches of the green deal code of practice. May we have a statement from the Government on what support they will offer to my constituents who have been left struggling to pay their electricity bills which, in some cases, have tripled?

Mr Lidington: There is a risk in any system that somebody might seek to abuse it. I suggest that the hon. Lady writes either to me or directly to the Minister responsible for these matters setting out the detail of what has happened to her constituents to try to secure a more detailed response to their concerns.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): As a brown-haired Member of the House, I am delighted to be the last Labour Member to be called.

The Leader of the House has already heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) about her Bill. She has offered support in relation to whatever problems he has, and he is now saying that it is an issue of time. By anyone’s maths, if the Bill was published only three days before it was supported in this House, that is eight weeks and two days ago. Will he clearly explain what the problem is with bringing this Bill into Committee, or is it that there are problems on his own Back Benches because it had too much support from Conservative Members?

Mr Lidington: As I said earlier, the Government continue to consider the financial implications of the Bill.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The Leader of the House has been asked twice for an important debate about the Post Office. The Government cannot simply wash their hands of the matter. The general post office in my Dundee constituency has been in the centre of town for almost a century but is set to close, and arguments for a sub-post office are simply not good enough. Furthermore, many pensioners do not go online to do their banking or to check their pensions, so may I ask the Leader of the House, for the third time, for an urgent debate on the very serious matter of closing post offices?

Mr Lidington: I think that the key concern of pensioners and others in the hon. Gentleman’s Dundee constituency would surely be whether they continue to have access to the post office services that they need. Whether those are provided via a Crown post office or through a franchised sub-post office is a separate issue; it is the quality and accessibility of the service that should surely come first.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on the future and current performance of UK Border Force at airports? According to the Tourism Industry Council, if the 23 million EU nationals who visit every year are subject to full border checks, staffing would have to increase by 200%—and that is on top of current failures. What are the Government’s plans?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman will be able to make that point to the Home Secretary during Home Office questions on 23 January.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The plight of religious minorities such as the Yazidi people, who are subject to terrible conditions under Daesh, including sexual slavery, should be a primary consideration for us all. Will the Government make a statement on what more we will do and on whether we will institute programmes such as that operating in Baden-Württemberg in Germany to support those people at their time of terrible need?

Mr Lidington: We are providing an enormous amount of support—almost £2.5 billion—to ease the humanitarian crisis in Syria and neighbouring countries. That is helping people in the region, including Yazidi refugees. Our resettlement schemes are also giving as much priority as possible to people who have been victims or who are at risk of sexual abuse, and to women and children who are particularly vulnerable. Clearly we always look actively at other ways in which we can help those people. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who has responsibility for the middle east, is sitting alongside me on the Front Bench and he will have heard the points made by the hon. Lady.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): There cannot be much that cheapens the honours system more than dishing out gongs to people who have been found by a UN committee to have breached human rights, including those of disabled people. I am talking not of a despotic regime, but of two senior civil servants at the Department for Work and Pensions. With that in mind, will the Leader of the House facilitate a debate on how we can reform the honours system?

Mr Lidington: No. The Government have already made it clear that we regard the report from that particular UN committee as a grotesque misrepresentation of the state of affairs in the United Kingdom. For one thing, it took no account of our very successful record in getting a record number of disabled people into work, or of the support programmes for disabled people who are in work.
Women in the House of Commons

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Select Committee statement. The Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and, of course, call Mrs Maria Miller to respond to them in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions, and should be brief. Those on the Front Bench may take part in questioning. I remind the House that ordinarily such a statement, and the questioning on it, can be expected to take, in total, approximately 20 minutes.

11.49 am

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to make a statement to the House on the fifth report of the Women and Equalities Committee on women in the House of Commons after the next general election, in 2020. The successful preparation of all our reports depends on the hard work of the Committee’s Clerks and staff, the diligence of hon. Members who make up our Committee—I am glad to see my hon. Friends the Members for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) and for Bath (Ben Howlett) in the Chamber—and the generosity of our witnesses, who give up their time to prepare for and take part in our sessions. I particularly thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), the right hon. Members for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and for Moray (Angus Robertson), and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), all of whom enthusiastically shared their views with the Committee and told us about the work of their respective parties.

If, 100 years ago, the suffragettes who fought for women’s rights—for our right to be elected and to sit in this place—had been told that just 455 women would be elected to this place over the next 10 decades, I am not sure whether they would have laughed or cried. I think they would be proud of the fact that the United Kingdom has had two female Prime Ministers, but the fact is that there are as many men sitting in this place today as there have ever been women elected to be Members of Parliament.

At the moment, we have 195 women MPs and 455 men. I am yet to see any evidence to suggest that women are less qualified than men to represent their communities, or that women do not want the opportunity to be a Member of Parliament and to improve the lives of those who live in their community. Therefore, this startling imbalance should cause us all a great deal of concern. At best we are failing to reach out; at worst the parties, which are, for the most part, responsible for selecting candidates, are failing in their duty. The Committee’s report provides an evidence-based set of recommendations to change that, to help to ensure that Britain does not slip further down the global rankings for female parliamentary participation, to promote a more representative Parliament and to make this place stronger.

Our report has consciously focused on female representation, but our recommendations should, we feel, also open up discussion about how to secure improved diversity in other areas so that we have a Parliament with more black and minority ethnic representation and more disabled members. All that will help to ensure that the debates that we have and the laws that we make are better. Of course, the report builds on significant work that has already been done on representation in Parliament, such as the 2010 report of the Speaker’s Conference on parliamentary representation—convened by you, Mr Speaker—and the comprehensive work done by Professor Sarah Childs, who produced “The Good Parliament”.

The trigger for the Committee’s new report was the Boundary Commission’s initial proposals about reducing the size of Parliament to 600 constituencies. There is no reason why that process should adversely impact women or any particular group, but the proposals mean that the seats of more than 20 women MPs would, to all intents and purposes, disappear. If political parties do not take action, it could mean that there is a smaller proportion of women MPs after the next general election.

The Committee’s recommendations are for the Government, political parties and, indeed, Parliament, because we all have to take responsibility. The first of our key recommendations is for more transparency from parties about the work that they are doing to improve candidate selection. We feel that the Government should immediately bring into force the statutory requirement for political parties to publish their parliamentary candidate diversity data for general elections, as set out in section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, so that we can properly scrutinise parties’ records of selecting a diverse slate of parliamentary candidates.

Secondly, we recommend that the Government should seek to introduce in legislation in this Parliament a statutory minimum proportion of female parliamentary candidates in general elections for each political party. We have proposed a minimum of 45% of women. This measure would be brought into force only if the number and proportion of women MPs failed to increase significantly after the next general election.

Thirdly, we have set out in our recommendations a domestic target of 45% for the representation of women in Parliament and local government by 2030. That is to inform the work being done by the Office for National Statistics to establish domestic indicators for the UN sustainable development goals—particularly goal 5, an indicator for which my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) and David Cameron fought hard when these goals, which apply to the UK as well as to other members of the UN, were established. To make progress, the measures need to have teeth, so the Committee has recommended the extension of the Electoral Commission’s remit to introduce fines for non-compliance.

In our evidence sessions with the chairman and leaders of the political parties, it was evident that there is enormous support for a more representative Parliament. Indeed, each of them agreed that Parliament would be a better place if 50% of MPs were women. However, we need to turn those warm sentiments into bums on seats—I hope that that is not unparliamentary language. The parties lack clear and comprehensive plans to turn those important warm words into clear action.
This Parliament is the mother of all Parliaments, but at the moment, on our watch, we are letting ourselves down on the global stage. Since 1999, Britain has fallen from 25th to 48th in the world for female representation. Parliament should have a clear aspiration to be the global leader for female representation and diversity more generally. The recommendations in the report can help us to achieve that.

Mrs Miller: The parties should look at the evidence of what works. Our report clearly states that there is a body of evidence that parties can look at. It is not for a Select Committee to dictate to parliamentary parties how they run their selection procedures. That is for them, but they should also consider the evidence.

Mrs Miller: I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the Women and Equalities Committee for this important report. The Labour party is committed to increasing the representation of women in Parliament and at every level of politics. As the report recognises, more than half of women Members of Parliament are Labour Members—women make up 43.7% of the parliamentary Labour party. Much of that is to do with Labour’s commitment to all-women shortlists. Does the right hon. Lady think that other parties should introduce all-women shortlists for their parliamentary selections? Does she agree that parties that are not already taking direct positive action to tackle the under-representation of women in Parliament should do so as a matter of urgency?

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When John Bright first coined the term “the mother of Parliaments” he was saying that even England, the mother of Parliaments, had still not brought full democracy to the country because the vast majority of its people were not able to vote. We are coming up to the 100th anniversary of some women, in 1918, being allowed to vote. Is not one of the biggest problems finance? Many women are still paid less than men, and working-class candidates still find it difficult to get selected, because it is a very expensive business.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This came out in relation to fairer child support. The cost of becoming a Member of Parliament can be very steep indeed and is therefore out of the reach of some people, whether they are male or female. The parties need to think carefully about whether they can lessen the obstacles that they put in the way of candidates, whether through financial support or other measures. I know that my own party, the Conservative party, has looked at that very carefully and provided practical help.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are building on firm foundations. Parliament has to look carefully at its operation to ensure that it is doing everything it can to encourage more women to come forward. Historically, we have looked very closely at childcare and family-friendly working. We should also be looking very carefully at how the dissuading effects—the violence and online abuse that female Members experience—can put people off. They are just as important and the House needs to take them very seriously.

W Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Scottish National party welcomes the publication of the report and we are grateful for being able to contribute in the Select Committee. We firmly believe that all political parties should be held to account for their action to tackle this democratic deficit. It is simply not acceptable in 2017 for women to be discriminated against or under-represented in the boardroom, in politics or anywhere else.

The SNP is committed to increasing the number of female elected representatives. For example, we have increased the number of women Members of Parliament and Members of the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Government’s gender-balanced Cabinet is one of the few in the world. The SNP Scottish Government are also taking decisive action to ensure that women are represented in senior and decision-making roles, including in the boardroom. Our “Programme for Government” contains many ambitious commitments that support women’s equality. Are the UK Government considering similar measures? When will they bring them to fruition?

Mrs Miller: The recommendations in our report are for the Government to consider. It is important that significant progress is made at the next general election, at which 45% of candidates should be female. The hon. Lady mentioned equal representation in Cabinets. I was heartened that Justin Trudeau had a gender-balanced Cabinet when he became premier in Canada and that he said, “What do you expect in 2016?” I think that we should ask, “What do we expect in 2017?”

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend mentioned the excellent report by Professor Sarah Childs. Does she agree that some of its recommendations would also help to bring more women into Parliament?

Chris Bryant: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are building on firm foundations. Parliament has to look carefully at its operation to ensure that it is doing everything it can to encourage more women to come forward. Historically, we have looked very closely at childcare and family-friendly working. We should also be looking very carefully at how the dissuading effects—the violence and online abuse that female Members experience—can put people off. They are just as important and the House needs to take them very seriously.

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Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I basically back what my right hon. Friend is aiming for, but with caution on one or two issues. Does she accept that at some stage the number of women MPs had to match the number of men still in Parliament? It was only some 30 years ago, when my wife was elected, that fewer than
5% of MPs were female. To reach nearly 30% is quite some progress, and I am glad we have met the equality my right hon. Friend has spoken about.

It is important not to think that the Government should require parties and Parliament to do things; Parliament and parties should require the Government to do things. One of those things is not putting people into Parliament, but giving people the opportunities and experience so that they can, with the necessary luck, be chosen on merit.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend makes some interesting points. His wife, of course, was one of my role models when I looked at Parliament and saw the effective nature of women and the work they did here. The University of London only started to admit women in 1878, but now more than 50% of its students are female. Other institutions have made the journey more successfully than we have, so it is right that we ask questions about why progress has not been made more quickly.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): As national secretary of the Scottish National party until the end of the last year, I saw the successes but also the struggles that come with implementing all-women shortlists. In some cases, despite having the requirement, we struggled to find women candidates. What more does the right hon. Lady think can be done at that formative point at which people might become candidates, for example in terms of work experience with local politicians, standing for a local council or taking on responsibilities at a local party level?

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the work needs to go in early. I applaud 50:50 Parliament’s work and its current campaign #AskHerToStand. Many hon. Ladies here today will know that it often takes asking women to stand for Parliament before they do so. Such early work, particularly standing for local government, can be an effective way of building people’s confidence to take this on as a career choice.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend have any concerns that a man from a working-class background could be discriminated against if all the proposals and recommendations contained in her report are accepted?

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Speaking as someone who was born in a council house and went to a comprehensive school, I do not want to see this place becoming populated by an unrepresentative group of people, but it is unrepresentative at the moment. We have to take some tough decisions, rather than failing to take action because of the threat that some groups might feel discriminated against, to put right what is a real injustice in terms of female representation.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for her statement and the hard work she does in leading our Committee. The UK has signed up to the universal UN sustainable development goals, in which the international community vowed to leave no one behind. While African nations have achieved over 50% female representation, it is embarrassing that in our Parliament that figure is only 30%. Will she join me in calling on the Department for International Development to focus on parliamentary representation as it publishes its SDG implementation plan?

Mrs Miller: I thank my hon. Friend and fellow Committee member for his comment. As he knows, we heard yesterday in our evidence session on the SDGs that the credibility of our country will be in jeopardy if we do not do more to implement those goals, particularly goal 5, which was fought for so hard by my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney and David Cameron. Part of that is about ensuring that we make significant improvements in parliamentary representation.
Points of Order

12.5 pm

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have heard you on occasion, Sir, advise Ministers at the Dispatch Box to address the House, not their own Back Benchers. I wonder whether you have noticed that the Leader of the House has developed an unfortunate habit of staring either at the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) or vacantly into space when answering questions from the quarter of the House where Scottish National party Members sit. There is an issue here not only of audibility but of non-verbal communication. For example, when the Leader of the House was unable to distinguish between a 94% performance in accident and emergency in Scotland, compared with 88% in England, had he been looking our way, he would have seen SNP Members shaking their heads. When he made an unfounded allegation about the conduct of the Scottish referendum campaign, which was impeccable, he would have seen us laughing at him. I do not want to pick out the Leader of the House, rather than behind them at the Member to whom they might be responding. Beyond that I will not go to the Tabled questions to be tabled.

Mr Speaker: My first point is that statements made in the Chamber should always be communicated through the Chair. The second is that people speaking from the Dispatch Box should address and, in so doing, look at the House, rather than behind them at the Member to whom they might be responding. Beyond that I will not venture. If I were uncharitable, I would imagine that the right hon. Gentleman was seeking, against all precedent and expectation of him, to propagandise, but because I am not uncharitable, I cannot imagine that he was seeking to do anything of the kind.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I know that you are a staunch defender of Back-Bench Members’ rights, so may I ask your advice? A Government proposal to site an asylum hostel in my constituency has caused great angst and concern there. It is an inappropriate place. It is the wrong decision. In connection with that, I have been pursuing questions with the Minister for Immigration. The Government seem to have taken a decision to put these hostels in mostly Labour areas. I have been trying to ascertain what the Minister has gone through full public consultation. I cannot see, therefore, how the Minister can give such an answer. I have tabled a further question to the Minister. If he still refuses to answer, given the information I have put before the House today, what advice would you give me, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: Off the top of my head, my advice is as follows: My principal suggestion is that the hon. Gentleman go to the Table Office and seek its advice on the nature and terms of the questions to be tabled. [Interruption.] He mutters, I think, that he has already done that.

Derek Twigg indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: If that has not availed him, I am disappointed to hear it. Having had no prior notification of this matter, and therefore off the top of my head, I have two further thoughts. One is that the hon. Gentleman can, without delay, seek an Adjournment debate with the relevant Minister, in which he would have a face-to-face opportunity, over a decent period, to probe the Minister with the relentlessness and tenacity for which he is renowned in all parts of the House. Secondly, he can use freedom of information opportunities to try to ascertain the facts that he wants to ascertain. I have a hunch that, if neither of those approaches helps, he will be raising his concern with me on the Floor again.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Momentarily, I felt moved to be charitable. I always thought that when I addressed the Chair, I was addressing the House—and, if I may say so, my pleasure in so doing is magnified when I address the Chair and you, Sir, are occupying it. [Laughter.]

Mr Speaker: Well! My cup runneth over. To be complimented by a parliamentarian of the repute of the right hon. Gentleman really does cause me, for the rest of the day, to go about my business with an additional glint in my eye and a spring in my step.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): And two inches taller.

Mr Speaker: And possibly two inches taller. I am a happy man indeed. I have always liked the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), in the 20 years I have known him, and I like him even more now.

Chris Bryant: Eleanor is not going to call him.

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Gentleman had better watch himself a little bit with the Deputy Speakers in the coming days.
The situation is particularly dire for children: the United Nations has estimated that eight children are killed or injured every day in Yemen and that nearly 50% of school-age children are not at school.

The situation is exacerbated by the difficulty of gaining access for imports of essential supplies such as energy, food and medicine. That fuels the humanitarian crisis. Supplies are filtering through to the country more quickly than they were six months ago, and that progress is obviously welcome, but levels remain significantly below those of March 2015. Not only is that damaging the economy, but any further changes in the availability of food will pose a risk of famine. It is to DFID’s credit—I am pleased to see that the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), is present—that it is putting more than £100 million into Yemen to help to relieve some of the most pressing humanitarian challenges. The UK is the fourth largest donor to Yemen, and we are leading the way in many respects, as we so often do in humanitarian crises, but we need to do more to press other countries to fund relief.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): If DFID is giving £100 million to Yemen—I totally support that—what is happening to the money? Presumably, it is blocked, because we cannot get through to the people who really need it. I suppose that it is in some bank or food store somewhere.

Stephen Twigg: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend’s own long-standing work on the issue and to the work of the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen. He is absolutely right to say that the issue is crucial, and I shall come on to access for humanitarian organisations.

At the end of 2015, the International Development Committee decided to conduct an inquiry into the crisis. Last year, we published two reports on Yemen. The first, which we produced on our own, related specifically to the humanitarian crisis, and the second was produced in conjunction with the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, through the work of the Committees on Arms Export Controls. One of the recommendations in our first report was that the UK Government should put pressure on all parties to the conflict to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. That includes, very importantly, measures to protect civilians and, as we have been reminded by my right hon. Friend, to allow humanitarian agencies a safe space in which to operate.

The humanitarian situation is grave. Our own Government have described the crisis in Yemen as one of the most serious humanitarian crises in the world. The United Nations estimates that more than 80% of the population—more than 20 million people—are in immediate need of humanitarian assistance. Fourteen million people face food shortages, 19 million have no access to safe drinking water, and more than 3 million have had to flee their homes because of the conflict. The situation is particularly dire for children: the United Nations has estimated that eight children are killed or maimed every day in Yemen and that nearly 50% of school-age children are not at school.

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Stephen Twigg: The situation varies in different parts of the country, but I remember that when the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne)—who is sitting next to the hon. Gentleman—was a DFID Minister, we discussed this issue when he appeared before the Select Committee nearly a year ago to give evidence. One of the challenges is precisely the one of which the hon. Gentleman has reminded us: securing...
humanitarian organisations can work unimpeded in need to comply with international humanitarian law, in Yemen is shrinking, making it even more difficult for organisations have told us that the humanitarian space on the ground. A number of non-governmental Doctors of the World, withdrew from Yemen because it damaged or destroyed completely and that more than 70 health centres have been and 31 have been injured. The World Health Organisation conflict. Since March 2015, 13 health workers have died and 31 have been injured. The World Health Organisation tells us that more than 70 health centres have been damaged or destroyed completely and that more than 600 have closed owing to damage or shortage of supplies or staff. Last year, the non-governmental organisation, Doctors of the World, withdrew from Yemen because it simply could not guarantee the safety of its volunteers on the ground. A number of non-governmental organisations have told us that the humanitarian space in Yemen is shrinking, making it even more difficult for them to carry out their work. All sides in the conflict need to comply with international humanitarian law, and one of the ways they should do so is to ensure humanitarian organisations can work unimpeded in Yemen.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that attacks on humanitarian operations have occurred on both sides, including by the Saudi-led coalition sometimes even when co-ordinates have been provided? On 27 October 2015 it was reported that there had been an attack on a Médecins sans Frontières hospital, even though the co-ordinates had been provided to the coalition two weeks before.

Stephen Twigg: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he has done on this issue and agree entirely with what he says, which brings me to the second part of my speech.

The second major recommendation that came out of both reports—it was also recommended by the Foreign Affairs Committee report, which disagreed with us on the question of arms sales but agreed with us on this issue—is that there must be an independent, United Nations-led investigation of alleged violations of international humanitarian law by both sides in this conflict.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I just want to make the point that not all Foreign Affairs Committee members disagreed with the report; a minority agreed with it.

Stephen Twigg: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and pay tribute to her for her long-standing interest in, and activity on, these issues, not least her active participation in the Committees on Arms Export Controls, which I believe perform a vital function and should continue.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I had not intended to intervene at this point, but as the FAC report has been mentioned, is it not a fact that all three reports—those of the Business, Innovation and Skills, the International Development and the Foreign Affairs Committees—were agreed by majority votes?

Stephen Twigg: I believe that is the case; certainly ours was agreed by a majority vote. I thought that my hon. Friend was going to make the different point that all three reports are in support of this motion. I am not aware of any of those voting in the minority in any of those three Committees doing so because they disagreed with this recommendation. I hope that the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington and I have framed a motion that can enjoy support across the House, because it focuses on the issue of an independent investigation.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The Chairman of our Select Committee will recall that when we took that vote—my decision is on record—it was my particular concern that the independent investigation take place. I feel strongly about that and want to put it on record today.

Stephen Twigg: I thank the hon. Lady, who is an assiduous member of the International Development Committee. I do indeed recall that her focus was very much on needing to see the independent investigation first, and that was why she voted in the way she did. However, we all agreed across the Committee that there should be an independent international investigation, and that, indeed, featured in our first report as well as the second.

Let me now focus on the proposal for an investigation that is independent and international. In May 2015, at the beginning of the conflict, Human Rights Watch accused the Houthi rebels of violations of international law in the southern seaport city of Aden; the crimes highlighted included the killing of civilians and the arrest of aid workers at gunpoint. Since then the Houthis have been accused of a range of other violations of international humanitarian law, such as the prevention of the import of basic commodities, as well as medicine, propane, and oxygen cylinders, into the besieged city of Taiz.

A United Nations expert panel has documented 185 alleged abuses. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) reminded us, Médecins sans Frontières, which often works in the most difficult and challenging humanitarian situations, suffered attacks on three hospitals in three months. In September 2016, the Yemen Data Project reported that one third of all Saudi-led raids on Yemen have hit civilian sites, and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has estimated that 66% of all civilian deaths in Yemen have been caused by Saudi-led air strikes.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I agree with my hon. Friend and concur with his point, but the UN panel also said that the problem facing the Saudi coalition and the Gulf Co-operation Council countries was that the Houthi rebels are operating in urban areas and against international law; they are effectively using civilians as human shields. There are problems with Saudi air strikes—they are killing civilians—but that point helps provide a more balanced picture of how this is occurring.

Stephen Twigg: Yes, indeed. I was seeking to be absolutely balanced in making the point that very serious allegations have been made against the Houthis, and I
gave just two examples—one from Aden and one from Taiz—but I reiterate the point of the UN panel that there have been 185 alleged abuses. I very deliberately say alleged abuses; that is why this motion argues for an independent investigation into all of those alleged abuses.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am concerned that, as usual in these debates, we will not have enough time to answer all the questions asked, although I will do my best. I did not wish to interrupt the hon. Gentleman’s speech, from which the House is learning a lot, and I hope he will concede that we take every report seriously, but the panel of experts that put the report together did not actually visit the country. We need to take account of that context when monitoring and understanding what is going on. I am not saying that we should ignore the report, but it is being used here today as if somehow we should add value to it. They did not enter the country; they were not able to provide the necessary intelligence that we would expect from a panel of UN experts.

Stephen Twigg: Surely they did not enter the country because of the challenges that I have been describing; they did not willfully decide, “We’re not going to bother going”, and just come up with the figure of 185. This was based on serious research and work done by the United Nations and I am disappointed that the Minister is so dismissive of that.

Mr Ellwood: This is important, because the lines “There are 105” or “There are over 100” do get used. The Ministry of Defence has looked at every single one of the allegations, and we have asked for more information on a number of them. I am sorry to labour the point, but to offer clarification and give information to the House, the assessment was made by aerial photography with months in between, and therefore we cannot ascertain what has happened unless we have more information as to whether these acts of atrocity were caused by the Houthis or the coalition. That is the point I am trying to make.

Stephen Twigg: I agree with that, and that is precisely why the motion says we should have a fully independent international investigation into all allegations against “both sides”. It may well be that some of these violations have been committed by the Houthis. I did not say that there were 105 alleged abuses by the Saudi-led coalition; there are alleged abuses by it, and there are alleged abuses by the Houthis as well.

Graham Jones: I should say in support of my hon. Friend that the UN panel was blocked from entering the country by the Houthis. The panel explains that in the report and points out that it tried everything to get in. Furthermore, the Houthis also blocked the peace negotiators from leaving Sana’a to go to Geneva for the peace talks. So the Houthis have been complicit in creating this problem of evidence.

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have heard nobody in all the debates in the International Development Committee and other Committees of the House in any sense suggest that the Houthis are not to blame, and that is why the proposal is that we should have an investigation into abuses by both sides in this conflict.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Perhaps my hon. Friend is going to come on to this, but our discussion seems to be being conducted on the basis of the Saudi-led coalition versus the Houthis. Does this not miss the very unhelpful, and indeed sinister, role played by the Iranians, particularly in providing conventional weaponry? Without going into all the data, I would suspect that many more people have been killed, injured and dispossessed by the use of conventional weaponry, of which there is a steady pipeline coming into Yemen from Iran, than they have by air action.

Stephen Twigg: I have already mentioned the role of Iran in supporting the Houthis, and any independent international UN-led investigation would certainly address the issue of Iranian involvement, but I reiterate the point that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has estimated that two thirds of all the civilian deaths in Yemen have been caused by the Saudi-led coalition.

Stephen Doughty: Surely one of the reasons that we need a full and independent investigation is that we are not clear about what has been assessed, and by whom. The Saudis have not produced reports through the joint incidents assessment team on the vast majority of the allegations, whether they are correct or not, and we are not clear about what this Government have assessed. Indeed, they have changed their position a number of times on the question of whether they have made an assessment or not. This has involved providing corrections to the House, in which it was revealed that they made mistakes in the evidence that they provided to us.

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I thank him for his comments because they enable me to move on to the question of the timeline—

Graham Jones: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Stephen Twigg: I will not give way now, because I want to move on to talk about the timeline of the Government’s response on this matter.

The United Nations Human Rights Council discussed Yemen in September 2015. The Government of the Netherlands tabled a motion to the Human Rights Council that would have mandated what today’s motion is proposing. That motion, tabled 16 months ago, would have set up a UN mission to document violations by all sides in the conflict since it began. The Netherlands withdrew the draft on 30 September 2015, and instead the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution tabled by Arab states which deleted calls for an independent inquiry.

On 24 November 2015, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who is in his place today, told this House that Saudi Arabia was investigating reported allegations of violation of international humanitarian law. He said:

“These investigations must be completed... The situation on the ground is very difficult and, in many cases, we are unable to have access to verify what has happened... We have been wanting to encourage Saudi Arabia and other parties that are involved...
[Stephen Twigg]

we want these cases looked into efficiently and properly by the country itself.”—[Official Report, 24 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1184-5.]

That was 14 months ago.

On 3 February last year—almost a year ago—during Department for International Development questions, the former DFID Minister, the right hon. Member for New Forest West, said:

“We have supported the UN Human Rights Council resolution that requires the Government of Yemen to investigate those matters”.—[Official Report, 3 February 2016; Vol. 605, c. 907.]

He said that the Government of Yemen should investigate alleged violations of international humanitarian law that were happening during the conflict. The following day, during a Back-Bench business debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East said again that he had raised the issue of an investigation directly with the Government of Saudi Arabia. That was almost a year ago.

Then the International Development Committee conducted its first inquiry, and on 8 July last year, the Government published their response to our report. Their response stated:

“The UK Government is not opposing calls for an international independent investigation into the alleged breaches of IHL but, first and foremost, we want to see the Saudi Arabian Government investigate allegations of breaches of IHL which are attributed to them”.

That was six months ago. In August last year, following the ministerial corrections to which my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth referred, I wrote to the Foreign Secretary regarding the corrections to parliamentary questions and Westminster Hall debates relating to allegations of violations of IHL. The Foreign Office’s response in August reiterated what had been said in response to our inquiry—namely, that the Saudis should be the ones to investigate first and foremost.

Last September, during a debate on an urgent question tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East said that Saudi Arabia had to conduct thorough and conclusive investigations into incidents where breaches of IHL had been alleged. He praised the fact that Saudi Arabia had released the results of eight reports in the previous month. That was four months ago. Then in October, during an Adjournment debate led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border, who is in his place today, reiterated that Saudi Arabia needed to be the party that investigated violations. He stated that the Government were

“very clear that the investigation needs to be led, in the first instance, by the Saudi Government”.—[Official Report, 18 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 782.]

So, over the past 14 months, the Government have repeatedly been asked about Saudi Arabia’s own investigations. To my knowledge—the Minister might be able to update us today—Saudi Arabia has produced nine reports on violations, even though there have been many more allegations made. Progress on this matter has been glacial, and I find it remarkable that the Government are still holding the line that Saudi Arabia must take responsibility for investigating its own alleged violations.

Mr Ellwood: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for interrupting him again, but I think it will be helpful if I provide further clarity as he develops his argument. First, on the Human Rights Council and the formation of texts, there is the question of consensus, as we have seen more recently in relation to UN Security Council resolution 2334. He knows this from his own experience: it is consensus that eventually leads to the creation of a text that is agreed by everyone so that it can actually pass. I hope that he recognises that fact. My second point—just to test your patience, Madam Speaker—is that I agree absolutely that the production of these reports has been far too slow. The reason for that is that we are dealing with a country that has never written a report like this in its life and it is having to learn the hard way how to show the transparency that the international community expects.

Stephen Twigg: I thank the Minister for those points of clarification, which I understand and appreciate. Of course I recognise the way in which United Nations bodies, including the Human Rights Council and the Security Council, operate. The point that I was seeking to make is that the original text from the Netherlands would have enabled the independent investigation to begin more than a year ago. Because of the diplomacy involved—I accept some of the realities of that—that did not happen. My argument today is that that has been a missed opportunity and that we could have started on this path at a much earlier stage.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): The process is slow because Saudi Arabia is a fledgling state. It is still a very young state that is not used to this level of scrutiny and transparency, and it will therefore take a long time for these reports to come out.

Stephen Twigg: The hon. Lady anticipates my final remarks. She used the word “slow”, as did the Minister. I have used the word “glacial”. The process is too slow, and I look forward to hearing the Minister tell us at what point the British Government will take the view that we need to move to an independent inquiry. I quoted the Government saying six months ago that they were not opposed to calls for an independent international inquiry but that first and foremost they wanted to see the Saudi Arabian Government carry out their own investigation. This situation has pertained for 14 months. How much longer do we have to wait before we can move to an independent investigation?

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the Ministry of Defence has delivered two training sessions in Saudi Arabia on the process of investigating alleged violations of international humanitarian law? I hope, as I am sure he does, that the MOD will have underlined the importance of dealing with these matters in an expedited manner.

Stephen Twigg: Absolutely, and I am sure that the Minister will have more to say on that when he speaks later. If it was the purpose of those sessions to remind
all parties concerned that they have obligations under international humanitarian law, it is vital that those obligations should be fulfilled quickly.

The view taken by the International Development Committee and other Select Committees of this House was that we would only get the full investigation that we need if it was completely independent. It is now long overdue for us as a country to move to support a fully independent international investigation. It is simply not acceptable for us to wait indefinitely for the Saudi Arabians to conduct their own investigations while people are still dying in this conflict.

**Graham Jones:** Morocco has 15 jets, Jordan has 15 jets, Kuwait has 15 jets, Bahrain has 15 jets, Qatar has 10 jets, the United Arab Emirates have 30 jets and Sudan has 15 jets. This is not just about Saudi Arabia; it involves the Gulf Co-operation Council and the Arab League as well. Will all those countries be involved in the inquiry?

**Stephen Twigg:** As I have made clear throughout every intervention that I have taken, the inquiry would cover all allegations made against any party to the conflict, but it is quite clear that the Saudis lead the coalition and their alleged violations will be investigated.

**Graham Jones:** Who dropped the bombs then? What do the allegations say about who carried out the air strikes and dropped the bombs?

**Stephen Twigg:** They say it was predominantly Saudi Arabia. There is little doubt that the Saudis have the predominant air power. But of course it is not only about the alleged violations involving air power; it is about all the alleged violations by all sides, including shelling by the Houthis, which must be investigated. That is the purpose of saying today that we want to see an independent international investigation.

I finish by saying that the motion enables the House to come together and to put to one side our different points of view on the question of UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia and others—the motion is not about that. I reiterate that, although the International Development Committee and the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee took one view on arms sales and the Foreign Affairs Committee took another, all three Committees took the view that we should have an independent, UN-led international investigation. This debate provides Members on both sides of the House with an opportunity to send a clear message to the Government and the wider international community that we want to see urgent and immediate progress to enable a fully independent investigation to take place.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Before I call the next speaker, it will be obvious to the House that a great many people wish to speak this afternoon and that there is limited time. I would like to try not to impose a time limit, because the debate flows better if we do not have a time limit. I trust hon. Members to behave courteously to their colleagues by speaking for around seven minutes. If lots of people speak for considerably longer than that, we will have a time limit, which will be unfair to some people. I know that I can trust Alistair Burt to begin.

12.41 pm

**Alistair Burt (North East Bed fordshire) (Con):** I much appreciate your introduction, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), the Chair of the International Development Committee, and his colleagues on both Committees for their thorough report. I also thank him for the way he introduced this difficult and complex situation. I also welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), and the Minister of State, Department for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart). We will listen carefully to their responses.

I was Minister with responsibility for the middle east between 2010 and 2013, and I also had departmental responsibility for arms control, so I have some background and feel for these difficult and complex issues. I do not want to spend a huge amount of time on the humanitarian statistics, simply because we are well aware of them—the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby got the statistics into the public domain quite effectively. I thank the Library of the House of Commons for producing yet another excellent background briefing. I am sure we all also want to thank Stephen O’Brien for his remarkable work through the UN relief agencies. To put one quotation in Hansard, he said of the recent attack on a funeral:

“This attack took place against the backdrop of a desperately worsening humanitarian situation across Yemen, with four out of every five of Yemen’s 28 million people in real and immediate need of assistance.

I was in Sana’a only last week and saw the relentless heart-breaking situation for myself: medical facilities with no medicines to treat basic conditions; parents struggling to put food in the mouths of their children even once a day; and entire communities terrifyingly affected by conflict and without access to basic services or livelihoods.”

The issue before us, as always, is not simply the relief of humanitarian pressures. We can do more on that, but it does not solve the problem.

I will talk about the elements of the motion that address the conflict, the impact on civilians and how the conflict can be resolved, because that is the most important thing. If the humanitarian crisis is to be ended, it will not be through more aid but through an end to the conflict.

I am exceptionally fond of Yemen. My visits between 2010 and 2013 introduced me to some of the country’s leaders, whose despair as events evolved was obvious. In 2011, I met some of the young people and women in the squares of Sana’a who helped to start changing the country. Things have not gone well, and the people of Yemen have been betrayed once again by those in their country who have responsibility for them, but I hope the spark of reform that was there with the youth and the women is not lost in the Yemen of the future. I hope that the political settlement, which will eventually come, includes those who were not included in the past—those people have a role to play.
We have this conflict because of that past betrayal, because of the manipulation by Ali Abdullah Saleh of all sides in the various conflicts over a lengthy time, because aid money that went into the country was used for the wrong purposes, and because there was a failure of governance and a failure in the process to deal with internal grievances, including those of the Houthis. All that led to a situation where it suits some to continue the conflict internally, but the cost is borne by the people of Yemen. It is essential that we recognise and understand that.

From the outside, it is understandable that we focus on the humanitarian crisis and that, to a degree, we focus overmuch on the role of Saudi Arabia—I will come to that in a second—but it is essential to recognise that, if we want to make a difference, we have to look at and understand why the conflict has persisted as long as it has. The conflict exists on the back of the civil strife that has been going on in Yemen for a long time. It exists because Yemen is genuinely important. Yemen matters, and this should not be a forgotten war in a forgotten country.

First, in a basic human sense, Yemen is a country of art, culture and music. It is a country of gentle people who have given a great deal to the world, and it is terrible that in our time we associate Yemen with conflict. Secondly, Yemen overlooks important sea lanes, and the Houthis have already attacked ships in the area. Thirdly, Yemen is ungoverned space. It matters to us if there is instability in the region. Yemen may be a faraway place of which many people know not very much, but it matters. Accordingly, Yemen’s location and the ability of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to exploit that ungoverned space mean that AQAP’s ability to direct attacks towards us and others in the west has increasingly become a matter of concern and importance for us. None of us in this House needs further information on the general instability in the region.

Understanding all that gives us an understanding of why the coalition came together, of why there is a UN resolution and of why the United Kingdom has an involvement. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is directly affected by instability in Yemen. It can be, and has been, physically attacked. Between 2015 and 2016, some 37 ballistic missiles were fired by Houthi rebels towards Saudi Arabia, inflicting damage. It is important that that is known, because sometimes the conflict is considered purely to be an internal issue in Yemen. The Houthis are sometimes not considered to be well armed, or anything else, but they are.

Graham Jones: The missiles supplied by North Korea in the 1990s, Scud-Bs, have a range of 300 to 500 km and are being shot down by Patriot defence missile systems procured by Saudi Arabia from the United States.

Alistair Burt: As the hon. Gentleman indicates, there are serious armaments in the area, which causes concern to all sides. That is a reason why the coalition is there, and I maintain that it is in the United Kingdom’s interest to continue supporting the coalition, to continue supporting the partners in the coalition and to recognise what is being challenged in Yemen—it is not only the loss of the democratically supported Government of President Hadi but, as has already been mentioned, the degree of Iranian influence. The Iranians have said publicly that they see Sana’a as yet another capital that they hold, and the risk and danger of that is that Iran is a regime with a clear intent to destabilise the region, to use terrorism to do so and to threaten stability in other areas. The consequence of that, not only in an unstable region but for those outside, is that the degree of risk to the United Kingdom and others has increased. Accordingly, it is not in the United Kingdom’s interests if the outcome of the conflict is that the Iranians are successful and terrorism is successful.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): The hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) mentioned the fewer than 20 Scud strikes, which should be deplored, but coalition air forces are engaging in 150 air strikes, and more, a day. There is a disproportionality here that everyone in this House should recognise.

Alistair Burt: It is very easy for us on these comfortable Benches here in Westminster to talk about disproportionality in a conflict far away. My point is that the United Kingdom has focused on the activities of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia without truly understanding why it is engaged, why the coalition is there and why the United Kingdom has an interest. I simply want to put that on the record. That is not, in any way, to minimise the reason and need for humanitarian law to be respected and for the activities of those who engage in warfare to conduct it according to the rules, but it does raise the rarely made argument about why on earth we are engaged in this and why the outcome matters to the United Kingdom.

Stephen Twigg: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Alistair Burt: I will just this once, as I am running short of time.

Stephen Twigg: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I have enormous respect for him and his experience, and I am listening carefully to what he has to say. For me, the crucial issue is respect for international humanitarian law. What is his answer to the point I raised: at what point would it be right to look at these matters independently, rather than leaving it to the Saudis to lead the investigation?

Alistair Burt: That point comes when the United Kingdom Government are not satisfied that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can fulfil its obligations, but I do not believe that position has been reached. I am sure the Minister will talk about the nature of our engagement with Saudi Arabia and how, as he says, it affects a group of states, through the Gulf Co-operation Council, that are engaged in a conflict in a manner they have not been before. There is an important point here: if we want and expect people in other parts of the world to be responsible for their own defence and security, they are going to have to get on with it and they are learning some of the processes. That is happening at the moment.

Secondly, on the nature of our engagement, I refer all colleagues to the very good report by the BBC’s Frank Gardner just before Christmas that is on the BBC
website. Most of us recognise that Frank Gardner is a pretty independent voice, and he has looked at the nature of engagement. The openness of the Saudi authorities in dealing with him and explaining what they do, and the openness of the Saudi Foreign Minister in coming to this House, with any Member of this Chamber having access to talk about these issues and question in a manner not done before, is an important step forward. We know that everything is by no means perfect or clear, but the steps that have been taken by the British Government to encourage full disclosure have been important.

I must close on this next point, because Madam Deputy Speaker was very generous. We are beginning to learn that the importance of ending a conflict is paramount to the people who are affected by it, but there are good outcomes and less than good outcomes. Sometimes unless we are involved we can see outcomes to conflict that are not in our long-term interest and not in the interest of stability in the area. That is why we should continue to support our allies, who are working through the Gulf coalition. We should continue to be engaged fully with them, but recognise that our interests lie in a situation that does not create a terrorist cell in Sana’a and does not result in a Hezbollah-type operation active in Yemen. We must recognise that those states that oppose such situations are right to consider that their long-term stability and ours is best satisfied by a solution that ends the conflict, and puts in place a democratic Government supported by Yemenis and a Yemeni political process, not the outside interference of Iran.

The right hon. Gentleman describes Yemen as the “forgotten war”. I am extremely proud of being a Member of this House, because what has been clear over the past few months is that Yemen is not the forgotten war in this House. At Foreign Office questions on Tuesday, 48 hours ago, 26 minutes of the 45 available were dedicated to some aspect of the situation in Yemen. Along with members of the all-party group on Yemen, which I have chaired for 26 years—almost as long as President Saleh was President of Yemen—recognise that the right hon. Gentleman has always been, both in government and out of it, very aware of the importance of this beautiful country. We are very aware of his personal concern that it is being hurt and it is suffering every single day.

12.52 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): If anyone should be allowed to exceed their six minutes, it is the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who is worth all the minutes he speaks about this important subject. Those who have been in the all-party group on Yemen, which I have chaired for 26 years—almost as long as President Saleh was President of Yemen—recognise that the right hon. Gentleman has always been, both in government and out of it, very aware of the importance of this beautiful country. We are very aware of his personal concern that it is being hurt and it is suffering every single day.

I want to confine my remarks to the urgency and importance of a ceasefire. I welcome what the shadow Foreign Secretary said at Foreign Office questions on Tuesday and the focus of those on the Opposition Front Bench, which is also the focus of the Government. I hate it when we fight over Yemen, be it on party lines, or about the role of Saudi Arabia or what is happening as far as the investigations are concerned. We clearly need investigations, as the motion suggests. I desperately want us to unite behind one concept: the importance of the ceasefire.

A few weeks ago, I was at the UN Security Council. Because of the ability of Matthew Rycroft to get parliamentarians in, I was able, after 30 years in this House, to watch my first live session of the Security Council. Every one of its members wanted to do something in support of a ceasefire—this was unanimous and included all the permanent members. Of course they had little digs at each other and at this country for our role, but the most important thing was that all the countries spoke with one voice. That is why it is so important that the draft resolution, which is really our resolution because we are the penholders, should be tabled before the UN as a matter of urgency. I know that the Minister told the shadow Minister that we table resolutions only when we know they are going to be implemented. I do not have the figures on how many of the UN’s resolutions have actually been implemented, but I know it has got up to about 2,500. The fact is that we need that resolution, because the best way to guarantee that people are focusing on the peace process and a ceasefire is if the UN speaks with one voice. That is why I seek a timetable from the Government today: a timetable to ensure that we get that resolution before the Security Council.

I was delighted by the ceasefire brokered on Syria, where the Russians and the Turks were able to make sure that we had peace in Syria. I know it is a bit wobbly, but it was followed by the UN endorsing that ceasefire. If we can get this in Syria, why can we not have it in Yemen? I am very pleased with the role the Foreign Secretary has played and the honesty with which he has spoken about Yemen. If we take him at his word, the British Foreign Secretary will be working with the new US Secretary of State and with the Russians, who are now the friends of the Americans—or will be
after 20 January. The Chinese will go along with the ceasefire—I met the Chinese ambassador recently and asked whether China would support it and he said it would—and the French are on board. As the five permanent members are going to be on board and the other countries are so supportive, I think we can get this through. Will the Minister therefore tell us when that timetable is going to be achieved?

My final point is about the aid agencies. The Chairman of the International Development Committee read out the scoreboard of shame: the 3.3 million women and children who are malnourished; the 370,000 children who are in immediate risk of starvation; the 7 million who do not know where their next meal is coming from; the 10 million who have no access to safe drinking water; and the fact that four fifths of the entire population—21 million, which is equivalent to the populations of London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Glasgow combined—are in desperate need of urgent assistance. These incredible organisations, ranging from Médecins sans Frontières to Islamic Relief, the World Federation of Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Muslim Communities, Oxfam, Save the Children, the Disasters Emergency Committee, are all trying to get the aid in. The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), another person who knows about Yemen so well, from when he served there, was right to ask: where is the aid going? The aid cannot get in effectively unless the planes land at Sana’a airport and unless the ports are able to accept it. We have to have a ceasefire.

If I am to have a new year’s resolution, and if the House can have a collective new year’s resolution, it should be that by 31 December we will have peace in Yemen and a proper political solution. Until we get that, Members of this House will continue to raise this subject, so that the forgotten war is never forgotten and we can bring peace to what is a beautiful, beautiful country.

1 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) just raised a very good prospect for 2017: peace in Yemen. Would that not be wonderful?

The south-east tip of the Arabian peninsula has been important to us for at least 200 years. The area was crucial to the functioning of the British empire, particularly after 1869, when the Suez canal opened and the route to India was much shortened. When oil came to replace coal, Aden became even more important, and British Petroleum set up refineries there. Time passed and the Aden protectorate became part of our empire. Indeed, the British Government had to rule it through 23 sheikdoms or tribal areas that were not great friends of one another. That remains the case to this day. We cannot just think of them as the Houthis or something; they are all different tribes, which is the problem.

This is where I come in. In the ’50s, the right hon. Gentleman and his sister, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), were born when I was in Aden—

Keith Vaz: We are not related to you, by the way.

Bob Stewart: I understand that the right hon. Gentleman was born there, although his sister might not have been. I definitely was not born there: I was a little boy there, as my father was a soldier with the Aden Protectorate Levies.

Keith Vaz: The worst thing about my having intervened from a sedentary position is that the hon. Gentleman did not hear what I said. My sister and I were both born there, it is just that he said that we were born when he arrived in Aden, and I was making the point that the two events were not connected. [Laughter.]

Bob Stewart: Thank God for that, Madam Deputy Speaker.

My interest in Aden comes from my time there as a little boy. I loved the place: it was a great place to grow up between 1954 and 1957. What a fabulous place to be—if one was on the right side, of course. Since 1990, Yemen has gone from bad to worse. It has essentially become some sort of cockpit that some say is an area of fighting between the two branches of Islam. That may well be the case, but do not think that within that each side is homogeneous—they are not.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It does stretch credulity that the Iranian regime has defined the Houthis as part of Twelve Shi’a Islam, which they most certainly are not. That is more an indication of mischief-making than of any orthodox theological position.

Bob Stewart: Into that cockpit comes more mischief-making with the arrival of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and then the latest lot, Daesh. The poor devils who live there have had these people imposed on them. They are not native to Yemen—they are not people like the right hon. Member for Leicester East, who really should be an Adeni, or a Yemeni, if he wants to be—they are people coming in from outside. It is a great tragedy that Security Council resolution 2216, which was passed unanimously, has not had much effect. In a way, that is a disgrace on the world.

Graham Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Stewart: I give way again to a gentleman who talks such sense on this subject.

Graham Jones: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s kind words. He referred to ISIS, which is of course developing in a vacuum. The UN panel of experts identified that where that vacuum exists—with the Houthis threatening from one side and no stabilisation force, United Arab Emirates or otherwise, on the ground—Sunni people, towns and communities are turning to the black flag as a way of getting security against the Houthis, a subsect of Shi’a Islam, coming at them. They are turning to ISIS as a defence mechanism. The problem is an absence of any governance at all and people wanting to protect themselves.

Bob Stewart: As ever, it is the little people who are suffering in this war. Apparently, 7,000 people have died. To me, that chimes with the number of people killed at Srebrenica, which I was kind of involved with all those years ago. When Srebrenica occurred, the world suddenly got its backside in gear and sorted
it out. I return to my original point: let us hope that 2017 sorts this situation out. It is clear that a political solution must be had, some way or other.

First, the protagonists from both sides have to meet. They have tried, and it is very difficult, but that is the only way forward. The diplomat from Mauritius, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, seems to be respected on all sides. The first thing we require is a chairman or chairwoman who is respected, and that man is respected. Let us hope he can work it.

My second point about the steps towards resolution is that the people negotiating must be protected, because they should be able to negotiate in safety. They have had some problems in the Gulf, so perhaps they should move to Geneva, the traditional place for negotiations, if necessary.

Thirdly, there must be a ceasefire that will hold. We must recognise that although ceasefires are written down on paper, they inevitably will not hold. They will never be perfect. We should almost expect that if there is a ceasefire, it will be breached. We have to live with that.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Has the hon. Gentleman seen the text of the resolution that the British have drafted but not yet put before the Security Council? Clause 1 of that resolution calls for a ceasefire and references the UN road map. Does he agree that that might be the basis for negotiations?

Bob Stewart: I have not read it, but it sounds very sensible and logical. Everything to do with sorting out problems has to be sensible and logical.

Fourthly, I have already alluded to the fact that AQAP and Daesh are not local to the region. The one thing all the protagonist share is that they hate these people who have come in from outside. AQAP and Daesh are part of the enemy and should not be involved.

Fifthly, there should be a withdrawal of armed forces from Sana’a and other towns. It will be very difficult, and it will probably involve UN peacekeepers of some sort. I always think of the model of the British going into Rhodesia and separating people, which was good. We cannot do it; whoever the peacekeepers are, they should probably be from an Islamic state. Good military officers and good military troops should go in, if there is to be some kind of resolution. The UN will have to grip this one.

Sixthly, a political solution is obviously the objective, and I very much hope that this year we will get one. For goodness’ sake, if Yemen is a forgotten war, let us make it not forgotten, and let us then make it a forgotten war by next year because it is over.

1.8 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Unlike several Members who have already spoken, I have never been to Yemen, but last September I went to Oman. What is interesting about Oman—a country that, of course, has a border with Yemen—is that it has managed, in a very difficult situation, to stay out of the conflict. The Iranians are trying to smuggle weaponry into Yemen through Oman. Yemenis fleeing from the conflict are being treated in Omani hospitals, and there is a potential for the issue to take on a wider role. Interestingly, what is probably not widely known is that the Omanis are not Shi’a or Sunni, but Ibadi. This small group has a distinctive position in the history of Islam, but so, too, does the group that we now call the Houthis. It is quite clear that this is a regional conflict, with Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Co-Operation Council countries and north Africa countries also involved as part of the UN-mandated and UN-supported coalition. On the other side is Iran and Hezbollah, and their commanders have revealed that they, too, have lost people in Yemen.

In a sense, what we are seeing in Syria is an alliance between the Alawites, who belong to a complicated branch that is close to Shi’a-ism, and Iran, Hezbollah, and, of course, Putin’s Russia. In Yemen, we have something similar: a coalition of Sunni Governments supporting a weak Government in what has become a failed state and, on the other side, a coalition with former President Saleh meddling and refusing to accept the transition to the new Government. A political solution is probably even more difficult to achieve here than in Syria, because the United States is not in any real position to influence the outcome, whereas Russia has an influence in Syria. Potentially, that has serious ramifications. The Houthis fired missiles at United Arab Emirates’ ships. They also fired missiles at United States’ naval vessels. There is the potential for this conflict to widen. This is a regional security issue, and it is quite right that the United Nations Security Council has to engage with it.

We cannot simply say that Saudi Arabia and Iran can solve this conflict, because the internal actors are not proxies for Iran or Saudi Arabia. Therefore, crudely to say that we should condemn the British Government’s support for the Saudis or that we should condemn Iran’s support for the Houthis will not take us anywhere. Sadly, I suspect that even if there were a regional deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia and they agreed a common position on the Israel-Palestine conflict, this conflict in Yemen would still continue because of all those factors I have mentioned. Therefore, this crisis needs to be addressed with urgency and to have big international involvement. We should remember that, above all else, these people are among the very poorest in the world, and they are suffering not just warfare, but terrible poverty, partly because of mismanagement and misgovernment over many years.

1.14 pm

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): I am pleased to have secured this debate along with the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting us this opportunity.

The conflict in Yemen between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi rebels has created grave instability and danger. Amnesty International has stated that the conflict has seen “violations of international humanitarian law committed by both sides with impunity.” UN reports suggest that around 60% of airstrikes during the war have been conducted by Saudi-led forces.

The Committees on Arms Export Controls had an inquiry last year into the sale of UK arms to Saudi Arabia. It is clear to me that there is an urgent need for the Government to suspend such licences, pending the
results of an independent UN-led investigation into potential breaches of international humanitarian law. That was the position taken by the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee and the International Development Committee in the conclusion of their inquiry.

Meanwhile, the Government have repeated their view that the Saudis should be allowed to conduct their own investigations. Almost two years into the conflict, the Saudi-led joint incidents and assessment team has initiated only around 15 investigations. Saferworld estimates that the number of credible allegations to be "well over 100". Furthermore, feedback by that team is limited to press releases and press conferences, rather than comprehensive reports.

During the Defence Secretary’s statement on 19 December, I asked my right hon. Friend to outline the circumstances under which the Government would pause arms sales to Saudi Arabia, to which the response was:

“If we have evidence that international humanitarian law had been breached".—[Official Report, 19 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 1224.]

I point to the devastating twin attack on a funeral hall in Sana’a in October, killing 140 people and injuring as many as 500. According to UN reports, the attacks were minutes apart, targeting a location where it was known that senior Houthi officials were assembling among families and children.

The US has since launched a review of that attack and cancelled a sale of precision-guided munitions worth around $350 million to Saudi Arabia, citing “systemic” and “endemic” problems with Saudi targeting in Yemen. For an attack to fail to distinguish between those fighting in a conflict and civilians gives serious weight to the argument that international humanitarian law has been broken.

The UK should be an example to the world in terms of our licensing regime, our commitment to the rule of law and our responsiveness to challenges. Criterion 2(c) of our arms export licensing regime forbids the authorisation of arms sales if there is a “clear risk” of a violation of international humanitarian law. In his response today, will the Minister outline at what point that threshold is met? The evidence that the Committees of Arms Export Controls heard last year was compelling in suggesting that there is very much a “clear risk”.

I have heard arguments that if we do not supply arms, a nation with a weaker licensing regime will do so instead. I pre-empt any such point today and suggest that that is no way to approach any situation, not least the sale of weapons. We must be accountable for our own actions, particularly if we are to be an example in cementing the rule of law into our practices. Such a position does not fulfil our obligations under the criteria and the law. Unless we wish to become one of these other weaker countries, we should maintain that position.

A legal opinion in December 2015 by Matrix Chambers argues that the sale of UK arms constitutes a violation of our obligations under national, EU and international law. I also pre-empt the widely recognised point that our strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia is one that must be maintained. I absolutely agree with that position, but that does not extend to our acting as its proxy defence. We pride ourselves on our relationship with Saudi Arabia, but it must not be a mechanism to deflect criticism, and our close ties should not be used to support otherwise.

Graham Jones: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. The primary subject of the debate is the people of Yemen who are suffering. That reflects my personal feelings. The objective is clear: a ceasefire, which is the only way to relieve the situation in Yemen. Stopping arms sales to Saudi is a bogus argument.

I put this to the hon. Gentleman: you have seen the arms sales from Putin and Moscow to Assad, and you have seen the devastation in Aleppo, so I find it incredible that you can make the argument about ethical arms sales and our ethical arms sales, and then allow Saudi Arabia, using our petrol pounds, to buy arms from whoever it wants. You see from Aleppo the devastation that could be caused if they bought Russian arms. That is a ridiculous argument.

Chris White: Thank you for the final point, but I suggest that where the hon. Gentleman talks about ethics he is missing my point entirely. This is not necessarily about ethics; it is about the rule of law and the criteria for our arms export licensing.

Seema Kennedy: My hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. I would echo the comments made by my Lancashire neighbour, the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones). On the relationship with Saudi, does my hon. Friend not recognise that, through the good offices of Ministers such as the Minister who is in his place the behaviour of Saudi has changed? For example, it now accepts that it will no longer use cluster bombs.

Chris White: I will answer briefly by saying that the Government had already been in discussions with Saudi Arabia regarding cluster munitions—in 2010—but I do not think that the Saudi Arabian Government took a terribly large amount of notice of our Government’s persuasion until after the events when those munitions were identified.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman, the Chair of the Committee, is making a strong speech. Members on both sides of the House and Governments of both parties led the world in arguing for the arms trade treaty, including the previous Labour Government, who put the process in place, and indeed the other arms export control criteria, so that we have a rules-based system for our defence industry to operate within and one that adheres to humanitarian principles. Does he agree that that wider principle will be at stake if we do not adhere to it?

Chris White: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris White: I am sorry, but I am probably getting well past the Deputy Speaker’s patience.

To return to the statement made by the Secretary of State for Defence on 19 December and to the specific question raised by the hon. Member for Hyndburn, we learned the Government’s finding that British made cluster munitions had been used by the Saudi-led coalition
in May 2016. That has a number of implications and is a cause for concern, and I challenge the Minister on the responsiveness of our arms exports licensing regime. It is unacceptable that an international ally used a weapon manufactured in Britain with complete disregard for the 2008 convention on cluster munitions, of which the UK is a signatory.

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris White: I will continue; my apologies. We will see. If I get a strange look, I might give way shortly.

We are duty bound by the 2008 convention to prevent the use of cluster munitions, so what steps were taken to convince the Saudis of our opposition to the use of such munitions and to convince them to decommission those weapons? I recognise that the Government have not sold cluster munitions to Saudi Arabia since 1989, but it is important to consider the durability of our munitions.

Dr Monaghan: We know that the UK Government stopped supplying cluster munitions to Saudi Arabia in 1989. However, we also know that the UK Government continued to maintain those horrific weapons until 2010. No doubt, the Minister will tell us why that contract was in place for 21 years, but does the hon. Gentleman not agree that the crucial point is that accountability should extend beyond simply sales to maintenance contracts?

Chris White: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it will be interesting to hear the Minister’s response to that intervention.

The humanitarian crisis requires an urgent and comprehensive response from the international community. Everyone in the Chamber agrees with that. As each month goes by and casualties grow, the case for an independent, UN-led investigation of potential breaches becomes all the more compelling. From a UK perspective, and to protect our reputation as an example to the world in arms export licensing, it is right that we suspend our sale of arms to Saudi Arabia until such an investigation is completed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I should remind the House of something. A few hon. Gentleman this afternoon have used the word “you” when, really, they meant “one”, or they should have said “the hon. Gentleman” or “the hon. Lady”. I have not interrupted people because I do not wish to spoil the flow of their arguments, but it must be noted that that is inappropriate use of language, and the debate works much better if we keep it in the third person.

1.25 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Yemen is one of the oldest civilisations in the Gulf, yet a unified Yemeni state was not formed until 1990. The BBC gives an excellent timeline on that, and I urge Members to look at it. Yemen has a history of war, assassinations, and political, civil and internal conflict, with earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and landslides thrown in. Its history is a toll of misery in many respects.

In 1992, along came al-Qaeda. We heard little of al-Qaeda initially, but following the attack in 2000 on the USS Cole, violence grew from al-Qaeda. In 2009, Saudi and Yemeni branches merged to form al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and the death toll has risen yearly. The northern-based Houthis, or Partisans of God, insurgency against the majority Sunni Yemeni Government started to grow in 2004. Houthis adhere to a branch of Shi’a Islam, and I appreciate that it is a branch.

Ex-President Saleh became President of North Yemen in 1978, and President of Yemen, following unification with the south, in 1990. He was forced to leave office in 2012, since when he has fought alongside the Houthis insurgents to control Yemen. In February 2015, a panel of UN experts released a report alleging that, during his time in power, Saleh amassed a fortune worth between $30 billion and $62 billion. The report claims that the assets—including gold, cash, property and other commodities—are held under various names in at least 20 countries.

In 2012, President Hadi was inaugurated, but he fled to Aden in 2015, as the Houthis took over large parts of the country. President Hadi is supported by the Gulf Co-operation Council—the military alliance that is often referred to as being led by Saudi Arabia.

In April 2015, the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo on Yemen’s Houthi rebels and allies, including former President Ali Saleh and his son. That arms embargo has been broken many times by the Iranians.

The 2016 global terrorism index lists Yemen as the country facing the sixth highest level of terrorism in the world. Of the 20 most fatal terrorist attacks in 2015, two were in Yemen—carried out by Houthi extremists. In 2015, 1,591 Yemenis were killed in terrorist attacks. Three groups carried out 90% of the attacks: the Houthis, AQAP and a new group, the IS affiliates. The Houthis still claimed responsibility for 63% of deaths and 62% of the attacks, the majority of which were against private citizens and property.

There is no doubt that violence has engulfed Yemen. That country has a history of conflict and tensions between its regions, and its ethnic and religious groups. Its leadership has a history of failing the ordinary people of Yemen. It is naive to suggest that Yemen is not also a proxy battle for dominance between Sunni and Shi’a powers drawing in wealthier and more powerful regional countries. The Houthis have also launched attacks on their neighbour, Saudi Arabia. I will not repeat all the information we have heard about the famine, disease and death tolls that result from the conflict, but this disastrous situation has reached a stalemate. Ceasefires and peace deals have been made and broken, and no side seems to see a real interest in reaching and maintaining a settlement.

In a region where the headlines so often include the horrific barrel bombing of civilians in Aleppo, a rising tide of refugees, murder, rape, and the torture of followers of differing religious groups, the warring parties in the Yemeni conflict have no real impetus in getting behind peace initiatives. I appreciate that the UN special envoy has worked hard. There is little in the motion before us that I think anyone in this House would not support, but I will talk about where we should be going because I am not going to get into a tit-for-tat argument about
whether the Saudis are the main problem or whether the coalition is the problem. The problem is that we do not have a clear road map to resolve the conflict.

I have looked at what I think is a very good report from Chatham House, which is one of the UK’s best independent think-tanks and can be trusted to take an impartial view. Its report points out that “the conflict is in fact multipolar, fuelled by regional and international support for the various parties involved in the fighting. There is broad consensus among international policy-makers that the only way the conflict can be brought to a sustainable end is through political mediation.”

Tensions are rife not only between the two warring factions—the two ex-Presidents—and we need to tackle those because the groups are also deeply divided. Whether we come down on the side of the Houthis or on the other side, an ongoing civil war will still ultimately emerge. We need a peace process that is more inclusive. I wish we would all listen much more to the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who happens to be, in my view, one of the great experts on the region. We need to move away from prioritising elite-level mediation and security concerns, particularly counter-terrorism initiatives, to look at the economic needs of the population.

The Chatham House report also states: “The new political process will need to give equal weight to bottom-up, grassroots local approaches to peacebuilding alongside top-down, national and elite-level interests; and ensure that the political, security and economic tracks of the transition are interlinked rather than dealt with separately. Failure to expand...”

There are many reasons why we in the UK need to pay great attention to what is happening in Yemen. Yemen sits on the Bab al-Mandab strait, a narrow waterway linking the Red sea with the Gulf of Aden, through which most of the world’s oil and trade traverse on a daily basis. Security and stability in the straits is vital to the whole world’s economies and whoever controls the straits has a potential stranglehold on those economies.

The situation is a matter of urgent attention for the world. In my view, it is only the United Nations that can speak on behalf of the world, so it is to the UN that we must turn. It is the UN’s responsibility to take that bottom-up, rather than top-down, approach. A coalition of support for the people of Yemen is where we must give our support. Rather than dividing the issue into attacks on Saudi Arabia or attacks on Iran, let us focus on the peace needs of the people of Yemen.

1.35 pm

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Colleagues have used the phrase “forgotten war” a number of times during the debate, so I pay tribute to many hon. Members on both sides of the House who keep bringing the issue of Yemen back to the Chamber to ensure that it is not forgotten.

There is an acute humanitarian crisis. I do not want to go over those details again, as many hon. and right hon. Members who have spent time in Yemen have detailed that. However, I would like to put on the record my thanks—and, I think, the thanks of us all—for the Government’s great contribution to helping the Yemenis, including the £100 million of Department for International Development money that has been spent. [Interruption.] I cannot, unfortunately, hear the sedentary interventions. I am proud that we have made our 0.7% commitment. It says a lot about this Government, the previous coalition Government and our commitment to being an outward-looking global nation, which is very important, particularly after the referendum result.

We are all here to discuss stability and peace in Yemen. That is our aim and it is what is right for the people of Yemen. However, I would argue that it is greatly in the interests of all our constituents as well. We have seen that terrorist organisations thrive in war zones and failed states. There was Afghanistan. Then it was Syria, where Daesh grew. Now that it cannot get a foothold in Syria, it is moving over into Turkey. We are providing people who want to kill our constituents with a training ground, so the stability of the state of Yemen can only be in the best interests of our constituents.

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady. She is making a very important point. Does she share my disappointment that there continues to be a small—I am glad to say that it is only small—number of Members in the House who continue to say that we should scrap all the aid budgets and scrap DFID? It is actually very much in our national security interests and in the interests of the people who are suffering in those countries that we continue to provide funding.

Seema Kennedy: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman and I can see a little bit of cross-party love coming through. I do not think he will agree with the rest of my speech, but we totally agree on this point.

The conflict is having a profound effect, of course, on the people of Yemen, but it is having a wider effect on Saudi Arabia, which is suffering from the effects of migration, disease and terrorism on its borders. As I said in my intervention, Saudi Arabia is a state that has existed only for decades, to which its people might say, “Well, as a Persian, of course you’d say that.” It is in a state of transition. We have heard that some of its leaders are starting projects to think about how it will move towards further democracy and have more representation from women and other groups. As an ally, we should support the state in that and we should support its Government.

I was heartened when the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister came to speak to hon. Members before Christmas. He was open about recognising that there is a great challenge for his country, because we do not want a situation where Jeddah and Riyadh are controlled by Daesh or al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

The war is legal, but we can argue about how effective President Hadi is as the leader in Yemen. My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) and I differ on the role of selling armaments to Saudi Arabia, and I would echo some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) on that. One must understand that relationships take a long time to build up in the middle east and they are reliant on trust, so we must keep talking to people. Historical relationships through trade and diplomacy take an awfully long time to build.
Graham Jones: Has the hon. Lady seen that the European Council on Foreign Relations has said that it is absolutely vital that Europe and the EU post-Trump keep a good relationship with the GCC and the Arab League in relation to Security Council resolution 2216 and the intervention in Yemen? If we are to resolve this problem, we have to see that it is about building relationships, not destroying relationships, as the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) wants to do.

Seema Kennedy: I agree: it is about relationships, and it is about influence and guidance.

What is written in the law about arms export control—my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) was instrumental in overseeing that when he was the Minister responsible—is very important. We need to do those things, and all arms exported to anybody go through a rigorous process. The coalition fighting in Yemen, which is led by Saudi Arabia but includes other Arab countries, is defending its borders and its interests.

Since what happened in the early 2000s, we have heard that we want to get out of the middle east and that countries there need to be self-sustaining, independent and more democratic.

Mrs Moon: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Seema Kennedy: I just need to finish this point before I lose my train of thought.

We need to allow those countries to do that, with the guidance that one would expect from an ally and a friend. Having our personnel there explaining compliance with international humanitarian law and explaining targeting is very important. I do not really like saying what my Labour neighbour, the hon. Member for Hyndburn, is saying, but if we are not in there, who do we really think will be there doing these things? This relationship is fundamental in terms of trade, security and the intelligence and co-operation we get.

George Kerevan: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Seema Kennedy: I am not going to speak for longer, because there are more expert voices in this House. I thank the hon. Members who are here today to speak in the debate, but all of us must really think about what we are talking about and whether it will actually protect Yemenis in the long run.

1.41 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Brexit aside, I feel as though this House has spent more time on Yemen than on most other issues. That is not a complaint—I would spend as long as I could debating the disastrous situation facing people in Yemen. Sadly, the evidence is that this Government are not entirely listening.

The misleading of the British people and the international community over Saudi Arabia’s intervention in Yemen and its use of cluster weapons, in particular, is a blot on the record of current and former members of the Government. Ministers stuck to their stock phrases of denial, denial, denial, before the Defence Secretary was chosen to open the worst possible Christmas present and reveal that Ministers had, indeed, misled the House on a number of occasions. I wonder what the likelihood is of any such Minister facing sanctions for their part in that cover-up. Call me cynical, but I am not holding my breath. Perhaps the Ministers concerned were, to quote something the Minister said earlier this week, “inadvertently disingenuously” misleading the House, although I am sure that was not the case.

At least none of the Ministers was quite so misleading as the spokesman for the Saudi coalition, Major General Asseri, who claimed that Saudi Arabia’s British cluster bombs were obsolete and had been destroyed. In fact, he went further and declared that Saudi Arabia’s Tornado strike aircraft were not configured to drop the weapons. Now that our Defence Secretary has admitted that British cluster bombs were used, it is interesting to wonder how that happened if the Saudis had no aircraft configured to deliver them.

If we ever get to the truth of this matter, we may find that the Government’s denial lasted for only as long as Saudi Arabia still had a number of British-made cluster bombs left to use. In other words, someone somewhere appears to have made a calculation that the use of these weapons may just have been enough to deliver a kind of victory and that the Saudi and UK Governments should deny their use until that had been achieved. Given the continuing situation in Yemen, I have to conclude that the code of denial was broken simply because Saudi Arabia now has no or few cluster bombs left to deploy.

However, if it is not the case that the stocks have been exhausted, and there is evidence that the Saudis still hold such weapons, will the Government commit to doing all they can to have them withdrawn from service and destroyed and to get Saudi Arabia to sign the convention on cluster munitions? That is what the Government are committed to doing under the convention: article 21 expressly obliges parties to the treaty to encourage non-members to ratify it. So I ask the Government to commit to coming back to the House to report on progress in securing Saudi agreement to withdrawing any remaining cluster munitions from use and to signing up to the convention.

Interestingly, the convention, perhaps uniquely, allows signatories to co-operate militarily with states that have not signed it, but it does not require them to do so. Surely, if we believe that cluster bombs should not be used, and especially not indiscriminately against civilian targets, it is clear that we should not be working in a coalition doing exactly that.

In addition to cluster bombs, the people of Yemen face another threat—from the increasing use of armed drones, especially in targeting so-called high-value al-Qaeda figures. While such strikes have been part of US operations in other countries, those carried out in Yemen have been criticised for having far fewer safeguards than those in other countries. If that is the case, will the Government use their bilateral discussions with the Americans to press for a change in their approach?

As the incoming Administration in Washington take shape, many fear that events are moving in an unhelpful direction. Some of the views placed on the record by senior members of the President-elect’s team are frankly astounding. Comments I have seen attributed to General Mike Flynn, the incoming National Security Adviser, would appear better suited to a fake news site.
Unfortunately, it seems they are true reflections of his views—for instance, that fear of Muslims is rational. The most concerning aspect of that was not just the horrible nature of the statement, but the shallow, hate-mongering video he was promoting to the world. Well, I have some news for General Flynn: President Hadi is a Muslim, and so, too, are the leaders of Saudi Arabia. Appointing someone to play a key role in a conflict such as that in Yemen who states that it is rational to hate all those involved defies belief.

In an earlier debate in Westminster Hall, the Minister for Europe and the Americas chided those of us expressing concern about the Saudi coalition’s tactics and behaviour, and he suggested the situation was too complex for us to understand. He is, of course, entirely right that the situation is hugely complex, which means there is all the more need for an independent investigation, but some issues are very clear, and so are some of the actions we must take, because the UK’s involvement in this situation is deeply regrettable. We must investigate, and we must suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia. We must clarify exactly what the role of UK military personnel has been, and we must do everything we can to build a consensus around individuals and institutions that can build a new future for Yemen. In that respect, I am pleased that the United Nations special envoy to Yemen has called a new round of talks in Tunis at the end of the month to advance Yemen’s constitutional process, and I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing the participants well in their endeavours.

1.47 pm

**Mrs Flick Drummond** (Portsmouth South) (Con): I cannot say that it is a pleasure to take part in this debate on Yemen today. Almost a year ago, we discussed this very subject in this Chamber. Yesterday, I reviewed what was said in that debate, and it is a source of great sadness that I could simply read out my speech of 12 months ago because nothing has changed, except for one thing: the suffering of the people of Yemen has got worse—much worse—and there is unimaginable suffering.

Another thing has changed: many more Members of Parliament are taking a keen interest in this forgotten conflict. Members of the public, including my constituents, are now becoming aware of the atrocities that are taking place. The BBC report by Fergal Keane was terrifying in showing what is going on. It is so easy to put these parts of the world out of the public eye, especially when there is another crisis nearby in Syria.

My own interest results from the fact that I was born in Aden, so I have always felt a special affinity for the country, and I would like to return. I know that the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) feels the same, and I hope we will be some of the first MPs to visit when the devastating civil war is at an end.

The situation continues to disintegrate, and even though we have a United Nations road map, it continues to be nowhere near implementation. I continue to be hopeful that this conflict can be resolved through diplomatic means, but that depends on the willingness of external powers to make it happen, just as it does on the willingness of the two sides in Yemen itself.

The transfer of power from President Saleh to President Hadi in 2011 could have been a fresh start. It was brokered by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Co-operation Council. Hundreds of thousands of Yemeni men and women peacefully demonstrated for democracy, but, sadly, the internal situation deteriorated—a process led by ex-President Saleh and the Houthis—so Yemen is now in a desperate state.

These events started as an attempt to put the democratically elected Government back in place, but Yemen has now become a failed state, with many different actors, including Iran, Russia, al-Qaeda and Daesh, all creating chaos. Even worse, there is a humanitarian crisis, with millions of people displaced and thousands dying.

Will the Minister comment on what is going to happen following the inauguration of the United States President, who appears to have a shaky grasp of issues in the region? Secretary of State John Kerry spent much time working on the road map, but I feel that the UK may now have to take the lead if we want to get a quick resolution to this humanitarian crisis. There is a real groundswell of support in this House, and beyond, for us to do exactly that.

We have a very close relationships with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries that are part of the coalition. As a critical friend, we have already pushed Saudi Arabia to be more transparent and to investigate each violation and publish the result.

**Mrs Moon:** Will the hon. Lady join me in particularly commending the work of the RAF personnel who have been guiding the Saudis in relation to rules of engagement? It is absolutely crucial that we are there, changing the nature of the conflict, and that is possible because of this long-standing commitment. If we just criticise the Saudis, the conflict will get worse.

**Mrs Drummond:** Absolutely—I totally agree. We have a very long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, and long may it continue. We can work side by side with them to create peace in the region.

We will need an independent investigation into reports of breaches of international humanitarian law, not least because of the violations by the Houthis, but let us concentrate on getting the road map back on track first. Can the Minister confirm that there are people on the ground who can verify each violation, as I am concerned that there are difficulties in getting international experts into Yemen? We have all heard in other speeches about the humanitarian crisis. I am very grateful to all the charities who work so hard in Yemen and who update us regularly in the all-party parliamentary group. I am pleased that the news channels have started to alert the public on this neglected civil war.

Unfortunately, people in Yemen cannot escape. They are either too poor or cannot cross borders because the only border is that of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Co-operation Council, or Oman—or the sea. Yemen has always been one of the poorest areas in the world. Before the conflict, 90% of food was imported. With the closure of ports and lack of cranes, 14 million people are now food-insecure and half of them are classified as severely food-insecure—that is 7 million people. I am sure we have all read about families scavenging on rubbish dumps just to survive.
I am pleased that because of the pressure that the Government have put on the Saudi coalition, the blockade of ports has eased, but imports are still significantly below pre-conflict levels. Bureaucratic obstacles, restrictions on access, and insecurity are not helping. I urge the Government to continue the pressure on the coalition and the Houthis to allow aid to move quickly through the country. The aid is available, but until flights are resumed into Sana’a international airport and food aid is allowed to move freely from the ports and around the country, the humanitarian crisis will continue.

I am confident that Yemen has the capacity to thrive again, as it has done so in the short time in which was there has been peace. Although it is not a major producer of oil or gas compared with other states in Arabia, oil was responsible for three quarters of Government income before the crisis, and there may be possibilities of exploiting other wells. Agriculture in Yemen depends on fuel to drive irrigation pumps to produce cereal. It is estimated by Famine Early Warning Systems Network that the planting of staple foodstuffs in Yemen is now down by around 30% on previous years. This is not influenced by climatic conditions, since rainfall has been at healthy levels in the main cultivated regions; it is simply because the war and its consequences are destroying agriculture.

I know that the international community will want to help Yemen to get back on its feet once peace has been established, but that will not happen until we show leadership. I hope that the UK Government will take on that role immediately, as too many people depend on it. It is also in our national interest, as al-Qaeda and, particularly, Daesh will use it as a base once they have been evicted from Syria and Iraq. There is no time to waste. I hope that the House will continue to push for further action to save what could be a thriving country like some of its neighbours, inshallah.

1.54 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The scale of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is unimaginable. A number of Members have referred to some of the statistics involved. I would refer only to the fact that 19 million people in Yemen—70% of the population—need humanitarian or protection assistance. This is clearly a huge crisis that the international community is responding to, or at least partly responding to. I hope that the Minister will be able to update the House on the progress being made on the United Nations appeal, which currently, according to the latest figures I have seen, is just under 60% funded.

I want to focus my comments, I am afraid—some Members will feel that this is not the appropriate focus—on the Saudi actions. I do so because the military action that is taken by the Houthis and the Saudis is a major driver of the humanitarian crisis that we see in Yemen. There is no doubt whatsoever that the Houthis are committing serious human rights abuses. The Minister was right to point out to me in a written answer about the attacks on Saudi Arabia that 90 Saudi deaths have been caused by the Houthis through cross-border attacks, with more than 500 people injured. However, it is also right that we in this place focus our attention on the Saudis, because they are our allies and they are using the weapons that we are providing them with.

I will limit my remarks to a few questions on which I hope the Minister will receive some inspiration in responding to the debate. First, do the UK Government know whether UK planes were used in the delivery of cluster munitions? This question has been posed before, but I do not believe that an answer has been given. I take that to mean that they probably have been used, in specific operations. Have the Government looked at whether UK-supplied aircraft have been used to deliver cluster munitions, whether there are any legal obligations under the Cluster Munitions (Prohibition) Act 2010 that would pertain to those activities, and whether the use of UK aircraft in that way would be covered by the UK’s cluster munitions prohibition?

A number of Members have mentioned that cluster munitions have been sold to the Saudis only up to a certain period. We know that 500 cluster munitions were delivered over a three-year period, and that they were safe and suitable for service only until 2008. I hope the Minister can clarify what that means in terms of the increased risk of civilian casualties. Presumably, if they are safe and suitable for service only until 2008, more recent use would increase the risk of civilian casualties because the ordnance would not explode on impact.

Mr Ellwood: Leaning on my previous military experience, as a general rule I would not want to go anywhere near any munition that has passed its sell-by date. I will write to the right hon. Gentleman with a more detailed answer, but I understand that these munitions did not fully blow up as they should have done. The fact that they were so old meant that they failed to work. This serves as advice to any country that has such stocks in their armouries: once the sell-by date has gone, they should clearly be removed. In this particular case, the country is not a signatory to the cluster munitions convention. From that perspective, it is not illegal to use cluster munitions, although we obviously advise against it.

Tom Brake: I understand that, but some Opposition Members would challenge the Minister on whether their use, in any circumstances, can be deemed legal. It is regrettable that he is arguing, in effect, that their use can be considered legal in some circumstances, because most people would consider their impact to be indiscriminate.

Graham Jones: I am following the right hon. Gentleman’s argument and he knows that I am going to make a counter-point. The state of Qatar is involved in the Gulf Co-operation Council mission in Yemen, so does he think that we should suspend our sales of coastal defence systems to it?

Tom Brake: I had anticipated the hon. Gentleman’s line of inquiry, but the focus of my remarks is on what the Saudis are doing, the use of cluster munitions and whether there is sufficient evidence to call for a suspension of arms sales and sufficient support for an independent inquiry, which the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) called for in his opening remarks. I believe that there is.

Will the Minister explain the basis on which the Saudi Arabians refused in 2010 to swap their cluster munitions for the more precise Paveway III bombs? I understand that the Ministry of Defence offered a free
swap with no cost implications, so what is the Government’s understanding of why the Saudis refused to take up that offer?

My final point relates to the joint incidents assessment team, to which, as I made clear in an earlier intervention, the Government have provided advice on how to investigate matters of international humanitarian law. One of the JIAT members is Mansour al-Mansour, a Bahraini judge who played a significant and unfortunate role in a series of trials in Bahrain about which it has been said: “A pattern of due process violations occurred at the pre-trial and trial levels that denied most defendants elementary fair trial guarantees.”

Does the Minister think that that person and, possibly, other members of the JIAT are suitably qualified to adjudicate on the issue of civilian casualties in Yemen? Clearly, the credibility of the JIAT must depend on the credibility of its individual members.

Emily Thornberry: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that Mansour al-Mansour is known in Bahrain as “the butcher”?

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Lady for putting that on the record. Clearly, there are significant concerns about his role and, therefore, his suitability for sitting on the JIAT.

In conclusion, there is a huge amount of evidence that suggests that the UK should suspend arms sales. I want to finish on the first point that was made in this debate, which is that there is now an overwhelming case for an independent inquiry into Saudi activities in Yemen. I fail to understand why the Government do not show the same enthusiasm as they did when they rightly made a very strong case for a similar independent inquiry in Sri Lanka.

2.3 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) for securing this debate. Although I do not entirely agree with their views on the matter—I think they know that—this gives us an opportunity to debate and bring the issue of Yemen back into the public domain. Sadly, neither the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) nor my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) are in their places, but it was interesting to hear their thoughtful contributions.

It may come as no surprise that I want to focus on the humanitarian aid aspect of the situation in Yemen, given that I serve on the International Development Committee. This debate takes place in a week when the term “humanitarian crisis” has been used. For me, it is what is happening in Yemen that is a humanitarian crisis, not some of the other issues that have been raised in the Chamber today.

It is two years since hostilities began to escalate in Yemen. The suffering of children and their families continues. Today more than 18 million people are estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance, many of whom, very sadly, are children. Some have described the situation as a children’s emergency. The United Nations estimates that more than 4,000 civilians have been killed and more than 7,000 injured. It has also been estimated that more than 3 million Yemenis are internally displaced. They and many others suffer from food insecurity. Close to half of Yemen’s health facilities are either closed or able to function only partially. Nearly 2,000 schools remain closed due to damage and destruction.

The International Development Committee often talks about the need for education for children. The sustainable development goals use the term, “Leave no one behind”, and concerns in Syria have led to the No Lost Generation initiative. I fear that Yemen may have another lost generation of children whose long-term futures will suffer because of a lack of education as a result of the conflict.

Last year, the Committee heard evidence from a number of non-governmental organisations and members of the Yemeni diaspora. Some of their stories, particularly those of the diaspora, were really striking and incredibly moving, including those about the need for water, food and urgent medical supplies—things that we take for granted in our own country. Low levels of imports of commercial supplies, such as fuel and medicines, simply add to the humanitarian crisis, as do the problems at Yemeni ports. Even so, the conflict continues to be described as the “forgotten war”, so debates such as this are helpful in raising awareness.

Graham Jones: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and she makes a powerful point. The UNICEF report identify two particular groups: the resistance groups—not the United Arab Emirates and Saudi armies—and the Houthis. The predominant age of those child soldiers running around with Kalashnikovs and getting killed is between six and eight. That is absolutely outrageous and I hope that she will comment on it.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. That specific point is not in my speech, but it is very important. Not only does war have an impact on children’s education, livelihoods and health; some get dragged into war and become part of it.

Graham Jones: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and she makes a powerful point. The UNICEF report has evidence that the Houthis in particular are purchasing young people from foreign countries and bringing them into Yemen to fight as child soldiers.

Wendy Morton: Again, I thank the hon. Gentleman, who makes his point eloquently. I hope that he will speak later in the debate and elaborate on it.

Debates such as this help to raise awareness, including in this Chamber on a number of occasions over the past year to 18 months. They also help to raise awareness beyond the Chamber, including among our constituents and the media. I fear that it is often overshadowed, understandably, by other events in the middle east region. Of course, by that I am referring to Syria; and yet, according to Save the Children, Yemen is the country with the largest number of people in need of humanitarian
assistance. Conflict drives food emergencies, and it is clearly impacting on the broader humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Such conflict also makes it extremely difficult for DFID, NGOs and other aid agencies to deliver aid safely and effectively. That is why safe humanitarian corridors are absolutely vital, and we must continue to press for them.

At this point in my speech, it would be fair for me to recognise the tremendous work and commitment of DFID staff and the work that they do in delivering UK aid to those who need it in Yemen, with more than £100 million in aid being delivered through schemes such as the Social Fund for Development, the Yemen humanitarian resilience programme, the programme to address malnutrition in Yemen and protection support through the UNHCR. The UK is one of the leading donors to Yemen; in fact, it is the fourth largest. Surely this is a good indication of the good work that our 0.7% commitment on international development can do, and how that aid goes out to help some of the world’s poorest and those most in need. We must continue to use our leadership role to influence other donors as much as possible to encourage them to step up to the plate.

That brings me to the wider point of seeking a political settlement and a cessation of hostilities. The UK has strong relationships in the region, and I urge us to continue to use our influence there to help to bring about the lasting peace settlement for people in Yemen that we are all desperately searching for. Today we have debated the security situation, and we know from what we have heard and seen that this is a brutal conflict. We should recognise that the allegations about violations of international humanitarian law are exactly that—allegations. They must be investigated, but surely we must not let that overshadow the real answer to the crisis, which is a ceasefire, peace and long-lasting stability, not just in Yemen but in the region. In bringing that about, we should make sure that we avoid creating a vacuum that could be filled by those whom we would not wish to enter it.

2.12 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): There have been some powerful contributions to the debate, and I welcome the chance to discuss Yemen in further detail. This has been talked about as a forgotten crisis, although not in the House and certainly not in my constituency. I am delighted to say that the Yemeni community in Cardiff has a long history, and it has long expressed its concerns to me about the situation.

That community is also willing to reach out to Yemen. Before Christmas, I was delighted to support the Disasters Emergency Committee campaign in raising funds for Yemen. The campaign had already been very publicly supported by Grangetown Primary School in my constituency, by TramShed and by the Cardiff Devils ice hockey team. That unusual coalition came together to make it clear that they did not want the scenes that we saw on TV over Christmas of people suffering and starving—those horrific scenes that the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) and other Conservative Members referred to—to continue.

I agree with the comments made by many Members across the House about the need for an absolute focus on securing a ceasefire and a peace settlement. Only through that can we truly address the horrors that we see in Yemen and the situation that Stephen O’Brien rightly described as a humanitarian catastrophe. Oxfam International states that 7 million people do not know where their next meal will come from, and we have all seen those horrible images on our screens. The UN and World Health Organisation estimate that 18.8 million Yemeni citizens—almost two thirds of the population—are in dire need of assistance and protection. As of 25 October last year, health facilities reported that there had been almost 44,000 casualties, which is an average of 75 people killed or injured every day. There are 3.15 million internally displaced people.

We have heard about the import restrictions at ports and the crisis in accessing food that has been caused by food shortages. Oxfam reports that almost half a million infants and young people are in need of immediate treatment for severe acute malnutrition. The war has led to the collapse of food imports. Yemen imported 90% of its food supplies before the escalation of the conflict. In November 2015, the country imported enough food supplies to meet demands, but in October 2016 imported food covered only 40% of the demand. Many aid agencies are warning that if the plunging trends in food imports continue unabated, they may come to a complete halt in four months.

There is a risk of a cholera outbreak, because the restrictions on fuel imports are having a catastrophic effect on Yemen’s water and sanitation infrastructure. There has been an extremely worrying rise in gender-based violence, especially sexual violence, domestic violence and early marriage. Reports indicate an increase of 70% in reported incidents today compared with March 2015, and 8,000 or more incidents were recorded between January and September 2016, with 64% of the cases defined as emotional and psychological abuse or physical assault.

The psychological impact of the conflict on children, let alone the physical impact, is absolutely appalling. I will read out the words of 13-year-old Wahiha:

“I see the damage everywhere and I see how many people are affected by the bombs. I feel scared when I see weapons and especially when I hear the sound of planes up in the sky. When you hear that sound it means a big explosion will follow and that people will be killed... Hospitals and schools are damaged too. For children there is no education any more. Life is very difficult in Yemen right now.”

That is a powerful testimony from one of the young people living through the conflict. The UN tells us that 3,000 children have been killed or injured since March 2015.

I pay tribute, as others have done, to the DFID team working in Yemen. Our Committee’s report found that DFID had been instrumental in supporting and facilitating the humanitarian relief effort through its timely and flexible response, and we commended the Department for that. DFID has more than doubled its humanitarian commitment to Yemen, making the UK the fourth largest donor last year. DFID’s work is crucial evidence of why we need to adhere to our 0.7% aid commitment. To do so is not only morally right, but in our national and global interest.

I believe, as I have done for a long time, that such excellent work risks being undermined by the continued sale to Saudi Arabia of arms that are being used in Yemen. Let me be clear from the outset that I accept the
very serious concerns that have been raised about the wider regional nature of the conflict. I do not have an agenda against Saudi Arabia, nor do I have an agenda against our defence industry. I believe in a regulated defence industry that adheres to the rule of law. The reality is that the UN estimates that more than 60% of civilian casualties were the result of attacks by the Saudi-led coalition. We might as well look at the current evidence: we have heard in the last few days about a Saudi-led coalition airstrike that was reported to have killed five people, including two children, near a primary school in the north of Yemen. That is just in recent days.

We have heard about the atrocities committed by the Houthis, and I want to be clear that I recognise and condemn them. We heard some absolutely disgusting stories about the use of child soldiers. The Houthis are blockading humanitarian access and using landmines and other indiscriminate weapons—just as cluster munitions are—against civilians. They have carried out appalling, indiscriminate artillery attacks at Taiz and along the borders, in which they have killed civilians.

We are not selling arms to the Houthis, however; we are selling arms to the Saudi-led coalition. Human Rights Watch reports that 61 allegedly unlawful coalition actions and airstrikes have resulted in the death of 900 civilians, and there have been attacks on markets, schools and hospitals. My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) asked who was dropping these bombs, and where they were coming from. Human Rights Watch suggests that US-supplied munitions were used at 23 of those locations. UK-made weapons, including one produced as recently as 2015, have also been found there.

Let us be absolutely clear. The UK is a signatory to the arms trade treaty, and we led the fight for it internationally. I am proud of the fact that there was cross-party support for it, and that successive Governments have driven it forward. We have signed up to the EU consolidated criteria and we have our own regulations, which are very clear. A legal opinion has been produced which states that the UK is potentially in breach of article 6.3 of the arms trade treaty because the Government ought to have had the necessary knowledge that serious violations of international law were taking place; that the UK may be in breach of article 7 because there is a clear risk that future weapons supplies could be used to commit or facilitate serious breaches of international law; and that in such an ongoing crisis, no feasible mitigation measures were deemed possible.

The position is clear: we are signed up to those restrictions. Unfortunately, we have had a series of obfuscations and confusions not only from the Saudis, but from the UK Government, who changed their position several times on whether they conducted assessments, the nature of those assessments and the date on which they were conducted. The Minister and others admitted that progress has been glacial. That is simply not acceptable. As the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), a former Foreign Minister, pointed out, the Saudi Foreign Minister visited twice. That was a great opportunity to question him. He gave us assurances that there would be responses to the investigations, yet we have not seen them.

There are more than 180 documented incidents. Clearly, some will prove not to be true, but that is why we need a thorough investigation, and progress to date has been slow, whether from the Saudi Government and the Joint Incident Assessment Team, or the UK Government, who I believe know full well what is going on and have conducted assessments and possess information to show whether atrocities have been committed against civilians. We need independent verification of what has gone on. Until we get that, I support the calls for a temporary suspension of arms sales because of the principles that the arms trade treaty sets out.

I hope that the Minister will give us some clear assurances about what assessments and investigations are happening and whether he is convinced that the UK is adhering to its legal obligations. We know that legal proceedings are ongoing and due to be in the courts soon. It is crucial that, before those proceedings, the UK Government are clear about what they knew and when they knew it because we need assurances that we are adhering to our international obligations.

The crisis in Yemen will be resolved only through a peace settlement and a negotiated solution. All our efforts must be focused on that. There is a great deal of unity on that in the House, on the need for a humanitarian and development response, and, indeed, on the need for an independent investigation. We have a part to play in that; we are selling arms to one of the parties. Until we have clear answers, I will remain unsatisfied.

2.21 pm

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Many Members have used the phrase “the forgotten war” this afternoon, but as my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) made clear, the House has been doing everything it can to ensure that that war is not forgotten. Although he is not in his place, I pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for all he has done over many years to highlight Yemen’s plight.

I know the country and the region well, having travelled there. I have been to and around Yemen on several occasions, and I therefore regard the situation there with particular sadness. As my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) said about her own speech, I could be making the same remarks as those I made a year ago in the same debate in which she spoke.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) set out with brilliance and insight, as always, the background to the situation. He did that in a measured and balanced tone, which is crucial.

The pre-war position in Yemen was always complex. I think that it was Ali Abdullah Saleh who described governing Yemen as like dancing on the heads of snakes, so complex is the tribal, political and religious make-up of that country. It is the most populous country in the middle east with a population of around 30 million, yet it has the lowest annual income per head—pre-war, it was $1,500. It has significant economic challenges and a young, male population with limited opportunities, even pre-war, to prosper. Yemen today relies heavily on foreign imports and was heavily armed, again, even pre-war. All that created a challenge for that country before the conflict broke out.
The position is even more challenging now. The geopolitical context is that Yemen is surrounded by a complex power network of different states and alliances, which make it all the more important to focus on it.

Possibly uniquely in this House, I do not intend to repeat the important points that other hon. Members have made—they have been very well made—but I will briefly touch on two things: the background and Saudi Arabia’s involvement, and the future.

It is right, as all hon. Members who have spoken said, that we remember that there is fault on both sides. Simply attempting to apportion blame does not advance the cause of peace. Of course, like all other hon. Members, I condemn any deaths of innocent civilians. It is right that, when they occur, they are properly investigated.

I cannot express the background more effectively, eloquently or eruditely than my right hon. Friend. The Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt). The conflict came about through the Houthi attempt to take over the country some years ago, the march on Sana’a and the request by President Hadi, leading the legitimate Government of Yemen, for aid to stop that advance. The Saudi-led international coalition responded. We must remember that, just as there are consequences of action, on which we are focusing today, there would have been significant consequences to inaction had the Houthis been allowed to continue their advance and take over the country. I would argue that the consequences would have been much worse for the people of Yemen. There would also have been greater regional instability and a risk to our national interest.

We should also not forget that Saudi Arabia is regularly attacked across its border in the context of the conflict and that it has the right to defend itself. I therefore believe that it was right for the coalition to step in and act in defence of a legitimate Government and regional stability. It is also right to remember the vital role that Saudi Arabia plays in the region to our national interest and the partnership that we have with them in intelligence matters and in taking on terrorism. That engagement and relationship are vital to our national interest. It is not an uncritical relationship—as with all our relationships with our friends, we will be critical in a measured way when appropriate—but not engaging and not participating constructively in that relationship would be detrimental to our national interest, the interests of the people of Yemen and to regional stability.

I conclude by focusing on three key elements as we look to the future. First, a ceasefire to allow aid to get into the country and talks to take place is vital. I do not believe that any hon. Member would disagree with that. I particularly pay tribute to DFID for its work, to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) for his work in his previous role in pressing the case for a ceasefire and to the Minister for his tireless work. The people of Yemen could have no better friend in this country than the Minister for the Middle East.

Secondly, there must be a long-term political settlement that will hold. That settlement must emerge from within Yemen and its people and not be imposed from outside, although of course countries and friends of ours, such as Oman, have a significant role to play in facilitating such a settlement. It must ensure that all tribes and groups in Yemen are represented and that none are excluded.

Thirdly, it is important to focus on rebuilding Yemen and giving the people hope. That will involve investment from outside and security. I believe that it will also have to involve a clear focus on fuel because so much of what goes on in Yemen—electricity generation and the provision of water—relies on diesel fuel.

Mrs Moon: Is this not a prime example of when UN resolution 1325 could come into play? It involves the engagement of women in rebuilding a society after conflict and in setting out the peace conditions. Women and children have been many of the victims in this war. Is this not a wonderful example of how women can be involved in rebuilding Yemen?

Edward Argar: I cannot disagree with the hon. Lady. She makes her point well and effectively. She is right about the role that women can play in rebuilding a country after conflict. Of course, everyone in that country needs to play a role in helping to rebuild it. I hope that when we next debate this matter, significant progress will have occurred. The Minister, the British Government and the people of Yemen desire that. I hope that 2017 will bring peace to that troubled country.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): There is a hidden element running through this debate. This House and the UK Government can hope to influence the conduct of Saudi Arabia and the other states of the Gulf Co-operation Council. We have less hope and opportunity of influencing the Houthis and the various elements active in Yemen, including Iran. No Opposition Member who wishes to be critical of Saudi is blind to the crimes committed against humanity, against their own people, by the Houthi leadership and other elements of the coalition Government. So if we are talking with emphasis about Saudi, it is not because we ignore the other side and its crimes, but if we are to move the debate on, all we can do—as a major ally, weapons supplier and market—is to influence Saudi. That is why we are doing it. Some Members have tried to present the discussion in terms of some people being anti-Saudi or forgetting about the Houthis, but that is not where we are going. We can influence Saudi. The argument from Opposition Members is that Her Majesty’s Government have been niggardly in how they have tried to influence Saudi. I will provide some evidence.

On 13 December, the United States Government vetoed the sale of 16,000 guidance systems for munitions that were going to be sold by US companies to Saudi Arabia. That tells me a couple of things. Why does Saudi need 16,000 guidance systems for bombs? It is something to do with the disproportionality of the air offensive that Saudi and several other air forces in the Arab world have been conducting. That disproportionality is getting in the way of a settlement. What began as a civil war—yes, there were some implications around the Saudi border—has been turned into a humanitarian disaster by the sheer scale of the action the Saudis have undertaken.

The fact that the Saudis are continuing after there is very little left to bomb suggests an unwillingness by the Saudi regime to come to a compromise before it is able to impose the political settlement it wants. It is therefore incumbent upon the UK to try to put pressure on the Saudis to reduce the scale of the bombing and say that
they have to do something else. If the United States can do it, so can we. The US spokesman, when announcing the veto of the weapons sales in December, said, “We will not give a blank cheque to the Saudi regime.” My criticism of HM Government is precisely that they are trying to give a blank cheque to the Saudi Government.

Edward Agar: The hon. Gentleman makes his point well, but does he recall that the Secretary of State for Defence, in a statement to this House on 19 December, made it clear that the United States Government had suspended a particular licence but had continued to supply military jets, helicopters and other ammunition to Saudi Arabia? It was not a blank cheque.

George Kerevan: I am well aware of that. Politics is politics in the western world, so while the US was banning the guidance systems, it was simultaneously agreeing a major contract to supply battle tanks to Saudi Arabia, but that just makes my point. If we presume, as HM Government do, that Saudi Arabia is an ally, the way we should deal with it is not to give it a blank cheque but to give it a choice. It is carrot and stick. The British Government have not done that. They spent a long time pretending or arguing that British cluster weapons had not been used. Once that was definitively proved, they moved back to saying that Saudi should conduct its own inquiries.

We have been training the Saudi air force. For the past 40 years, we have been helping to set up the command and control system for the Saudi air force. If it is not getting it right now, it is for political reasons, not because of any defectiveness in its command and control system. Waiting on the Saudis to investigate is a subterfuge. We have to put political pressure on the Saudis to come to the negotiating table to reduce the scale of the bombing and move towards some kind of ceasefire, and to do it properly. If we do not do that, we let them off the hook. As long as the British Government are being so soft—I use the word advisedly—on the Saudis in this context, we will never to get the international control system. Waiting on the Saudis to investigate is a subterfuge. We have to put political pressure on the Saudis to come to the negotiating table to reduce the scale of the bombing and move towards some kind of ceasefire, and to do it properly. If we do not do that, we let them off the hook. As long as the British Government are being so soft—I use the word advisedly—on the Saudis in this context, we will never to get the international inquiry, which is the start of the process.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) crystallised the debate right at the very beginning by asking at what point do the British Government go on underwriting the Saudi air offensive, that is, the more it becomes a possibility that British personnel in the military and in the Government could be culpable legally.

My final point relates to the possible legal culpability of British service personnel, whom I greatly applaud. The Cluster Munitions (Prohibitions) Act 2010 makes it clear that it is an offence to “assist, encourage or induce” other persons to make use of cluster bombs. That is a pretty wide definition. As long as the British Government go on underwriting the Saudi air offensive, the more it becomes a possibility that British personnel could fall under that heading.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about legal culpability, but does he agree that that relates not just to cluster munitions but to the wider sales and compliance with the arms trade treaty? I do not know whether he has had the chance to look at the freedom of information request, but officials in the Foreign Office were clearly very exercised. They say that, owing to the high-profile nature of this subject and the attention it is getting from Parliament, the media and the courts, they have been advised that they have to correct answers. They are clearly worried about their legal position. Is that why we are seeing such obfuscation from them?

George Kerevan: I totally accept what the hon. Gentleman says. In his contribution, he made the wider legal case very well.

My worry is for British personnel if a legal case begins to develop. The Minister alluded to section 9 of the 2010 Act, which gives a defence for British personnel involved in an international conflict with allies who might not be party to the UN cluster convention, but the problem is that it is only a technical, theoretical defence. I do not think that section 9 could be interpreted beyond a point where we know a non-compliant state is deliberately using British cluster weapons over a long time, causing great civilian casualties. The position under the 2010 Act then becomes more opaque. Will the Minister comment on what legal advice the British Government have taken on those grounds?

2.39 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I thank the hon. Members for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) for securing today’s important debate through the Backbench Business Committee.

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen continues to worsen, despite all the parliamentary time we have spent over the past months discussing it. The situation is continually deteriorating, despite all the reassurances from our Government that millions of pounds is being spent on aid. There seem to be no end in sight for the suffering of the Yemeni people in the near future. Meanwhile, according to figures from Oxfam, some 14 million are food insecure, with about 7.5 million on the brink of famine. Unless something changes radically, the situation is set only to worsen in 2017. Yemen was heavily dependent on food
imports prior to the conflict, and the war has had a devastating effect on food security. Not enough is making its way into the country to meet daily demand.

The country’s decimated infrastructure is making it impossible to get food to all who need it. It is not just roads that have been destroyed; ports have been targeted by the Saudi-led coalition. As a result of ‘air’ strikes on the port of Hodeidah, only one of the six loading cranes remains functional. Prior to that, aid groups had complained that the coalition naval blockade prevented relief supplies from entering Yemen. There is further evidence to suggest that aid agencies are not being given proper opportunity to deliver aid.

About a year ago, Oxfam and other NGOs were sent a diplomatic note stating that if they were delivering aid anywhere remotely close to where Houthis were operating, they were doing so at their own risk. In effect, the Saudis were saying that they would not take responsibility for bombing aid workers if they were near Houthis. That diktat, which was surely a breach of international humanitarian law, has meant that civilians in need of aid are unable to receive it. Hunger should not be used as a weapon of war. Famine Early Warning Systems Network warns:

“To mitigate severe, ongoing food insecurity and prevent Famine over the coming year, the international community and local actors must protect the ability of private traders to import staple food”, that “more resources are needed to support the continuation and expansion of humanitarian response” and that traders and humanitarian actors must have access to conflict zones.

The UK needs to play its part and heed these recommendations. The Saudis are a key ally of the UK, and we should be working to ensure that it is acting responsibly in the conflict. Such responsibility includes military operations—actions should be proportionate to the military threat—yet we continue to hear reports that would suggest that this is not the case. Serious questions need to be asked of the Saudis about their targeting. There are too many documented cases of indiscriminate bombings leading to thousands of needless civilian death and injuries, including of many children, as we have heard.

As we have also heard, the conflict is certainly not one-sided, but the fact remains that we are a key ally of the Saudis and have licensed £3.3 billion-worth of arms sales since their intervention in Yemen. We cannot shirk responsibility. That is particularly the case where UK-supplied weapons are being used in the conflict. Too many questions remain improperly answered around the use of BL755 cluster munitions. I have pursued the Government on this issue since last June, and I am sick of their cluster bluster. Members deserve nothing less than full transparency and disclosure.

Last June, I asked the MOD, by way of written question, when the UK had last maintained cluster munitions held by Saudi Arabia. The Secretary of State delivered a succinct and blunt response, saying:

“The UK has never maintained cluster munitions held by Saudi Arabia.”

Yesterday, I got sight of a response to a freedom of information request submitted to the MOD by Amnesty International. Contained within is confirmation that up until 2008 there was contracted manpower support in place for the maintenance, handling and storage of these cluster bombs. I will be seeking urgent clarification from the MOD on this. I seriously hope that I have not been misled by the Department.

Furthermore, it is revealed in the freedom of information response that the MOD offered to replace all of the Saudi stocks of BL755s with Paveway III precision-guided bombs as recently as 2010 but that the Saudis continually refused this offer. The MOD must provide answers to the House urgently as to why this offer was allowed to be declined without repercussion. Why have subsequent arms export licences been issued without question when the Saudis have so resolutely refused to give up their stockpile of UK-produced cluster munitions?

We also need concrete answers from the Saudis on how many of the BL755 bombs have been dropped on Yemen and absolute transparency on the targeting data of such air strikes. Furthermore, will the UK Government take sole responsibility for ensuring that any and all UK-produced cluster munitions dropped in Yemen are cleared, working alongside national de-mining institutions, including the Yemen Executive Mine Action Centre, and increasing the direct funding it receives from the UK as necessary? In short, I am asking the Government for an undertaking to clean up their own mess and show an appropriate level of responsibility. Our foreign policy needs to put the innocent civilians of Yemen first and foremost, now more than ever. Our efforts can help to avert a full-scale famine, but the time to act and help secure a ceasefire is now.

2.46 pm

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), each and every minute of whose speech was a valuable contribution to this debate. We also need concrete answers from the Saudis on the primary purpose of this debate is to end the killing and suffering, to secure a ceasefire and to stop the humanitarian crisis. It is not just the primary purpose; it is pretty much the sole purpose. There are some other ancillary issues, but that is what we are here to do. This is a humanitarian crisis and a forgotten war—it has been under-reported and under-considered. I therefore welcome this debate. We must elevate it not only for those living in Yemen but for others in the region who will suffer and perhaps also for the people of western Europe, given some of the extreme Islamist elements within Yemen.

The country has a history of problems. To the members of the Labour club in Accrington, I say, “The problem is we have this despicable leader, Saleh, who has now returned. He was once fought by the Houthis, but now he’s joined them. He milked the nation, and after robbing the resistance on the other side has become involved in the war.” This is a very simple view, but it is the view that the United Nations takes in UN Security Council resolution 2216: that there has been—dare I use the word?—a coup. A coup has been carried out by some very terrible people, including Houthis and the Saleh alliance, and the resistance on the other side has become involved in committing some atrocious acts. A vacuum has been created by the former President, who is now causing trouble again.
Let us face some truths. The biggest donors to Yemen over the years, which have, in the past, prevented the humanitarian crisis from being what it is today, have been the Gulf Co-operation Council and Saudi Arabia. Because of the Houthis, the aid tap has been turned off. Worse than that, however, because the Houthis want to fight Saudi Arabia on the border, foreign workers from Yemen can no longer work in Saudi Arabia, which is logical, so all the remittances have dried up. No wonder the country is in poverty—and we are allowing these people to get away with it. It is obvious why Security Council resolution 2216 pins it all on the Houthis, the people who started this in an alliance with the person whom they were formerly fighting, President Saleh. Therein lies the problem, and the reason for resolution 2216.

We must try to deal with the situation, but that will mean building bridges. According to the UN reports, the GCC has tried—twice in Geneva, and also through the Muscat principles—to bring the two parties together for a peaceful settlement. Which party is resisting the peace talks? It is the Houthis, who will not allow a peace delegation to fly to Geneva, and will not allow the UN panel of experts to go in and observe the situation on the ground. This is a group of people who, to my mind—I say this to the people in the Labour club in Accrington—are just trying to rob the state. They are not interested in a peaceful settlement, and that makes things very difficult, but we should never abandon the principle of trying to build bridges, and that includes trying not to upset or destabilise the GCC or the Arab League.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am enjoying listening to the hon. Gentleman’s speech. Does he agree that one of the things that shows these people’s intent is that the coup disrupted a constitutional process that was in place in Yemen to try to bring in a lasting and stable Government?

Graham Jones: I wish this debate were longer, as I could speak for two hours on this issue. [Interruption.] My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby is right; I have had a good go at going for three hours. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) is right, however. The proposal in that constitutional settlement was for a six-state federated Yemen, and President Saleh walked away from that; he walked away from the talks at Geneva because he did not want a federated state. He wanted to do what he was doing before: milk the state for himself. That is the problem, and all the while the people are suffering.

The Saudis are trying to get aid in. We have donated £100 million, which I am pleased about, but that is a fraction of what Saudi Arabia donates, yet we are trying to castigate the Saudis.

This conflict has been presented as Saudi Arabia against the people of Yemen: what an absolute load of garbage. The Saudis are operating under a UN mandate; five members of the GCC and four members of the Arab League are operating under that mandate, and Saudi is one component of that. It is the biggest component; I do not deny that. The Saudis are also guilty, it appears, of doing some awful things, and they should be held to account; nobody is saying anybody should be exempt from the law. But we must never take our eye off the ball: people are suffering in Yemen, and we must try to get to the end result of relieving that suffering. That is...
the primary purpose, and I am never going to slip away from that. I am not going to be taken on to some hard-left, loony left or right-wing bandwagon about arms sales to Saudi Arabia if that impacts negatively on the people in the region. I stand here unequivocal: I am here to help the people of Yemen, and I want to see the best outcome for them.

**Tom Brake:** Is the hon. Gentleman aware, however, that after the strike on the funeral in which I think 140 people died, even the UK Government were quoted as saying they were going to review their policy towards arms exports to Saudi Arabia? I wonder whether he has had any feedback on what that review has stated.

**Graham Jones:** There is an issue there; there is a concern—a well-meaning and genuine concern—that the speed and efficacy of Saudi’s investigations into some of the things they have done is not up to the required standard. However, as has been explained by many Members, they have attempted at least to come to this place, to speak with foreign powers, and to allow coalition partners who supply military equipment, as well as the British, to go in and be involved in looking at what is going on and in training. They have tried to a degree—although we do not know to what degree—to be open and transparent.

**Mrs Moon:** One of the issues that has not been addressed is the risk that, if we take Saudi Arabia out of this and isolate that coalition, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS will fill the gap and flourish in Yemen, making the conflict even worse.

**Graham Jones:** My hon. Friend takes my next words out of my mouth, and I congratulate her on raising a point that has perhaps not been raised enough. If we read the UN report and all other reports, this is the situation on ground: we have the Houthi-Saleh alliance marching south and, as there are next to no Government forces, they are marching through and they are marching into Sunni areas. We are seeing a repeat of Mosul: we are seeing history repeat itself in Iraq. We are seeing Shi’as marching into Sunni areas and the consequence of that, as in Mosul, is a consolidation of the presence of the black flag over these places.

So when I see 150,000 Saudi troops marching to the south through Aden and Iraq, and when I see the UAE send troops in—if I lived in the area I would prefer that as a force—I am at least satisfied that some degree of civil and military force is moving into place to try to secure the area. Instead, as is happening, as we see from the UN report, towns and communities are becoming fearful. Salafists and extremists then turn to their towns and communities and say, “The only way we can defend ourselves from those Houthis and Saleh supporters is to raise the black flag.” It will be terrible, because we will not be able to remove ISIS from those communities for years to come. We are storing up a major problem. So when I see the Saudi and UAE troops moving to south Yemen, it has to be welcomed. Let us not forget that it is not just the Houthis and the Saleh alliance who are using child soldiers; the resistance forces who are fighting them are doing so as well. We need a restoration of civil governance. We cannot support a coup against a legitimate Government, even if that Government are not popular or efficient. We cannot allow that to happen.

I want to talk about arms, because some issues relating to arms have not yet been discussed. Who is supplying arms to Yemen? The UN register of interests gives us a list of the countries that have done so. They are: Russia, Bulgaria, Moldova, France, the USA, Ukraine, Belarus and China. Those armaments have included tanks, attack aircraft, rocket launchers and MiG jets. All those have been provided to the nation of Yemen. But I will tell you one country that has not supplied arms to Yemen: the United Kingdom. We have not supplied arms to Yemen, but all those other countries have done so. That ought to be noted. We have a good, robust system of arms export controls, far better than many others—"[Interruption.] I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall end my remarks by saying that 2017 will be the year in which we will seek a ceasefire, and that I shall stand up and oppose anyone who wants to jump on the passing bandwagon of using Yemen to stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

3.2 pm

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): As we have heard, the conflict in Yemen has sometimes been labelled a forgotten conflict. I want to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who mentioned earlier that it has not been forgotten in this House. I also want to pay tribute to the hon. Members for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) for their excellent contributions to the debate, which I have thoroughly enjoyed. It has given all of us here in Parliament a chance to keep the issue at the forefront of the public debate and to remember those killed and injured as a result of the ongoing violence and those who are starving or stricken with illness as a result of the breakdown of civil society.

We must also remember the UK’s central role in the middle east, and in particular in this conflict. It is our moral and civic duty—and also in our best pragmatic, strategic self-interest—to do all we can to end the conflict and bring peace to Yemen. I think that there is consensus across the Chamber that that is what must happen, first and foremost because the humanitarian suffering in the country has now reached a horrifying tipping point.

I was grateful this week to have the opportunity to host a presentation by a range of aid organisations, setting out the scale and scope of the human suffering we are now seeing in the Yemeni population. We were warned by Oxfam, Christian Aid and the Yemen Safe Passage Group that the dangers of famine in the country are now very real indeed.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend mentioned Oxfam. I have been contacted by a number of constituents who are supporting Oxfam’s Red Line for Yemen campaign. Will she join me in welcoming the campaign and support its call for the Government to uphold the spirit of the arms trade treaty and end any illegal arms sales that could be used to cause further suffering in Yemen?

**Ms Ahmed-Sheikh:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising awareness of that campaign, and I hope that many more people will now sign up to it.
Even before this conflict, Yemen was reliant on imports for between 90% and 95% of its food. By October 2016, the combined effect of a blockade of ports by coalition forces and severe damage to roads and port facilities meant that imported food covered only 40% of demand.

Graham Jones: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Ordinarily I would give way, but the hon. Gentleman had 15 minutes to make his speech and I want to make sure that the Minister has time to answer the important questions we have all posed. Please forgive me.

Oxfam has stated that, if the trend of plunging food imports continues unabated, food imports will come to a complete halt in four months’ time. Adding to the spiralling economic problems now facing the country—the central bank has stopped salary payments to Government employees, pension payments to the elderly and welfare payments to the vulnerable—a human tragedy on an almost epic scale is upon us. The estimate of the experts is that, by April or May 2017, there is a high likelihood of a “cataclysmic” famine that would condemn millions to suffering and death.

It is important that we bear in mind that those civilian victims are not a by-product of the conflict. They are the targets of military action, with the lack of food being used as a weapon of war. We have a moral responsibility to our fellow human beings to act now to address this crisis, which is why I welcome the work of aid organisations in Yemen. They have ensured, as best as they possibly can, that aid is delivered to those who need it now. I recognise that the UK Government have contributed more than £100 million-worth of aid to the country, and the Scottish Government have donated to the Disasters Emergency Committee’s ongoing Yemen crisis appeal, but our charity alone will not avert this tragedy.

What the people of Yemen need now, as much as they need food, is international leadership. I welcome the efforts of the outgoing US Secretary of State, who tried to broker a ceasefire deal at the end of last year, but we know that the incoming Trump Administration are unlikely to take the same view of relations in the region. I fear that the policies of the new White House Administration will instigate a worrying degree of further instability in the middle east, a point also made by the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond).

Keith Vaz: Because of the vacuum that has been created—obviously, with a new Administration—Britain holds the pen, as we are told, at the Security Council. There is nothing to stop us hosting a conference that tries to bring all sides together or tabling a resolution, because it will take several months for the new American Administration to get into the right position. Of course, they might take a different view from the Obama Administration.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: The right hon. Gentleman demonstrates how we can show international leadership on this issue. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), has already been very active in this area, but we need to build on his efforts. We should do so not just because of the humanitarian crisis, but because it also makes strategic sense in helping to combat the bastions of al-Qaeda terrorism on the gulf of Aden while de-escalating the tensions caused by what the Foreign Secretary called the “proxy war” between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Before we take on the role of peace broker, we have to face up to our role in the conflict now. If Saudi Arabia and Iran are, in the Foreign Secretary’s words, the “puppeteers” in the conflict, the UK has often acted as the quartermaster. That must end now. The UK has exported £3.3 billion of military equipment to Saudi Arabia since 2015. If we are to be an honest, impartial broker in the conflict, the Government must immediately suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia and facilitate a full, independent, UN-led inquiry into Saudi Arabia’s conduct in the war in Yemen. That has to happen because we now know that, after consistently failing to live up to our moral and legal responsibilities on the use of the now-banned cluster munitions manufactured in the UK and exported to Saudi Arabia, the current approach to arms sales has failed in the case of Yemen. The Yemeni people are the innocent victims.

The Government must show the same leadership shown by the Netherlands and Germany in suspending licences for arms exports to Saudi Arabia. More specifically, at the end of last year the US Government, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) has already said, banned the sale of guided munitions kits to Saudi Arabia. Will the Minister clarify whether the UK Government have granted export licences to Saudi Arabia for any similar weapons manufactured here in the UK? Would the Government be happy to do so in the future? In addition, rather than relying on the Saudis to dispose of the weapons themselves, Ministers should demand that they are turned over to our own personnel for disposal. As signatories to the cluster munitions convention, are we not legally obliged to do everything we can to prevent their use? Decommissioning them ourselves would serve that responsibility, so will Ministers pledge to do so today?

To be the honest broker that the region so desperately needs, we need to be clear about the involvement of UK forces on the ground in Saudi Arabia. When it published its report in September, the Foreign Affairs Committee recommended that the UK Government answer the following questions:

“How many UK personnel are assisting the Saudi Arabian armed forces and in what roles, including BAE Systems employees; What is the extent of the involvement of each group of UK personnel with the Saudis operations in Yemen; and How are UK personnel advising the Saudi Arabian armed forces on IHL and what level of understanding do they have of the coalition’s regard for IHL in its operations in Yemen.”

Those answers should also be forthcoming now.

This Government have an opportunity: to show international leadership; to use our power and influence in the middle east to stop violence, not to sell more weapons; and to end the suffering of millions of Yemeni men, women and children. In order to do that, the Government must come clean, with this House and with the country, about our involvement to date and the actions they have taken to put things right. Then, the Government can begin to play their part in consigning this forgotten conflict to history, where it belongs.
3.11 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Let me start by echoing everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and Members from both sides of the House have said today about the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. I congratulate him on securing this important debate. Let me also make it clear at the outset that we agree with the principles behind UN resolution 2216. We all want to see Yemen restored to the control of a legitimate, stable and democratic Government, capable of peacefully leading the whole country, and we all want to see the Houthi rebels held to account, both for their illegal coup and for the atrocities they have committed during this war. But with all due respect to those on the Government Benches and to some Members on my own Benches, may I say that it is possible to agree with the principles of the UN resolution while disagreeing profoundly, first, with the way in which this has been enforced and the way alleged violations of international law are being investigated and, secondly, with the abject failure of the British Government to bring this war to an end?

First, let me deal with the investigation of alleged war crimes. [Interruption.] If Government Members will give me a moment, I will be going into details, as I have 10 minutes. First, let me turn to the investigation of alleged war crimes committed by both sides, coalition and Houthi. Labour Members have said many times, just as the UN, all leading human rights groups and a number of Select Committees of this House have, that the only way to ensure the comprehensive, thorough and impartial investigation of those alleged crimes is to commission an independent UN inquiry. In response to our call, the Government have been consistent, saying that the Saudi-led coalition must be left to investigate themselves. Let us see how that is going, shall we?

In October, I revealed at this Dispatch Box that of the 3,158 documented airstrikes against civilian targets up to the end of August 2016, the coalition’s joint incidents assessment team had issued reports on just nine—a pathetic 0.002%. How many more reports has it completed since? It has completed just four. Of that total of 13 “investigations”—I use that word advisedly—there are just three in which the JIAT has found any culpability on behalf of the coalition. In the other 10 cases, comprising 241 civilian deaths and the bombing of four food trucks, three medical facilities, one school, one wedding, one cattle market, one food market and one food factory, the JIAT has found—surprise, surprise—that the coalition has done nothing wrong. This is the investigatory body into which the Government have put all their faith to ensure that the coalition is not violating international law.

Let us look at the man in charge of the JIAT, Colonel Mansour al-Mansour—or, as he is known by some in Bahrain, “The Butcher”. In 2011, while Bahrain’s popular uprising was being brutally suppressed and martial law was being put in place, Colonel al-Mansour was the military lawyer who presided over the kangaroo court that was set up to jail and execute the protestors, activists, Opposition politicians, teachers, doctors, religious clerics, journalists and human rights campaigners—in fact, anyone seen as a threat to the Bahrain regime. Hundreds were jailed or sentenced to death under his orders, yet this is the man in whom the Government have put all their faith to investigate alleged war crimes in Yemen. What are we to make of that? The Government are being either extremely naive or extremely negligent, but either way it is not good enough.

I thought it very telling when on Tuesday the Minister said of the Saudi coalition:

“This is having to provide reports when it makes mistakes, and it has never done that before. It has no experience of even writing reports.”—[Official Report, 10 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 145.]

That much is obvious, given that it has produced only 13 reports in eight months. What is more telling is the Minister’s implication that the JIAT’s role is just to identify mistakes.

Mr Ellwood: No, it is not.

Emily Thornberry: The Minister shouts from a sedentary position that that is not its role, but he said on Tuesday—I am simply quoting him—that it is having to provide reports when it has made mistakes. If it has only to identify mistakes, contrary to everything the Government have claimed, the JIAT is not investigating whether international law has been breached; it is just being taken on trust. All the JIAT is doing is looking at a handful of high-profile incidents and in one or two cases saying that a mistake has been made. Again, that is not good enough—[Interruption.] If the Minister wants to intervene on me, he is welcome to, but if he is just going to sit there and heckle, I am afraid he is not doing his cause any good. What I have described is not good enough as an investigation and it is certainly not good enough as the basis for confidence that our arms laws are not being breached. It is not good enough for this to be investigated by al-Mansour in the way that it is being investigated. Thirteen reports in eight months is not good enough.

I turn to the role that Britain must play in bringing an end to the conflict and, again, I go back to what the Minister said on Tuesday. The House may remember that I asked why the UK had not presented its resolution to the Security Council, and the Minister explained that “we will not get a Security Council resolution passed until we get the cessation of hostilities in place.”—[Official Report, 10 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 142.]

If that is the case, why does clause 1 of the UK’s draft resolution demand an immediate cessation of hostilities? Why would the very first line of the resolution demand something that is already in place?

Back in October, the UK’s ambassador to the UN said:

“We have decided to put forward a draft security council resolution on Yemen calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities and a resumption of the political process”.

In other words, the resolution was designed to be the driving force behind a ceasefire and peace talks, just as one was with resolution 1860 on Gaza, resolution 2174 on Libya, and resolution 2254 on Syria. For the Minister to claim now that we must have the ceasefire before we can have the resolution makes no sense. So what is the real explanation for the delay?

Mr Ellwood: I do not know where to start with this. Perhaps I should begin by saying that when a draft resolution is put together—and when the words are formed and so on—we do not air it in public because it is very likely that the details will change. The hon. Lady needs to hold on until the actual UN resolution comes about, and then we can absolutely debate it. I pose a question
to her, as I am supposed to in an intervention: has she read UN Security Council resolution 2216? I ask because it calls for exactly the same thing. She is asking for a ceasefire, but that is already inherent in UN Security Council resolution 2216.

Emily Thornberry: I am very interested to hear what the hon. Gentleman says, and I will listen with some care to his speech. I know that the Government have said on many occasions that the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen is backed by the UN, and that they rely on the same resolution. I would be interested to hear where that is in the resolution, and how it can be claimed that Saudi intervention in Yemen is—[Interruption.]

Keith Vaz: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Emily Thornberry: Yes, of course.

Keith Vaz: I do not think that there is a huge gap between what my hon. Friend and the Minister are saying. When I was at the Security Council, what was in the draft resolution was certainly common knowledge, and every member of the Security Council spoke in favour of the ceasefire. Given that everyone knows what is in the draft resolution—it is in the public domain—there is no reason why this cannot be tabled.

Emily Thornberry: I respectfully agree. For 50 days, we have all known what is in the draft resolution, and we wait and wait for the British to put the resolution on the table. There is support for it, and it has a number of elements in it. During the rest of my speech, I wish to explain why the British are not putting it on the table. I will take interventions as necessary if the Minister wishes to explain.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady tempts me. I ask her to join in with the spirit of the debate and try to look at the positives and at what we can actually do. She is focusing deeply on a draft resolution, which, having been involved in the Riyadh talks on 19 December, I can promise Members is now out of date. I will go into more detail in my response, but if she devotes another few minutes to this matter it will be superfluous to the wider debate—the good debate—that we have had in this Chamber.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natasha Engel): Before the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) rises, may I remind everyone that we have another debate after this and that it is quite well subscribed?

Emily Thornberry: I will not take any more interventions. I will just go straight through the rest of my speech, because I have some important points to make. The truth is that Saudi Arabia does not want this resolution to be presented. When asked about the UK’s draft resolution in November by an Arab newspaper, the Saudi ambassador to the UN said:

“there is a continuous and joint agreement with Britain concerning the draft resolution, and whether there is a need for it or not.”

The newspaper goes on to say that the Saudi ambassador claimed that the UK draft resolution

“includes an unnecessary text, in addition to having a wrong timing.”

So there we have it in black and white.
the capital, Sana’a, and forced out the legitimate Government of President Hadi. Those forces have subsequently attacked Saudi Arabia, shelled border villages and killed Saudi civilians.

In March 2015, a Saudi-led coalition of 10 countries started a military occupation to restore the Hadi Government, deter further Houthi aggression—which, otherwise, was likely to have reached the port of Aden—and defend the Saudi border. In April 2015, UN Security Council resolution 2216 condemned the Houthis actions. Paragraph 5 of the resolution called for a cessation of violence. In that context, the UK supports the coalition’s efforts.

UK diplomatic efforts also play an important role here. The Government believe that a political settlement is the only way to find lasting peace in Yemen, and we have been at the forefront of the international diplomatic effort to make progress towards that goal. In July last year, here in London, we brought together the Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and the US Secretary of State, to discuss a political way forward and to show support for the role of the UN in mediating a solution to the crisis.

Keith Vaz: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: If there is time at the end of my speech, I will give way, but I am under pressure from Madam Deputy Speaker as there is another debate after this.

That informal group of key players is known as the Quad, and subsequent meetings have expanded to include the UN special envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ahmed, and representatives from other Gulf countries.

The last Quad meeting I attended was in Riyadh on 18 December, and we agreed to urge all the Yemeni parties to engage with the UN process and put the needs of Yemen’s people first. We will continue to engage directly with the parties and with our partners in the region to support the UN’s proposals for peace. I spoke to President Hadi on 6 January—just a week ago—to emphasise the urgent need to find a way forward in the political process. We clearly have a transition, and in America, Rex Tillerson will take over from John Kerry. He is familiar with the area, having lived and worked in Yemen for about three years during his career.

Emily Thornberry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: No. I will give way at the end, as I need to pay tribute and comment on other contributions.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby touched on the history of the region, and it is worth underlining the fact that there are complex divisions in that country, not simply one between those supporting President Hadi and those supporting the Houthis or Saleh. There have been internal conflicts and power struggles since unification in 1990. There are super-tribes, tribes, militias, family clans, elites, secessionist groups and terrorist organisations—all this leads to instability on a grand scale. Loyalties are not firm. They move and come and go, along with the winds. That is the backdrop against which we are dealing with this matter.

The hon. Gentleman asked the key question as to when we will join calls for an independent inquiry. We have said we will support an independent inquiry, and I shall make the argument to say when that case might come to the fore.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) gave a powerful speech, reflecting his understanding and grasp of what is going on in the region. He paid tribute to the work that the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Stephen O’Brien, is doing at the UN in exposing what is actually happening and what further work needs to be done. I think the whole House would join my right hon. Friend in that tribute. He also talked about the remarkable visit, which I was pleased to be involved in, of the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir. Had we ever before heard of a Foreign Minister from any of the Gulf nations coming to this House, meeting parliamentarians and answering every question as best as he could? I hope that will happen again.

The Saudi Foreign Minister asked the clear question, “Why would we want to bomb farms and schools in Yemen?”, putting into context the fact that the two countries have a deep history with one another. There is no long-term interest in Saudi Arabia causing damage right across the piece to Yemen in the way in which some Opposition Front Benchers have described. It is not in the interests of Saudi Arabia, especially because of the international condemnation that that brings about. The Foreign Minister admitted that Saudi Arabia is slow in providing the reporting that everybody in this House has been calling for, and he was willing to ask whether we could help him to provide that.

Saudi Arabia is very much a culturally reserved country. It is unused to the limelight that it now has to adapt to live in, and to the sustained warfare in which it is now having to participate. It is also clearly unused to having to provide the reporting and scrutiny required when sustained warfare takes place, in the same way that we have had to learn to have those mechanisms in place to provide the transparency that is now expected on the battlefield.

Stephen Doughty: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: Very briefly.

Stephen Doughty: On the issue of transparency, the Minister says that Saudi Arabia should learn from us, so will he explain something? He said that his Department had immediately decided to correct the mistakes that it had given to this House in debate and in parliamentary questions, but he has just confirmed to me in a written answer at 3.11 pm that, in fact, the Foreign Secretary...
knew about it as early as 28 June. Why did it take nearly a month to come to this House with the correct information?

Mr Ellwood: The Defence Secretary made a point about that. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) knows me; I have done my best to be as transparent as possible. Those Opposition Members who have ever been Ministers will know that we have one of the best civil services in the world, dealing with thousands upon thousands of written answers.

Emily Thornberry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: No, I will not. I will finish my point. Occasionally mistakes are made, and we put our hands up and say that they have been made. I am sorry that there was a delay. At the time, I think we were in the middle of the Brexit piece as well. As soon as we realised that one error was made, we did an investigation and found that, out of almost 100 parliamentary questions answered, there was one clerical error, which continued on; I think there was a handful of them.

Stephen Doughty: Six.

Mr Ellwood: Six, yes. In six out of almost 100 the wording was incorrect. We then did an investigation that took some time. I tell the House now, as I did before, that I apologise for that. There is no conspiracy. It was an error that I take on my shoulders. Yet again, I apologise to the House. I will now move on.

Emily Thornberry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not because I want to mention the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who made some important points about the conflict being a forgotten war. Today’s debate is doing well to ensure that we have not forgotten about it here. He mentioned the urgency of a ceasefire, which gives me licence to talk about the pending UN Security Council resolution—it has not yet been completely written, but is in the process of being written. It is based on the road map, which was discussed on 19 December, and includes seven steps. I will elaborate a little on those steps so that hon. Members can see how complicated it is to get a consensus on them.

The measures include: the sequence of security steps for the withdrawal of equipment; the agreed roles and appointments of who is going to run a transition process; the resumption of consultations in accordance with the GCC negotiations, the partnership and peace agreement, and UN Security Council resolution 2216; the additional withdrawals; the signing of a detailed agreement; and a potential donor conference, which we need a commitment for. All that leads up to an electoral road map. That is complicated business, and that is why a UN Security Council resolution is not going to be a draft coming straight out, because that one is out of date.

Emily Thornberry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way to the hon. Lady—I have actually made that clear.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) made an important point, which came up at Foreign Affairs—

Emily Thornberry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In your absence, there has been a bit of backwards and forwards between the Front Benches, and I gave way on several occasions to the Minister. He is now making it clear that he will not allow me to intervene at all.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Let us just be clear about this. It is up to the Member, the Minister or the shadow Minister whether they give way or not—those are the rules of the House. The other point is that I understand this debate was meant to finish at 3.30 pm. We are now running over. The fact is the Minister does not wish to give way—that is his choice. It is no use getting uptight about it—that’s life.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker. I understand that, with the remaining two minutes—

Emily Thornberry rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This is not a continuation, I hope. Let us get to the end of the debate. There are people who want to go on to the next debate. Please, I want to look after all Members of this House and all Members who wish to speak in the next debate, but they will not do so if we run on a lot longer over time. Please, let us get to the end, because I do want Mr Twigg to come in next.

Emily Thornberry rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. No, I am sorry—I have finished.

Mr Ellwood: In the last two minutes I have, I wanted to make a point to my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham, who raised an issue that was mentioned at FCO questions on Tuesday. The fundamental backdrop to this issue is, in essence, a cold war that exists between the Sunni and Shi’ite leaderships. We need to solve that; we need to try to move forward from it. There is actually—technically, theologically—no doctrinal difference between the two faiths. They both believe in the centrality of the Prophet Mohammed; it all actually goes down to the difference in succession in 632—was the successor Ali, the son-in-law and cousin, or was it Abu Bakr, the father-in-law? Since then, there have been varying tensions throughout Islamic history, and peace and prosperity might improve if the two faiths could actually reconcile their political differences. That is at the core of a lot of the challenges we find in the middle east.

Time prevents me from being able to respond to other contributions, although I will do my best, as I have in the past, to write to Members. I will end by clarifying—

Stephen Twigg: Will the Minister give way before he sits down?

Mr Ellwood: I will give way, unless I can answer the hon. Gentleman’s question, as I think I am about to, by talking about when we feel it would be inappropriate to have faith any longer in the Saudi system.
The Government are not opposing calls for an international independent investigation, but, first and foremost, we want the Saudis to investigate allegations of breaches of international humanitarian law attributed to them, and we want their investigations to be thorough and conclusive. The Saudis have the best insight into their own military procedures, and will be able to conduct the most thorough and conclusive investigations. That will also allow the country really to understand what went wrong and to apply the lessons in the best possible way.

That is the standard we set ourselves and our allies. For example, when allegations were made against us in Afghanistan and Iraq, we investigated them. When, for example, the US was accused of bombing the Médecins Sans Frontières facility in Kunduz, it investigated that incident and applied the lessons learned to its military procedures to reduce the risk of such things happening again.

Saudi Arabia has publicly stated that it is investigating reports about allegations of violations of IHL and that any lessons learned will be acted on. It is absolutely right that, to date, only 13 have been reported. The machine is slow in putting these things together. The conduct of the investigations is absolutely new, and the Joint Incidents Assessment Team is learning its way. I keep putting pressure on those involved, and I will continue to do so.

To digress, we should remember how long it took for the Chilcot inquiry to come together, and the machine we have in this country is well versed in the legal parameters we have to deal with. For the moment, we need to have faith in Saudi Arabia to say, “Yes, these reports must be forthcoming.” For the moment, I remain with that and confident it can produce these reports.

In conclusion, this has been a very good debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee. This is not a forgotten crisis, and we remain fully engaged in securing a political solution. We will continue to lead the way in providing humanitarian support. Ultimately, it is for the Yemenis themselves to reach a compromise, and we stand ready to help them.

3.39 pm

Stephen Twigg: I am very disappointed that the Minister, in his final remarks, gave us no further indication of when the Government would actually move to support a fully independent investigation. I am pleased that he responded to my point, but we have not been taken further on this issue, and I think that the House will return to it.

I agree with the Minister that we have had a very good debate. There are many areas of agreement. This is a complex country in terms of history and politics. The humanitarian crisis is appalling. We all want to work together to ensure access for humanitarian organisations. We welcome the positive leadership role that DFID has played in getting aid in. We need a ceasefire, we need a political settlement, and we need reconstruction.

This debate was co-sponsored by my friend, the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White), who chairs the Committees on Arms Export Controls. Those Committees play a crucial role in this House in monitoring arms exports. Some are arguing that that system should be abolished and that instead this should fall under the remit of the International Trade Committee. This debate demonstrates again the importance of effective scrutiny of arms exports controls in terms of development, foreign affairs, and other aspects; it is not simply a question of international trade.

Evidence to my Select Committee from humanitarian organisations said:

“There is a paradox at the heart of the”

UK’s

“approach to Yemen.”

We are generous on aid but we are also contributing to the conflict through our arms sales. There are different views on arms among those on both sides of the House, and that has been reflected in the debate. However, I hope that we can all come together behind this motion, supported by three Committees of the House, which says that we should have this investigation, because, yes, we want peace, but alongside peace we want justice. A ceasefire is a necessary condition, but not sufficient. We will get justice only when we have a full, independent investigation into all alleged violations by all parties to this conflict.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen and the impact of the conflict on civilians; condemns any breach of international humanitarian law; and calls for an urgent independent investigation into reports of breaches of international humanitarian law on both sides of the conflict.
African Great Lakes Region

3.42 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the security and political situation in the African Great Lakes region.

This is the first opportunity that the House has had since the general election to discuss the great lakes region. I shall curtail my remarks somewhat to allow sufficient time for Back Benchers who wish to speak, as we have already lost 12 minutes or more of the debate.

The first three countries I am going to mention are countries where things have gone better in recent times. I start with Rwanda, which has a booming economy and has moved on from the genocide of 1994 in the most admirable ways. In November 2015, the White House put out a statement saying: “President Kagame, who in many ways has strengthened and developed Rwanda, now has an historic opportunity to enshrine his legacy by honouring his commitments to respect the term limits set when he entered office...any move to prolong his hold on power would be to the detriment of Kagame’s legacy”.

On 1 December, Samantha Power called for Kagame to step down in 2017. What is the UK Government’s position on this?

Secondly, in relation to the UN rapporteur’s report on freedom of association and freedom of expression, has the UK been making representations—for example, in the Minister’s meeting with the Rwandans in December 2015—to ensure that those in other political parties are not being labelled as enemies of the state and that the plurality of democracy becomes a key part, alongside a booming economy, of building this country as one of the great powerhouses of Africa?

The third issue is the function of non-governmental organisations, which is another big worry in Rwanda, not least in relation to appointments to the leadership of NGOs through the Rwanda Governance Board, whose role should be regulatory—it should not interfere and control. What is our Government’s position on that, and what representations are being made on those three issues?

I will move on from Rwanda. It would have been good to say more, but I am sure that others will do so. I suspect that less will be said about the Central African Republic, which is not mentioned or visited much by anyone. It has been too unsafe to visit, but the Pope has now demonstrated that it is moving on. The turnout at the last election in 2016 was an impressive 79%, and now demonstrated that it is moving on. The turnout at the last election in 2016 was an impressive 79%, and

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The all-party parliamentary group on the African great lakes region intends to make a proposal relating to the delegation to the Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly—Members may be interested in participating—and both CAR and Congo-Brazzaville may well be part of that. The Foreign Office in Kinshasa would certainly be keen on delegations visiting areas with which we need to build relationships and whose gains we can consolidate. Things have improved significantly in those countries in recent times, which is welcome. We should temper criticism and provide support for improving their democracy. We should continue to press them on that, while acknowledging their progress.

In Burundi, which I visited two years ago, there is a less happy state of affairs. The Department for International Development has pulled out and we do not have an embassy there. I pressed Ministers in the last Government on that issue. It was a mistake for us to withdraw from Burundi—and that has proven to be the case—because it is becoming increasingly anglicised in its approach to the world, as part of the east African community. It has followed many others by going its own way. Some Presidents seem to think that they ought to be there for life. In this case, there has been significant turmoil and a lot of violence, not least from the acolytes of President Nkurunziza and his entourage. There are huge dangers in the country, but what are we doing to assist and intervene? Do we support the use of chapter 7 of the UN charter to deploy a police force, in accordance with UN resolution 2303 of July 2016? What will it take for the UN Security Council to make that decision, and are we working to that end? What other leverage are we using on the President to ensure that the country moves on?

Burundi is hardly spoken about, but its genocide compares with the worst in Africa in recent and historic times. An extraordinary level of genocide was hidden away in the ‘70s and ‘80s. From 1972 onwards, the country experienced the biggest single proportionate dislocation of people anywhere in the world. The displaced population moved across the border to Tanzania in dramatically large numbers, and they have been reassimilated extraordinarily successfully. Yet we stand aside from all that, and from the needs of the country. Its democracy is under threat and violence has broken out repeatedly. The country carries the legacy of the hidden genocide, which has been highlighted by the discovery in the last...
24 hours of 1,000 bodies in a mass grave in the Rusaka district. What are we doing, and why are we not properly engaging?

What about the NGO situation? The Iteka league was banned on 3 January. What about malaria? The country—the second-poorest country on the planet—is not really moving forward in tackling malaria. When it comes to human rights, what are we doing in Geneva with the Human Rights Council to ensure that Burundi is not given a soft option and that it is tackled about what it is doing, so that it can become a great success in Africa rather than regressing into dictatorship and the ensuing violence?

The final country I shall mention is the seventh poorest on the planet and the biggest—the DRC. It is a country of extraordinary size, with a population of 60 million, high levels of displacement and wars on its eastern side for a long time. Again, the opportunities are great, but what are we doing? An agreement was reached on 31 December on progress to enable the President to stand down. He has not yet signed the agreement, although most observers seem to think that he will. What are we doing to ensure that democracy prevails in that huge country? We have a significant aid programme in the country. What are we doing to ensure that the move on of Kabila is seen as a starting point for significant change, not a silver bullet?

What are we doing to ensure that our efforts are not concentrated entirely on the conflict areas of the east, but that they reach the whole mass of the country? The largest amount of—I am not sure that illegal is the right term—ad hoc land mining anywhere in the world has taken place across the western borders, and a huge chunk of the country has the most extraordinary health and safety conditions, deaths and lack of regulations. Our expertise could play a significant role.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I understand the plaintive cry of, “What are we doing?” This country can do a lot only through working with others, but we are doing a significant amount in our own right at Foreign Office level, through DFID, and, as the hon. Gentleman knows, even at party level. In my role as vice-chairman of international affairs in the Conservative party, we work, along with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, on democracy building in several of those states. The Conservative party has a project, and I suspect that the Scottish National party and the Labour party have projects too, in the great lakes region. There is one pivotal country to which the hon. Gentleman has not referred—Uganda. The security implications of what is happening in Uganda will be gravely important for the whole region in the years to come.

John Mann: The right hon. Gentleman makes his point eloquently.

I have some practicalities for the Minister. The electoral commission in the DRC has no money and no capacity. Our expertise in elections is huge, so could we provide expertise and support? Are we considering how our aid programme can assist in trying to ameliorate some of the conflicts—for example, that in Katanga with the Bantu and the competition for land? How do we see the MONUSCO force developing? Many perceive it as highly ineffective in recent times. What is our approach to ensuring that that force is effective and that our expertise is brought to bear as part of it?

Alongside our aid programme, we have huge interests, such as mining companies, which are heavily involved in the DRC. The minerals are without question the reason for so much continuous war in the east and the south-east. People are battling for minerals, or groups are funded by minerals. What are we doing to ensure that we, with companies in this country, are not responsible? Indeed, when we consider the bribery and the payments to military groups, how do we know whether we are responsible?

Do the Government not see the importance of the proposals on beneficial ownership in places such as the British Virgin Islands? That directly connects to the conflict in the DRC through mineral companies that are based in offshore locations such as the British Virgin Islands. The New York Times recently revealed a series of suspicious bank transfers totalling around $100 million to Mr Kabila’s adopted brother. That is only one example. It is clear from the way in which the Serious Fraud Office has had to be involved that that is only skimming the surface. We could do a significant amount if we simply clarified and confirmed beneficial ownership of the moneys and the mining interests and held people to account. Some people believe that the various military forces battling illegally in the DRC are using mining money through bribery and direct extraction. We therefore have a huge responsibility to the region as well as to the DRC. What are we doing about that?

I pay tribute to Carole Velasquez and Noreen Kassam—two volunteers who have assisted the all-party group; in Carole’s case, for many years—for their support, and to CAFOD, which has been hugely influential in supporting and assisting the Catholic Church in getting the breakthrough in the DRC. There are many other great players in the aid world in this country, and they should be congratulated on their work. I could say much more but I will not; I hand over to others.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Marvellous. May I say to hon. Members that if they speak for up to seven minutes, everyone will have equal time? I know that Front Benchers do not like their time being squeezed, but they may get squeezed again.

3.59 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) who has also sponsored this debate.

The UK is increasingly engaged in the great lakes region and rightly so. It is vital that we continue to be so for the long term, and that we do not dip in and out but maintain our presence in a positive way in the many different respects I will come on to. I am more positive about the great lakes than I have been for some time. We have on many occasions in the past year raised huge concerns about the future of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, yet I hope the agreement reached on new year’s eve will be remembered in the same way as we remember the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland: as a time when differences were put aside in the interests of their people. As the hon. Member for Bassettlaw said,
the agreement talks about elections this year, no third
term for President Kabila, and no referendum or
constitutional changes.

I pay great tribute to the Catholic Church, which has
done so much; to the retiring US envoy Thomas Perriello,
who has done a tremendous job; to our own Foreign
and Commonwealth Office; to the EU; and to our own
great lakes envoy, Danae Dholakia. I also want to pay
tribute to the work done by DFID—colleagues and I
saw its work on a visit in July—particularly on health in
remote regions and access to water. They are some of
the best projects I have ever seen. They are done at low
cost by people who have been really committed to the
DRC for decades. These are not consultants who come
and go, but really committed people who put their life’s
work into helping the poorest.

Burundi is another matter, but we must be as positive
as possible. The years 2015 and 2016 have been a
tragedy for that country. It is vital that 2017 is better.
Every effort must be put into turning the country around,
principally by those who have responsibility for it. One
lesson we have to remember is to ensure that any
agreements made are watertight. The Burundi problem
arose from the lack of clarity over how many terms the
current President would serve or in what way he would
be re-elected. As a result, hundreds if not thousands of
people have been killed. Any agreement must look forward
to problems that may arise when they are signed.

The former President of Tanzania, Benjamin Mkapa,
is negotiating and has done a fine job. We must continue
to support him in every way possible. It is disappointing
that some organisations have withdrawn their support
from the process. We can understand the reasons why,
but I believe it is the only game in town and they need to
be engaged with it. As President Mkapa said, they need
to deal with the situation as it is: to work with President
Nkurunziza; to try to persuade the Government of Burundi
to turn away from an extremely dangerous path; to see
extrajudicial killings stopped; to see paramilitaries and
roaming gangs return to lawful activity; to restore law
and order and human rights; and above all to not let the
blight of ethnic hatred, to which the hon. Member for
Bassetlaw referred, come back. Burundi has suffered as
grievously from genocide as Rwanda, but it was a rolling
genocide over decades and not a genocide in 100 days
in 1994.

I will not say much about Rwanda, because other
Members possibly will do so. It has been a success story,
but with problems along the way. There is an election
this year. This is a time for the country to come together.
It is also a time to look to the future. If as seems likely
President Kagame, who in many ways has been an
outstanding if flawed leader, stands again, he needs to
look beyond the next term as to who his successor will
be. He has the interests of his country at heart. He
will want it to prosper in the future. He knows that he
will not be around forever—none of us are.

Tanzania is probably the country in this region that is
closest to my heart, having lived there for so many years.
It has generally managed the transition to free
and fair elections extremely well, except, sadly, in the
case of Zanzibar. There was progress in Zanzibar from
2010 to 2015, but the elections in that year were flawed
and pulled in a way about which our Government made
their view quite clear. The elections were re-held in 2016
without the presence of the main Opposition party. It is
vital that the island of Zanzibar comes together with
the Union Government and resolves this problem. The
people of Zanzibar deserve nothing less. They are a
peaceful and wonderful people.

At the same time, Tanzania has respected the two-term
limit for presidents impeccably, for which we should
give that country great credit. The CCM, the major
ruling party, has achieved a great deal, but it needs to go
further. The Government need to bring in an independent
electoral commission in Tanzania. In my opinion, that
is the biggest flaw in Tanzanian democracy at the moment.
At the same time, the Opposition need to use Parliament
and the parliamentary process to deal with the understandable questions it has for the Government,
rather than just taking to the streets every time. I pay
tribute to the Opposition for keeping calm and not
going ahead with the major demonstrations proposed
in September, which I believe would have resulted in
unnecessary violence and possibly deaths.

On Uganda, the examples of former Presidents Benjamin
Mkapa and Ali Hassan Mwinyi in Tanzania, as well
John Kufuor in Ghana, show the benefit of presidents
who recognise the importance of term limits. Those
who stay on forever rarely go gracefully. That is surely a
lesson for Uganda. The peace and stability since 1986 has
been a huge relief for the people of Uganda, but proper
open and democratic transition is also a sign of wisdom
and maturity.

Finally, I wish to refer to development in all these
countries. In our debate on the sustainable development
goals last November in Westminster Hall, I referred to
the five levers of development that I believe are crucial,
including to all the countries of the great lakes region:
jobs and livelihoods, health and health research, education,
gender equality and infrastructure. DFID and the UK
are involved in pretty much all these countries, including
in Burundi—not directly but through multilateral means—
and it is vital that this continues. As I said at the
beginning, we must remain committed for the long term
to ensuring the future prosperity of this wonderful and
very important part of the world.

4.7 pm

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I thank my hon.
Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) for
securing this important debate.

I want to focus on eastern Democratic Republic of
the Congo, because it is an area that has been overlooked
by this place, the west and the whole world. Obviously,
stability and security in the great lakes region of Africa
is too often overlooked by the international community.
That applies particularly to the eastern DRC but throughout
the region. Violence, rape and displacement have become
normalised, while several of the region’s countries have
become bywords for conflict and human rights abuses.
Over 1,000 Congolese women are raped every day. It
seems uniquely shocking when we talk about it, but then
there seems to be a transformation in our minds, and
we think, “Well, it is tragically commonplace”, and
we just seem to accept it. That is a really sad reflection.

The result is a relative lack of awareness of and
action against the political instability that has beset
these countries for decades. Worse still, there is a tendency
to regard the violence as perpetual and inevitable, in contrast
to conflicts in other parts of the world, which seem more immediately redeemable and on which we seem to be more focused. The ongoing refugee crisis in Europe and the Mediterranean is testament to this trend, as is Syria. The Calais “Jungle”, for example, received a huge amount of coverage and activism, compared to the refugees of eastern DRC and Burundi, and yet the Calais refugees, as tragic as their plight was, numbered just 7,000, compared with the millions of internally displaced persons in Burundi, eastern DRC and DRC more widely who have been displaced for decades—not months or a year but decades. Worse still, millions of refugees torn from their families, homes and communities have been forced to live in east African refugee camps for about 20 years. It is a shame that so little attention is paid to this issue.

Having visited Rwanda twice in the past few years and spoken to Congolese refugees who have been accommodated there, I have some tentative reflections on the issue. Rwanda seems to be a developed country and a relatively stable and increasingly prosperous democracy, whereas the DRC continues to be plagued by anarchic and systemic violence. According to recent UN statistics, there are currently 2.7 million internally displaced people, as well as 430,000 refugees displaced from the eastern DRC, spread in camps across Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania—nearly half a million people whom we seem to ignore when we talk about human rights and helping people.

On my first visit to one of the camps at Byumba, I witnessed at first hand the conditions in which families, often spanning three generations—can Members believe that?—have had to live. Located at the very top of a lowly mountain range, isolated from the attention of the world, the Gihembe refugee camp houses some 15,000 people. It has been there since the 1990s. It is overcrowded, lacking in resources and cramped. The shacks and primitive accommodation are crowed together on the steep slopes, and inside the camp there is an inadequate supply of water, electricity and food. Children aged under 18 represent a staggering 51.2% of the camp’s population, and because they have grown up in these camps, they know nothing else. This is the world in which they live, which our world does not seem to understand or even care about. Poor education and insufficient public amenities abound.

The situation in the DRC makes it almost impossible for refugees to return home. More than 100 armed militia groups camped out in its impenetrable jungles continue to kill and terrorise families daily, and rape continues to be used as a weapon of war. I hope that the issue will be raised in the Chamber again and again in the future, because we should not turn our back on it. No inquiry seems to be taking place into the failure and the ongoing violence. Stabilisation would enable the refugees to return home and conduct their lives without the constant fear of violence and unending poverty.

An attitudes survey carried out by the South African Sonke Gender Justice Network in 2012 showed a shocking prevalence of the acceptance of rape among Congolese men. One in three men in the eastern DRC admitted to committing sexual assault, while 61% of interviewees stated that women sometimes deserved to be beaten. The DRC has been branded the “rape capital of the world”, and I hope that we will address that in future debates.

4.14 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) on securing this debate and making a wide-ranging and comprehensive speech on the region.

There can be few areas of the world where the real legacy of colonialism remains so apparent as the great lakes region of Africa. Few areas have such outstanding resources—natural resources and resilient people—but few areas also have a greater burden to bear due to the horrific history of western greed and appropriation among other reasons.

I have a particular interest in, and many friends from, the DRC and I wish to focus on it today. This is a country that has never had a peaceful transition to democratic power, and that is tragic. The fact that the Church has brokered a deal at least puts the democratic transition back on the table in the coming year and that is to be welcomed, although only cautiously as it remains to be seen whether President Kabila will sign up to the transition; his record, as we know, is not a good one.

This is how Amnesty International summed up the last year in the DRC:

“Government repression of protests…intensified. Violations of the rights to freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly increased. Human rights defenders, youth activists and politicians were threatened, harassed, arbitrarily arrested and in some cases convicted for peacefully exercising their rights…numerous armed groups perpetrating serious abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law…high civilian death toll and mass displacements.”
It is understandable, therefore, that people are cautious, but, as I said, a deal has been struck and right now the DRC is in a better place than before. I hope that this limited progress will be a call to action for other countries in the region, and those elsewhere with strong links to the DRC, to support the formation of a transitional Government as per the deal and ensure that Kabila does indeed step down and democratic elections do indeed take place later this year.

However, the key structural problems across the region remain and will continue to drive instability unless they are tackled. Many of these stem from the colonial period, as I mentioned at the start of my speech. Good governance of natural resources is a massive issue and is essential, but others have spoken, and will speak, about that.

Unequal distribution of land continues to impact on many of the countries in the region. Those who have been displaced because of internal conflict often return to find their land has been redistributed in their absence. While that is traumatic enough for an individual, it becomes far more destabilising if entire communities or ethnic groups are displaced and return to find their land has been seized or sold off in its entirety in their absence. Instability in one country can quickly spread across state boundaries, and there remain those who are more than willing to exploit this.

There are also very real political and financial difficulties placed on states hosting refugees from neighbouring countries. Some 100,000 displaced Burundians currently reside in Tanzania. We would do well to remember that it is the poorest countries who host the majority of the world’s refugees—and I think we will probably find they complain less because they do not see what they do as charity; they see it as their duty to humanity.

As the Scottish National party’s civil liberties spokesperson in Westminster, it would be remiss of me not to mention some of the very real dangers facing journalists, civil organisations and opposition leaders in the region. That is something that we in this Parliament can affect; by looking to build links with our parliamentary colleagues in the great lakes region, we can work to strengthen democracy and the rule of law.

I know that a great many colleagues are involved with projects and associations that work across Parliaments to help other countries develop their democratic institutions. In my role as vice-chair of the all-party group on Africa, I recently chaired a meeting here in Westminster looking at how the UK can support the participation of women and the rule of law in the DRC. It was attended by some very impressive and some very courageous women from the DRC—campaigners, activists, refugees, academics, and Eve Bazaiba, a Member of the DRC Parliament since 2006. If we need one reason above all others to do everything in our power to support the people of the DRC, it is these women and all the women and children currently living there, so many of whom have been, or will become, victims of sexual violence. Amnesty International described the rate of sexual violence in the past year as “rampant”. It is out of control. As we have heard, 1,000 women are raped a day—that is 48 per hour, which means that since this debate started not that long ago about 34 women have been raped in the DRC.

When I was a Member of the Scottish Parliament, I attended a meeting with campaigners against sexual violence in the DRC. What I heard from them haunted me for a long time. I rarely allow myself to think about it, far less speak about it, because it was so overwhelming. I cannot begin to imagine what it must have been like for those women to experience it. Today I am choosing not to share those stories that haunted me, but I remain in awe of those women because, while they courageously told their personal stories, I cannot bear to repeat their words. The sexual violence that they experienced in the DRC was savage, and if it is something that I find unspeakable, it must be extreme. We cannot turn our backs on the people in that region, and in the DRC in particular. We cannot merely tick boxes; we must tell the people of the DRC that we in this House really do care. That means that the very least we will do is play our part in ensuring that the people of the DRC are able to participate in free and democratic elections later this year.

4.20 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin), and I particularly support what she said at the end of her speech about the horrors of sexual violence in the DRC and the importance of the elections there. I reiterate the point that she and my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) made that it is often the poorest countries in the world that host the largest numbers of displaced people, including refugees. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) on securing this debate, and I echo all that he said in his opening remarks.

I congratulate the other Members who have taken part in the debate, particularly the members of the Select Committee who are here. They include my friend the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who is an expert on Tanzania and Burundi. He has been a real champion for Burundi. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), who is unable to take part in the debate but is a great champion of these issues and an expert on the situation in Uganda. My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn made a powerful speech. He talked about displacement and refugees in Africa, and the Select Committee will be addressing that important matter in an inquiry shortly.

I want to focus today on the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The scale of the humanitarian challenge there is enormous, with at least 1.6 million people internally displaced. It is estimated that about 5% of the poorest people in the world live in the DRC, and projections suggest that, unless things change, that figure will more than double over the next 15 years, which is the period for the global goals. That is the challenge that we face. Water Aid tells us that fewer than 30% of the people in the DRC have access to basic sanitation.

As others have said, the humanitarian crisis has been shaped by conflict and political instability. I echo what has been said about the encouraging signs with regard to the political position, and I congratulate the Catholic Church and others on the role that they have played in mediating talks over the Christmas period. Let us hope that we will now see movement towards elections in the DRC this year. As my hon. Friend the Member for

[Anne McLaughlin]
Bassetlaw said, the United Kingdom can and must play a proactive role, not least in supporting electoral registration. The International Development Committee is currently conducting an inquiry on fragility and development in the DRC. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford said, we visited the country last July and saw some of the work that the Department for International Development was doing. I spoke in the debate on Tuesday about the support that the Commonwealth Development Corporation is giving to a very positive hydroelectric power programme in the Virunga region. We also saw some excellent peace-building work being done in the Goma region to bring together members of the community and the police to try to break down the barriers that have inevitably built up between them over the past 20 years. We visited a camp for internally displaced people in South Kivu and heard how cash transfer—an issue that has been in the news recently—is giving back control of their lives to people who have been powerless to do anything but flee from conflict. We also went to the Red Cross hospital in Goma, where a war surgery team run by the Red Cross treats a slow but steady stream of people who have suffered some of the most appalling gunshot and machete wounds. Those are positive examples of UK aid making a real difference to some of the poorest people in the world.

As everyone who addressed the subject of the DRC in this short debate has said, the recent history of that country has been violent and unstable, but there are now some reasons for cautious hope. Let us as a country play a positive and proactive role in supporting a peaceful solution that enables elections to happen, that enables those elections to be free and fair and that puts the focus on human rights, while seeking to bring peace to a country that has been savaged by war.

The humanitarian crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo will not disappear overnight, so it is important that, through DFID, non-governmental organisations and others, we continue the hard work to alleviate the worst aspects of poverty in that country. We who serve on the International Development Committee, on a cross-party basis, have seen at first hand the many good things that are being done to alleviate poverty in the DRC, and we look forward to releasing our report as a result of that inquiry shortly.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I welcome the fact that this debate is taking place in the Chamber, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) on securing it. He said that this is the first debate in the Chamber on the great lakes since the general election, which might be true, but last January there was a debate on east and central Africa, secured by the former Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham, that tackled on a number of similar countries—there was a similar debate about the exact definition of the region. Sadly, very little has changed since then in the overall stability of the region, although we have heard about some glimmers of hope today.

Perhaps the most tragic and depressing aspect of the situation is that the people most affected by conflict, instability, poverty and food insecurity are usually the people who have done the least to cause those situations and who, almost by definition, are not in a position to do very much about them, at least without appropriate support and encouragement. At the heart of the debate should be basic questions about human dignity and our role in making sure that it is respected.

I will briefly address the various countries that have been mentioned, some of the broader regional issues and the role for the UK Government and international actors. The DRC has probably been the main focus of the debate. I have not yet had the privilege of visiting that country, but, like my hon. Friends, I have met many people visiting from the DRC, not least at the event organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) and during my time with the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund. I have never failed to be moved by those people’s optimism and determination to work for a better future, despite the immense challenges—not least the terrible sexual violence that a number of hon. Members spoke about.

I often make the point that the DRC should be one of the richest countries in the world. We all carry around a little bit of the DRC in our pocket—in the coltan in our mobile phones—yet it is one of the poorest countries. I wonder whether, in a way, we are all slightly complicit, because we enjoy cheap access to technology and perhaps do not speak out enough about the instability that suits the extraction companies and the Governments of the countries in which they are based.

I join the tributes paid to the Catholic Church and the civil society organisations that brokered the new year’s eve deal. The deal will hopefully see fresh elections and President Kabila standing down, although, as we recently saw in Gambia, it is not beyond Presidents to go back on their word.

Burundi has also been mentioned, and the hon. Member for Bassetlaw made important points about the role of the UN Security Council. Of course, tensions continue with Rwanda, and the displacement has an effect across the whole region. There is displacement into Tanzania and down into Malawi, a country with which I am familiar—the Dzaleka camp has more than 25,000 refugees from Burundi and elsewhere in the region. Yes, there is some stability in Rwanda, but at what price? Kagame will be standing again in 2017, which is why support for civil society and governance is important. The points about the Central African Republic, which Pope Francis visited in 2015, and Congo-Brazzaville are also important.

Africa would have so much to gain from tourism if only there were a little more stability and infrastructure. Very few of the challenges we have heard about are caused by natural causes or force majeure. The behaviour of people and Governments in the region and across the world are responsible. That is particularly true of climate change, which is often more of a driving force than might be immediately obvious. We in the west have done the most to cause climate change through decades of pollution and industrialisation, and people in the great lakes region are among those feeling the effects first and hardest. Indeed, the development they themselves are affected by climate change and the increasing demand for water, which threatens biodiversity.

Climate change also has a major impact on food security and the ability of small-scale and subsistence farmers to produce enough food for themselves. Food security, in turn, affects health, educational attainment, gender equality and, ultimately, people’s ability to take...
part in society and the economy. That compounds the challenge of a weak civil society and the continuation of “big man” politics throughout the region, which we have heard about.

Investment in civil society and good governance programmes is vital, even if it can be slow-burn—long-term investment is perhaps not as attractive to DFID and other donors as it once was—and, without it, the cycle will continue. Weak governance of course makes it easier for multinational companies to run riot—whether food producers grabbing land or forcing the use of GM crops, or extractive companies dodging taxes and ignoring labour standards. Members who want to reduce our foreign aid budget—we have not heard from them today, but they exist—should be the first in the queue to demand that corporations pay their taxes in developing countries, so that domestic resources are available to invest in food and education. They should be demanding that this Government hold those companies to account, especially when they are based in the City of London or in offshore tax havens.

The African Union has a role to play in all this, and it would be interesting to hear from the Minister about any diplomatic, structural and financial support the UK is prepared to give, so that it can play a full role in promoting peace and stability and in the development of democracy and good governance across the continent. The point about 0.7% is also important, and it would be good to hear the Minister reaffirm the Government’s commitment to that in this and future spending periods. I hope he recognises that that commitment is even more important in the context of Brexit, as a signal that the UK intends to play a continued, positive leadership role in the world and wants to continue to engage.

What leadership are the Government showing in tackling the complex supply chain, tax and corporate governance issues that are also wreaking so much of the havoc we have heard about today? What progress is being made to improve the reporting of the beneficial ownership of companies operating from tax havens in UK overseas territories? Again, the impact of Brexit arises here: will the UK demand that the highest standards of country-by-country reporting and supply chain management continue once it is decoupled from existing EU regulations? How will the UK continue to promote efforts to tackle climate change? Will the Foreign and Commonwealth Office be using its trumpeted relationship with the incoming US Administration to ensure that they maintain their commitment to the Paris agreement? Are the UK Government prepared to provide adequate funding to help countries in the great lakes region and across Africa adapt to the impact of climate change, which is already taking place?

If there is a similar debate in a year’s time, when I hope this Minister will at least get a break from the Dispatch Box—he has been here all afternoon—I wonder what progress will have been made. Will there have been elections in the DRC? Will the elections in Rwanda take place peacefully? Will there have been any kind of resolution or progress in Burundi? This is about the human dignity of the people who live in those countries, and our dignity is in some way diminished if we do not play our part and step up to the plate to promote a resolution. All the issues and challenges we have heard about today have been created by people, so it stands to reason that people and political will can overcome them.

4.32 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): First, let me thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) for securing this important debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I acknowledge the excellent contributions made by Members on both sides of the House. My hon. Friend highlighted some of the less mentioned countries of Africa, including the Central African Republic and Congo-Brazzaville, and the work done by Prince William. He then moved on to discuss the more commonly talked about countries in this debate, such as Burundi and the DRC.

I wish to thank the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who highlighted his positivity. I was pleased to hear him say that he felt more positive about the region than he has for a long time. That is encouraging, given his expertise, having lived in Tanzania—I was pleased to hear him share his expertise on that country. I wish to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones), who has moved place again, keeping us on our toes. He highlighted shocking violence, including the widespread acceptance of rape, and human rights abuses in the eastern DRC. He also highlighted the plight of Congolese refugees.

I wish to thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) for sharing her expertise on the DRC. It was my privilege to attend the all-party group meeting that she organised with women from the DRC. This was when I was still fairly new to this role and it was a great education for me, so I thank her for organising that meeting and inviting me along.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg)—like many of us, he has been in the Chamber all afternoon—for highlighting the humanitarian challenge in the DRC and the work done by the Department for International Development and non-governmental organisations. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) highlighted climate change and its effect on the great lakes region—an important aspect that we must not forget about.

As we all know, the African great lakes region is one of great significance, not only to stability in the African continent, but to the UK, because of the humanitarian and developmental aid that we contribute and our future trade and investment. We have heard that the region witnessed abuses of constitutional powers in 2015 and 2016, with the extension of presidential terms and numerous failures to hold fair and free elections, along with state crackdowns on political opposition and discourse.

Like most speakers, I shall focus on the DRC and Burundi. Both countries are at an acute political crossroads. Trouble in the region is no more so apparent than in Burundi, where President Pierre Nkurunziza successfully engineered for himself an illegal third term in office midway through 2015. He has also indicated that he will stand for re-election in 2020. I would be interested to hear the Minister’s comments on that situation.

Since President Nkurunziza’s decision to run again, political unrest has led to more than 1,000 dead and 8,000 people detained on political grounds, including
the leader of the main Opposition party, Gervais Niyongabo, and many high-ranking army officials. Amnesty International has reported that torture by the Burundian national intelligence service has become systemic. It has shown that secret detention facilities have multiplied and served as torture centres, used for extracting information on all those who are believed to oppose the ruling party.

Sadly, Burundi took another major step backwards by officially withdrawing from the International Criminal Court in October last year. The decision was unprecedented and could lead to other countries in the region following suit. What have the UK Government done, and what can they do, to persuade Burundi to reconsider? On new year’s eve, the country awoke to the news that its Environment Minister had been assassinated, adding to further civil unrest. Will the Minister update the House on events following that tragedy?

In 2012, the Government set out their global review of DFID funding, which committed to phasing out the bilateral programme of funding to Burundi, with no plan or commitment from the Government to restart that programme. Is the Minister aware of any additional funding or assistance that could be used to help the people of Burundi?

As we have heard, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is in similar turmoil. During President Kabila’s two terms as leader, military forces have executed a widespread crackdown on political dissidents, including through a media blackout in which he has shut down media outlets close to the Opposition, at least six of which remain blocked. At least 40 Opposition leaders and supporters and pro-democracy youth activists remain in detention throughout Congo. Many have formed rebel groups and factions that have dispersed to borders, and insurgency killings have plagued civilians, mainly in the east of the country. What additional support are we giving the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DRC to help to implement Security Council resolution 2277?

President Kabila’s failure to hold elections has led to further violence and abuse in the country. Over the Christmas and new year period, DRC security forces killed 40 protestors who were peacefully demonstrating against the refusal of a peaceful and legal transition of power. In the last days of 2016, the Catholic Church managed to broker a deal between the ruling party and the Opposition. That agreement was signed between the political parties on new year’s eve, and it stated that President Kabila will step down at the end of 2017. It is clear that all parts of the House welcome that move, and it is hoped that President Kabila himself signs and upholds the agreement to which he has yet to commit.

Sadly, yesterday, we did see the first signs of backtracking on this agreement, as a group of senior MPs, alongside confidantes of President Kabila, outspokenly challenged the deal, calling for it to be scrapped. The signs are beginning to look ominous. Will the Minister outline to the House what will happen if President Kabila fails to sign the agreement or, worse, fails to comply and to leave political office? What changes would materialise between our two countries? Would the Government consider imposing sanctions on the DRC given that the Congo is one of our largest aid recipients, with the Department for International Development projected to grant £168 million in aid in the forthcoming year? If the President does not stand down in the agreed timeframe, will the UK Government consider imposing sanctions on his family business, which has benefited from his policy reforms, particularly in mining, energy and the banking industry, all of which have gained heavily from foreign investment into the DRC, including from the UK, the US and the EU.

The African great lakes region is seeing an upsurge in political repression, violence and militia recruitment, and heightened cross-border conflicts are on the rise. Much of that is derived from historical warfare, but the suppression of fair and democratic systems and the upholding of human rights are a grave cause for concern.

The world’s eyes are currently focused on the devastation of the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, which, of course, we have just debated in this Chamber, but we must not turn a blind eye to this region, which has seen its own horrors of civil war in the 20th and 21st centuries, most notably in Rwanda. I am sure that all of us here in this House will not forget the horrors of the genocide, which claimed the lives of around 800,000 people only 23 years ago.

Rwanda is now seen as an international success, and it has blossomed as an architectural model for rehabilitation and reconciliation. None the less, the political situation in all these regions is fragile, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw and the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) have highlighted current issues with Rwanda, particularly in relation to democracy. The great lakes region will be stable only if all the countries in the region are stable—their politics are integrally linked.

As we have seen only recently in the Gambia, the power of the ballot box is beginning to break the rule of the strongman in Africa, although, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) pointed out, progress is slow. Like the hon. Member for Stafford, I am hopeful that a new era is upon us in the region. We must show our strength and ensure that, where we can, measures can be implemented to support countries across the African continent and in the great lakes region.

4.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate. Although many of the same characters are here from the previous debate, I suspect that the tone will be slightly different. It is a pleasure to respond to a subject on which there is a lot of cross-party agreement. Many of today’s questions relate to our international aid commitments, but I will do my best to answer them. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) on securing this debate. He asked a series of pertinent questions, and I will endeavour to write to him and to other Members if I do not get the opportunity to answer them or to pay tribute to the work that is being done.

Many important points have been made. Let me begin by saying that the great lakes has long been a troubled region, and that remains the case today. It faces many challenges: challenges to democracy when those in power seek to hold on to it; challenges to livelihoods; challenges to human rights from armed groups and repressive Governments; and challenges to survival from violence and hunger.
[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

It is also a region of great potential. The rapid development in Rwanda, which I have visited a number of times, is testimony to that. It also shows what can be achieved when regional Governments and the international community work together.

The UK is a major partner for the region, which is why it was part of my first visit to the continent, following my appointment in July as Minister for Africa. The UK is the second largest donor of humanitarian and development aid. We continue to play a key role in promoting sustainable peace and stability. The people of the great lakes region are resilient, and our aim is to work with Governments and the people of the great lakes countries to achieve a more peaceful, better governed, more democratic and more prosperous region.

Before going into the details of the main countries, I shall respond to some of the points that have been made. The hon. Member for Bassetlaw, who introduced the debate, talked about conflict minerals. I can assure him that we take the matter seriously. The Serious Fraud Office is looking into some investigations that are linked to British companies. Again, I can write to him with further details.

I think the hon. Gentleman was the only Member to refer to the illegal wildlife trade. We place importance on that matter and the Foreign Secretary takes it very seriously indeed. He is working with the Environment Secretary, who attended the illegal wildlife conference in Vietnam in November. We offered to host the next event, which will take place in London, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, in 2018. The Foreign Secretary’s father is very engaged in the matter as well.

Mention was also made of the power that the monarchy can bring to bear. Prince William is a huge driver in raising the profile of this matter and in increasing the understanding of the work that we have done. On a visit to Uganda, I was able to see some of the Department for International Development programmes that are in place, which are providing better intelligence to enable us to understand criminal gangs. Those gangs have no regard for borders. They are moving the ivory and so forth across those borders—looking for markets, getting through customs illegally—and on, predominantly, to the far east, which is the biggest market. That is why the hosting of the event in Vietnam was important in respect of people in the region acknowledging that more needs to be done in that neck of the woods.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the Republic of the Congo. I had the experience of crossing the mighty Congo river, in a very small boat, from Kinshasa to Brazzaville. I also had the opportunity to meet the President there, who is absolutely committed to the areas of work that we want to do.

Furthermore, there is more engagement and involvement in honouring the constitution in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: with 80 million people, what happens there can have a spillover effect into Angola and elsewhere, so it is very important that we ensure that there is stability in that part of Africa.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), whom I have long known, is an advocate and supporter of and expert on Africa. He made a powerful speech. He knows that my interest in Africa is personal, and we have a connection by way of the fact that my sister was headteacher of the international school at the base of Kilimanjaro, in Moshi. Through that, we recognised our mutual interest in Africa.

The fact that my hon. Friend says he is positive about the region, given the amount of knowledge he has, fills me with a sense of promise that we are going in the right direction. I join him in paying tribute to Tom Perriello, although I have no idea what the American envoy to the great lakes region will do next, as changes are taking place.

I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the work done by the Catholic Church to broker the deal, which is so important. I will come to that in a moment. I also pay tribute to the Tanzanians and Ugandans for the work that they have done in looking after so many refugees who have been caught up in the region.

The hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones)—who, I am pleased to say, has remained stationary since he was last referred to—mentioned the refugee crisis. We should not forget that while we discuss refugee issues relating to Libya, the Mediterranean, the shores of Turkey and Greece, and countries right across Europe, the source of many of those problems is the instability in the heart of Africa. Get the source right and those people will not feel the need to make that terrible journey across Africa to seek a life in Europe.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) made a powerful contribution, as she does on such matters. She reminded us, perhaps less delicately than I would have put it, about our historical colonial links to the country. We cannot deny our history. We have to recognise the role that we have played in the vast continent, but we can use that to our advantage by saying that there is a desire for us to continue our engagement, now working with the countries in the region in a positive way to meet some of the challenges faced today.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) mentioned the challenges of the DRC and the number of people that are displaced there. I pay tribute to the work that he and his Committee, which others have mentioned, are doing to focus on the issue. He spoke about the humanitarian crisis there that is shaping the wider conflict. He also touched on something that is so important and that was not yet apparent to me when I visited the DRC. There is vast criminality, particularly in the east of the country, but extremism has yet to set foot there. However, that is exactly where it could go to next, in the same way in which we have seen Boko Haram take advantage of the absence of government in Nigeria and al-Shabaab take advantage of the absence of governance in the southern neck of Somalia. That is why it is so important that we get it right in the east of the DRC.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) made an important point that the many millions of people affected by conflict are those who have not caused it at all. They are in a limited position to influence what is going on, yet they are the ones harmed by the conflict. However, the conflicts and problems are man-made, so they should be solvable. He was the only Member to touch on the issue of climate change. We should not forget that climate change is affecting the ability to grow crops. If it becomes too hot to be able to do so, people will have to move, so migration will be a consequence.
He asked me to reiterate our 0.7% international aid commitment. I absolutely stand by it. I would hate to see a Government of any hue challenging our 0.7% commitment, which allows us to stand up with some authority at the United Nations and to call on other countries to do things, act and follow us. I hope that all parties will continue in that vein. The more we make noises about it, the less anybody at the Treasury can sneak anything through on the quiet. We are all in agreement on that.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), the Labour spokesperson, mentioned the challenge and failure to honour constitutions across Africa. I am afraid this is something that we all need to work on. As the mother of all Parliament and a country that supports the idea of democracy, the programmes that we support with that 0.7% must not simply be about infrastructure, or working with NGOs and groups that need support, although that is important. It is also about improving governance, decision making and democratic processes so that when the terms of people such as President Kabila end, they stand down. There is nothing to stop President Kabila in the DRC from standing again in five years’ time, if he wishes to. Such people should not be able to continue on or to tweak and play around with the constitution. We do not want to see that.

The hon. Lady talked about the role of the ICC. I am afraid that there is an issue with a number of African countries choosing to step away from it to protect those who may be up for charge. We are working with our colleagues in the ICC to prevent that from happening further.

I will talk about the countries in a little more detail in the time I have remaining. In the DRC, President Kabila’s mandate ended on 19 December, as hon. Members have reflected. No elections have taken place, yet he remains in power. When I visited last year, I made the point that the UK was deeply disappointed that elections did not take place in 2016 as planned. I do not know whether hon. Members are aware of what happened. The opposition in the DRC also did not want elections to take place because the electoral commission had not upgraded the electoral roll, meaning that many 18-year-olds were not on the roll. There was a disjoint in where things would go and who should be in charge. Thankfully, the new electoral roll is being mapped out—it requires a census—so we are finally moving forward.

The unexpected good news came on 31 December, when talks mediated by the Catholic bishops hon. Members have paid tribute to reached a deal between the opposition and the Government. I join others in paying tribute to the bishops’ work—the fact that they have done that work there means there may be demand for them in other parts of Africa as well. They have achieved what few thought possible: an inclusive deal that, if implemented, will secure the DRC’s first democratic transition of power since independence. I hope to visit the country in the near future to underline Britain’s commitment and to enforce the point that that process must continue.

The two key points in the deal were, first, that assurances were given by the Government that Kabila will step down and elections will be held by the end of this year and, secondly, that the current Prime Minister must be replaced by someone from the opposition majority.

As hon. Members have mentioned, armed groups in the eastern DRC are causing problems in terms of the security situation. We need to work with the United Nations to make sure that the commitment to stability in the east continues.

Graham Jones: I want to ask about the situation regarding MONUSCO. There seems to be a failure to resolve the violence. MONUSCO is the biggest UN peacekeeping operation that has ever been undertaken, yet it appears to be a failure.

Mr Ellwood: I raised the point of what more we could do from the international development perspective. Half the problem is actually getting access to remote areas. The roads are extremely poor. A journey from one community to another, which we would normally expect to take 20 minutes, takes seven or eight hours, which is a perfect situation for criminals and insurgents to operate in and perfect for the instability we are seeing. I suggested to the deputy head of the United Nations Development Programme that more effort—this is something the hon. Gentleman may wish to take up—should perhaps be placed within the DFID budget on improving the infrastructure as well, to allow the security forces to get deeper into these areas to provide the security we need.

It looks like I have one minute left. I have made comments on the other countries, but I will write to hon. Members to clarify where we stand and to underline our commitment. However, let me go back to the beginning and say thank you to the hon. Member for Bassettlaw and, indeed, to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place.

The Government share the grave concerns aired by hon. Members about the continuing violence, the human rights violations and the repression of civil and political rights across the various parts of the great lakes region. I wish to assure hon. Members of the UK’s unwavering commitment to the people of the region. They want and deserve peace, democracy and hope for the future, and we will continue to work hard with regional Governments and the wider international community to make those aspirations a reality.

4.57 pm

John Mann: I thank the Minister for his response and his kind offer to write to hon. Members present to pick up the myriad detailed issues that were raised—clearly, no one could possibly answer them all within any rational time limit. His offer is appreciated, and it would be very helpful.

Mr Deputy Speaker, inspired by your firm but fair moving-on of the last debate to allow us to have this debate, let me say that this has been a most excellent debate. That is hardly a surprise, given the experience of those on the Back Benches and Front Benches who have participated. Nevertheless, the debate has been of superb quality. We have managed to cover—in important detail and knowledgeably—seven different countries in a short time. That perhaps shows the scale of the issues and the opportunities.

I hope the Minister will take away in particular from the debate the fact that we have huge leverage. We have different kinds of leverage: someone who is forced out of office in disgrace and who has a fortune in Swiss banks has been paid by somebody, and some of those
people will certainly be British. Therefore, the more we have transparency, the more we can add to that leverage. However, there are many other kinds of leverage—not least from excellent Departments. The Minister has excellent civil servants in the region, as does DFID, and we stand with a competitive advantage if we use our leverage wisely. I trust that the Minister will take from the debate the importance that the House gives to using that leverage. I share with the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and my hon. Friend who represents Middleton—[Interruption.] Lancashire somewhere—the other side of the border—

5 pm  

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).
Authority, raised concerns with the then Conservative Mayor of London in Mayor’s question time by highlighting the build quality on the estate. Unfortunately, the then Mayor simply said that the homes would be National House Building Council-certified and that Circle would rectify any plumbing defects—as if this reflected the scale of the problems on the estate. This intervention by Mr Evans followed a complaint to Havering Council by the local councillors for the South Hornchurch ward. None of these councillors represents my own party. Indeed, none represents any party represented in the Chamber at present. There is, in short, wide cross-party agreement concerning the quality of the build, and I trust that the Minister appreciates that.

I put on record my appreciation of the work of the three local councillors in South Horncruch—Michael Deon Burton, Philip Martin and Graham Williamson—on behalf of their residents on the estate, and of the work of the newly formed Orchard Village residents association chaired by the tireless Colin Nickless.

There have been literally hundreds of complaints by residents. I have scores of resident complaints covering all aspects of building and repairs. In every instance there are multiple complaints about each property, and most of them involve long-term problems regarding resolution of the faults.

The main problems include failure to build homes to an adequate standard with regard to damp, mould, noise pollution, fireproofing and adaptions; failure of the maintenance service; unacceptable response times for repairs, with the treatment of vulnerable residents and tenants being of particular concern; homes without adequate insulation in all phases of the development; heating issues whereby homes with vulnerable residents are left for days without heat, as well as excessive heating bills and major concerns about the standing charges on district heating systems. In short, there are serious allegations that homes have been built in breach of both building regulations and of the funding conditions stipulated in grants from the Homes and Communities Agency and the GLA, and that that had had a consequent effect on the wellbeing of my constituents.

On 10 November 2016, the newly formed residents association submitted a formal complaint to Havering Council about their treatment by Circle Housing and its agent Willmott Dixon. That is currently being investigated by the council under the corporate complaints procedure. As well as raising the issues with the council, I have been in contact with the Health and Safety Executive and the HCA, met the social housing regulator and the Mayor’s office, and corresponded with Public Health England. Residents have lodged their concerns with the relevant ombudsmen throughout.

The issue of the regulator and Circle Housing is particularly important. In 2015, the HCA downgraded Circle Housing from G1 to G3. The HCA increased the rating earlier last year, given the improvements in the repairs service, although that was challenged at the time by residents.

The Department for Communities and Local Government is well aware of all of the issues. On 16 August, I wrote to the Secretary of State about the problems. The Minister for Housing and Planning responded on 12 September, saying that

“the regulatory standards had not been breached in this case” and that the Department was, therefore, “unable to take regulatory action”, not least because it does not have a statutory mandate to deal with individual cases. I accept that that is the ombudsman’s role. The Minister concluded:

“I appreciate that your constituents will feel disappointed by this decision”.

So disappointed were the residents by the Minister’s letter that they actively considered a legal response to the regulator’s decision, but that was ruled out when the regulator subsequently informed us that its investigations were ongoing, so it was not possible to make a legal challenge.

On 21 December, just before Christmas and just after the merger was completed, Circle Housing was criticised by the housing regulator for risking “serious harm” to its tenants, given the continuous concerns regarding the repairs service. The HCA issued a regulatory notice saying that Circle had breached the home standard, with a “large number of outstanding complaints” affecting vulnerable tenants. Obviously, that decision is welcome, but I have to tell the Minister that the view among residents is that the announcement was delayed until after the merger. They believe that if the announcement had been made earlier in the year, it may have had significant implications for Circle Housing, given its earlier downgrades, and, therefore, the merger.

The important point is that we were disappointed with the Minister’s response, particularly in the light of the regulator’s findings in December. It is especially disappointing if we compare the Minister’s response with that of the newly merged Clarion Group since the takeover. In contrast to the Department, it has accepted the significance of all the issues. Arguably, that is the type of response that we might have anticipated from the Department and the regulator, which are supposed to act on behalf of the residents.

Clarion Housing Group has established a new project team to resolve the issues at Orchard Village. In turn, the project team has appointed Pellings to act as an analyst and sort out the full extent of the problems on the estate through internal and external surveys. Pellings has also been instructed to undertake a full survey of building quality compared with the original building specifications on the site. Aaron heating services has also been employed to review the heating systems. We shall see what they uncover over the next few months.

We are awaiting a report from the fire brigade on fireproofing and fire risk on the estate. I, as well as local councillors, now receive a weekly briefing on the progress of the casework. On 19 December I was forced to contact Public Health England about concerns regarding combustible gas exposures on the estate. Clarion has now appointed expert consultants to investigate, and tests began on air quality this week.

Interim compensation payments are being made for phase 3 residents in particular.

This month’s meeting of the Circle housing board is also discussing the question of buying back the shared ownership and freehold properties. The contract with Willmott Dixon was terminated for non-performance in remedying serious defects, and Clarion is considering the legal consequences of that. Most significantly, the full building spec survey will tell us whether Willmott Dixon
built the homes to the appropriate standards, and what the legal consequences are if it did not. That is all to be welcomed, and it is a tacit acknowledgement by Clarion of the reputational damage that might affect the new housing association if this is not sorted out, not least because of the major building programmes and opportunities that are likely to open up across Barking and Dagenham and Havering over the next few years.

The point is this: why was none of that fully taken on board by the Department? If there had been no merger, would we just be carrying on as we were with the Department and the regulator—and everyone else, apart from the residents—telling us that nothing was wrong? What recourse do residents have in such cases? Of course, it should be to the Department. The Minister is formally responsible for housing supply policy, home ownership policy, planning policy, planning casework oversight, estate regeneration, the HCA, the Thames Gateway, building regulations and so on. Is the system working? Is the only solution to wait for a merger and for the merged organisation to put its hands up?

Between 2010 and 2016, Circle Housing received more than £250 million of public money. Within the local community, people assume that there have been breaches of public grant compliance in the building standards—we shall wait and see whether that is the case—and we are talking about grants of £31.2 million over the three phases of the development. The outstanding investigations initiated by Clarion and the council will, we hope, get to the bottom of all this.

More generally, legal issues are ongoing, including exposure to mould and damp, which is leaving children hospitalised. Freeholders and shared ownership leaseholders are starting legal proceedings over misrepresentation of their properties and failure to repair, and seeking damages to cover their suffering. There are issues for the Department. Basically, do we need a review of the system of regulation? The HCA found against the residents even when the new merged organisation accepted the legitimacy of some of the residents’ concerns and decided to investigate other key parts of the case independently. Should it not have been the investigations of the regulatory system that secured that outcome, on behalf of the residents?

Overall, Orchard Village holds a light up to some of the changes occurring in the housing association sector, aided by Government strategy. The danger is that housing associations are, in effect, turning into housing developers. Consequently, they appear to be in danger of losing their historical role, and, indeed, their historical ethic. Yet the Government are actively committed to deregulating the sector further to ensure that housing associations are not treated as part of the public sector, so as to build more homes. I accept the logic behind their position on deregulation, but what is the cost in terms of oversight and accountability on behalf of residents, such as my constituents in Orchard Village? The Government argue that further deregulation will not change their strong regulatory framework. Well, the experience of Circle Housing and Orchard Village does not bode well in terms of whether that works at present.

More generally, the Government now appear to have redirected attention back toward housing associations to resolve the escalating housing crisis, rather than just relying on the market. That is obviously a good thing, because the private sector business model for housing supply has, for too long, been built around land banking and rationing. Yet the Government rethink poses dangers for the sector in reconciling housing associations’ role as developers with their historic purpose.

My real fear is this. I hope that we do not look back in a few years’ time and realise that we missed the warning signs—similar to the experiences of building societies in the financial services sector—as key non-market institutions are swept up in a dash for growth, with the collateral effect being the removal of their original ethical purpose. I hope that the experience of Orchard Village will act as a warning, and that, locally, Clarion can turn the situation around on behalf of residents. Nationally, we must preserve the integrity of housing associations as part of a genuine mixed economy across the housing sector.

5.13 pm
The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) on securing this debate on Circle Housing and Orchard Village. It is an issue that I am familiar with, for two reasons. First, I am sure he is aware that the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) raised in an Adjournment debate at the end of last year issues relating to Old Ford and the impact on her constituents.

The hon. Gentleman referred to Colin Nickless and his role on behalf of residents of the Orchard Village estate. I can tell him that Colin Nickless communicates regularly with me on social media, raising concerns about the quality of development at Orchard Village. I am therefore familiar with the issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised and I am grateful to him for doing so. He speaks powerfully on behalf of his constituents. There have been several developments since the previous Adjournment debate and I look forward to updating hon. Members about those as well as responding to the hon. Gentleman’s particular concerns.

If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will start in general terms by setting out the Government’s vision for affordable housing and the important role that housing associations play in that. I do not need to remind hon. Members of the chronic housing shortage in this country. It is clear that we need to build more homes and that we have not been building enough homes for 30 or 40 years. The Government are determined to put that right and provide more homes for those who need them. Nowhere in this country is that need more acute than in London in constituencies such as mine and the hon. Gentleman’s. We are already making progress: housing supply rose by 11% in 2015-16, the highest level for eight years. However, I accept that much more needs to be done. As the hon. Gentleman said, housing associations have a crucial role to play in that. Let us not forget that, during the financial crisis, housing associations kept on building. The sector is responsible for about a third of all new housing in England each year. That is why we are increasing investment in the housing association sector. Just last week we invited bids to the expanded shared ownership and affordable homes programme. As well as the additional £1.4 billion that the Chancellor announced in the autumn statement, we have introduced greater flexibility into the programme, which will allow housing associations better to respond to local needs and markets.
As I said, the situation is at its most acute in London. We need new homes of all tenures but in particular we need to ensure that there are affordable homes for sale and rent. In November, we announced a £3.15 billion funding package for London, with an ambitious aim to build significantly more affordable homes over this Parliament. The Mayor of London was generous enough to say that that was a record level of funding for City Hall for affordable housing. He has since opened registration to his own affordable housing programme using that money. Bidding will be open from the end of this month to mid-April. We look forward to housing associations building more homes so that more Londoners get a decent and secure place to live.

Before I come on to Circle Housing, I want to respond clearly but gently to the hon. Gentleman’s challenge about the changing role of housing associations. He is right to say that their role has changed over time. Many, particularly those that are engaged in large developments, have become increasingly commercial in their practice. Often, they are building market housing and using that to subsidise increased provision of affordable housing. However, I would like to challenge the hon. Gentleman in two regards. First, I have not yet come across a housing association that thinks of itself as equivalent to a private sector developer. All the people I had the privilege of meeting during my six months as Housing Minister are still very conscious of the original purpose behind housing associations.

Generally, housing associations come from three main routes. Some are the old Victorian philanthropic bodies—Peabody is a good example. Many emerged from the “Cathy Come Home” movement and others emerged through local authority stock transfers. At one point in his speech, the hon. Gentleman posited that perhaps there was a tension between the housing associations’ role in developing new homes and their historical purpose. I disagree. To me, their historical purpose was to meet housing need in our communities, and at this time, particularly in London, but all around the country, there is a desperate need for more affordable housing. In trying to meet that need, housing associations are fulfilling their historical purpose.

There is common ground between the hon. Gentleman and me on the point that as housing associations engage in increasingly commercial activity to help them provide more affordable housing, they must not lose sight of their historical purpose or their obligations to their existing tenants. I am completely with him on that. He was honest enough in his speech to recognise why the Government are deregulating. Historically, we have viewed the housing association sector as part of the private sector, and that remains the Government’s view, but the Office for National Statistics has reclassified them into the public sector. If we allow that situation to continue in the long term, it will have a damaging impact on housing associations’ ability to develop new housing, because not only the funding that the Government give them, but the money that they raise through private markets would be counted as Government spending and fall within the Treasury’s control. It is therefore very important—I hope there is a political consensus on this across the House—that if there is a return to the private sector. That means we need to address the concerns raised by the ONS. Again, there is common ground between us. We need to ensure the funding we give to housing associations is used in the interests of public policy and for a clear purpose, and that we do not lose sight of that.

The hon. Gentleman raised a whole suite of serious concerns in relation to Circle Housing and Orchard Village. Many of his constituents have been seriously let down by their landlord. I congratulate him on championing their case. I very much share the concerns he set out.

The regulator received a large number of complaints and referrals regarding Circle’s repairs service across east London, in particular the quality of new build properties at Orchard Village. The information provided by residents was part of the regulator’s wider investigation into Circle and it informed the notice issued in December. The regulator found that Circle had breached consumer standards and risked serious detriment to its tenants in its repairs service across east London. It is worth noting that I believe this is the first time the regulator has made such a finding in relation to an ordinary repairs service. The regulator also concluded that the specific issues at Orchard Village did not, of themselves, constitute a separate breach of standards, but it will continue to examine any new evidence provided by the residents of Orchard Village. This is still a live issue—the regulator is still looking at it.

As the hon. Gentleman said, Circle has merged with Affinity Sutton to form Clarion. It is the responsibility of Clarion to address the issues raised by the regulator. I met the chief executive of Clarion earlier this week, and I believe the hon. Gentleman met him, too. He is committed to resolving these problems quickly. Clarion has a responsibility to protect the needs and welfare of its tenants and leaseholders, and it needs to meet that responsibility. He is clear that Clarion needs to work with the regulator and provide assurance on how the issues are going to be fixed. I am encouraged, although I will continue to pursue to the issue, that Clarion is investigating what has led to the problems. It is making immediate improvements where it can, such as: improving call waiting times at the relevant call centre used by Orchard Village residents, and improving systems to ensure calls are properly logged and actioned. It is also trying to increase engagement with tenants.

Clarion has established a dedicated project team to manage and resolve the issues with Orchard Village specifically. It has put in place new contractors to develop the final phase of regeneration, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned in his speech, and repairs to properties. It has appointed a specialist property consultant to undertake a full survey of build quality. I also understand that Havering’s environmental health department is launching an investigation following reports of the presence of methane gas at Orchard Village. Clarion has appointed a specialist consultant to undertake its own investigation and is taking the potential risk to public health very seriously.

There has been some concern regarding the potential impact of Circle’s merger on tenants. Having spoken to Clarion’s chief executive, I see the merger as presenting an opportunity to sort these problems out—and to sort them out quickly. That is clearly what the hon. Gentleman, in raising these issues in this debate, wants to see. The new organisation should bring the skills and expertise needed to transform the service that tenants receive, putting matters right and ensuring they do not recur. I am sure that that is what the hon. Gentleman and his constituents want.
In a wider context, I welcome Clarion’s vision to build 50,000 new homes in the next 10 years. I think the hon. Gentleman and I agree that if the organisation wants the Greater London Authority and London boroughs to work with it, it will need to demonstrate progress on these issues before anyone will want it to be given funding to develop new housing. I welcome its ambition, but it will need to be seen to be putting this matter right before local authorities in this part of the country will want to work with them on further new supply.

The role of the regulator presents the real challenge in both this case and that raised by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow, who wants to know whether the Government are satisfied that the arrangements are working properly. Through its framework, the regulator is meant to support and create the conditions for a flourishing housing association sector and ensure that housing associations are properly managed, provide good-quality homes and serve the needs of their tenants and communities. The Government are committed to upholding a strong and independent system of regulation for social housing, which is why before Christmas we announced we were establishing the regulator as a stand-alone public body, following the recommendation in the HCA’s tailored review.

At the moment, the regulator forms part of the HCA, which is also responsible for delivering many of my Department’s programmes, but the review recommended that it be set up as a wholly separate body, and we will take forward that recommendation. We are consulting on the legislative process to do that, but I want to make it clear that that change will not diminish the regulator’s powers or objectives. The regulator will continue to have a vital role in encouraging and challenging the sector to improve efficiency and asset management and to maintain robust governance so that the sector remains attractive to commercial lenders. If we want private organisations to lend money to housing associations to help them deliver affordable homes, they must have confidence in the quality of the governance.

Finally, and most importantly and relevantly to this case, the meeting of tenants’ needs is a vital aspect of housing associations’ purpose. While it is commendable that they explore different commercial models, their tenants’ needs must not be forgotten. Indeed, they must have a mechanism in place for tenants to have a say in how the organisation is run and deals with complaints when tenants think that the service they are receiving is not satisfactory.

Finally, I want to explore why the threshold for action was quite high, as the hon. Gentleman would see it. The regulator does not have an active role in monitoring compliance with consumer standards. The ombudsman is the starting point for such complaints. The regulator can intervene only where there is judged to be a risk, or there has been risk, of serious harm to tenants. That is the threshold at which the regulator takes action. As the regulator is independent, I cannot personally intervene in those decisions, but it is my role, when Members or others draw concerns to my attention, to make sure the regulator is aware of them. I am confident that the regulator takes all complaints it receives from tenants seriously and investigates where necessary. I have undertaken to the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow, however, to look at the interaction between the ombudsman and the regulator to make sure that those processes work well so that when the ombudsman spots a spike in complaints about a particular association or element of an association’s work, it is drawn to the regulator’s attention speedily so that these situations can be resolved as quickly as possible.

Tonight’s debate serves as a reminder of the importance of robust governance, accountability and transparency within the housing association sector. As the sector evolves and becomes more complex in its diversification and commercialisation, it is vital that housing associations continue to uphold their responsibilities to their existing tenants. The regulator has a crucial role in maintaining standards in the sector and upholding both financial viability and management. In the case of Orchard Village, there is a clear expectation from me, as the Minister, from the hon. Gentleman, as the constituency MP, and from residents that Clarion will follow through with its assurances and address the issues he has raised tonight. It will be held to account by him, me and its tenants if it does not do that. I thank him for securing this debate on such an important and timely issue.

Question put and agreed to.

5.28 pm

House adjourned.
Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.
technical side of all this. Could my hon. Friend remind me: is FM part of that analogue or is it a digital thing? What is it?

Kevin Foster: FM is an analogue transmission, and most community stations currently broadcast on FM. With DAB, people tune in using the name of the station. On a digital radio, we search not for a frequency but for a station name. You never know, with more opportunities for digital radio there could even be a station called Hedgehog DAB Community Sound—a local station dedicated to promoting the benefits of having the hedgehog as our national animal. I know that my hon. Friend takes that matter very seriously and that he has brought it to the House on several occasions.

Many of us probably already listen to digital radio and will wonder how this Bill fits in, what its purpose is and what small-scale multiplexes are. Three national digital radio multiplexes currently broadcast between 10 and 19 stations each. Those are the most popular stations—I will not give them any promotion as they really do not need it—that can be heard in virtually every part of the United Kingdom. Different transmitters across the country broadcast a selection of services that does not vary from location to location, and about 97% of the UK’s population can receive one of the three national multiplexes. There are also 58 local commercial DAB multiplexes, covering approximately county-sized areas. Each broadcasts up to 14 commercial radio stations as well as the relevant local BBC station for the area. According to figures from the Library, over 90% of the UK’s population should be covered by one of those multiplexes. In my area, for example, I can receive BBC Radio Devon and some of the commercial services that currently operate on DAB.

However, one instantly realises that there is a real gap between all that and what most people recognise as the third layer of radio: community radio. We have national radio, regional radio and then the small-scale community radio stations that many people know and love.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that community radio is an oft-forgotten layer? We hear about the big names in radio, but community radio reaches right into the heart of many local communities.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for that interesting observation. In some cases, community radio can become quite famous across the country—I will touch on hospital radio later—because it reflects the community in which it is being broadcast. As I will go on to say, some communities have different language services that would not necessarily have an appeal across the UK, but they speak to a particular need and provide people with what they want to hear. There is an explosion of opportunities on the internet, so it is strange that what one can get on to the radio is restricted. We even have the bizarre situation in which many areas can receive more TV channels, broadcast free-to-air to homes, than radio stations. That contrasts with the situation that most of us will remember from about 20 or 25 years ago when we still only had the main analogue TV stations, but radio had started to expand. The Bill seeks to expand that sort of choice so that people can get more local news and things from their local community that mean something to them, but not necessarily to an entire region.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his clear explanation of the difference between digital and analogue. Does he agree that rural areas such as mine are where community radio stations can really come into their own? Such areas often cannot link into the main transmitters and have sparse populations, and small community radio stations can serve a really important purpose.

Kevin Foster: I absolutely agree. One issue at the moment is that if a community radio station is looking to serve a small community, that might be viable via FM but the jump to DAB is impossible owing to the current licensing structure and the revenues that it would have to produce. Even in a rural setting, the station might have to cover a nearby city to make the move to DAB worthwhile, which can take away from the special element of community radio. The Bill aims to provide more communities and areas with a practical, rather than theoretical, way of getting a digital radio station. Many rural areas would be unable to generate the type of revenue necessary to support such a move and, to be blunt, many people in the theoretical listening area might not want to listen.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the rurality of an area is a problem in itself? It is about not just the necessary income, but the strength of signal that community radio stations are allowed. If an area’s topography is hilly, that can restrict the distance over which a station is able to transmit via analogue.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend is right to point out that geography and topography have a large impact on what radio and TV signals people can receive. The Bill is targeted at radio infrastructure and could provide options, which I will touch on later, to provide a service where digital radio currently does not exist or where choice is limited owing to an area’s topography. The current licensing system has not kept pace with the development of technology, so a different option is needed for smaller-scale radio stations. The situation with analogue was similar. Only a small number of analogue stations were broadcasting when the technology was extremely expensive. As the costs fell, increasing numbers of stations were created, including community stations. Now that digital technology is becoming cheaper, we need to look at creating a legislative process and a licensing system to allow community stations a chance to move to digital.

As I have touched on already, one issue with community stations and the current multiplex system is that many of the areas they cover are just too large, meaning that stations might be providing content that is irrelevant to many. For example, if a community station wanted to cover Torbay, which is perfectly reasonable under an FM licence, it would have to broadcast over a much wider area, leading to problems with sponsorship and rendering local discussions and contributions from local groups meaningless to much of the theoretical audience.
That is why the Bill seeks to create smaller multiplexes that can cover defined areas in the same way as a community FM licence.

The fact that there are such wide areas to be covered means that there is a large jump in the cost of access that is not necessary if someone is looking to use analogue and get a community licence. For a station that might be broadcasting from someone’s bedroom or over the internet from a small studio, the jump to digital radio can involve a fee of £100,000, meaning that it would have to generate revenue of some £1 million a year to provide a DAB service through the local multiplex. Would that be tolerated in any other industry? There is in effect a shelf that stifles the natural growth of a business from a bedroom or of the amateur operation moving to internet broadcasting, then through to a small-scale broadcasting operation and then to who knows where. Large companies have literally been developed in people’s bedrooms. Microsoft, for example, started out as a group of students drinking Coca-Cola to keep them awake all night while they created code and is now one of the biggest companies in the world.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): It is all very well my hon. Friend referencing commercial operations, but will he confirm whether the Bill would allow commercial radio stations to operate, or is it limited to non-commercial operations?

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend will have read the Bill, and he will have seen that subsection (4)(c) of proposed new section 258A of the Communications Act 2003 states that Ofcom may “require small-scale radio multiplex services to be provided on a non-commercial basis”.

The main thrust of my argument is that we would have a shelf—meaning that a service that is trying to grow has to jump immediately from a very cheap internet, almost market stall-style, operation to a £1 million a year turnover operation—which exists in very few other industries.

My intention is that such multiplexes will mainly focus on community radio and will be the main focus of Ofcom licensing, although I emphasise that if the Bill were to become law there would need to be detailed consultation with the industry on its operation. It is possible to provide very small-scale services through such multiplexes but, fundamentally, we are looking at non-commercial services. My hon. Friend will see that non-commercial does not necessarily mean a totally non-profit or charitable operation—we should be clear about that. The Bill provides for infrastructure that allows digital radio to be broadcast into a certain area, and that infrastructure may carry some for-profit stations. If the Bill gets its Second Reading today, it will be interesting to explore in Committee how to refine it to ensure that its target is clear and absolute.

I make it clear that the Bill would not put any new requirements on existing multiplex operators, nor is it intended to provide a way of bypassing licensing regimes. An operator would not be able to have multiplex small-scale licenses to avoid going through the current Ofcom licensing procedure for clearly large-scale commercial operations. I use the analogy of a retailer—either charitable or any other form of retailer—that grows from a market stall. Imagine if the only options that a retailer had were either a market stall or a large department store.

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is being generous in giving way again. He sparkes many memories from my long career in radio. I used to get incredibly frustrated when I tried to bid into tortuously complicated systems, particularly the BBC system, to try to get my ideas through. The Bill would offer an opportunity for people to set up their own outlet and broadcast their own ideas. It would give many opportunities to people on many different levels. I know that we can now do these things on the internet, but will he comment on that? I particularly wanted to pursue environmental, gardening and countryside ideas, and, back in the day, I was told that no one was interested in those things. Of course, that has been proved quite wrong.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend makes the fantastic point that sometimes a community radio operation can take a broadcasting risk that a large-scale commercial operation, or even the BBC, with its requirement to satisfy licence-fee payers that their payments offer value for money, cannot take, and can develop a service and show that it works. Earlier this week we were talking about the Green Investment Bank, which was started to address a perceived market failure, but now private investors want to take it on and develop some of its actions into a profit-making venture because they believe the market has changed. As my hon. Friend points out, broadcasting is the same.

A service that may not be seen as inherently profitable, or as something that a broadcaster would want to launch fully commercially, could be allowed to build its name in a community setting. Indeed, an individual can build their abilities and talents with a community service, allowing them to move on in broadcasting more generally. Community services would effectively act as an incubator for what might become successful and popular services. However, if people cannot make that jump, we are in essence restricting the options to those who are tech-savvy and can go online to access such content. People will then find that there are no community services out there when they tune in on their DAB radio, or they will have to rely on FM technology, which clearly puts them at a disadvantage because of the quality of the output they will be able to produce.

The Bill would fix the issue with the scale of digital broadcasting by allowing the creation and licensing of smaller-scale multiplexes that can operate in a local area, giving a new opportunity to create the infrastructure to deliver digital radio. I make it clear that the technology has moved on hugely since the House last considered these issues.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I declare an interest, because I wrote songs in the 1980s. I do not know whether that has anything to do with this debate, but I am just covering myself.

On a serious note, if I remember rightly the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), when he was Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, announced that he wanted the old analogue system to go digital sooner rather than later. At that time, the public expected that that would occur quickly. Will my hon. Friend clarify the situation?
Kevin Foster: Just to be clear, the Bill makes no move towards turning the whole sector from analogue to digital. The Bill does not seek to end the process of seeking community FM licences, which will remain. The Bill is about creating an option to enable people to put community radio on digital broadcasting systems. There is a debate to be had in Parliament at some point in the future on options for a fully digital radio broadcasting system. However, that is not what we are discussing today—that is a debate for future years.

In fact, with technology moving on, we do not know whether we will have separate broadcasting systems in the future. I suspect that many of us use, for example, the BBC’s iPlayer Radio app, through which people can turn a dial to select a station and listen to live broadcasts. That does not come through a DAB system, FM, medium wave or anything else; it comes via a device’s internet connection. There will be a debate on it in future, but I make it clear that the Bill is not about forcing anyone to broadcast on DAB or about bringing the analogue broadcast system to an end, or even about envisaging that; it is about giving a practical option to broadcast community services on digital radio. That is what the Bill is about, although my hon. Friend is right to say that there have been suggestions that, at some point, the UK might look to move to digital.

Norway says that it will be the first country to switch off its analogue radio transmissions, and there is some debate in the industry about whether Norway is genuinely about to start doing that, apart from in some areas of the larger cities. Fundamentally, that is partly a debate for another day. If the House were to consider ending the analogue broadcast system, we would clearly need to provide a practical and affordable solution for community and smaller-scale operators to broadcast on digital radio so that we do not annihilate the whole sector. The current licensing system for digital radio would do just that. If we went to a totally digital solution, it would leave the larger operators but take out literally hundreds of community radio stations.

The Bill is about giving community stations an option for digital; it is not about forcing them on to digital. Crucially, the Bill is not about forcing any of the existing multiplexes or existing infrastructure to carry community stations. Existing multiplexes are not affected by the Bill, and it does not seek to force them to do anything. The Bill creates a timely option. It might contribute to future changeover, but that is not the intention.

Technology is moving on and the days of large-scale equipment being needed to broadcast a reliable radio transmission are long gone. The idea of engineers running around in white coats to fix various bits of equipment is not what small-scale radio is about any more. In some of the small-scale radio trials, the main broadcast was being run off a laptop. It is even theoretically possible to run a broadcast off a smartphone. Self-broadcasting has become huge on the internet. YouTube and Facebook Live are both showing a range of changes and a range of diverse programming opportunities that people would never see on a broadcast channel, which says to me that more people out there want to hear such content. The follower rates for content that is self-broadcast over the internet point to how community broadcasting and people expressing personal experiences that connect with others now really mean something—in some cases, to more people than watch certain broadcast television shows. Therefore, providing that opportunity in digital radio makes eminent sense.

In response to an intervention, I touched on how we can see the impact of digital TV in opening up a range of choice and opportunities to deliver new community services, and digital radio could be the same if we give an option to have smaller-scale multiplexes. As has been said, we do not know where technology will go next, and it is almost pointless to spend a morning speculating on whether we will still have broadcasts, whether we will do this via the internet and what further integration will take place involving wearable technologies that may or may not benefit from this type of Bill. However, what we fundamentally know is that the technology exists to enable effective, community-run, small-scale, digital radio broadcasting, and that is what this Bill seeks to create a licensing structure to allow.

With any technology, we may say, “Yes, it exists but is it practical?” Between 2014 and 2016 the Department for Culture, Media and Sport funded a programme of work by Ofcom to look at the potential of a new software-based approach to enable small-scale DAB broadcasting. The work included 10 technical field trials in towns and cities across the UK. The three main aims of the trials were: to test how well the small-scale DAB technology worked; to test how well the technology lends itself to several parties co-ordinating their services through the transmitter; and to give the market a chance to learn about small-scale DAB and the potential opportunities it presents.

I am sure that some Members will have studied the Ofcom report published in 2016 before coming to today’s debate. The report confirmed that the trials had achieved all three aims. First, the technology worked and was reliable in terms of transmission. Secondly, the 10 trial operators gained significant experience, with some innovating further in how this technology could work. Thirdly, and most importantly, across the 10 areas, 70 unique radio services are now being carried, the majority of which are totally new to DAB. This was not about seeing existing choices disappear or providing competition with them; it was about giving a new choice.

Oliver Colvile: I am curious as to how much it would cost a community organisation to apply for a licence, because that needs to be taken into account, too.

Kevin Foster: In terms of the process to apply, we must remember that this is mostly focused on the infrastructure, so it would be possible for a couple of community groups to club together or for an organisation to seek to provide a small-scale multiplex to help facilitate the growth of creativity in their area. A university would be the classic example of an organisation that might provide a small-scale multiplex to broadcast a student radio station and potentially provide an opportunity for other community-based stations. Let me be clear that the Bill also makes sure that protections are in place for those who operate existing multiplexes. As has been said, this is not about creating a new competitor for them; it is about creating an opportunity for existing community services to go to digital. I will say a bit more about that later in my speech.
Mr Nuttall: Can my hon. Friend explain the status of the 70 unique radio stations that, apparently, have sprung up, most of them being new? What would be their status if the Bill did not proceed? What is their status now, without this Bill? How can they be operating?

Kevin Foster: At the moment, they are, in effect, operating under a trial basis that Ofcom has created. If the Bill did not proceed, I suspect that they would be able to continue on a trial basis, although I have seen indications that they might not be able to do so, because it is a trial. To be blunt, if the current system is reinforced by the failure of the Bill, with Parliament deciding that it would rather stick with having the national operators and the current 58 local areas and that it did not wish to see things on a smaller scale, at some point those radio broadcasts would need to be brought to an end. My guess is that some might move purely to internet broadcasting, restricting their audience, and others might seek to switch to a community FM licence. This could be one of the few examples of this Parliament saying, “We can see a new technology breeding, coming on and creating new opportunities, and creating more diversity of media, but we would rather you all went back to just FM only, with the national operators the only ones able to take advantage of this.” In other debates we sometimes get a misleading picture presented that people in this country get their news from only one source, which is palpable nonsense when we think about the number of options that exist. If we do not want to create the type of opportunities this provides, having seen what they are, that would be a negative step. I see the Minister indicating agreement with that element of my comments. I am sure he will wish to comment on the future for those stations if we do not seek to create a permanent structure of small-scale multiplex licensing. It is safe to say that the future would be rather grim.

We know that the technology works, and we know the operators who did this succeeded and created new services. So the technology is there and the gap in the licensing is there, so the next thing to address is whether the demand exists.

Wendy Morton: Will my hon. Friend say a few words about preparedness and whether the infrastructure is in place? Is it going to be financially viable for some of these community radio stations to move on to the multiplexes?

Kevin Foster: The infrastructure currently is not in place, and we are dealing here with creating the licensing for small-scale multiplexes to allow its creation. On the costs, we know that the existing multiplexes work reasonably well for larger-scale operators; as I have mentioned, those with a turnover of more than £1 million might find this an option for them, although some would debate whether there is, in effect, a monopoly in some areas. I am not looking to affect that situation; I seek to create an opportunity for small-scale operators. The feedback from the industry is strongly that the opportunity is there and the technology is there in an affordable way, particularly with the potential use of tall buildings, rather than having to build separate broadcast masts, but the opportunity of licensing is not in place legally.

As I have said, this is not about forcing anyone to do anything: the Bill does not compel the Minister to provide a service by subsidy; and it does not compel the BBC to spend licence fee money in setting something up—it gives people an opportunity to set something up. My strong belief is that there is genuine demand to take this step; for reasons that I will set out in a moment, but if we do not do it, we are merely blocking it out in legislative terms. We have seen the impact of the trial, with new services coming along. We have seen those develop and flourish, but if we do not wish to create that opportunity, we have to ask why not.

David Morris: I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous in giving way, and I just want to clarify something. If the demand is there—as he said, people could be utilising this technology on laptops—would that not eventually drive the cost down?

Kevin Foster: Indeed, and I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. As we have seen in the past, as things have become easier and industries have grown and developed, the costs have fallen. I am convinced that we would see the costs fall significantly in this area if there was more ability to do it. The fact that small-scale multiplexes would exist would reduce the straight broadcasting costs—that would be a key benefit of this Bill; people would no longer have to pay for coverage over a very large area that they did not really need. All the evidence about technology and broadcasting has shown that as time goes on, things get cheaper. As people are able to innovate and use their creative speciality, things get cheaper. We can look back to 50 years ago to see that when we were overly tough in our regulatory system of broadcasting onshore, we ended up with people in radio stations operating from ships just outside our territorial waters to flagrantly get around a licensing system that had become out of date and irrelevant, with its basis in another era. If we are not creating opportunities for this sort of industry to flourish, all we do is push people on to the internet, thereby restricting choice and people’s ability to listen to new and interesting services that may well be able to be provided at much lower cost than has been possible in the past.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): I declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party group on commercial radio. My hon. Friend is talking about setting up small-scale multiplexes on a non-commercial basis, but would such multiplexes be open to small commercial stations? For example, would High Peak Radio in my constituency be able to access one of the multiplexes, even though it is a commercial station?

Kevin Foster: My understanding is that yes, it would, although I have to be clear that the Bill will only set a framework; the exact details of a small-scale licence would be a matter for consultation with the industry and for Ofcom in considering individual licence applications. My understanding is that, yes it would be possible for very small-scale commercial operations to take advantage, but there would be processes in place to ensure that the rights of existing multiplexes were not affected unduly.
One consideration would be whether someone had an interest in another multiplex. For example, the Bill includes provisions to enable Ofcom to create rules to disbar someone from applying to set up a small-scale multiplex if they already have an interest in a local or national multiplex. Yes, the Bill could create opportunities, but it is very much about setting a legislative framework, with the detail to follow. Individual licence applications would be considered by Ofcom in the normal way.

There should be an element of flexibility in the framework because, as has been touched on, there will be unique individual circumstances. Some areas are covered by the national digital radio multiplexes but not by a local one. In such circumstances we may wish to look at having some flexibility to allow the provision of digital radio. The Bill is about creating a framework and giving an opportunity. It puts some limits on the framework so that it does not undermine the existing regulatory system, but it is very much a deregulatory Bill that will provide an opportunity to small-scale radio stations that serve particular communities and cannot realistically take on the cost of a local-area multiplex that covers a very wide area.

We know that the technology works, but there is a legislative gap that needs to be fixed to allow that technology to flourish throughout the UK. However, as I just touched on in response to that intervention, is there actually a demand for this type of system? There is little point passing a law for theoretical benefit, or to make the argument that this structure should exist; it must have a practical effect to justify the parliamentary time.

Around 400 community radio stations are already in existence. There is a huge range of diversity in their output, and they are positioned throughout these isles. There are university radio stations, including UCA Radio in Ayr. Interestingly, quite a large number of British forces broadcasting stations operate as community-licensed radio stations, such as the ones at Brize Norton and Shorncliffe. There is also Aldershaw Army Radio, and I think there is another one on Salisbury plain. They operate using community FM licences, so would potentially benefit from the framework in the Bill. There are community stations that reflect the community they are in, such as Hillz FM in Coventry—on which I was once interviewed—and Riviera FM in Torbay. A lot of these stations end up broadcasting via the internet as their sole digital output, but if they can broadcast over the internet, they could quickly convert to using a small-scale digital multiplex, which is why I am keen for the structure in the Bill to be created.

As I touched on earlier, hospital radio stations give people more than just something to listen to while they are staying on a ward; they can be a real part of the local community. Several already operate as community FM stations, and I would like to see them have the opportunity, if they wish, to become community DAB stations via a small-scale multiplex. They would cover approximately county-sized areas; they are clearly not going to look to compete with a national digital radio multiplex—that is flagrantly not what they are going to want to do. They should at least have the practical opportunity to go on to digital radio if that is what they see as the natural progression for their services.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing forward this excellent Bill to broaden choice for community providers. Will he join me in paying tribute to the volunteers who work in community radio stations throughout the country? I very much welcome the opportunity to expand the role that they play in our communities.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for that intervention. Hospital radio absolutely provides an opportunity for volunteers to be part of delivering something to patients, and it also develops skills and talents that may well sustain them in a future paid career. There will be stories of people who have started off presenting a hospital or community radio show as a volunteer, but displayed talent that they could take much further. My hon. Friend will know Torbay Hospital Radio, which regularly provides the outside broadcast system for community events and fairs. The image of hospital radio is just someone sat in a broom cupboard at the bottom of the hospital, playing requests, but they actually get out in the community and do interviews, and they look to be more than just a station that people listen to in their hospital beds; they really want to make a contribution.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): In my office, I have a young lady who volunteers at her local hospital radio station. She said that it gives volunteers the chance to go round and befriend patients. They are a conduit between the radio station and the patients. It makes patients feel befriended, and the shows are tailored to their needs. It makes them feel like someone is taking their views seriously, and they can listen to the things that they want to listen to. Does my hon. Friend agree that although we hear so much negativity about hospitals, hospital radio provides so much and can help with the loneliness that we often discuss?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for such a passionate intervention on behalf of hospital radio stations. I totally agree that is about providing not only a song to listen to but a sense of community in the hospital. Why would we want to maintain a system that effectively bars such stations from any possibility of transmitting digitally? Why would we want to say to them, “You can go digital, but you’ll have to do so on the same basis as fairly large regional radio stations, or radio stations owned by fairly large media conglomerates”? Why would we want to send that message by not giving the Bill its Second Reading and thereby not allowing the development of a small-scale DAB transmission system? We want to do that not only for the technical reason that it would be nice to have a slightly better sound system, but because we think it is right to give stations the opportunity, if that is the direction they want to go in.

The whole point of the Bill is to provide options. It provides the option if stations want to go to DAB. It does not make any requirements on anyone, and nor does it require any of the existing multiplex operators to do anything to allow smaller stations to go to DAB. It simply gives those stations the opportunity to do it themselves, in a practical and affordable way. Without a licensing system of this nature and without the framework in the Bill, they would not be able to do it. Those are all reasons why giving this opportunity to the community radio sector is the right thing to do.
There are lots of examples of how the Bill could help to drive a local service, creating news and information from South Uist to the Isles of Scilly. As I keep saying, the point is to give people a chance and take the legislative opportunity to form infrastructure for that growth. I am not asking the taxpayer suddenly to fund a whole load of small-scale multiplexes and broadcasting equipment throughout the country, and I am not asking existing multiplex owners to provide space for these services on their broadcast systems. The Bill is about providing an opportunity.

Although it is not the main thrust of the Bill, I have given a little thought to whether services of the type I have described might in future provide an opportunity to help to sustain local newsrooms. Throughout the country, many local newspapers are struggling to maintain the capacity for investigative journalism at a local level. In the past, Parliament rightly ensured that there were strong restrictions in place to prevent a potentially dominant local newspaper owner from also owning one of the handful of local FM licences. The coming of the internet and the growth of other news sources means that in future a wider platform may be needed to sustain some level of professional journalism in a local area, or, bluntly, to avoid it being reduced to only the BBC having a pool of paid local journalists available. That is not something I wish to dwell on in discussing the Bill, but it is perhaps worth considering the role of smaller-scale digital radio operations when it comes to future policy development.

Rebecca Pow: If my hon. Friend is saying that the taxpayer will not have to fund these mini-multiplexes, where will the money come from? Will it have to be factored into what each community radio station pays to use the service?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for her helpful intervention. In essence, it would be similar to how FM transmissions are funded, with stations getting the equipment and going on to the licence. There might be grant funding in other environments. For example, a local authority might decide to help by providing the infrastructure—I must emphasise here that I am talking about the infrastructure, not the service. It is not the role of a local council to provide a radio station, in the same way that it is not its role to use taxpayers’ money to provide a local newspaper. For me, it is about providing an opportunity, but who would it be funded by? I think that we have seen from the trials that, yes, there would be some demand from community stations for the infrastructure to be provided, and, as has been mentioned, the costs have fallen significantly. The cost to install such a service can be relatively low, particularly if there is a friendly owner of a tall building nearby, which means that a station does not need to go to the expense of building a mast.

We see the community radio sector flourishing on analogue without heavy taxpayer support or subsidy. I do not see any reason why the community digital radio infrastructure could not develop in a similar way. Allowing schemes to go ahead would give us an opportunity to see what happens in reality. It is possible—particularly if we move to all digital—that the Minister that decide to provide some sort of support to help community radio stations convert to DAB, but that is not the focus for today. Today is about creating an opportunity for radio stations. Once those stations have taken up the opportunity, we can look at their experience and see where new services have started up. I cannot see why things will be any different in Torbay than they are in Bristol or Taunton. If the opportunity is there, people seem to want to take it up and move forward with it.

There may be some opportunities for groups such as councils and universities to consider providing the infrastructure to allow creativity to spawn in their area. Again, as I keep saying, this is about infrastructure and about providing an opportunity. It is for others then to use their sparks of entrepreneurship to take specific ideas forward. It is not for Parliament to legislate on whether there should be a community digital radio station in a particular area or whether a particular operator should be required to put up an aerial or a broadcasting system.

As I have said several times, the Bill does not require any station to move to DAB; nor does it require anyone who has a multiplex to provide space on it. There has been a debate about our entire radio system going digital, but that is not something I want to discuss today. Today is about merely providing an opportunity to go digital; it is not about forcing anyone.

This Bill does not seek to interfere with current national or local multiplexes. It is quite specific in clause 1. Paragraph 4 (b) clearly says that provision may include “disqualifying persons who have an interest in a national or local radio multiplex”.

Any licence may also include provision to require services provided via the multiplex to be done on a non-commercial basis. Yet there is a small bit of flexibility to allow for unique circumstances where there might be a pressing case. I urge Members who have specific concerns to join the Bill Committee to look at the whole matter in depth. I know that there will be a debate about how exactly we get the law just right on this point.

Under paragraph 4(e), it is possible to reserve some space on a small-scale multiplex for particular services, which might be of benefit in more isolated communities or where there are limited opportunities to install new infrastructure. One point that may come up is that, in some locations—it certainly would not apply in central London—a small number of tall buildings may be the only realistic option for installing the infrastructure. It therefore might make sense in an individual location to have the requirement in the licence that access must be provided for another service. This is about not compelling people to do so on existing infrastructure; it is about ensuring that, for example, where there are four tall buildings in a particular area, one operator cannot make an agreement with the owner that they should be the only one who has the right to install broadcast equipment and then seek a licence, effectively excluding others.

The Bill aims to put a draft framework in place that makes it clear that Parliament intends to legislate without making the provisions so rigid that unique circumstances cannot be accommodated. As stated in the explanatory notes, the final details of the regulatory framework will be subject to a full consultation with the industry.

I recognise that this Bill has a targeted power to modify primary legislation by statutory instrument. However, in justification, there are already precedents in using such a power to create lighter-touch regulatory
regimes for smaller audio visual services. A similar approach was taken by Parliament to create such regimes by using secondary legislation for community radio—via the Community Radio Order 2004—and local television, with secondary legislation in 2012. This Bill builds on those precedents in strikingly similar circumstances. The power in this Bill will be used in such a deregulatory way and, as mentioned earlier, the Bill will not create additional burdens for existing multiplex operators. Finally, I can confirm that the power is exercisable only by affirmative order, ensuring scrutiny in both Houses before such modifications could come into force.

I am sure that the Minister will wish to set out in his speech similar points and to confirm that that is the intention of the Government, although I hope that Members will be reassured both by my comments and the affirmative order provisions. As I have said, the power builds on precedents in very similar areas of policy development. Therefore, it is appropriate to have it in this Bill.

In summary, this Bill creates opportunities for new creative talent to flourish, gives hundreds of community stations a practical and an affordable opportunity to go digital, and provides—I know that we will hear this from many Members who are about to speak—the chance for more communities to have a unique choice of radio stations that reflects the area in which they live. Not to give this Bill its Second Reading would not help any radio operator, would not protect any interest and would not see things develop in a better way. It would merely block the growth and development of community radio stations and restrict development in the industry in a way that we would find absolutely ridiculous in any other sphere. This is about supporting small community stations, giving that local opportunity and allowing broadcast radio to reflect the explosion of creativity that is taking place on the internet. The days of strictly broadcast radio to reflect the explosion of creativity stations, giving that local opportunity and allowing other sphere. This is about supporting small community in a way that we would find absolutely ridiculous in any other sphere. This is about supporting small community stations, giving that local opportunity and allowing broadcast radio to reflect the explosion of creativity that is taking place on the internet. The days of strictly broadcast radio to reflect the explosion of creativity that is taking place on the internet.

I said at the beginning of my speech that my hon. Friend has brought forward a Bill on an important subject. Those words of praise are often said out of polite custom in this place, but on this occasion they could not be more deserved, as he actually slept in Parliament overnight in order to secure the opportunity to introduce the Bill, such was his passion. As he pointed out afterwards, the reality of sleeping in a royal palace is far less glamorous than it sounds. I hope for his sake that he has had a better night’s sleep before Second Reading than he did on that occasion. I do not know how he passed the hours while waiting to submit his Bill, but it would have been extremely apt if he had listened to a digital radio to keep him company.

As in so many sectors across the UK, digital has become hugely important for radio. In the third quarter of 2016, just under half of all radio listening—45.5%—was on a digital platform, and that figure will increase. The radio industry predicts that if current trends continue, the number will be 50% by the end of 2017—I think that is a fairly conservative view. Small-scale DAB—the kind of digital radio that the Bill deals with—is especially important. Industry data show that 60% of UK homes today have at least one DAB radio, and the DAB terrestrial platform accounts for about three quarters of all digital radio listening. These figures underline the growing importance of the area and make it more important than ever that small-scale digital radio becomes a viable option for as many stations as possible.

I recently listened to Radio Derby on the digital platform, and it does have a better signal than I used to get, so I am pleased that it has been able to move to that platform and continue on FM. Unfortunately, small radio stations currently face a major disadvantage when it comes to digital radio. At present, the costs and the licensing scheme are not conducive to allowing small-scale radio services access to the DAB radio network. As with anything, costs vary, but digital specialists estimate that the cost of carriage for a mono service on a non-London multiplex is between £3,500 and £5,000 per month. That could mean £60,000 a year. Needless to say, that is a pretty hefty sum for a small station, with the consequence that it is priced out of the market. Contrast that with Ofcom’s estimate that using small-scale DAB could allow stations to access the digital market from just £9,000. That is a huge difference, and it would make the market much more accessible for smaller stations.
Alongside cost, the current climate creates a number of other key problems for smaller stations. County-sized local DAB multiplexes exist and are used effectively by several stations, such as Radio Derby, which covers not only the county of Derbyshire but part of east Staffordshire. However, their large coverage area means that they are not suitable for smaller stations that want to transition to DAB but cannot do so. Even if local DAB multiplexes could be used in theory, stations encounter problems in practice as there is not always sufficient capacity for them to operate.

Providers are very aware of the fact that they face dwindling audience numbers and the fall in advertising revenue that comes with that as digital listening by default becomes the norm. Quite understandably, they want to change that. Ofcom trials have proved that there is major demand for change and that appropriate legislation would be followed up with action. In a research report from September 2016, Ofcom states that ‘there is a significant level of demand from smaller radio stations for small scale DAB, and that a wider roll-out of additional small scale services into more geographic areas would be both technically possible and commercially sustainable’.

That statement was made after a trial in which 100 small commercial and community radio stations successfully broadcast on terrestrial DAB for the first time. Those stations came from a wide range of different backgrounds, from new entrants to established companies, which provides an even more compelling case that all small stations could make a success of using digital radio.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Community radio stations sometimes have dwindling audience numbers. Does my hon. Friend think that this might also be an opportunity for print media to broadcast from their news rooms? We know what pressure they are under as well.

Pauline Latham: Yes, and I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. It could also be used as part of a degree to give students real live practice on radio, which they would not normally have. I am sure that the University of Derby would embrace that, as it already uses the local theatres to give students real live practice of producing and acting in plays so that they have a practical example when they go into the world of work. People working in local university radio would have real experience to draw on in interviews, which we all know, as employers, is incredibly important.

The Bill provides an opportunity to alter the current legislative framework for digital radio multiplex licensing, as set out in the Broadcasting Act 1996, to introduce a more appropriate, lighter-touch regulatory framework. Greater numbers of small radio stations could expand into a digital market to which they currently do not have access. I particularly commend how the proposed approach has adopted features of effective previous secondary legislation, such as the Community Radio Order 2004, that has successfully modified primary legislation by allowing for provisions of the 1996 Act to be modified rather than replaced. That slight but important distinction will not only make things simpler, but allow for the creation of a new licensing regime that will take account of the varying needs of smaller stations.

Although the use of small-scale DAB is a relatively novel form of technology, implementing this Bill fits into the Government’s long-term radio strategy, published in 2014 in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport’s “Digital Radio Action Plan.” The plan recognised that “radio is changing”, and that the Government must respond by helping to facilitate a digital-friendly environment where 50% of all listening is digital. The paper also states that the transition to digital and the changes the Government make should always be “driven by the listener.” To some extent, the change must also be driven by the concerns of radio station providers themselves, and it is clear from Ofcom trials that smaller stations really do want to access a digital market. We must not ignore their views.

As well as setting out the digital criteria, the paper stresses the major contribution that radio makes to the UK, outlining that 90% of the adult population consume in excess of 1 billion listening hours each week, which is a huge number. That allows them exposure to an endless variety of cultural topics and the chance to listen to...
The economic impact of the sector is highlighted by the digital plan, and the fact that this Bill can lead to economic growth and job creation cannot be dismissed. Having so many more digital stations will mean that young people—I presume that it will mainly be young people—can take up a valuable real-life experience and go on to bigger and better things in the larger broadcasting corporations, whether in the BBC or in commercial operations. That cannot be dismissed. The Bill would create many jobs. At the moment, the entire radio sector is worth an estimated £1.2 billion and employs 17,000 people. Ensuring that legislation that affects the sector is helpful and up to date is an important responsibility and one that should encourage us to vote in favour of the Bill. I am sure that the Minister will cover many of those points in his response.

I once again congratulate my hon. Friend for Torbay on introducing the Bill and urge the House to support its Second Reading. Let us make sure that his sleepless night was worth it.

Mr Nuttall: My view is that the matter could have been dealt with, without any undue side effects, in the Digital Economy Bill. But we are where we are, and we now have this separate Bill.

The Bill is what we might politely call an enabling Bill. It will be of no benefit to anyone unless, once it becomes an Act and reaches the statute book, it is driven forward by the Minister, who I am sure will want to take advantage of the powers by making an order and doing something about it. The Bill will not help anybody, as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay would agree.

Kevin Foster: It is an enabling Bill.

Mr Nuttall: It is. For it to be of any use at all to man or beast, the Minister and his team at the Department need to bring forward the appropriate order—as soon as possible, I hope, if this Bill reaches the statute book—to cover all the various aspects set out in clause 1. The Department will need to give those powers to Ofcom so that it can set about licensing new broadcasters, in order that they can enjoy what some of those who have taken part in the trials have already benefited from.

Basically, the Bill is about making it easier to broadcast digital radio. At the time the original Act was passed, digital radio was very new, and it was thought that it could be dealt with only on a large scale—a national or county-wide scale. However, since the Act was passed, it has become possible through advances in technology for smaller-scale multiplexes to operate and to provide opportunities for community radio stations and small-scale commercial stations to operate.

Incidentally, I should declare an interest at the outset, in that I am an avid user of my digital radio. In fact, I carry it with me everywhere—at this very moment, it is in my coat pocket—and I rarely go anywhere without it. [Interruption.] We are not allowed to use props, as the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) knows. My digital radio is a wonderful thing. In fact, it is my second one—the first one broke, having had an unfortunate incident.

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend has sparked my interest. Will he share with us what sort of radio stations he listens to and whether there are any local and community stations among his favourites?

Mr Nuttall: Well, I will be honest: it is usually Radio 4, Radio 5 or Radio 5 live sports extra, particularly when it is carrying the cricket commentary.

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): Does my hon. Friend not think that many people also carry digital radios with them wherever they go not least so that, on a Friday, they can listen to his wonderful speeches in Parliament?

Mr Nuttall: I am sure that is not the case.
In her most recent intervention, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) asked whether I use digital radio to listen to community radio stations. Of course, there are very few of those operating, but if the Bill reaches the statute book and is followed up by an order and some activity from commercial radio stations, it will enable me to have even more stations on my little digital radio than there are already—and there are already plenty on there from around the country.

Incidentally, I made sure that my last car, which I bought a few years ago, had a digital radio. I understand that virtually all cars now have digital radio as standard. At that time, it was an option, and people had to pay a little extra if they wanted it—I wanted it mainly because “Test Match Special” was no longer broadcast on long wave, and to reach it I had to get Radio 5 live sports extra.

Kevin Foster: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the biggest changes that has happened since Parliament last substantively looked at broadcasting regulations is the spread of DAB radio into the car? Like him, I was one of the early adopters—I got a digital radio back in 2003, which I have at home. However, digital radio is now in most new cars coming on the market, which means there is a need to create an opportunity for community radio stations to be there, as well as the larger operations.

Mr Nuttall: My hon. Friend, the promoter of the Bill, is absolutely right: there has been an enormous increase in the use of digital radio over the past few years. While I fully understand the concerns of those who operate on the FM frequencies, radio seems to be moving inexorably—just as television did—towards a situation where it will operate in the digital space in years to come. As Members will be aware—it has been on the news this week, and it was touched on earlier—Norway is apparently planning over the next few months to become the first nation to move its radio stations on to an entirely digital platform.

These things will take many years, and I hope we proceed very cautiously, because I am conscious of the fact that lots of elderly people, in particular, do not have access to modern equipment. However, we managed it with television, and it would not be beyond the wit of man for us to manage it in due course with radio. However, we will need to proceed carefully and to make sure that all the technical research is properly done. To be fair, Ofcom is dealing with this, and if I have time I will touch briefly on the fact that the report it issued last year specifically refers to the feasibility of accommodating small-scale community radio stations that currently transmit on analogue.

One concern I do have about the Bill relates to clause 1(4)(c), which states that an order would “require small-scale radio multiplex services to be provided on a non-commercial basis”.

I see no reason why we should try to restrict this to non-commercial services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay said in his opening speech, the cost of moving straight to the larger multiplexes could be prohibitive for a start-up operation. I want to see more competition and to see the costs of entry reduced, so that the barriers to entry are as low as possible. Restricting things through a reference to non-commercial services only is not necessary, and if the Bill proceeds I will look at that further.

Kevin Foster: What I would emphasise—I am sure my hon. Friend looked at this in reading the Bill—is that the clause starts with the words:

“An order under this section may in particular”.

Although it alludes to the fact that there “may” be a requirement for services to be provided on a non-commercial basis, that is not a “must”.

Mr Nuttall: I accept that. In making that intervention, my hon. Friend draws attention to another point I was going to make about the Bill, which is that, in many ways, it raises more questions than it answers. Because of its use of words such as “may”, it does not make it clear what will actually happen. When we hear from my right hon. Friend the Minister, I hope he will give us more clarity about exactly how this will play out. There are competing interests, and I can understand that the commercial interests of the larger operators mean they will not want it to be made easier for new competitors to join the market, but that is no reason not to allow new entrants to the market, and more competition would be a good thing for the larger operators.

I particularly support the Bill because I want my area to be able to benefit from the possibility of having its own commercial or non-commercial radio station—a community station. There is, or has been in the past, something called Project 29 radio operating in Bury, and I appeared on it from time to time. It was a very small-scale operation, operating from the centre of Bury with a very small staff, who worked on a volunteer basis, and running community programmes. That sort of small-scale community radio station will be able to benefit if the Bill goes ahead and it is made easier for small operators to be given a digital licence, to operate with modern equipment, which, by definition, would be the latest available, and to broadcast over a relatively small area—smaller, for example, than the whole of Greater Manchester or the whole of Lancashire.

I am conscious of the fact that many Members want to give their time to this debate, so I do not want to extend my remarks unduly, but I do want to refer to the trials that were allowed last year by Ofcom. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay touched on this. Three different types of trial were allowed, covering different sorts of equipment at different levels of cost. I will not go into all the detail, but the cost of the equipment involved ranged from £9,000, to £17,000, to £19,000. Different licensees were given the different types of equipment to try it out and to see how efficiently it operated. The results are all set out in Ofcom’s report. It is a lengthy document that it would take some time to read all the way through, but it is worth while for those who are interested to study it, because it sets out the detail of the nature of the equipment and how successful it was.

More importantly, perhaps, the end of the report covers the technical scope for the wider roll-out of DAB. In essence, although we can solve the problem of the legislative framework and create a licensing regime, there is an underlying problem about the frequency blocks that DAB operates on. The bands are fixed, and there is not much we can do about that. At the moment,
DAB transmitters in the UK use the VHS band 3 frequency blocks, which range from approximately 211 MHz to 229 MHz, known as blocks 10 to 13. Those frequencies provide the spectrum to support the existing three national DAB multiplexes and the 58 local commercial DAB multiplexes.

When Ofcom looked at the prospects for small-scale DAB trials, it was clear right from the outset that further spectrum would be required. Because DAB radio receivers can also tune into lower frequencies than those currently used in the UK, Ofcom examined the availability of frequencies below 211 MHz for use during the trials. It also carried out an initial study looking at whether it would be technically feasible to develop a future frequency plan for small-scale DAB that might provide an opportunity for small commercial and community stations, which currently transmit only on analogue radio, to be carried on DAB. This goes back to the argument about whether we can ever transfer everything on to DAB, because we need the frequencies available to be able to do so, not just the legislative framework. The study says that

“in most areas of the UK, it should be technically possible to develop a frequency plan for small scale DAB which might accommodate those stations”;

so the position is not completely clear-cut, even for Ofcom. It concludes:

“However much more detailed planning and optimisation work would be required to develop a frequency plan which could be implemented in practice.”

David Morris: Does my hon. Friend agree that the whole point of this Bill is to enable smaller multiplexes to be set up, creating the network across the country that Ofcom would like to see?

Mr Nuttall: Yes, I do agree—that is exactly what the Bill seeks to do. However, as I said, the Bill, of itself, will not achieve that—it will need to be followed up with action from the Department. I hope the Minister can assure the House that if this Bill reaches the statute book, his Department will act speedily in bringing forward the appropriate order to make use of it. I wish the Bill well as it proceeds and hope it receives a Second Reading.

11.6 am

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on bringing forward this Bill. He has worked particularly hard on it, not only in spending the night here with other hon. Members—[Laughter.] You know what I mean. He has done a lot of research, because this is quite a complicated Bill—at least, it touches on something technical. Often in this House, when those of who do not have an engineering or science background are discussing these matters, it feels as though we are analogue children in a digital age and we are always running to catch up. I am absolutely delighted to support this Bill, because through it we are, if not in the vanguard of technology, anticipating the future.

I have an admission to make: I am an absolute radio nut. There have been periods in my life, sometimes several years, when I have not had a television, but I have always had a radio. I lived in Tehran for a few months in the early 2000s, and my only company—besides my family—was the BBC World Service. The only English voices I heard were through the means of short-wave radio. That was fantastic, but now I am a total convert to DAB. In true radio style, I want to give a shout-out to my favourite radio presenter, Graham Liver of BBC Radio Lancashire.

The transfer from FM and all the other frequencies to DAB has been somewhat controversial. We heard at the beginning of the week that Norway is going completely on to DAB, and that has caused some consternation in that country. We have to recognise that, as my hon. Friend said, this has nothing to do with switching off other frequencies. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) mentioned that there might be technical difficulties in doing that.

Wendy Morton: Does my hon. Friend agree that the switchover in Norway is an opportunity for us, as a country, to watch and learn from what it is doing as we take our radio forward into the future?

Seema Kennedy: That is an excellent point. Of course, we have huge geographical and demographic differences with Norway, but we should be watching and learning, and seeing what happens there—I completely agree.

Oliver Colvile: Is perhaps the reason Norway is moving away from any analogue form of radio that it does not broadcast “Test Match Special” on a regular basis?

Seema Kennedy: Probably, although I would not dare to make any comment on cricket to my hon. Friend.

Jo Churchill: The game of cricket provides the perfect example for our approach to this situation. We are quite happy to listen on the radio to a match that can take five days to take its course. Similarly, it is good that we are approaching the change from analogue to digital in a slow and measured way, and that we trial it first.

Seema Kennedy: There are so many cricketing metaphors that I could use, but I had better not. I agree with my hon. Friend, but there must be a balance. We have to do things in an evolutionary way and look at what other people are doing. However, in this House, we need to be alive to the possibilities that technology offers us and our constituents, particularly in this area, where a great barrier to entry exists.

In discussing the Bill, we have heard that the costs for small community radio are prohibitive. Different figures have been mentioned, but for a non-London multiplex service, the cost is about £3,500 per month. That is too high a figure for community radio stations to raise. There is also inadequate capacity. That barrier to entry prevents the opportunities that could be offered to businesses and communities. In a day and age when groups and entrepreneurs can set up from their laptops or mobile phones, this area seems at odds with what is happening in other spheres of life.

I want to focus on community radio. Some hon. Members have spoken about community radio stations in their constituencies, but others have said to me, “We don’t have one.” I am very lucky that South Ribble has a
radio station called Leyland Festival Radio. I pay tribute to two constituents, Keith Bradshaw and Rev. Phil Gough. As Mr Deputy Speaker knows, because his seat used to contain Leyland, the Leyland festival is the highlight of Leyland life. As hon. Members might be aware, Leyland has had a long history of vehicle making, including trucks, tanks, buses and the Popemobile. All those things are now stored in the vehicle museum in Leyland. In a weekend in June, there is a huge festival at which there is a parade of classic vehicles and floats. It is a joyous occasion where we can make the most of what is fantastic about Leyland and its heritage. I remember going to watch the Leyland festival as a little girl; now I have the great honour and pleasure of judging the floats.

Back in 2015, a group of local people came together who wanted to celebrate the occasion. They wanted to create a moment and a focus for the civic pride involved. This happened between April and June 2015, when I was the candidate and then had the great honour of becoming the Member of Parliament. It culminated in three days of hyper-local community radio broadcasting on FM in June 2015.

The aims of Leyland Festival Radio were to enhance community identity not only in Leyland, but in Farington and Moss Side. Other hon. Members might never have heard of Farington and Moss Side, but they identify very strongly with Leyland. This is the point of the Bill. We have county-wide multiplexes—as I have mentioned, very strongly with Leyland. This is the point of the Bill.

The radio station was a partnership. There was money from South Ribble Borough Council and it involved Runshaw College, which has its own excellent radio station, as I have mentioned, and local community groups. It presented an opportunity for businesses to talk and for artists and performers to get proper on-air broadcasting experience. My first ever radio experience was as a candidate in the 2010 election, when I stood in Ashton-under-Lyne. I was interviewed by Tameside Radio. I am sure the only people listening were my agent and my grandma, but it was still a great experience for me. Such interview opportunities are valuable. A fantastic sense of community cohesion grew up around Leyland Festival Radio.

Wendy Morton: I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous in giving way this morning. She is touching on the value of community radio. I know that she is a great advocate for tackling isolation. Does she agree that community radio is an excellent means of reaching into the homes of some of the most vulnerable and isolated members of our communities?

Seema Kennedy: My hon. Friend anticipates the next part of my speech. It is almost as though she had seen it in the Tea Room, which she did not. I am glad that the points I am making in this place about isolation and loneliness are getting through. That is exactly the point I will move on to next.

To conclude my remarks on the excellent work of Leyland Festival Radio, although it continues to broadcast breakfast programmes presented by Keith Bradshaw, it is very limited. The aim of the group is to be a community radio station for Leyland, Farington and Moss Side.

To move on to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), I believe that hyper-local radio has a role in combating loneliness and isolation. Members will know, because I have raised it before, that the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and I are carrying on the work started by our late colleague, Jo Cox, and that the Jo Cox loneliness commission will be launched in Speaker’s House on Tuesday 31 January. I know that other hon. Members will join us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North said that he always has his radio with him. We recognise that radio is a very intimate medium; it really can speak to us. I know that from friends and family members who have suffered from loneliness. Indeed, when I have been very lonely in my life, I have put the radio on. It makes us feel safer and as though we have somebody there.

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is making some valid points about radio acting as a friend. I know that many elderly people turn to their radio when they wake up in the night, particularly the World Service. Many local radio stations have regular callers to their phone-ins, many of whom are lonely people who are gaining relationship building from the radio. Radio stations serve an excellent purpose in that regard.

Seema Kennedy: My hon. Friend, with her history in broadcasting, knows about this only too well. Local radio plays such an important role in the community. Hyper-local radio already performs that role, but the Bill will allow a flourishing of hyper-local radio.

Mediums of technology are useful in tackling loneliness and isolation only if they lead to face-to-face contact. As human beings, we need the contact of others just as much as we need food and water. That is the key point. We all talk about Facebook and Twitter, but radio, too, has to be able to connect people. When a radio station broadcasts to a few thousand people, those who are at risk of being lonely and isolated—the old, the infirm, people suffering from mental health problems and people who are disabled who cannot travel very far—will hear about community events and businesses close to them and go to them, which is the great advantage.

There is much to applaud in the Bill, but I have some questions to which I hope the Minister will respond. How do radio multiplex services work in practice? My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay mentioned attachment to high buildings, but many of us do not have them in our constituencies or anywhere around. Forgive me if I
have missed something, but whenever anything new is put up, there are worries about what it looks like, so an example would be helpful.

The Bill has great potential to expand community radio, which plays such an important role in helping communities to build and foster good relationships. As I have mentioned, radio stations such as Leyland Festival Radio do sterling work in our communities. I hope the Bill gives it the opportunity to fulfil its dream of being a full-time radio station in South Ribble.

11.21 am

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on securing this spot in the Chamber. I have to declare an interest: I used to write songs in the 1980s, which always cheers up my hon. Friends.

Oliver Colville: Does my hon. Friend still get royalties?

David Morris: That would be telling.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If Mr Colville is to ask a question like that, he has to name the tune he is referring to.

David Morris: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Digital radio affects areas of the UK that should have been honed in on a very long time ago. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay earlier, when the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) was Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, his ambition was to have digital radio take over from analogue. My hon. Friend stated that his proposal would involve an optional request from the broadcasting industry, but it must be taken seriously.

We have a few good radio stations in the Morecambe and Lunesdale area, including The Bay radio. Its website states that there is no DAB solution for it currently, but it covers low-lying areas in my constituency and leading into the Scottish borders. It says on its website that people who want to find the coverage area can click on the application. The option that my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) has often said, when flooding comes there is not much warning. Enabling community radio stations to give more information is a good thing.

Jo Churchill: Today of all days, I should like to reiterate how important that last point is. On the east coast, particularly in Suffolk, we have the challenge of the possibility of flooding. As my hon. Friend says, and as my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) has often said, when flooding comes there is not much warning. Enabling community radio stations to give more information is a good thing.

David Morris: I agree with my hon. Friend. I pay homage to my hon. Friend for his research on the Bill and for speaking for one hour, largely without notes. I was in the music industry once, and it shames me to say that I did not know half of what my hon. Friend told us. His Bill would be a big help to the industry as a whole and I am sure that it will welcome it.

I hope the Minister looks on the proposal favourably. We must go forward and progress—if we do not, it will cost us. The radio industry has had certain problems over the years, not least having such a measure to help out in the first place. If The Bay had had DAB, people in the areas to which it broadcasts would have been better informed about what was going on within their localities. Not just my constituency was affected; Lancaster and constituencies further up towards Carlisle were also affected. During the floods, I met the then Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart). Not many people knew that he was running around the vicinity trying to sort out the problems and that he was working very hard, purely and simply because communications broke down in the area. The power cut in my vicinity lasted nearly two days.

Radio is a lifeline for communities. We should enhance the industry and not curtail it. The measure proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay is very welcome indeed. Larger broadcasters such as the BBC would welcome it because it would drive their costs down. I am not being more favourable to one radio station than to others. I have not mentioned them all, but I must plug Beyond Radio—I am sure it will use it in its jingles.

We must look at this in a sensible and grown-up manner. DAB is the way forward and the future. It was for the right and collegiate reasons that the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Leigh, wanted to push the project forward, but we have yet to see that.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend refers to what the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) suggested when he was the Cabinet Minister responsible. The Bill is not about that specifically, but does my hon. Friend agree that, if ever there is a move to digital, we need to ensure that all three layers of radio are represented—national, commercial and community—on the digital spectrum?

David Morris: I totally agree. I pay homage to my hon. Friend for his research on the Bill and for speaking for one hour, largely without notes. I was in the music industry once, and it shames me to say that I did not know half of what my hon. Friend told us. His Bill would be a big help to the industry as a whole and I am sure that it will welcome it.

11.28 am

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris). It is amazing what we
discover about our colleagues during such debates. I am intrigued to find out some of the songs he wrote. Perhaps he could share that with us later.

Having spent very much of my life as a broadcaster and journalist, with many years’ involvement in radio stations of every kind, from community to local, commercial and BBC national radio, I am delighted to support my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) in introducing the Bill. I congratulate him on all his work in introducing the Bill, in particular on the very clear case he has made today. He has made it very clear even for those of us who do not understand very much about the technicalities.

I reiterate the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham). It is disappointing that the Opposition Benches are so empty, particularly the Scottish National party Benches, because the Bill will help the very remote areas where it is difficult to receive a signal. [Interruption.] There are two Welsh MPs on the Labour Front Bench. The Welsh are well-represented, but the House gets my point.

I am a very keen supporter of local media, including our local newspapers. I am particularly keen to support local radio stations, which are targeted by the Bill. Anything that can be done to facilitate them must be applauded. Like my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) and for Bury North (Mr Nuttall), I am a fanatical radio nut. I literally go everywhere with my radio. In our house in Taunton Deane, we have a radio in almost every room and we go from one room to the other switching them on. Members might think that that is a bit sad, but we cannot live without them.

Oliver Colville: I confess that I drive to and from my constituency for two reasons: I want to listen to “The Archers”. I am a complete Radio 4 addict. I listen to the World Service when I wake up in the middle of the night and I could not be without my radio because of “The Archers”. Sometimes I listen to the same episode three times: at lunchtime, the repeat in the evening and the long episode on Sunday. That is quite sad, but I am never quite sure what episodes I have missed! I am also a very big local radio fan. I do exactly as my hon. Friend does: as soon as I get back to my constituency in my car, I switch on the local radio so I can catch up instantly with the local news.

The way we listen to radio is changing. Television, which I spent many years working in, has already undergone a big transformation. Radio is now going through a similar change. Almost half of all radio listeners use a digital platform and approximately 60% of UK homes have at least one DAB radio. For Christmas a few years ago, my husband gave me a DAB radio for the bedroom. This year’s Christmas present from my husband was a DAB system for the kitchen to replace the old system—I am not sure whether the new system was for him or for me. It has taken me quite a long time to work it properly, not because it is not a good radio, but because I now have to put my glasses on to be able to see the touch-button thing—it is terribly sophisticated, and black and beautiful.

Rebecca Pow: I welcome that intervention, because I am a complete Radio 4 addict. I listen to the World Service when I wake up in the middle of the night and I could not be without my radio because of “The Archers”. Sometimes I listen to the same episode three times: at lunchtime, the repeat in the evening and the long episode on Sunday. That is quite sad, but I am never quite sure what episodes I have missed! I am also a very big local radio fan. I do exactly as my hon. Friend does: as soon as I get back to my constituency in my car, I switch on the local radio so I can catch up instantly with the local news.

If we think of local radio, we cannot help but think of travel reports. Local radio is where I find out what is happening on East Reach in Taunton during rush hour and whether to use the busiest road in Somerset, the A358, which goes right through my constituency. If one hears that that road is log-jammed, one avoids it, so it is a marvellous service. I hope we will soon never have to hear such messages on our local radios again, because this week the Secretary of State for Transport reiterated his commitment to upgrading the A358.

I would like to mention a couple of the excellent community radio stations in my constituency. Tone FM, based in Taunton, is very good for traffic news. It has an audience of 22,000 people, which is incredible for a town community station. It has great live broadcasts, despite operating on a shoestring. I used to do a regular gardening slot. We had a lot of fun, but I hope we also managed to impart a lot of knowledge. I would take something in and invite the audience to guess what we were talking about. One time I took in a giant elephant garlic, a terrific thing to see and to use in cooking. Similarly, much guesswork went on over my Jerusalem
artichokes. I now regularly go in to provide updates on what is going on in Parliament. We have an awful lot of interaction and many people listen to the podcasts. It is a great way to disseminate information. I applaud all the people who work for Tone FM, in particular Darren Cullum who gives up hours of his time. The station could not run without them.

Another excellent community station is 10Radio, based in Wiveliscombe on the far western outreaches of my constituency.

Seema Kennedy: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill could enable these hyper-local radio stations to be a substitute for the Facebook community pages that have grown up in many of our villages and rural areas but are not very accessible for older people? They might be the perfect substitute for them or for declining local newspapers?

Rebecca Pow: That is a valid point. The Wiveliscombe station transmits to only 10 parishes, but it provides an invaluable service with local news and gossip. I much enjoyed going there just before Christmas to give an update on my year in Parliament: the station did a long interview with me, and then put it on as a podcast.

10Radio is run entirely by volunteers. I congratulate Derek Skeavington, the chair, Anton Matthews, who is the “techie brains”—the technical side of these services must be run by someone—and Barry Summers, who is the “glue” and has a great touch with all the people who come to be interviewed. However, I particularly want to mention Josef Tucker. Josef is a wheelchair user who speaks through a computer-controlled gadget controlled by his eye movements, and he presents a programme on 10Radio: “Joeshows”. It is all about musicals, and it is absolutely brilliant. It is a fantastic platform on which Joe can engage with people and people can engage with Joe. That is one of the great things about community radio stations.

It was, in fact, on a very small local commercial radio station called Radio West that I started. Many people from pirate radio had gone to work there, such as Johnnie Walker, who is now on Radio 2. I had left university, and went to the station to gain work experience. I then went back and worked there for a whole year, pretty much unpaid: I had three other jobs on the go to fund myself. I devised a programme called “Country Connections”, which I broadcast live on Sunday mornings at 7 am. It ruined all my Saturday nights, because obviously I could not over-imibe.

I had to drive home, and I had to drive all the way to Bristol early in the morning to broadcast the show to the whole city, although I was sure that no one was listening. It was early and because people in Bristol are a very urban audience. Nevertheless, that was a fantastic grounding. I learnt all my craft there—editing, producing and directing. I am certain that, without that experience, I would never have gone on eventually to produce “Farming Today” on Radio 4. Small local community stations are still offering young people that opportunity, and I urge them to take it because it is a fantastic grounding. The more we can do to help those services to operate, to remain in existence and, indeed, to expand, the better, and I think the Bill will ensure that that happens.

Tone FM and 10Radio are not on DAB platforms, both because the cost would be too high and because there is often not enough capacity available to such stations on DAB multiplexes. BBC Somerset, which is a bigger station, is on one of the larger multiplexes, and I must say that it does excellent work in helping many of the community stations. That is to be applauded. The smaller local stations are well aware that audiences are moving over to digital and have told me that they would welcome the opportunity to broadcast on a digital basis as long as that was practicable and affordable. 10Radio would benefit particularly, because the area is very hilly and it has difficulty with its FM signal.

I welcome the work being done by Ofcom, especially the 10 technical field trials that have been run over the last two years and which have examined the viability of small-scale DAB multiplexes. I believe that they have gone very well, having demonstrated that a software-based approach can be workable. The nearest trial to Taunton Deane was based in Bristol and carried out by The Breeze, which broadcasts from my constituency. Across the 10 trial areas, nearly 70 unique radio stations are now being carried, most of which are new DABs. I believe that a great deal of interesting, innovative work went on during the trials, and that lessons can be passed on and learned. Exciting opportunities have opened up. It has been proved that they could work, and I hope that the Bill will facilitate some of them.

I am delighted to support a Bill that will allow Ofcom flexibility in the servicing of small-scale radio stations with multiplex licences in a much simpler and more straightforward manner. That can only benefit small local radio stations and help them to do their great community work, and the community will also benefit hugely. Let me emphasise to the Minister that if the Bill is passed, the opportunities could be endless. Perhaps I could even start up Pow Radio from my garden shed. Who knows?

I welcome the Bill, and wish it the best of luck.

11.33 am

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I have not yet listened to the omnibus edition of “The Archers”, although I have tried quite hard. I look forward to hearing it on Sunday. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on an excellent Bill, which I shall be delighted to support later should it be pressed to a vote.

I must declare an interest. When my father left the Navy, he immediately became head of outside broadcasting at Rediffusion Television, the forerunner of ITV. Moreover, as many Members may know, my brother is the cricket correspondent at Sky Television, and before that—some while ago—he was a newsreader on Radio 4. Reputedly, he went on air at 1 pm one Saturday and said, “BBC radio news at one o’clock. A Russian submarine has been found south-east of Swindon.” It should have been Sweden, but it turned out to be Swindon instead. It was one of those things.

I must make a confession. In the 1980s, I was the Conservative party agent in the London borough of Merton. I worked for a woman called Angela Rumbold, a Minister at the Department of Education who was my great mentor. She later went to the Home Office. Before she became a Minister, however, she was very much
involved in a campaign connected with an organisation called Radio Jackie. Radio Jackie was a pirate radio station which initially broadcast on Sundays, and then began to broadcast on other days. At the time, there was a real sense that the Department of Trade and Industry did not want more radio stations than were being proposed. Provision was very limited: there was the BBC, and I think that by that time Capital Radio had come on board as well.

The issue was really important then, and today feels a bit like Groundhog Day to me. There were times when the DTI was so stringent that it decided to try to raid some of the pirate radio stations, and it actually succeeded in raiding Radio Jackie, which was owned by Tony Collis. My governor asked me to make sure that he was aware that the equipment could be taken away. We have moved on an awfully long way since then. The advent of digital radio enables us to provide a better service, and, more important, a greater service that provides more choice, and I believe that the Bill will make that possible.

I pay tribute, obviously, to my local BBC radio station, Radio Devon, and the wonderful Gordon Sparks, who unfortunately has not been commenting much on Plymouth Argyle, who, as Members may know, ended up drawing against Liverpool. We look forward very much to seeing what happens on Tuesday, when the replay will take place at Home Park. I understand that the tickets have been selling incredibly well, and that the sales could add £1 million to Plymouth Argyle's exchequer.

I also pay tribute to Simon Bates, who has just left Radio Devon. Every time he interviewed me, he wanted to talk about my great campaign for hedgehogs to become a protected species, and I am delighted that he did. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] One would not want to miss an opportunity to mention that during an informal debate of this nature. Sadly, Simon Bates has decided to stand down, but I pay great tribute to him; it was a delight to be interviewed by him, and I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

I must pay tribute to Radio Plymouth, which is probably the best example of a local community radio station in the city as a whole, and covers a series of issues. One of the great things about community radio is that it can cover specific community events. In 2020, Plymouth will be celebrating Mayflower 400. The Mayflower left Plymouth after a journey into Torbay and other places, and those on board went on to found the American colonies. We need to provide good community coverage of the commemoration of that event, so that people can become engaged with it.

We all know that at the time of Ascot or Wimbledon, for example, specific radio stations are set up to cover those events. These are really useful opportunities for local communities to promote their activities and ensure that the people in those communities become engaged with them. Indeed, if these ventures are successful, they could become another version of the Liberal Democrats’ “Focus” leaflets or, for that matter, our “In Touch” leaflets.

I am delighted to see the Minister for Digital and Culture, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), in his place today. He is a great cricket fan—he has played cricket with me, which was great fun. That was in India, where I took the opening bat’s wicket, much to everybody’s surprise. We ended up having a great time. I know that Newmarket is in his constituency, which holds big racing events. There are specific ways in which we could do this, including covering specific campaign issues. I am also aware that there are a number of community websites, such as SW19, which I know about from the days when I was taking a historical interest in what happens in Merton. People write into those websites regularly and put comments on them about the local community activities. That, too, is important.

I have one question to ask of the Minister. I am acutely aware that the Bill is about infrastructure rather than about some of the other details, but when the provisions are being developed, could he ensure that the licences will be affordable to local communities? There would be nothing worse than if these new arrangements were prohibitively expensive and the local communities could not afford to set up their own stations.

Kevin Foster: I hope that my hon. Friend will be reassured to hear that, when Ofcom carried out its trials, many small operations did get going. The purpose of my Bill is to enable such arrangements to be set up on a more permanent basis across the country. The cost of the current multiplexes clearly excludes any community operations.

Oliver Colvile: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for that intervention.

It is important that we develop an infrastructure that is not too expensive for local communities. Before I was elected to this place, I did some work on behalf of one of the mobile phone operators, and I am aware that we still need additional infrastructure for those services too. I know from travelling from Paddington down to Plymouth on the train that we still need much better mobile phone coverage. I cannot get on to the internet or even take telephone calls half the time, because the mobile phone coverage is not particularly good. But why should not local communities be able to put their stuff on to the mobile phone mast network? That is also an important consideration.

Will the Minister also give us an assurance that community radio stations will not be abused by other political parties and that they will comply with the Representation of the People Act in providing balance, especially during election campaigns? I would be very nervous about the possibility of biased reporting at such times. I personally do not think that the BBC is particularly biased, and it is important that we do not give an opportunity to other people, who do not necessarily agree with everything we say, to use community radio against us in a party political manner.

Thank you very much indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker. This has been a pleasure and a delight. It has been fantastically informal debate with some entertainment, some of which I suspect I have provided myself.

11.54 am

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile). I should also like to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on securing this debate on his Bill today.

This is obviously an issue of great importance to those of us here in the Chamber and, I hope, to many other
Members as well. I should also like to add my name to the list of people who are fans of “The Archers”. I, too, have been known to listen to each episode three times, although I must put on record the fact that I no longer have time to do that.

Oliver Colville: Is my hon. Friend aware of a wonderful organisation called Archers Anarchists, whose members believe that “The Archers” is not so much a soap opera as a fly-on-the-wall documentary? Among its activities is the annual Sammy the Cat lecture.

Maggie Throup: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I was not aware of that, but I am not surprised.

The issue that we are discussing today is of great importance to my constituents, especially those who live in the southern part of my constituency. I represent the constituency of Erewash, which has a community radio station called—not surprisingly—Erewash Sound. What is surprising, however, is that not every resident of my constituency can tune in to the station.

The Erewash Sound Community Interest Company was granted a five-year community radio licence in April 2008 and began its full service on 96.8 FM on Saturday 6 March 2010 from studios in what was an old school in Ilkeston. It is important to understand that it is a community interest company, which is a not-for-profit organisation. It is run by volunteers for the benefit of the people of the borough of Erewash. The running costs are covered by the sale of advertising, by sponsorship and, when the company can secure it, by grants, donations and fundraising.

Community radio across the country faces certain issues that continually affect their sustainability, and we are talking today about one way in which we could improve the sustainability of community radio operators. I am led to believe that the Community Radio Order 2004 places restrictions on community radio. Those include limiting broadcast power levels to quite low levels and stipulating that community radio stations can accredit only up to 50% of their total revenues to advertising and sponsorship. Indeed, some local radio stations cannot even sell any advertising or receive any sponsorship; they have to get their money from elsewhere.

Erewash Sound is currently restricted by the so-called 50% rule, but it has even greater problems. It was allocated a power allocation of just 25 W on 96.8 FM. That is just one point away from transmitters in Ashbourne to the west and Grantham to the east that broadcast commercial radio stations on 96.7 FM, making it difficult to separate the stations.

The 96.8 frequency is also used by BBC Radio Wales’s Welsh language service, which has a reported 125 kW of power, going up to 250 kW in some parts, and the transmitter is located in south Wales. Since its launch, Erewash Sound has suffered spurious and intermittent interference from the BBC transmitter, the effects of which can be severe, interrupting or even obliterating Erewash Sound’s transmissions in some parts of the borough. I am sure that people do not mind listening to the Welsh language programme, but I am afraid that not many people in Erewash will be able to understand what is being said. The problem is about differentiation and people being unable to listen to the local radio station. I understand from the operators that the effects are worse in fine weather—I reassure hon. Members that we have lots of fine weather in Erewash.

When Erewash Sound challenged Ofcom over the frequency allocated, it was told that 96.8 FM was the best frequency it could offer, which is really quite poor. Erewash Sound was also informed that 25 W was the usual power level allocated to community radio, yet there is evidence that other community radio stations have been allocated 50 W—or double the power—or even 100 W. The problems are starting to build up. Low power and interference from the BBC transmitter result in over half my constituents being prevented from tuning in to Erewash Sound. Residents in Long Eaton struggle to tune in, and the problem is worst in the southern part of the area. Residents in Stanton by Dale, a village on a hill between Ilkeston and Long Eaton, can tune in, but people living beyond the hill are unable to. The low power and the bandwidth are restricting the transmission of this fantastic local community radio station. However, that does not prevent Erewash Sound from promoting the station and supporting residents in the south of the borough, even though they cannot hear it. The station lives in hope that things will change one day—hopefully as a result of this Bill—and that everyone in Erewash will be able to hear what Erewash Sound has to play. The outcome of today’s debate will determine whether all my constituents are able to enjoy the sounds of Erewash Sound.

I want to describe how Erewash Sound contributes to the community right across Erewash. In the summer months, Erewash Sound can be found at the fairs and carnivals in the two major towns of Ilkeston and Long Eaton. Erewash Sound provides outside broadcast facilities at the League of Friends of Ilkeston Community Hospital summer fair and the Ilkeston and Long Eaton carnivals. In fact, last summer I was invited to judge the floats at Long Eaton carnival alongside one of the presenters from Erewash Sound. I was so relieved to have a fellow judge, because I did not want to upset anybody when judging such fantastic floats that people had put a lot of effort into. He blamed me for the ones that did not win and I blamed him for the ones that did not win—it was a dual-purpose approach. Erewash Sound also actively supports the local Treetops hospice, including allowing the hospice’s business club to meet on its premises so that people can see what the radio station involves. It is really trying to reach out. Other hon. Members have already alluded to the importance of community radio as a training ground for budding presenters, and Erewash Sound has an academy that is open to local people regardless of age or experience.

It is completely wrong that while Erewash Sound supports my entire constituency, a great number of constituents cannot enjoy the pleasures of our local community radio station. The broadcasting gets off to a lively start every day with the breakfast show, hosted by Paul Stacey—my fellow judge at Long Eaton carnival. Next up is “Morning Plus” with David Allen, who will still be broadcasting now as he goes from 9.30 am to 1 pm. On a recent visit to the station, I had the pleasure of sitting in with and being interviewed by David live on air. We had a really good chat and a phone-in—the radio station is really interactive. David’s show finishes at 1 pm and is followed by “The Afternoon Show”,
“Homeward Bound”, “The Alternative Show” and then “The Late Show”. For the insomniacs among us, the “Night Owls” show provides non-stop music throughout the night, but I always try not to listen to it because I like my night’s sleep.

Many members of the public in Long Eaton, and in the part of the constituency that cannot receive the community radio station, have told Erewash Sound directly that they really want to listen to the radio station. They want the proposed changes to be made so that they can tune in.

In my maiden speech back in July 2015, I spoke about how people in Ilkeston think that the residents of Long Eaton get everything and how the people in Long Eaton think that the people in Ilkeston get everything. Well, I usually say that they are wrong, because both towns get everything, but in this case Long Eaton residents are right—they do not get Erewash Sound. It does nothing to bust the myth when a community radio station called Erewash Sound cannot be heard in Long Eaton. In fact, a major part of the original bid for the community radio station back in the early 2000s was based on the premise that it would help to bring the two towns together, yet technology has so far stopped it doing that. The low wattage and the constituency’s topography have got in the way.

The Bill would allow an affordable DAB licence that is accessible to community radio stations such as Erewash Sound. My discussions with Ofcom have resulted in my reaching the conclusion that an affordable DAB licence is the only option available for Erewash Sound to be able to fulfil its goal of bringing together and broadcasting to my whole constituency. I support the Bill and hope it completes its next stages without delay so that Long Eaton can enjoy the delights of Erewash Sound.

I finish by thanking everyone at Erewash Sound for providing such great entertainment and for supporting the whole community through its community action; even though it does not broadcast throughout the whole constituency. Erewash Sound does a fantastic job, and it is all voluntary. I am sure that people in Long Eaton want the Bill to be passed as quickly as possible so that they can enjoy the same benefits as Ilkeston.

12.7 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), who talked with so much passion about her local radio station. She is a good advocate for all things in her constituency.

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on presenting the Bill. I will shed a little light on his speech. I lea ve it at that.

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Kevin Foster: Does my hon. Friend agree that the focus here is on giving an option for community stations to go on DAB—nobody is going to be forced to go off FM? I am happy again to give the reassurance that the Bill is about giving an option for the third tier of radio, community radio, to go on to DAB if it wishes to do so.
Nothing in the Bill would force those wishing to stay on the current analogue transmissions to move away from them.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful again to my hon. Friend for giving us all that welcome reassurance.

There are many reasons why DAB and the digital switchover is important—the first, and most essential to this Bill, is choice. My hon. Friend has just reassured us again on that. The variety and quantity of stations available is the main motivation for listeners to use DAB. A huge number of stations are available, and we have heard many examples given this morning. These range from stations that play jazz music non-stop all day, children’s stations and religious stations through to those that play only heavy metal—I have not listened to any of those. The FM spectrum has only limited space and is currently very crowded. DAB provides a greater space, meaning more stations and therefore more choice for consumers and more space for local communities.

Broadcasters are currently paying double transition fees on FM and DAB, as they broadcast the same station on multiple platforms. Cutting their costs allows broadcasters to invest further in the technology of DAB. Surely that must be a good thing. Digital radio offers the possibility to develop content and innovation much better than analogue does, be that scrolling text or slideshows, and the ability to pause, rewind and record live radio. Many people have come to expect that as the norm now. As with most things, there are naturally some negatives to DAB. We heard earlier that reception is currently far from perfect, often being described as a cliff-edge—as you may know, Mr Deputy Speaker, there is either a perfect signal and reception, or absolutely nothing at all. I am hoping you are on the same wavelength as me today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): In Chorley FM country we get the perfect wavelength.

Wendy Morton: That cliff-edge contrasts with FM, which becomes slightly fuzzy as the signal begins to be lost. There are possible options to deal with reception problems but, much like with FM, there is a limit to how many stations can be broadcast from a single multiplex, although the limit for DAB is much higher than for FM. As a multiplex fills up and competition for space increases, the cost of broadcasting from it naturally rises, pricing out local stations. That is another reason why the Bill is so important.

The industry has already made some developments in increasing capacity on the DAB matrixes, one of which is broadcasting stations in mono, which reduces the transmission costs and enables more stations to be accommodated in a multiplex. Another more efficient way of increasing DAB capacity is to switch to DAB+, which is two to three times more efficient than regular DAB. Some of the trialists in the OFCOM trial were allowed to start broadcasting on DAB; it will be interesting to see how they progress, and perhaps the Minister will have something to say on that.

I shall explain the importance of community radio and why it matters. As we have heard, community radio is alive and kicking throughout the UK, with more than 500 stations broadcasting on analogue and online. For those stations to really grow, there needs to be the opportunity and space for them to broadcast on small-scale, local multiplexes covering the local areas that they represent. I am reminded of my own background: I come from a rural area where Dales Radio has been designed to help the area, reporting on things such as bad weather and local road conditions. We have heard the bad weather forecast for today—not only rain and floods, but heavy snowfall throughout the country—and I am sure that local radio stations are playing a vital role for our constituents and local communities. The British Forces Broadcasting Service is another fantastic example of a true community radio station.

I am going to wind up my speech, as I know that time is marching on and others would like to speak. At the heart of the Bill is an opportunity not only to help local radio stations to access local multiplexes, but to make a real difference to our local communities, which we all fight so hard to represent in this place. Some have local radio stations; some do not. I would like to think that for some communities this Bill will bring about the opportunity for more local radio—more chance to broadcast and communicate. That is particularly important at a time when so much is being said about the need for greater social cohesion and for communities to come together, particularly post Brexit. We have a perfect opportunity to all come together and make a difference.

12.18 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is my great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton).

I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on bringing this Bill to the House. He is proving himself to be a tenacious campaigner who always stands up for his constituents. He is an incredibly impressive Commons performer, as we saw at the start of the debate, when he spoke for nearly an hour and took all the interventions that were thrown at him with great elegance. I am not at all surprised that he spent a night in his office queuing to get this Bill on to the Order Paper and before the House. I congratulate him on his efforts on behalf of his constituents.

Members tend to know that they are in a pretty good place with their private Member’s Bill if my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is not present. We have not had a contribution from him, so there must be very broad support for the Bill, as we are seeing demonstrated in the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley regularly uses the words “worthy sentiment” when he speaks on a Friday. There is a lot of worthy sentiment in the Bill, because it is all about communities, local services and communication with local people in local areas. The objectives that underpin this Bill most certainly constitute worthy sentiment.

I wish to start by recognising that, in Corby and east Northamptonshire, we are very well serviced by our local media outlets. When it comes to radio, we have BBC Radio Northampton, Corby Radio, and Connect FM, all of which provide a local service, with their own niches and listeners. We also have good television coverage with BBC Look East and ITV Anglia, which provide a very good local news service. We also
have the Northamptonshire Telegraph and the Nene Valley News. All of those outlets come together in their different ways to contribute to local Northamptonshire life.

As Members from across the House will appreciate, those different outlets have different resources available to them. Some are much better resourced than others. We should not forget that community radio is very dependent on volunteers who put an awful lot of time and effort into providing those services on behalf of the communities in which they are based. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that, currently, around 200 small commercial radio stations and 244 community radio stations do not have the opportunity to broadcast on digital radio. The realities are very striking. The rationale behind this Bill is exceptionally logical, as there is not enough capacity on the current DAB multiplexes, particularly in urban areas. The cost of carriage on networks is too high for some small local stations, which is a particular challenge locally in north Northamptonshire. The area of multiplex coverage provided by county-level DAB multiplexes is too large compared with the smaller FM transmission areas, and the set length of licences of 12 years is not appropriate for all broadcasters.

We must recognise that we need to move with the times. Many small commercial radio providers broadcast online, but they need a viable option to move to terrestrial DAB. By the end of 2016-17 and early 2018, 50% of radio listening will be on a digital platform, which is hardly surprising in a digital age, and 60% of UK homes have at least one DAB radio. I am sure that that figure has increased over the Christmas period, with many people being given a DAB radio as a gift. My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) alluded to her household situation and the digital radios that she has received at various Christmases.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay and I can sometimes be accused of chuntering from a sedentary position. I can tell the House that that happens when we believe that Members are complaining about problems but are not bringing forward any solutions to address those problems, and that frustrates us on a regular basis. That is where this Bill has a particular strength. The funded trials, which were run by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport between 2014 and 2016, have proved that the technology works, that this is a viable opportunity, and that the scheme could be rolled out. The success of those pilots is clear both in the outcome of those pilots and in the Library briefing notes. Not only have we identified a challenge and a problem, but we have something to help rectify some of those challenges which is ready-made and readily available and can be rolled out if we move forward on that basis.

One criticism that can be made of this House is that, sometimes, the debates are a little abstract. In the back end of my remarks, I will set out the local context and exactly where we sit in my part of the country—in Corby and east Northamptonshire—in relation to this issue. As I have said, we are very well serviced by two local community radio stations, namely Connect FM and Corby Radio. As part of my research for this debate, I have made contact with both of the radio stations to ask what their take is on this Bill, whether there are any areas that can be improved, and what challenges they face. Let me reflect on the comments that I have had back. Connect FM states:

"Connect FM is on DAB Radio currently. We believe that DAB is the way forward and so took the decision to invest in DAB. We currently broadcast on DAB across Northamptonshire, incorporating Corby. DAB gives smaller broadcasters like Connect FM, who previously only covered part of a county, the ability to compete on a county or even region wide basis. This is vital to ensure the long term financial stability that commercial radio broadcasters like us require. It provides the level playing field on Transmission—" a level playing field is important here—"previously only enjoyed by a limited number of commercial broadcasters and the BBC.

The costs involved in broadcasting on DAB currently are eye-wateringly high when compared to the financial return currently gained. Connect FM have had to negotiate heavily with Arqiva, the sole DAB supplier, to be able to broadcast on the platform and even then can only afford a low-bitrate mono signal. Stereo is beyond our reach currently.

We have been keeping a close eye on Small Scale DAB and it would be of interest to us even if it were to simply offer a level of competition on the transmission market. Current DAB costs are excessive so anything that can be done to drive those costs down, whilst at the same time offering more listener choice, has to be a good thing.

We support the bill if its aim is to achieve that and to also bring forward a switchover date."

I hope that the Minister will remark on some of those issues later, and perhaps they will inform the nitty-gritty discussions when the Bill goes into Committee—I would be delighted to serve on the Bill Committee—to ensure that we get this right for all our different providers.

Corby Radio, which first started broadcasting on 5 December 2009, is a full-time, community-focused radio station. It is incredibly strong on local issues and it has a news output, combined with popular music for all tastes. It does regular studio programming, as well as special live broadcasts, for example from key community events such as the Corby carnival, the highland gathering, which is very popular in the town, the opening of the Corby Cube and the arrival of the Olympic torch. Those pivotal moments in Corby’s history have all been captured in our local media output, but I do not think that they would have been without Corby Radio, and I do not think that it would necessarily happen as successfully in future.

We need to remember the enormous contribution that Corby Radio makes. It is uniquely local coverage, by Corby people and for Corby people, with input from Corby people all the way through. Over the summer I took part in the listener takeover. I went in for an hour and basically had a “Desert Island Discs” show in which I ran through my favourite songs. I thoroughly enjoyed it, as I hope did the listeners at home. I hope that it raised a few pounds to contribute to the radio station. I was just one of many people who took part in those initiatives throughout the summer.

Kevin Foster: Were any of those favourite songs written by our hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris)?

Tom Pursglove: Shamefully, I am not aware of any of the songs written by our hon. Friend, and I was very disappointed that he did not name them so that
Corby Radio also mentioned that Norway has started to phase out FM and that by the end of 2017 the whole country will be digital only. That is a global trend. The Government have said many times that they want us to keep up and be at the front in the global race, and I think that on this issue we should do exactly that. Corby Radio would be very interested to see the Bill progress. It is fully supportive and, as their local MP, I think that it is important that I put that on the record and ensure that we get the Bill through Second Reading. That is why I am pleased to be here for this debate today.

As I come to the end of my remarks, I want to say that the Bill really matters. Corby Radio and Connect FM both provide such an important local service, promoting excellent local community groups, causes and fundraising efforts that other radio providers are simply not in a position to advertise in the same way, and providing topical local news. We currently have inclement weather around the country and, as other hon. Members have mentioned, local stations provide crucial local weather updates. The news output from small local radio stations is, in my experience, completely impartial. It is simply often a case of presenting the facts and letting people know what is going on.

A point that has not yet been mentioned in this debate is that community radio provides a platform for local sports clubs to get across future fixture information and reports about past fixtures, and that is welcome. People are interested in their local clubs and teams, so it is good that there is a platform to let them know how local people are getting on and to encourage more people to go along to the grounds on a Saturday, for example, to support their team.

Jo Churchill: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point about the value of community radio in his constituency. I am sure that, as with Radio Suffolk, his constituents hear, as weekends and summers approach, about fêtes and local charity group events. That shows the importance and vitality of our commercial and local stations. The Bill will help with that, as I am sure my hon. Friend agrees.
This has been a great opportunity for us all to wax lyrical about our local radio stations, and I intend to be no different. I will talk about the aptly named High Peak Radio, which covers the whole of my constituency. It is a big constituency, at over 200 square miles, and the name—‘High’ and ‘Peak’—tells you all you need to know: we have lots of hills, and signals are a problem. However, because of where we are, we do not really identify with the Radio Manchesters, the Radio Sheffield or the Radio Derbys of this world. So High Peak Radio provides us with a tailor-made station for our area.

The future of radio is digital, and I am sure that that is the way High Peak Radio will want to go one day. However, the way things are at the moment, it is beyond the finances of small, independent, community, commercial local radio stations to go into digital—it is too expensive and too difficult.

The Bill is an excellent piece of legislation, and the sooner we get it through, the better. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) laid out, it would put in place a framework whereby the likes of High Peak Radio can get on to digital—they can move into the digital zone.

Somebody here once talked about being an analogue person in a digital age.

Seema Kennedy: I think that was me.

Andrew Bingham: Actually, I was referring to the former Member for Sedgefield and the former Member for Witney, but it still works. The former Member for Witney did actually come to High Peak Radio, but more of that later.

We need to allow the likes of High Peak Radio to move into the digital age, and the Bill puts down the framework that will allow it to do that without the huge expense it would currently face. The benefits for local radio are huge, and many of them have been highlighted today.

I look at what High Peak Radio has done for High Peak in the years it has been broadcasting, and I see that it brings so many benefits. We talk about community and community charities. We have things such as Blythe House hospice in Chapel-en-le-Frith; High Peak Radio is a great supporter of that great charity, as well as many others.

I have done events in High Peak: I have walked round High Peak and golfed round High Peak—I have done everything round High Peak for charity—and High Peak Radio has been a fantastic supporter. It is not that it has enabled me to do those things—I have to do the walking or whatever it might be—but it gets the word out.

On one of the first charity walks I did, I walked round the boundary of the constituency. I was walking out of Buxton when a car pulled up. The driver opened his window and said, ‘There’s a tenner, Andrew.’ I said, ‘What’s that for?’ He said, ‘I’ve just heard on High Peak Radio that you’re walking the boundary of the constituency for charity. There’s your 10 quid.’ That 10 quid went to the charity.

That is just an isolated instance of how High Peak Radio helps support so many people doing so much good work for so many charities. People cannot afford to have an advert on the big commercial radio stations, let alone the television, but High Peak Radio provides them with a vehicle and a conduit to get the word out and to encourage support. That, in turn, promotes community cohesion. We talk a lot about community cohesion in this place, and that is a great way of promoting it.

Somebody talked earlier about isolation, which affects a lot of people. We all think that, nowadays, with satellite television and all these channels, people do not listen to the radio any more. Well, in High Peak, they do. I know lots of people who have High Peak Radio on because, yes, there is music, but they also get the local news and it makes them feel part of their local communities. They are sometimes elderly people who cannot get out as often as they would like, and it makes them part of the town or village they live in. Whether it be Chapel-en-le-Frith, Charlesworth, Dove Holes or New Mills, they know what is going on in their town and area. They know, for instance, that on Christmas day an organisation did a Christmas lunch for people. It is a great way of promoting community cohesion and dealing with the social isolation that we in this place try to find many ways of dealing with.

As we sit in here, I do not know what the weather is doing, but it is probably pretty snowy in High Peak. Buxton is one of the highest towns in England, and we have the highest football ground and the highest pub in England, all of which will be covered in snow. With High Peak Radio, people can put their local radio station on. If they put a national radio station on, they would probably hear of Buxton only two or three times a year when we are snowed in. They hear about the Cat and Fiddle and the Woodhead pass, because those roads are often blocked with traffic.

At this time of year, snow is always a problem on those and on many other roads. If someone is looking to get from Glossop to Buxton this morning, they will not get that information on BBC radio news but they will get it on High Peak Radio. One of my constituents, Jamie Douglas, cannot get to work today because of the snow. For anybody in High Peak who is watching this, I am very sorry but my constituency office is closed because my staff are snowed in in Glossop. How do people work that out? How do we know where we can go and where we cannot go in High Peak on a day like this when we get more snow than anybody else? People turn to High Peak Radio because the road and traffic news goes on all the time.

My hon. Friend—an old friend—the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) talked about sport. I was glad he mentioned that. In fact, I was not that glad because I wanted to mention it first, but hey ho—he beat me to it. We have lots of football, cricket and rugby teams in High Peak.

Oliver Colvile rose—

Andrew Bingham: Ah—my friend with the hedgehog is back.

Oliver Colvile: My hon. Friend may recall that he organised a game of cricket up in Burton which I was delighted to play in. It was a great game.

Andrew Bingham: That is right, although I must correct my hon. Friend: it was actually in Buxton, which, by the way, saw the only case of a day’s cricket being lost due to snow in this country, in June 1975.
Andrew Bingham: Yes, and it must remain so.

If we can give local stations a low-cost option to move on to digital radio, that has to be welcomed and encouraged. The sooner we get it on the statute book, the better. We can encourage our local stations to continue. We all have our own stations and they all have their own programmes. My hon. Friend the Member for Corby has been on “Desert Island Discs”. My radio does not do that, but it does have “High Peak Insiders” and “High Peak Happenings”, on which events can be advertised.

I am a great supporter of High Peak Radio and local radio in general. We need to give it every chance and every encouragement to survive and flourish. Getting the Bill on the statute book will help them to move into the digital age without costing them a fortune. I am delighted to see the Bill before the House today. The sooner we can get it through Report stage and all the other processes, the better.

Before I sit down, on the wider subject of radio, I want to give a gentle nudge to my right hon. Friend the Minister—who is now looking somewhat startled—and ask him to please get on with the radio deregulation consultation, because it has been talked about for some time. [ Interruption. ] He is looking towards his officials, as am I, and everybody is nodding, so hopefully we have achieved something there.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay on bringing the Bill forward. I enthusiastically hope it will get on to the statute book as quickly as possible, and that that news can be broadcast on High Peak Radio very soon.

12.47 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on the Bill. It intends to allow Ofcom the flexibility to create a lighter touch listening regime in relation to small-scale digital audio broadcasting. It follows the two-year trial run by Ofcom and funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport between 2014 and 2016.

As Members may know, there are two categories of radio multiplex for which licences are awarded by Ofcom under part II of the Broadcasting Act 1996. Those are for national or local coverage, with local coverage being roughly county-sized. The Bill would allow for small-scale radio multiplexes, which the DCMS has said would likely be no more than 40% of the size of current local services. The intention is to spread the opportunity of DAB to smaller stations, which have so far not been able to use those frequencies. We welcome that.

There are 58 local commercial DAB multiplex services across the UK, which is not enough to offer coverage in all areas. Often, the county-sized DAB services are too expensive and have too large a range for smaller community stations. As a result of this and other factors, there are up to 400 local and community stations that are not carried on DAB but on analogue AM or FM services. Small-scale DAB would provide a cost-effective way forward.

The Bill aims to benefit areas experiencing over or under-subscription. The extra DAB coverage provided by small-scale radio multiplexes would benefit those areas, especially urban areas, where the current county-sized local services do not have the capacity to meet demand.
Likewise, as is outlined in the explanatory notes for all to read, in areas such as Shropshire and the Scottish borders where there is no local multiplex, small-scale multiplexes could cater to people at a community level.

Having more radio content and more people accessing that content are clearly desirable outcomes. Indeed, the access radio scheme, which saw the licensing of 15 community radio stations, was piloted by the Radio Authority in 2002 under a Labour Government. Community radio continued to grow and strengthen. In the five years following the Community Radio Order 2004, licences were given to more than 200 community radio services, which created more than 400 jobs, involved 10,000 volunteers and provided services to an audience of more than 10 million people. At the heart of the scheme was the use of radio for social gain. The developments were hailed by Ofcom as one of the great UK broadcasting success stories of the past few years.

Radio content made by and for communities was funded, supported and championed under Labour. The hard-working groups and individuals who continue to run those services continue to receive our full support and gratitude. Given that the Bill extends and modernises Labour's legacy, we welcome it. Our questions relate mostly to the practicalities rather than the principles.

The Government drafted the Bill, so we will be interested to hear what the Minister says in response. As has been mentioned, the Bill draws specific attention to rural areas where there are currently no local multiplexes. We have heard many examples of how they would be welcome throughout the country, but the Ofcom trial on which the Bill is based used 10 locations, all of which were cities, from Glasgow to Manchester and Cambridge. I understand that the trial used pre-existing radio services and so could not take place in areas without local radio multiplexes, but the disparity between the stated aim of the Bill and the scope of the trial on which it is based requires further exploration.

Radiocentre, the industry body for commercial radio, has expressed concern that the measure prohibiting anyone with an interest in a national or local multiplex from gaining a small-scale DAB licence could negatively impact rural areas, particularly where it is possible that no other operators would be interested. Will the Minister tell us whether the DCMS consultation will specifically address the feasibility of the programme in rural areas? What is his view of the concerns expressed by Radiocentre?

The explanatory notes refer to the 200 smaller commercial radio stations and the 244 community stations that currently do not have access to DAB, and so continue to broadcast on AM and FM analogue frequencies. The Bill has been presented as an opportunity for such stations, but in “Small-scale DAB trials: final report”, from September 2016, Ofcom notes that although “it should be technically possible to develop a frequency plan for small scale DAB which might accommodate those stations...much more detailed planning and optimisation work would be required to develop a frequency plan which could be implemented in practice.”

The House will not want to pass the Bill until it knows that it can be implemented in practice. Will the Minister tell us what plans have been made to address those uncertainties? When will that detailed planning and optimisation work take place? Furthermore, there are issues to address such as the skills and knowledge needed to capitalise on the opportunities that the Bill could offer.

Ofcom’s final report notes that the trials focused on functionality, so that the software and materials provided to the operators involved were often complicated and user-unfriendly. The majority of operators had suitably skilled engineers or technical staff to deal with that, and those who did not received additional support. In reality, a wider roll-out would require tools that are more user-friendly, as Ofcom recognises in the report.

Kevin Foster: I welcome the broad thrust of the shadow Minister’s remarks, which appear to be supportive. She referred to the operators and the recent trials. Has she met anyone involved with the operators in the trials, as I have, when I found out from them just how simple it is?

Dr Allin-Khan: I have not personally met the providers as I am the shadow Minister for Sport, but my shadow DCMS team have met providers, and I have been briefed. The Opposition team are fully aware of all the details, as I am outlining.

Kevin Foster: It is not that complex.

Dr Allin-Khan: I beg to differ and will make progress. As I have said, the majority of operators had suitably skilled engineers or technical staff to deal with those issues, and those who did not received additional support. In reality, a wider roll-out would require more user-friendly tools, as Ofcom recognises in the report. That would be needed by operators that do not have engineers and skilled technical staff, and by those establishing a station for the first time.

The software-developing community and market are beginning to deliver those more user-friendly technologies. However, given that the report was published only four months ago, it is safe to assume that no breakthrough accessible technology has yet become available. Do the Government have a plan for making such technology available? Will Government stakeholders and the industry co-operate to build up skills and knowledge? What assessment has been made of the risks of adjacent channel interference, a matter discussed in the Ofcom report and one with which I am sure the hon. Member for Torbay is fully familiar?

As is so often the case, this comes down to funding, and the Government are cutting funding wherever possible. DCMS seems hopeful that the Bill will encourage the establishment of new small-scale radio services. Will the Minister clarify if and how those stations will be eligible for any grants or funding? Since 2010, the money provided for the community radio fund, established under Labour, and community radio projects have suffered a 17% cut. I understand that no community radio fund will be available for small-scale DAB stations. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case?

Other details require clarification. The draft legislation specifies that a small-scale multiplex would only be operated on a non-commercial basis. Uncertainty about this has caused some concern among stakeholders. Radiocentre appreciates that the aim is to keep the costs of carriage as low as possible, but will this prevent a commercial operator from holding such a licence?
Will commercial radio stations be able to broadcast on the multiplex? The Community Media Association has also expressed concern about the Bill's ambiguity in this area, although it, like Radiocentre, is supportive of the Bill in general. In the light of that, what measures will be taken to ensure that the licensing of small-scale multiplexes promotes healthy competition without crowding out existing local services?

Finally, why was the provision in the Bill not included in the Digital Economy Bill, the most obvious legislative vehicle for such a measure? The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) asked the very same question today in this Chamber. The Government crammed everything else into that Bill, to the extent that this is a rather more obvious measure to include than many of the other measures in that Bill. Does that not show that we were right all along and that the Digital Economy Bill was not ready when it was introduced, hence so many Government amendments?

As I said, Labour is supportive of the Bill. The Labour party encouraged the proliferation of small-scale radio when in government, and we welcome the opportunity for community channels and small commercial channels to expand on to DAB frequencies, and we support the establishment of more new local media.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that community radio is great for local news and may benefit enormously from the Bill? I was once a volunteer reporter on a community radio station in Sydney in Australia, for which I covered rugby and international relations. It was good to play a small part in updating the local community. I am sure we support the Bill for that reason.

Dr Allin-Khan: Absolutely. We wholeheartedly support the Bill for that reason. I thank my hon. Friend for his articulate and eloquent comments. I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate our support for all local radio. Indeed, I am very grateful to Wandsworth Radio for its coverage of the by-election hustings when I was victorious in June.

Labour is proud to have encouraged the proliferation of small-scale radio in government. We welcome the opportunity for community and small commercial channels to expand on to DAB frequencies, and we support the establishment of more new local media. We have questions, some of which I have mentioned and more we shall be discussing in Committee if the Bill succeeds in having its Second Reading. I greatly look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

12.59 pm

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): It is a pleasure, tempered only slightly by the small element of party politics injected into what has been a very non-party political and good-humoured debate, to follow the shadow Minister. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for introducing the Bill. He is always an assiduous parliamentarian and performer in this Chamber. It is always a pleasure to listen to him, even more so when he is presenting his own Bill. I pay tribute to him for what he said and for the work he has done on this issue.

As those who know me will be aware, I am not a particularly technologically minded individual. Debates like this always provide a great opportunity to learn something that one has not known before, not only by participating and listening to what is said, but by doing the research beforehand.

Like many Members, I am a great fan of radio. In my view, no radio broadcaster will ever quite compare to the late, great Sir Terry Wogan. I was a TYG in my youth, a “Terry’s Young Geezer”; I was not quite a TOG at that stage. Sir Terry will continue to be missed. Nevertheless, as many Members have pointed out, there are some fantastic broadcasters today. I greatly enjoy listening to “Test Match Special” and the wonderful John Suchet on Classic FM, and also to the wonderful Jim and Jo on the BBC Radio Leicester breakfast show.

Today’s debate reflects the success of digital radio. Huge technological strides have been made, and that is a massive positive. However, the legislative, regulatory and licensing framework that governs this area is still rooted in the Broadcasting Act 1996 and the Communications Act 2003, and has not managed to keep pace with the changes that we have seen. Although the regime is not explicitly anti-small community radio stations, that is often the effect of the way in which it operates. As we have been told today, carriage fees can be as much as £5,000 a month, which is clearly excessive for many small community or voluntary radio stations. The trials about which we have heard—which I understand will now run until 2018—are hugely important and very positive, but they are not a basis for the sustainable long-term footing on which we wish to put community radio stations.

The Bill deals with three key elements: innovation, localism and proportionality. Let me deal first with innovation. We are aware of the huge strides that have been made in DAB radio technology, and we have observed that an increasing number of our constituents choose to listen to radio in this way. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) spoke of the huge successes achieved by the technology. He also said that there were still challenges to be overcome, but I believe that they are being actively worked on and will indeed be overcome. We have heard about, for example, the innovations in software technology.

We have also heard about localism. Nearly all the Members who have spoken so far have rightly talked about their constituencies. As constituency Members, we know that each of our villages and towns, and each part of our cities, has a distinct and proud local identity. Local and, indeed, community radio stations focused on towns and villages play directly into that, because people want to hear local news. They want that intimacy with the radio station that serves them.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) about the role that such radio stations play in combating loneliness—an issue that she was right to mention, giving the amazing work that she is doing in connection with it. We have also heard about their potential for introducing new broadcasting talent. My hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), who has moved from his previous place but is still in the Chamber, spoke of people’s sense of identity and the stickers that they put in their windows—doubtless, in the early summer of 2015, alongside others advocating his election to the House.
The third element in the Bill is proportionality: the proportionality of regulation to what is being regulated and what we are seeking to achieve. The current regulatory framework may well be, and probably is, entirely appropriate for the regulation of multiplexes when applied to the BBC—national stations, or stations serving large regions—but I would argue that it is neither proportionate nor reasonable when applied to small local community stations serving particular towns or villages.

This Government, and particularly this Minister, have a strong track record of supporting innovation, especially in technology. I appreciate that the Minister probably sometimes despairs at my unwillingness to embrace all the elements that the technological revolution in this country can deliver, but he continues to champion the cause of technological innovation very proudly. He is also a great champion of localism and—in this role and his previous roles—of deregulation, to ensure that any regulation is proportionate to the risk involved and to what is being regulated. In this case, the aim is to free up small and community organisations, the better to deliver services to their communities.

I would argue that the Bill is overdue, given the innovation and developments in technology that we have seen in this country, but it is extremely welcome. Seizing the opportunities that technology brings, harnessing the innovation and passion of our local communities and freeing them from unnecessarily onerous or costly regulation and licensing frameworks are all extremely worthy ambitions and objectives. I believe that the Bill meets those ambitions head-on and addresses them in full. I very much hope that the House will fully endorse the contents of the Bill so that it will be able to proceed to its next stage. I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, but I have no doubt that he will be similarly supportive towards the extraordinary and important efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay.

1.6 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I am very pleased to be following my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), who has, as usual, raised lots of very good points.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on bringing forward the Bill. I have to confess that this is not an area that I am particularly familiar with. Indeed, like my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood, I am actually a bit of a technophobe. I still cannot work out how to do certain things on my mobile phone, for example, but I now have a DAB radio in my car, so I am probably a bit more familiar with the technology than I was in the past. I had not realised that there were significant barriers to local community and voluntary radio stations getting access to the infrastructure. I was interested to learn about that, and it made me look at how things were going in my own constituency and what opportunities there might be there.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) mentioned earlier, this is a technical Bill. It focuses on opening up something that we already have, in order to make it more accessible for communities and small organisations. That must always be a good thing. We are really lucky in my constituency of Rochester and Strood, because we have a radio station called KMFM which operates across Kent and Medway. It is run by the KM Group, which operates a number of radio stations at regional level across the county. In Medway, it is sited in my constituency, but it also operates on a DAB multiplex across the county. That involves one radio station operating across the county on that system. The separate analogue stations around the county also play a major role in getting news out.

One of the things that KMFM is really good at doing is supporting local events. It provides coverage of all the events in my constituency. Whenever we have a big festival in Rochester, Chatham or Strood, the local radio station always covers what is going on. It is massively important that local people can hear about and be part of what is going on by listening in if they are unable to get to such events.

Another key thing is live, real-time news. In some cases, it is far quicker and far more accurate than what we get from some of the bigger regional radio stations, such as BBC local radio. Only yesterday, the local radio station was able to get out news about the snow and about an unfortunate incident involving a man whose boat was set alight. He had to jump into the river and was taken to hospital. That news was live very quickly via local radio. I have not yet heard whether he is okay, but I am sure he is now.

The local radio station is also good at covering business, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham). Local radio is far more accessible for local businesses and to the local authority. When you want to advertise local events, local radio provides a cost-effective option for promotion, which is a major thing for the local community. Local radio is also prepared to cover the small events, such as village fetes, that larger radio stations will not cover. My sport is sailing, but the national regional stations rarely cover sailing events. However, our small community radio stations will cover what we are up to, which is important not least for getting out the message about what is actually going on in the constituency.

The range of programmes and coverage on small community and voluntary radio stations is diverse. Kent has a station called Channel Radio, on which Sian Murphy, a constituent of mine, hosts a show called “Women In Business“. Many women come to speak on her programme and talk about entrepreneurship or raising a family while running a small business from home. It presents a real opportunity for listeners to network without actually being face to face, and I have received feedback that that is really important. Loneliness might play a part, but if someone is bringing up a family at home and trying to contribute to the growth in our economy by setting up their own business, they can listen to other females’ experiences of what it is like to run a business and some of the challenges that they face. It is a really interesting programme. Sian is a businesswoman herself and does the show voluntarily because she just wants to help women get on.

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does she agree that local radio stations, such as BBC Somerset in Taunton, are great places to help spread education? I did a couple of gardening programmes—“What’s Growing On” and “Grow it. Cook it. Eat it”—that were about encouraging people not only to garden, but to grow food to feed their families healthily for little money.
Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend makes a wonderful point. She is absolutely correct. That is the beauty of small community and voluntary radio stations. They have the opportunities, the time and the capacity to deliver interesting programmes that help the particular demographic that they serve. I have definitely seen that in some local radio programmes.

Paul Andrews runs Kent Business Bunker Radio and hosts a programme that covers a range of topics, such as jobs across Kent and interesting industries to get into. He also talks about funding for start-up businesses and businesses that want to grow, as well as talking about business and helping the local community. In constituencies such as mine that have a small-business economy, such opportunities and programmes are especially important.

I have not spoken much about this, but many speakers have talked about particular voluntary radio organisations such as hospital radio, which are valuable resources for our local communities. I will not keep going on about this because we have all said it, but one reason why I am pleased to support the Bill presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay is that it represents progress. The Bill takes something that already exists and asks how we can open it up to small sections where there is a clear need. There are many opportunities where we can look at opening it up to small businesses or the voluntary and community sectors.

This is a lovely, ideal proposal, and I have no hesitation in supporting my hon. Friend today. I congratulate him on his very detailed and well-explained introduction, which gave me better knowledge of the digital radio industry. I thank him and look forward to supporting his Bill.

1.16 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) for her speech. I concur with many of her points, particularly on connectivity. I also add my voice to those who rightly paid tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for presenting such a pertinent Bill that will not only enable businesses to grow but will start allowing us to pull down barriers and reduce regulation, which is what we are about. The Bill is also about showing that we are a flexible and adaptable Parliament. In these modern times we all work differently to how we worked in the past, so we must be about enabling more effective modern communications.

I declare myself a radio nut. My DAB radio is on top of my kitchen cupboard, where nobody can reach it. It was originally put there so I could get a better signal, and now it stops my children changing the channel—it seems to work well on both fronts. I do a lot of radio listening through my phone, and I echo the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) about whether we could use mobile phone connectivity in a more beneficial way. I am no technical buff, but I ask the Minister to look into that. In previous debates on mobile phones and notspots, we heard that churches, as often the tallest buildings in rural communities, have said that they are happy to help facilitate masts, and so on, to drive greater connectivity in communities.

My hon. Friends the Members for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) and for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) spoke about loneliness and connectivity. It is vital that people can hear about what is going on in and around their local area, and in and around their life. I would welcome an answer on that.

Radio is brilliant, and it brings comfort. The Minister and I share not only Radio Suffolk but West Suffolk hospital. Radio West Suffolk brings real support to the hospital’s patients. I will give a shout-out to Ian Norris at this point. He volunteers and we have heard so much about that today: how people running these radio stations give of their own time so selflessly. Given that 87% of all local radio stations support young people volunteering, we see that this is a hugely important area of our life, as this grows skills as people move into the workplace. I do not know whether I am right, and perhaps the Minister would like to respond on this, but I believe I read that he had some time on a local radio station. I think it was called radio Oxygen—I hope he does not run out of that when he is responding positively to this afternoon’s debate!

I had the great privilege of visiting the British forces radio in Canada last summer. It, too, is hugely important for connecting people’s lives and driving information into places that would not normally have that accessibility. We are talking about giving little personal bits of information that make people feel so much better at a time when they cannot always get out of their hospital bed or across parts of the world to put their arms around a loved one.

We are taking things slowly, and my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay explained eloquently in opening this debate how things would proceed. As I said, I am not a technical person, but this Bill is a good idea that we should all be supporting. Today in particular, when snow is falling outside, local radio travel news, which has been spoken about by other Members, including my hon. Friend the Members for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham), for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) and for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), acts as a vital conduit. These stations also tell us when our schools are open. As I said, we are dealing today with flooding issues along the east coast, and people who are not using the Environment Agency’s buzz to find out about what is going on with flooding locally are going to be listening to local radio. That shows its huge importance in our community. Public information is disseminated brilliantly in this way, so we need to enable this sector of our creative economy—an economy that drives an awful lot of money into this country—so that it can help with volunteers and with skills and build on those.

It is now 1.22 pm, so Lesley Dolphin will be entertaining people across Suffolk. I have had the pleasure of being on her show and chatting to her. Earlier in the day on Radio Suffolk we have Mark Murphy, and he is leading a great campaign on people not using mobile phones when they are driving. That is another great thing community radio stations can do: they can start that campaigning zeal which we all appreciate in this place. The use of a mobile phone in the car is one of the top four causes of death, along with not putting a seatbelt on, drink-driving—[Interruption.] Somebody might have to help me out with the last one.

Kevin Foster: Excessive speed.
**Jo Churchill:** Yes, excessive speed. Well done. Once again, my hon. Friend comes to my rescue.

The last speaker told us that local radio, and community radio in particular, covers 10,000 local events, such as the fêtes. I was recently interviewed by people from local radio at our fireworks event in Bury St Edmunds, but I have also come across them at a plethora of fêtes across the country and all sorts of different events.

More importantly, these stations raise £25 million for charity. As my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak mentioned, they announce that an event is going on, they drive it forward and get people to visit, and then get people to put those contributions into the bucket. Therefore, we are talking about another huge community asset.

**Rebecca Pow:** My hon. Friend is making an exceedingly powerful point. About a year ago, I mentioned in this Chamber that we might light up the Wellington monument, which had not been lit for years, and our amazing local radio station, BBC Somerset, broadcast that. When we turned up in the dark, unexpectedly, with the National Trust, hundreds of people turned out because they had heard about this on local radio. That is what convinced the National Trust to support my project to raise money to restore the monument. That is all thanks to radio, so does my hon. Friend agree with me about how effective it is?

**Jo Churchill:** I readily agree, and congratulate my hon. Friend on getting included in the autumn statement the money to repair the monument in her constituency.

After all we have said about work experience, volunteering and so on, I want to give a shout-out to a member of my staff who goes home from her day’s work here to the community radio station for the Harrow area. The station is the result of a merger back in 2012 of Northwick Park hospital radio and Harrow Community radio, and operates out of the hospital. It is primarily about the community and is run entirely by volunteers. It provides befriending and wellbeing services, and volunteers spend time on the ward with patients and tailor the shows to their patients. It is a chance for volunteers to gain hands-on experience in the totally new field of radio broadcasting.

**Oliver Colville:** I am told that BBC Radio Hereford & Worcester has not yet been mentioned in the debate; I want to ensure that it appears in Hansard as well.

**Jo Churchill:** I am delighted to give my hon. Friend the chance to have those words written in Hansard.

Many broadcast journalists and ambitious young broadcasters use the Harrow community radio station as a platform to get involved. It runs fundraising events, sponsors community activities and brings local news to local people—and it is all done by volunteers.

Only yesterday, I heard that Radio Caroline, which most Members are probably too young to remember, has applied to Ofcom for a licence to broadcast on AM across East Anglia. The station’s ship, Ross Revenge, will be moored in the Essex estuary, so only the northern part of Suffolk will be able to receive DAB broadcasts. It would be good to extend that ability to broadcast across the piece, along with any new business ventures.

Whether it is someone’s source of news, music, travel, politics or a little bit of something different, the radio is also their friend, as my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak said. When I was raising a small family, “Woman’s Hour” used to mark the time through the day. When I was recovering from having been quite poorly, when I heard the afternoon play I would think, “I’m nearly at teatime.” I have many other memories. I am so sad that I even take my radio gardening with me, as I potter about to pull a few weeds—

**Kelly Tolhurst:** Only weeds? [Laughter.]  

**Jo Churchill:** I do know the difference—vaguely.

A radio is not only a piece of technical equipment but a friend by one’s side, so I urge the Minister to take those thoughts on board. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay introducing the Bill and look forward to hearing from the Minister that we are now going to action stations—I think that is the radio term. I look forward to supporting the Bill.

1.28 pm

**The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock):** It is a pleasure and an honour to be called to the Dispatch Box to respond to this debate.

Like everybody else, I put on the record wholeheartedly my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for introducing the Bill. He gave a great exposition of the Bill and set out in good detail what he hopes we can achieve. I also put on the record my thanks to the officials in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport who have worked with my hon. Friend on the Bill and prepared me for it. We have in DCMS an incredibly dedicated radio team who care deeply about the success of radio in this country, and I thank them. I had proposed to try to answer directly many of the questions that had been asked in the debate, as well as set out, quite briefly, what is in the Bill, but because that was done so well by my hon. Friend at the start, I shall be relatively brief.

I am grateful to all Members who have contributed to this debate. Perhaps we should start with the position of the Labour party and the Labour Front-Bench team. It was, I think, the maiden performance, at length, from the Dispatch Box by the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan). She was elected only in June and gave a great performance with lots of questions. So impressive was her performance today that I wonder whether she, like an increasing number of her friends, will be opting for a job outside Parliament soon.

I will go through the hon. Lady’s questions in detail. I was, I think, the maiden performance, at length, from the Dispatch Box by the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan). She was elected only in June and gave a great performance with lots of questions. So impressive was her performance today that I wonder whether she, like an increasing number of her friends, will be opting for a job outside Parliament soon.

On the frequency plan, the hon. Lady seemed to imply that it was not possible to vote in support of the Bill until that plan was in place. I caution her against such an approach, as the process has already started. The frequency trials were very positive. Of course further
consultation will address the technical details, but those technical details are a matter for the orders and statutory instruments that follow the Bill rather than the principles that we are debating today. The same is true about the comments made by Radiocentre and the Community Media Association. Those are matters for the regulations.

The hon. Lady rightly raised the matter of skills. The Ofcom report was clear that the trials delivered exactly the sorts of skills that we should be looking for in this space. She also talked about money, saying that this all comes down to funding. Well, I caution her against that view. Although Labour thinks that everything comes down to public funding, we think that human ingenuity is quite impressive, too.

As it happens, in this spending review period funding for community radio support was increased and guaranteed out to 2020, but it is amazing what people can achieve if they are given the permission to do so. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay set out many times in the course of his speech, this Bill is ultimately a permissive piece of legislation: it is about allowing people to do things that, currently, they cannot do. Therefore, it is about a further unleashing of human ingenuity.

The hon. Lady asked, perfectly reasonably, why this Bill and the clauses in it are not part of the Digital Economy Bill. The reason is that we wanted to see the conclusion of the trials before putting out the legislation. We published the Digital Economy Bill back in the summer, but the trials had not concluded at that point, so we did not want to put these details in that Bill. There have been odd noises from the Opposition Benches about why the Digital Economy Bill was not delayed. I do not think that we can delay in bringing forward the transition to digital, whether in this or the other Bill.

The hon. Lady also raised a question that had been mentioned by a number of others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) and a number of others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), about the matter of public only or public and private. I know that some of her friends on the Front Bench think “public good, private bad” but we on the Government Benches reject such an approach, because we think that there can be a contribution from both public and private. That question will be addressed in the consultation. Again, this Bill is permissive on that basis. It does not require either public or private backing. However, there is an important balance to be struck in the consultation, which is that, ultimately, small-scale digital radio is about enabling communities and community support. We do not want it to be completely gobbled up by large commercial providers for whom there are other options. We want to ensure that there is space for the innovative and for the very small. As my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) said, people need to be able to start a radio station from their garden shed. That is what this is all about. There is a reasonable case for limiting the commercial element, but there is also a case for small commercial operations, and we will address the balance of those cases in the forthcoming consultation. I hope that addresses the points made from the Opposition Front Bench.

Let me now address some of the questions asked by other Members. My hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) asked how the masts will work in practice. Of course, individual radio stations will not necessarily have to put up their own masts; the whole point is to have a network of masts. The masts can go on to existing masts that are used for other things, and they can go on to buildings. In fact, we have just relaxed some of the planning regulations on masts. Like my hon. Friend, I represent a rural constituency. I had the great privilege of opening our local digital mast, which has gone up next to a school in north Suffolk, which means we can now get BBC Radio Suffolk on digital radio. The technology is there and the planning system is in increasingly good shape to allow this. Therefore, although a radio company could put up its own mast, there are also ways to start up a radio station without having to go down that hardware route.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), who is a great supporter of radio, provided not only insight in the debate, but entertainment. In fact, one could say that as well as the music, he has provided the lyrics. He made a passionate case about the positive impact of radio in times of distress, such as the serious storms and flooding in his constituency just over a year ago. He paid tribute to his local radio station in what I thought was a very balanced way. There is no reason to think that DAB will be any less reliable and resilient during storms. By allowing for more localised digital content, we can get even more local information in times of distress. I hope that he is reassured on that point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) made an important point about political balance in community radio. Of course, anyone in broadcasting has to follow the law of the land and the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 and ensure that their output conforms to what is required. He made a strong case for radio, mostly on the grounds of cricket. I remember well the time he astonished not only the entire Indian parliamentary cricket team, but the rest of the British parliamentary team by taking a wicket in Dharamshala. I also recall spending an awful lot of time recovering the ball from the boundary.

Oliver Colvile: I must say that I, too, was deeply surprised. My right hon. Friend might also recall that although there were only 250 people in the grounds, the match was being watched by 19 million people on Indian television.

Matt Hancock: I have no doubt that all 19 million were totally astonished. It just shows that if you put on what might be regarded as niche broadcasts—in this case, a cricket match between the UK and Indian Parliaments—sometimes many, many people will watch.

Andrew Bingham: Does the Minister recall that I was actually commentating for Indian television when my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) took the wicket?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I remember that. On a slightly more serious note, I think there was a reason why 19 million people in India were watching that cricket match, and it was not due to the quality of the commentary, the bowling or the fielding. It was because there is very heavy regulation on the number of broadcast channels in India, so there was nothing else to watch. Putting
ourselves in the eyes of the viewer or the ears of the listener, it is far better to have more stations, especially local ones, so that people can do something better than watching my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport and I play cricket.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) made the case that small-scale multiplexes should be able to run on a commercial basis as well and asked when all this will be in place. The answer is that, should the Bill proceed and, alongside it, we consult on the details of the orders, our goal will be to have the system in place by early 2018 before the trials finish at the end of March 2018. We are on the path to get that timing right, but we need to get the Bill through to make that happen.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill)—the Suffolk Bury—made the same argument. Many people, and I count myself as one, are incredibly enthusiastic about and excited by technology, but technology is only any good if it caters for people because of what it does, not what it is. People who are not enthusiastic about technology can still use digital radio including, for instance, to listen to “Test Match Special.”

As long the gradual move to digital is handled correctly, it has the potential to free up spectrum that can be used in other ways. It has to be done carefully. I come back to a point made a lot at the start of the debate: this is about adding a capability, not turning off analogue. By coincidence, I met the Norwegian Minister on my way here this morning and she told me about the progress Norway has made in starting to turn off the analogue services. We are not there yet. We still hope to do it, but we must make sure that enough people are on digital first and that we support those who are still on analogue in the transition.1 There have been some big changes in the past couple of years, including in the car market. Nearly 95% of new car radios are digital. The change is happening and it is a good thing, but we must do it sensibly and carefully, and the Bill has no impact on those plans.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds mentioned BBC Radio Suffolk and Radio West Suffolk, which I visited in the last Parliament. It is true that, as a student, I was on Oxygen 107.9 FM, a radio station in Oxford where I learned how to handle a radio mic. I had the same sort of experience as my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane and it taught me a huge amount. I was the minority sports correspondent and I had a lot of fun. In fact, I am sure that the radio show was more fun to make than to listen to.

I pay tribute to the work of those who are helping with the expansion of digital radio, and particularly to Ford Ennals, who has done an enormous amount of work outside this House to make sure people understand what digital radio is—indeed, he is often on the radio talking about why digital radio matters.

Currently, about 200 smaller commercial radio stations covering small markets and 244 commercial radio stations transmitting mainly on FM and medium wave are not broadcasting on digital radio. The details of the Bill have been well discussed and set out today, and the purpose of the Bill has been well set out. I am delighted the Bill has cross-party support and support from everybody who has spoken in the debate, and I hope it can make progress. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay for bringing it forward with such panache.

1.41 pm

Kevin Foster: With the leave of the House, may I thank all Members, and particularly the Minister and the shadow Minister, for their remarks and support? I am glad to note that I seem to be on the same wavelength as everyone else in the Chamber today. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] I am sure we can look forward to a range of broadcasts when we take the Bill into Committee.

I particularly thank my hon. Friends the Members for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and for Erewash (Maggie Throup) for their support in bringing the Bill forward. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), who has to play a silent role, but who was very effective in ensuring that I was fully aware of all the procedure. With that, I thank Members for their support.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Civil Partnership Act 2004 (Amendment) Bill

Second Reading

1.46 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am very excited because, in almost 20 years in the House, this is the first time that a Bill of mine has ever got an airing on a Friday morning. That shows what can happen if we persevere, and I do hope the Minister is not going to spoil it when he gets up to signal his vast support for this very sensible and much needed measure.

The debate over the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 has passed. The Act has become law, and over 15,000 couples have taken advantage of that new opportunity. Whatever people on the opposite sides of the argument, then or now, think, the world has not fallen in. However, as some of us argued at the time, the extension of marriage then has unwittingly created a new inequality, and a Government who argued zealously that same-sex marriage was an equality issue seem to have rather lost interest when it comes to an equality that affects opposite-sex couples. That new inequality is that marriage is available to same-sex and opposite-sex couples, yet civil partnerships are available only to same-sex couples.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I absolutely support my hon. Friend’s Bill. He will recall that, at the time, the same-sex marriage Bill was known as the equal marriage Bill by many people. Does he agree that, for it to be truly an equal marriage Bill, it is essential that his Bill is enacted to make the situation properly equal as between homosexual and heterosexual couples?

Tim Loughton: I do agree, which is why, at the time, I argued that the amendment that forms part of the Bill would have prevented the inequality that was created, closed that loophole and made that Bill more acceptable for people who had difficulties with it. My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Many constituents have contacted me about this issue—different-sex couples who wish to give legal recognition to their relationship but not necessarily to get married. Does the Bill not deal precisely with that situation?

Tim Loughton: That is right, and I will come on to explain precisely why the Bill is needed.

I have described the inequality, but some people may say, “Well, so what?” Opposite-sex couples have always been able to get married in a church or a register office—or even, now, in medieval castles, on exotic beaches, or, increasingly, wherever else takes their fancy. The problem is that a great many of these couples choose not to go down that traditional marriage route.

The Office for National Statistics estimates that there are just under 3 million cohabiting opposite-sex couples in this country—almost double the figure reported some 15 years earlier—of whom over a third, about 38%, have children. Indeed, cohabitation is the fastest growing form of family in the UK. We need to recognise that our society is changing, just as we did when recognising same-sex partnerships in law back in 2004. That was the right thing to do, and I enthusiastically supported it at the time. It was a glaring inequality and injustice that until then loving same-sex couples were not recognised in the eyes of the state and enjoyed no protections under the law. That anomaly was rightly addressed by this House back in 2004, and I was proud to be part of that.

People choose not to get involved in the paraphernalia of formal marriage for a variety of reasons. It is seen as too much of an establishment thing to do. For many, it is identified as an innately religious institution; even if done in a register office, it has religious connotations. Some see it as having a patriarchal side—as being some form of social control and not a proper partnership. Those are not my own views, necessarily, but they are certainly how many people see it. There are a whole lot of complex motives as to why many of our constituents do not go down the formal marriage route. They are mostly still in committed, loving relationships, but if they do not want to go for traditional marriage, they have no way of having those relationships recognised in the eyes of the state, just as was the case for same-sex couples pre-2004.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Can my hon. Friend think of any reason why all those who supported the same-sex marriage legislation would not want to support his Bill?

Tim Loughton: Absolutely not. At the time, my proposal, which I set out in an amendment, was the policy of the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats, and supported by a good many Conservative Members, but for various reasons people voted against it. The logic is that of course we would want to address this inequality.

There are also various practical reasons for doing this. Particularly worrying is the common misconception that there is such a thing as a common-law wife or common-law husband, as a woman typically finds out abruptly on the death of a partner when there is an inheritance tax bill on the estate and potentially on the family home.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend think that if people realised that there was no such thing as a common-law wife or husband, they would opt for this to give them the protection in law that they do not have currently so that they would not lose their home?

Tim Loughton: That is a very practical advantage of this Bill. There is a great deal of ignorance among constituents who think that they have these protections.

If a woman has a child with her partner and the relationship breaks down, she is not entitled to any automatic form of financial support if they are not married, and there is no automatic entitlement to property even if she had been paying into the mortgage. Surely couples should not be forced to choose between having no legal protection or entering into an institution that is not right for them.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): The other issue that is incredibly important is dependency, whereby, for example, a daughter who is
looking after her elderly mother finds that when her mother dies her home is therefore in danger. Is that not something else that needs to be looked at?

**Tim Loughton:** This is about the future maintenance of children. It is about an inheritance tax bill that happens all of a sudden that could lead to the sale of a property so that someone finds themselves, in effect, homeless. These are all potential dangers currently faced by people who are not in a formal, legally recognised relationship.

**Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con):** My hon. Friend is making a very sound case. I was fascinated to hear the current statistics on cohabiting. If we are to build a balanced society, bringing up our children in a fair and good way, surely it is very important to bring forward the ideas encompassed in this Bill in order to help society as a whole.

**Tim Loughton:** My hon. Friend pre-empts a large plank of my speech. Rather than let everybody pre-run what I want to say, I think I shall get on with saying it. Perhaps I will take some contributions at a later stage.

Returning to the problem that I have identified, when one partner is much older than the other and there is a reasonable expectation that they will die some years before the other, the long-term survivor would not receive the same tax benefits as a married person or someone in a civil partnership, which is also discriminatory towards the couple’s children. Even a couple who are engaged to be married have more rights than a cohabiting couple. Offering a formalised role within an opposite-sex civil partnership could save a lot of retrospective ignorance and the ensuing heartache and financial implications.

It is for those reasons of natural justice and protecting the rights of partners that I am yet again promoting a private Member’s Bill to extend civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples, which I have been trying to do since the change to the legislation back in 2013. There is a deal of déjà vu involved in my reappearance on the same subject here today.

Without Government support, the Bill is unlikely to make headway, despite the support of hon. Members from all parts of the House and a nationwide campaign that has so far attracted more than 71,000 signatures to a petition. I am particularly pleased that we have the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady), who is the chairman of the 1922 Committee, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). We have the support of hon. Members from just about every party represented in this House. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who speaks for the official Opposition on equality matters, wrote on her blog:

“we have the chance to take another step in extending true equality, admittedly only in one aspect of our lives; choosing the type of partnership that best suits our needs, faith and aspirations.”

She gave her support and that of her party to the Bill, and is sorry she could not be here to give it in person.

**Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op):** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward the Bill. I have supported this proposal for a long time, as it is all about equality. I had a private Member’s Bill, which did not get as far as his, that would have corrected another anomaly in the law by putting mothers’ names and occupations on marriage certificates. The hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) has taken up the mantle on that. The Bill before us is about equality. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, despite the result of the appeal in the High Court, which is being challenged, it is for this House to decide the matter because it is of great public interest?

**Tim Loughton:** The hon. Lady is right. I will refer to that case, which will go to appeal imminently, as she says. My Bill may not get much further than hers if I succeed in talking it out in the remaining minutes, so I will make some progress.

The Bill has high-profile supporters, including Rebecca Steinfeld and Charles Keidan, the couple who instigated the campaign. I pay tribute to them. They appeared in the royal courts in London last November seeking to overturn the Government ban on different-sex civil partnerships, arguing that it is unfair because it treats people differently dependent on their sexuality.

By contrast and more recently, Claire Beale and Martin Loat became the first UK-based heterosexual couple to enter into a civil partnership in the British Isles. The catch is that they had to travel to the Isle of Man for the privilege. Bravely, the island recently made this reform to its legislation. While our British island cousins have made this step towards equality, the Government on the mainland of the United Kingdom claim, as they did when Rebecca and Charles first went to the High Court in January, and when I first tabled an amendment to the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill, that such a change would be costly and complicated. I just cannot see how or why.

I am not convinced by the Government’s excuses. This change is very straightforward. Just as with same-sex civil partnerships, it would not be possible for someone to become a civil partner with a close family member or someone who is already in a union. Such a union would need to be subject to the same termination criteria. All that is required is a simple one-line amendment to the Civil Partnership Act 2004, which is what my Bill would enact. That is why it is a very short, one-clause Bill. It could all be done and dusted in Committee by tea time.

**Philip Davies:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Tim Loughton:** I will give way very briefly.

**Philip Davies:** I promise not to interrupt my hon. Friend again. Obviously, the other way of equalising the law would be to ban civil partnerships for gay couples. Would he be in favour of equalising the law in that way?

**Tim Loughton:** That would indeed provide equality and close the loophole, but it would be a retrograde step. For the reasons I mentioned, some couples do not want to go down the formal marriage route, whether they are of the same sex or opposite sexes. We would therefore be denying the civil partnerships to an awful lot of people. Many people have chosen to go down that route and many have chosen not to convert a same-sex civil partnership into a marriage, which they can now do.
Clearly, they have reasons why civil partnership suits them, but those of the opposite sex cannot have that same privilege if it suits them better than traditional marriage. My hon. Friend suggests one way of doing it, but there would be serious downsides.

In the Government’s original consultation before the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, 61% of respondents were in favour of extending civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples. Alas, for some inexplicable reason, it never made it into the legislation, which would have made it a better and fairer Act. Other hon. Members and I wrote recently to the Secretary of State for Education, who is also the Minister for Women and Equalities. In her reply on why the Government do not support the measure, she said that, as part of the exercise after the Act was introduced, the Government examined whether or not people supported extending civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples and found that the majority did not. However, a clear majority in a more extensive consultation before the Act did support the extension. Why do those views no longer count?

Aside from the equality question, there is a further major practical benefit of opening up civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples: family stability, which my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) mentioned. The Centre for Social Justice has calculated that the cost to this country of family breakdown is some £48 billion each and every year, or some 2.5% of gross domestic product. That is a big, growing and costly problem—it is costly both financially and socially.

Fewer than one in 10 married parents have split up by the time a child reaches the age of five, compared with more than one in three of those who are cohabiting but not married, and 75% of family breakdowns involving children under five result from the separation of unmarried parents. There are all sorts of statistics showing that those children are more susceptible to not doing well at school and not ending up in good jobs, and that they have problems with housing, mental health and so on. That is not to be judgmental about parents who find themselves having to bring up a child alone through no fault of their own, but two partners make for greater stability.

We know that marriage works, but we also know that civil partnerships are beginning to show evidence of greater stability for same-sex couples, including those who have children. It is through adoption, surrogacy or whatever. There is a strong case for believing that extending civil partnerships would improve that stability for many more families in different ways. If just one in 10 cohabiting opposite-sex couples entered into a civil partnership, it would cover some 300,000 couples and their children. It would offer the prospect of yet greater security and stability, less likelihood of family breakdown, and better social and financial outcomes. That, surely, is progress, and would be particularly good for children in those families.

There is a further application. Many people who have strong religious beliefs, particularly Catholics, who end up getting divorced, which is in conflict with certain religious teachings, may not be inclined to get married again if they meet a new partner because their Church supposedly believes that they should be married for life. In many cases, however, they would be able to reconcile that position by entering into a new formal commitment through an opposite-sex civil partnership. There are a number of practical real-life scenarios in which civil partnerships for opposite-sex couples could achieve something very positive that would not be available to those loving couples otherwise.

Opposite-sex civil partnerships have not been cooked up haphazardly in this country. In South Africa, the Civil Union Act 2006 gave same-sex and opposite-sex couples the option to register a civil union by way of a marriage or a civil partnership on the same basis. In France, the pacte civil de solidarité, or PACS as it is known, was introduced in 1999 as a form of civil union between two adults of the same sex or the opposite sex. Gay marriage has been added. Interestingly, one in 10 PACS has been dissolved in France, while one in three—many more—marriages ends in divorce. There is evidence that some of those civil partnerships have created greater stability, whether they are opposite-sex or same-sex partnerships. In countries such as the Netherlands, where marriage and civil partnerships are open to all, the vast majority of different sex couples continue to choose marriage, so the measure in no way tries to undermine the traditional partnership of marriage. A significant minority choose civil partnerships, so surely UK couples should have that choice.

In the many years I have been banging away on this subject, support for the campaign has grown. The London Assembly recently gave its unanimous support to the change in the law and passed a motion that states: “The Assembly notes that whilst same-sex couples are able to form a civil partnership, different-sex couples cannot.

The Assembly recognises that City Hall has often been at the forefront of efforts to extend rights and liberties: in 2000 it introduced the first ever registration scheme for same-sex couples.

The Assembly calls on the Mayor to support the equal civil partnerships campaign and urges him to make representations to the government for a change in the law if the Court of Appeal rejects Rebecca Steinfeld and Charles Keidan’s appeal against the High Court’s decision to reject their application to form a civil partnership.”

Last week, there was a very supportive article in the Solicitors Journal, which referred to the current anomaly as “discriminatory”. Marilyn Stowe, the senior partner at Stowe Family Law, said:

“To some couples the concept of marriage is outdated. They do not wish to marry but equally seek a legally recognised civil union where vows and promises to each other are not required.”

There is, therefore, a lot of support for this measure. I have received many emails from couples around the country who are waiting for this change in the law to be able to signal in the eyes of the public, their friends, the law and the state that they are part of a loving, secure and sustainable long-term union. It is just a different arrangement from that which many other people choose.

I would like to quote from two emails I have received in recent days:

“Dear Mr Loughton, my partner and I have lived together for 25 years. We are not religious, nor do we feel a registry wedding is suitable for us. We have worked full-time and very hard all our adult lives and feel we deserve the recognition that other couples enjoy. As we get older” —
they are in their 50s—
“we feel we deserve the financial and long-term benefits that are
given to other couples who have contributed to this great nation,
but we are currently being denied these rights.”

The second email reads:
“My male partner and I”—
she is female—
“have lived together for 38 years. We do not wish to marry for
many reasons, for example my mother was very adversely affected
by marriage in the days when women were immediately ejected
from their careers upon marrying, and rape in a marriage was
legal until 1991. My mother’s advice was ‘try to enjoy it, as it
might reduce the physical damage.’ But we do want a civil
partnership. We are now both dependent on our pensions, but
if my partner died tomorrow, heaven forefend, I would not be
recognised by his pension provider and would receive nothing
from them. If we had a civil partnership, they would recognise my
claim.”

That is just another example of the instability facing
loving couples—in this case, they have been together for
38 years—if one of them dies, because the state does
not recognise their relationship.

We need to close this anomaly. I do not understand
why the Government have reneged, effectively, on their
promise, after the Same Sex Marriage Act, to pursue
this properly and to draw an end to the inadvertent
inequality that has come about through that Act. Regardless
of the Act, there is a case for extending civil partnerships
to opposite-sex couples for the whole raft of positive
reasons that I have set out in my short comments today.
If the Government are to allow people to be as free as
possible to make their own decisions without harming
the freedom of others, what on earth are they doing
failing to make it lawful for people of the opposite sex
who happen to love each other to enter into a civil
partnership, when they allow that very same freedom to
people of the same sex? The current situation is unfair,
illogical and needs to change. That is exactly what my
Bill will do with minimum fuss and that is why I
commend it to the House today.

2.8 pm
Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I
rise to support the Bill on behalf of Her Majesty’s loyal
Opposition. The Bill has genuine cross-party support.
It is backed by colleagues who voted on both sides of
the argument on same-sex marriage in 2013, including
the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham
(Tim Loughton). He made a very powerful case. Indeed,
he has nicked many of the points I want to make in my
speech. Over 72,000 people have now signed the online
petition—I think he has slightly old figures.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Martin Loat and
Claire Beale. They are my constituents—thev live in the
next road to me in Ealing—and, as he pointed out, they
were the first people in the British Isles to enter into a
civil partnership. However, they had to go to the Isle of
Man to do that. I am sure the Isle of Man is a lovely
place, but if the Bill is passed, no one will have to make
that journey again. [Laughter.] Let me say, before
people write to me from the Isle of Man, that I am sure
it is lovely. I have never been there. [ Interruption. ] I am
going to crack on, because my hon. Friend the Member
for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) is going to speak
about workers’ rights, we hope and pray.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the London Assembly,
and its unanimous vote in favour of this move. Early-day
motion 619 expresses genuine cross-party support, from
Democratic Unionists as well as the usual suspects. This
is clearly a matter of public interest that the Government
ought to revisit.

As has already been pointed out, it is a matter of
equality. Civil partnerships currently exist only for same-sex
couples in the United Kingdom, but in a democracy, all
people should be equal before the law. I am proud to say
that my party has authored much of our anti-discrimination
legislation: the Race Relations Act 1976, the equal pay
legislation, the legislation that abolished the heinous
section 28, and the Equality Act 2010. The Bill seems to
me to be a logical next step.

Civil partnerships were a new Labour creation in the
first place. They were ground-breaking at the time,
allowing LGBT people to have their loving relationships
recognised by law and to enjoy the same benefits as
married couples. The present anomaly is, I think, an
unintended consequence that was necessary on the long
and winding road to equal marriage, and it needs to be
rectified now. Although civil partnerships represented a
huge step forward in 2004, that was 13 years ago, and it
is now time to open them up to all.

As we have heard, that could easily be done. The Bill
is very short: it consists of only a couple of lines. All
that we need to do is delete the words “of the same sex”
from the Civil Partnership Act 2004. No new law is
necessary; this would merely be an extension of what is
already on offer. The Equal Civil Partnerships campaign
estimates that 2.9 million people are in partnerships
and, for whatever reason—a long list of reasons has
been given today—choose not to marry, although the
figure may be higher, and that 39% of them have
dependent children.

When same-sex marriage became legal, many gay
couples in civil partnerships had an upgrade, “trading
up” to full marriage. Here we have the opposite case. We
are talking about people who want to take a leaner,
modern, 21st-century option, affording their families the
same legal protections. Fairness, consistency and equity
in legislation: who would disagree with any of that?

Back in 2013, my party tabled an amendment stating
that the Government should consult on allowing all
couples access to civil partnerships as soon as possible
following the passing of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples)
Act 2013. Since then, however, the Government seem
to have found all sorts of pretexts for not granting access
to civil partnerships for all, or even revisiting the issue
in a serious way. They have argued that the results of
their consultation were inconclusive, and that they must
await the outcome of pending legal action before they
can possibly reopen the issue. To the outside world, all
that sounds like excuses.

We can look further afield to other jurisdictions. A
French case has been mentioned. When I was an
international student in France more than 20 years ago,
the term was “concubinage”. The French thought it
was completely normal, and could not understand why
we did not have it here. I could go into all the complexities
of international law, but there are academic papers out
there that people can google. Articles 8 and 14 of the
European convention on human rights—thankfully, we
are still in it, and it seems likely that we will not be
leaving in any great hurry—promise equality in the
application of the convention and freedom in relation to family life. It could be argued that the current law contravenes those provisions. Case law shows that our Government have been on the wrong side of the convention on previous occasions. We do not want a repetition of the waste of public expenditure and time that featured on previous occasions. We do not want a repetition of Government having been on the wrong side of the convention.

I shall not eat up any more time. In short, this is the right thing to do. As my constituents Claire and Martin put it, “Imagine two houses: one says marriage and one says CP on the front. All couples are allowed in the first house, but only gay couples are allowed in the second. Now heterosexual couples like us just want to be let in to the second house, too.”

For the sake of fairness, equality, the tangible benefits that would flow from it and the right of couples to choose the type of partnership that best suits their needs, faith and aspirations, we support the Bill and urge the Government to revisit this matter without further delay.

2.14 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): This has been a fantastic day for private Members’ Bills, and I believe that this Bill will be welcomed across the land. It really is time for us to address this issue, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing this date in order to explain his Bill to the House.

My personal feeling is that if people love each other—same sex, heterosexual, it does not matter—it should be entirely up to them if they wish to enter into an agreement or partnership. The law should accommodate any partnership that is legally binding, especially when it comes down to the sharing of property. If, God forbid, one partner should be left behind—either, sadly, through death or for other reasons—they should be legally covered. I know that the previous Government moved mountains to achieve equality by introducing legislation on same-sex marriage, but the question of civil partnerships should now be looked at more intently and as a matter of urgency. My hon. Friend has spoken eloquently and at length today about his wish to see his Bill become law, and I, too, commend it to the House.

2.16 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am conscious of the time, so I shall keep my remarks fairly brief. I am planning to get married in June, and I am interested to see this Bill. Hazel and I feel that marriage in a church is the right choice for us, but I know that there are others who feel it is not for them and who wish to go down the path of entering into a civil partnership.

It is good to see the newest member of the Women and Equalities Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), here on a Friday and taking his duty to be a champion for equality seriously. He makes his points strongly. I note that some other Members who might have liked to speak on this subject have not found the time to join us today.

For me, this is about giving people a choice. The Minister might like to reflect on the fact that this links into a wider debate. There is a debate to be had about civil partnerships and civil marriage—obviously, the situation is different for those who want a religious marriage—in relation to if and how we continue the system. If it does continue, it would be strange for civil partnerships to be retained purely as an arrangement for same-sex couples. I think we probably all take the view that that situation should not be maintained in the long term. Perhaps the Minister could also tell us what impact the extension of marriage to same-sex couples has had on the numbers of civil partnerships taking place.

Civil partnerships originated as a bit of a compromise, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) rightly said. At the time, it was felt that legislation on same-sex marriage would not get through, but this arrangement at least gave legal protection to long-standing same-sex couples. There had been numerous notorious examples of families suddenly developing rather Victorian attitudes towards a loved one or relative who had been in a same-sex relationship when they realised that certain legal precedents might help them to get hold of assets and property. Civil partnerships were originally brought in to stop such behaviour and to give people the certainty of legal protection. Then, some years later, the momentous step was taken to equalise marriage in a civil sense, and same-sex couples are now able to be married under the law just as opposite-sex couples can be.

I welcome the Bill. It is right that we should have a debate about what types of relationships we recognise in law. The only thing on which I slightly disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham is that those who seek religious relationships may be disappointed in that civil partnerships will probably be viewed in many parts of the Church as almost equivalent to being married if such a commitment is made. However, whatever my personal religious beliefs may be, they should not affect the legal definition of the type of relationship that someone has. That was certainly something that Hazel and I reflected on in our discussions given what we were looking to do, but we found that the views on marriage of the Catholic Church or the Church of England do not necessarily reflect the position of the law of land, which has been the case since 1836 when the concept of civil marriage was created.

Finally, it is a sadness that it is currently unlikely that I will be able to have my mother’s name on the marriage certificate, but I will sit down now not only because I want to let the Minister speak, but because I will be hanging around until 2.30 pm in the hope that some legislation on that front may be able to make progress as well.

2.20 pm

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on introducing this Bill. He said that this was the first time that he has been able to speak on a private Member’s Bill—[ Interruption. ]

Tim Loughton: On my own.
Robert Halfon: On his own. Given that this is about civil partnerships and marriage, I congratulate my hon. Friend on losing his virginity with this Bill.

My hon. Friend talked about the 2014 consultation, which ran during the time that same-sex marriage was introduced. There were 11,500 respondents, 76% of whom opposed extending civil partnerships. The Government’s position is that we want to see what happens and to look at the data before taking any further decisions on the matter.

My hon. Friend also said that marriage has patriarchal and religious associations, but the concept of marriage has moved on from when women were considered chattel. Civil marriage ceremonies are available to all couples and contain no religious element. In fact, when I got married a few months ago, we had the “The Wizard of Oz” playing and a tin man in the registry office. Civil ceremonies can be personalised by the couple, which is exactly what we did, to include non-religious words and vows. There is no requirement for a couple to take vows to honour or obey each other. The only requirement is that the marriage takes place in the presence of witnesses and that the ceremony includes the statutory declarations and contracting words. It is no longer for everybody a religious and patriarchal way of making a commitment.

The Government have rightly taken great pride in championing equality for all. The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act was passed in 2013 and during the passage of the legislation the question arose of whether, if marriage was available to same-sex couples, civil partnerships should be open to opposite-sex couples as a matter of equality. My hon. Friend pointed out that the Government considered the issue at the time and decided that it would be a mistake to rush to amend the Civil Partnership Act 2004 owing to the unknown, untested effects on myriad legislation spanning areas such as pensions, devolution, international recognition, gender recognition, adultery and consummation. At the time, the House recognised that to invite such risk would be irresponsible and that the unforeseen issues that may arise, as with all issues that come from great legislative change, will take time to identify, understand and account for, lest we burden the public with expensive, ineffective laws.

I mentioned the consultation and the number of people who responded to say that they wanted no change to civil partnerships. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who introduced his brilliant Bill, as the Minister for Digital and Culture said, with real panache earlier, also asked about civil partnerships. Civil marriage ceremonies are available to all couples and contain no religious element. In fact, when I got married a few months ago, we had the “The Wizard of Oz” playing and a tin man in the registry office. Civil ceremonies can be personalised by the couple, which is exactly what we did, to include non-religious words and vows. There is no requirement for a couple to take vows to honour or obey each other. The only requirement is that the marriage takes place in the presence of witnesses and that the ceremony includes the statutory declarations and contracting words. It is no longer for everybody a religious and patriarchal way of making a commitment.

The coalition Government also believed that some couples might take much longer to decide between civil partnership and marriage if they wanted a legal relationship or, in particular, to decide whether conversion to marriage was a step they wished to take. Even now, it is still too early to tell whether that will happen in practice.

That is not the only reason why the Government now believe that my hon. Friend’s proposals would require significant further work. I will take each reason in turn: the legislative complexity introduced by a change to the law; the difficulty in estimating the size of the challenge in successfully making such a change; complications introduced by marriage being a devolved matter; treatment of other overseas relationships; the reaction of religious communities and stakeholders; and finding parliamentary time during this Parliament.

Tim Loughton: I understand that every single one of those considerations applied to the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, which was taken through Parliament in a matter of months. Three years on, why is that an impediment?

Robert Halfon: There is always the law of unintended consequences, as I am sure my hon. Friend would acknowledge, and it is right that the Government make sure that all these avenues are carefully looked at before making any further changes to the law. That is not an unreasonable position.

My hon. Friend will know that marriage law is an inordinately complex landscape. References to marriage and civil partnerships are peppered through the entire body of law in this country. If we were to change the Civil Partnership Act to amend the definition of a civil partnership so that the term, wherever it appears in legislation, means a relationship between both same-sex or, in opposite-sex couples, we would need carefully and methodically to assess the impact of the change on all other relevant legislation where the term appears. We would need to check every position in all relevant
legislation to ensure that the legislation still works as intended and, if not, to provide for consequential amendment of that legislation.

Let me give the House an indication of the complexity of this task. Policy decisions would need to be made by a number of Departments on issues such as pensions and benefit entitlements of same-sex couples entering into civil partnerships, the dissolution of civil partnerships for same-sex couples and the rights of same-sex couples in relation to assisted conception. In each case, the question would be whether—

2.30 pm
The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).
Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 24 March 2017.

Business without Debate

WORKERS’ RIGHTS (MAINTENANCE OF EU STANDARDS) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February.

PROTECTION OF FAMILY HOMES (ENFORCEMENT AND PERMITTED DEVELOPMENT) BILL
Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (25 November), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 3 February.

REGISTRATION OF MARRIAGE BILL
Bill read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

MODERN SLAVERY (TRANSPARENCY IN SUPPLY CHAINS) BILL [LORDS]
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March.

VEHICLE NOISE LIMITS (ENFORCEMENT) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE (NATIONAL DATA GUARDIAN) BILL
Bill read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).
Night Schools and Adult Education

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

2.31 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am very grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, to have the opportunity to talk about an important issue as the House adjourns.

Tonight, in a Portakabin in the car park of a small industrial estate, under the dilapidated railway arches in Bethnal Green, east London, Courtney will be teaching a class as usual at The Knowledge Academy. He will be teaching men and women from all backgrounds, ages and races who all have one thing in mind: passing the “knowledge” and becoming a London cabbie. They want to leave behind zero-hours contracts and insecure casual work. They are sick of minimum wage jobs in call centres, labouring on building sites, stacking shelves or waiting tables. They desperately want to get into more secure, better-paid work—the ticket to a better life for themselves and their families. The reason why I called this debate, and why I mentioned The Knowledge Academy, is that it feels to me that it is pretty much the last night school left in London.

When my mother arrived in the UK in 1970 from a tiny village in Guyana, she was unskilled and uncertain of her future. She worked as a home help and then, after she finished work for the day, she went to our local college and trained in shorthand and as a typist. Thirty years later, she retired from her role as a manager at Haringey Council. What does that tell us? It tells us that a woman can start off with nothing and work up from being a secretary to a managerial position, earning a salary to support a family as a single breadwinner. It tells us that if we give people opportunities to get the skills they need, they will go from strength to strength.

The term “social mobility” gets thrown around a lot here in the House of Commons, but it basically means helping people to climb the ladder. Ordinary people do not care about jargon such as “social mobility” but they certainly care about climbing the ladder. They are working two or three jobs, borrowing too much money from the bank and borrowing from friends and family. They are sometimes sleeping on floors to save on rent. They want the security of a reliable job that can pay them a wage that can support their family—here in London, that is between £40,000 and £50,000 a year.

We have a proud history of adult education in this country, stretching back to the early 19th century. In the 1820s, Birkbeck was established, as were mechanics institutes in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Liverpool and Manchester. The Working Men’s College opened in 1854, and City Lit first opened its doors in 1919. Such institutions gave working-class adults the chance to gain the skills that they had not learned at school and certainly would not learn at work. George Stephenson, the inventor of the steam engine, was illiterate until the age of 18 and then the product of a night school. The career of L. S. Lowry, one of our most renowned artists, began in an evening course.

I thank Birkbeck, which is doing outreach work in my constituency, Tottenham; City Lit, an amazing institution and a gem in the fabric of London; Morley College; the Workers’ Educational Association; the College of North East London in my constituency; and the other institutions throughout the country for the work they do to keep the tradition alive. They are making sure that we do not lose the legacy of Samuel Morley, John Ruskin and William Morris or the value of learning for learning’s sake. They are helping thousands of modern-day “Educating Ritas” to gain the confidence that they need to flourish. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) for establishing the all-party group on adult education and pushing it up the agenda.

According to Hansard, since 2010 this House has discussed education on 339 occasions. There has not been a single debate on adult education—not one—and there has been just a single question on it in education questions, back in October 2010. That is it: that is what this place thinks of adult learning in this country. Such total disregard for adult education is not good enough. It is not good to say that if someone does not go to university they cannot progress and are limited to a life of low-paid work with no prospects of change.

It is not good enough to deny opportunities to the already marginalised and struggling, and to those who did not have opportunities when they were growing up. The bottom line is that in this place we are totally obsessed with the education policy for 16 and 18-year-olds. We are obsessed with university entrants, and we are currently obsessed with apprenticeships. It is all about getting young people into university or an apprenticeship, but education does not and must not end at 18.

It is important to put this debate in the context of our times—Brexit—not least because we are set to lose the European social fund, which currently contributes between £50 million and £100 million to our colleges each year. Skills shortages already make up nearly a quarter of all job openings, according to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. Some 69% of all UK businesses are worried that they will not be able to find enough people with the requisite skills to fill job vacancies. It looks like we are going to leave the single market, so businesses will not be able to recruit from the continent to plug skills gaps. Much more will need to be done to reskill and retrain people here, in our own country, to take up those jobs.

As has been said in this House so many times since June, the referendum result highlighted the fact that there are millions of people out there who feel left behind in places such as Great Yarmouth, Blackburn, and Barking and Dagenham here in London. The average earnings in Barking and Dagenham are 40% lower than the London average. In Great Yarmouth, average earnings are £10,000, or 40% lower than the national median. Blackburn has the second lowest earnings of any UK city.

There are growth industries in this country: look at coding, programming and the digital sector more generally. The construction sector is crying out for skilled workers to deliver the infrastructure and homes that our country needs. There is a huge demand for engineers, especially in sectors such as biotechnology and aerospace. Professional services, consulting and accountancy also continue to grow. However, my question is: how are working class people in those places going to access those sectors and get the jobs where they can earn even the average salary—never mind a comfortable salary on which to support a family and enjoy a good life? Millions of people trapped in low-income, dead-end jobs with children...
and care responsibilities have been shut out of adult education. Let me put a question to the Minister, who I know cares about the issue. I am not here, on this occasion, in a partisan way, but I want to know what he will do about this critical issue.

By 2024, only 2% of people in employment will have no formal qualifications. What exactly will happen to the millions of people who did not get qualifications when they were young? What is the strategy for those adults? We need to talk about the 30-somethings, the 40-somethings and the 50-somethings. In a country where we are living longer and longer, how will these people access education? We cannot expect them to go to university and pay nine grand a year; it is unrealistic to think that they can drop their lives and not support their kids in order to do that.

We have an hourglass economy in this country, with a shrinking middle section and a growing section of society trapped at the bottom. We have huge structural problems, especially the loss of manufacturing and the failure to replace those breadwinner jobs. That is the fault not of Europe, of free movement or of migrants who come to this country to work, but of successive Governments—both Conservative and Labour.

What context does the Minister have to address? The Association of Colleges has warned that at this rate adult education will disappear by 2020. The total number of adult learners fell by 10.8% in just a single year between 2014 and 2015. We have had 40% cuts in real terms to the adult skills budget between 2010 and 2015, and spending on the non-apprenticeship parts of this budget fell by 57%.

The Government published their 60-page post-16 skills plan last July. If Members turn to page 31, they will see a couple of small paragraphs dedicated to adults. It says that

“education and training need to become a more important part of adults’ lives.”

The Government’s plan promised to outline a plan for lifetime learning by the end of 2016, but it did not appear. I asked the Minister’s office when that plan would be forthcoming, but I have not had a reply yet. I hope to hear from the Minister on that subject.

The Government Office for Science has said that

“lifelong learning and the challenges of an ageing population is now an urgent issue for public policy in the UK.”

The range of courses on offer has narrowed to basic skills and English for speakers of other languages. Only 4,900 adults achieved level 4 awards or above. Under the adult education budget in 2015, there was a 36% fall in one year. In 2013, the figure was 20,000—a 75% fall in two years. I ask the Minister: where is the strategy? Where is the investment and where are the ideas?

Do not get me wrong: this situation has been caused by funding cuts and the political neglect of successive Governments. Labour implemented Union Learn, of which I am very proud. I was proud to be a skills Minister who worked on that. We also had to focus on basic skills—English and maths—which are hugely important for adults who do not have the basics to move on.

We implemented Train to Gain, and gave employers huge budgets—millions of pounds—to train up their staff. On reflection, I am not so sure about that programme, because there is a lot of evidence to suggest that employers do not train up people to leave, which is why we need to empower adults themselves to take up these courses.

We need a national strategy, which is led by a Minister working across Departments because the benefits of adult education have a huge impact on employment and health outcomes and our GDP. In the coming years, the Government will be devolving control of skills funding, so we need to ensure that we do not end up with a patchwork of provision across the country. Britain cannot afford that outside the European Union. I hope the Minister will say something about that.

The Government are bringing in £3 billion per year through the apprenticeship levy. Will some of that funding be allocated to support adult education? I hope the Minister will address that point. The present system is hugely unbalanced. If someone decides to go to university at age 18, the Government offer an open-ended commitment to fund their tuition fees and living costs, and the person pays it back only if they earn over a certain threshold. Where is the support for adult learners and those going through technical education?

The answer is not the advanced learner loans, which are not working. In 2015 only £140 million in loans was taken up, of a total budget of just under £400 million that was set aside. In my constituency only 38% of adult learners are taking them up. Leaders in the sector have told me that the uptake is not there because people simply do not know about them. If they do know about them, often the burdens of a loan make them too problematic for the kinds of families we are talking about, who have kids to feed and other commitments. Frankly, if we are going back to life before the EU, we may well have to go back to subsidising adult education once again. That has to be on the table if we think it is economically important.

The Government also need to consider what has variously been called a “single tertiary education entitlement,” a “skills entitlement” or a “career fund”. Ignoring the jargon, in the modern economy people are going to have to learn new skills and change jobs. The jobs of the future have not even been created yet, so there is no way the education that people get in their teens and early 20s can prepare and support them through their whole lives. Creating a fund that people can draw upon throughout their lives to fund training and qualifications reflects the reality of the modern world. I call on the Minister to consider a single tertiary education entitlement or a similar sort of scheme.

I finish by saying this: look across this country, at our seaside towns and post-industrial towns across the north, the midlands and Wales. In places such as Boston, Hartlepool, Blackpool, Oldham and Wrexham, the prevailing wind is to blame immigrants for our problems; for taking jobs, houses, school places and GP appointments. But in a country where people are trapped in low-income, low-skilled work, and where they do not see a way out, we are playing a very dangerous game if we do not listen and act.

People are not trapped in low-income jobs because of immigrants; it is the fault of successive Governments who have failed to equip them with the skills they need to get on in the modern economy. My fear—a very real fear—is that if we do not act now, the consequences down the line will be very grave indeed, and we will be opening up a very dark chapter in our history.
The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): May I offer my genuine congratulations to the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this debate? It is customary to say these things, but I really mean it. He knows this subject inside out and he cares about it passionately. He raises some incredibly important points. I am glad that he has put the issue on the agenda, because adult education is incredibly important.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Brexit. When people raise it with me, I always say that we have been in the European Union for over 30 years, yet Governments of all persuasions and businesses have hugely underinvested in skills, so the idea that it has all been caused by Brexit—he did not say that, but other people do—is not true.

Advanced learner loans have been going up substantially—I am happy to send the right hon. Gentleman the figures. He talked about apprenticeships which, as he rightly pointed out, are not just about 16 to 18-year-olds. In fact, I get a lot of stick because people say, “Not enough 16 to 18-year-olds are doing apprenticeships.” In fact, there were 377,960 apprenticeship starts among the over-19s in 2015-16. That is a very important part of the Government’s strategy for giving adults the skills they need.

The Government’s priority is to create a ladder of opportunity and ensure that there are various rungs that people can climb. The first rung of the ladder is that we must have a national conversation and change the prestige of skills and adult education. The right hon. Gentleman said, rightly—I did not know this—that the House of Commons has hardly ever discussed adult education and night schools. He can check with my officials, who will say that when I came to this post, before I knew about this debate, I raised the issue and asked for surveys providing evidence, of which there is not currently a huge amount.

Other rungs of the ladder include: having widespread and quality provision; addressing the skills needs of the nation; achieving social justice and a sense of community; and steering people to jobs and prosperity. Social justice is important because, in my experience, the kind of people who go to adult education centres often come from disadvantaged backgrounds. It does not matter whether people are doing cake-making or a maths GCSE; it is a bridge for them to go on to further education and jobs. I do not say “community” lightly either, because, in my experience, adult community centres and night schools build social capital, enriching disadvantaged areas. That is why I believe in adult education and why I am looking at what we can do.

As a Government, we are trying to promote a conversation about skills and non-academic paths for young people and adults through the Get In Go Far campaign, ensuring that we have dedicated careers advice and guidance all the way through. We are investing £77 million in the National Careers Service to ensure that people have advice on what adult education, jobs and skills training is available. A strong further education sector is essential to ensuring that everyone in our society is empowered to succeed. We need to equip further education colleges to be high-status institutions that can confer similar advantages to those of traditional academic institutions, and we need to have apprenticeships that are seen to be as valuable as going to the best universities in the world.

Compared with previous years, the spending review was recognised for protecting the sector, given the funding pressures and what had gone on in the past. The whole purpose of the Technical and Further Education Bill is to expand the role of the Institute for Apprenticeships to include technical education, ensuring that employers shape the technical qualifications as well as apprenticeship standards.

1 Including the levy and taken together, the adult education budget, apprenticeship funding and advanced learner loans will provide more funding to support adult further education participation than at any time in our island’s history. The flexibilities we have introduced into the FE system will ensure that local demand will determine when and where learning is delivered. I want the new institutions we are establishing to consider the benefits to communities of making evening classes available. For instance, the National College for Digital Skills, which the right hon. Gentleman did so much to make happen, is in discussion with a number of other colleges and providers about utilising its Tottenham Hale campus for level 1 and 2 courses outside standard hours and during college holidays. I share the right hon. Gentleman’s keenness to maintain the tradition of night school learning and evening classes.

From a survey of adult and community learning, I recently commissioned, it has emerged that evening classes are run in 1,380 local centres. The survey is still in progress, but results received from 97 providers so far suggest that about a third of providers use more than 40% of their budget for evening classes. It is important to quote the figures. In 2015-16, of the £1.5 billion for adult skills provision, the Government provided £210.7 million to 315 providers for community learning, £170 million to 139 local authorities, and £29 million to 137 FE colleges. There is more. Ofsted rates 236 community learning providers as good or outstanding. In my constituency, there is very good adult and community learning in Harlow College and in the adult community learning centre. The reason I quote those statistics is that, yes, we need to do a lot more and, yes, there are problems, but things are not completely bleak.

Mr Lammy: I just want to make this profound statement: most FE colleges up and down the country are closed at about 8 o’clock in the evening. Most FE colleges carry out about 70% or 80% of their activity with young people—by that, I mean under-25s. Of course, community learning is still going on, but it is at the very basic level—English for speakers of other languages, basic English and basic maths. If we are serious about working people contributing to our economy, that learning will need to be at the higher levels, and that is really where the Minister’s strategy is going to have to be targeted.

Robert Halfon: The right hon. Gentleman is right. I remember that anyone going to Harlow College in the 1990s could not get a car parking space because people were doing adult night school learning. Learning is still going on, but it is not as extensive as it was. As the right hon. Gentleman so honestly pointed out, it is not just this Government or the last Government but every Government who have not put resources into this—as far as I remember, that started in the ’90s. Now, people
Robert Halfon can get a space at Harlow College, in the centre of town, in the evenings, so the right hon. Gentleman is right about this issue, and that is what we are looking at.

As the right hon. Gentleman highlighted, people’s energy and enthusiasm for evening classes are among the principal drivers of lifetime learning. We will soon bring forward potential policy options from the current review that will enhance a pathway that everybody in the nation can use to climb the ladder of opportunity, but that has to meet our priorities: meeting our skills deficit, as I said; helping the socially disadvantaged and the community; being as widespread as possible, given the funding pressures; and being good quality.

I accept that the problem with skills has been getting worse over the past 20 years. Some 20% of our long-term productivity gap with Germany is due to lower skills levels. We are the only OECD country where 16 to 24-year-olds are no better at literacy and numeracy than 55 to 65-year-olds.

The two skills that employers say are indispensable are maths and English. We are giving adults the best opportunity to gain qualifications in English and maths by fully funding all adults to achieve their first level 2 qualification, be that functional skills or GCSE, as well as other qualifications that help them get to that level. Investment in maths and English provides substantial social and economic returns, which are beneficial to individuals, families, workplaces, communities and the economy.

I mentioned that advanced learner loans have gone up. They are an important offering to those doing adult courses. They are available to thousands of adults aged 19 and above who are studying at level 3 to level 6, who can access loan support to help to meet upfront fees, removing one of the main barriers to learning.

I highlighted the fact that community learning often takes place in accessible local venues such as libraries, children’s centres and community centres, and reaches those most in need in the most disadvantaged wards and on the most deprived housing estates, often at a time to suit learners. The outcomes of community learning are many and varied, including better self-esteem, better mental and physical health, more confident parenting, higher-level skills, formal training courses, employment and the confidence to apply for jobs.

We know that FE works. In terms of the destinations of adult students who complete FE courses, 64% get jobs, 20% go into further learning and 4% go to university. Achieving a level 2 boosts earnings by 11% and increases the chances of being employed by 2 percentage points. Some 41% of level 3 FE students live in areas of educational disadvantage, of whom 34% progress to higher education.

We have to be proud of these institutions. Of 385 colleges, 19% are outstanding and 61% are good. Just as in the case of the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency, no doubt, my own college and adult and community learning centre have shaped my views as a Minister, showing me how the education system must be part of evening up the odds for those who are disadvantaged. I intend to visit more as our reforms take root, and to lay out further proposals in future.

Question put and agreed to.

3 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Monday 16 January 2017

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Act 2017

Oral Answers to Questions

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Local Authorities: Business Rate Retention

1. Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What discussions he has had with local authorities on 100% business rate retention. [908140]

2. Steve Double: I welcome the decision that Cornwall will be a pilot area for the retention of business rates. However, business rates in Cornwall are low, particularly when compared with urban areas. Will the Secretary of State reassure the people of Cornwall that Cornwall Council will not lose out on any funding as a result of the changes?

Sajid Javid: I am pleased that Cornwall will be one of the areas to pilot some elements of the new 100% business rate retention system. The pilot will help us to develop the system and make it work for all local authorities, including rural authorities. We have been clear in setting up the system that we will ensure redistribution between councils, so that areas do not lose out just because they collect less in local business rates.

Mr Baker: As you know, Mr Speaker, Buckinghamshire is the entrepreneurial heart of England. What assurances can the Secretary of State give the people of Wycombe that the needs-based review and the new business rate system will result in rebalanced service funding to reflect better economic growth in entrepreneurial areas such as ours?

Sajid Javid: I have visited the area with my hon. Friend several times, and he is right to call it entrepreneurial. Under the new business rates retention system, the redistribution of resources will continue, with baselines set through the fair funding review, so that all authorities are treated fairly.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): In two-tier local government, it is the district council that allocates land for important commercial development. Will the Secretary of State ensure that districts are appropriately awarded for taking on these responsibilities?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a good point about districts and their role in promoting business and development. We introduced the Local Government Finance Bill last week. I am sure that he will welcome the fact that councils outside London can also promote business development districts.
Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The Government’s autumn statement showed an increase in business rates income to the Treasury of £2.4 billion in 2017-18, but that remains unallocated. Will the Secretary of State protect local people from massive council tax increases by investing that money in social care and ending the precept, as suggested in October by Unison, the largest trade union supporting carers?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will be fully aware that this country had a huge budget deficit back in 2010, thanks to the previous Labour Government. All areas of Government have had to make a contribution to dealing with that, including local government. I am sure that she will welcome the changes to adult social care that were announced last month.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the new system allow local authorities any discretion with regard to business rates levied on hospitals that, like Southampton general hospital, face a rather large increase in business rates following a revaluation?

Sajid Javid: I can tell my right hon. Friend that the new system does allow some discretion to councils, but I do not think it will apply to hospitals. It will apply to businesses, and only in one direction, but as he has made the point, I will take a further look.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), when the Government committed to letting local authorities keep 100% of business rate income, they promised, alongside that, commensurate further cuts to their funding from Whitehall. Given that the Local Government Association estimates that councils are already underfunded for their legal responsibilities, including social care, to the tune of almost £6 billion, when will the Secretary of State tell the House what further cuts in funding the people of England can expect their local services to suffer?

Sajid Javid: As we have publicly announced the numbers, the hon. Gentleman should be aware that 97% of councils have accepted the four-year budget deal and have come forward with efficiency offerings. In return, the Government have guaranteed the funding. That does not mask the fact that, of course, many councils find it challenging to deal with their settlement, but many councils are able to deal with it. He should look at that carefully.

Social Care: Funding

2. Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of funding for adult social care.

Bridget Phillipson: The Local Government Association has been clear that the money raised through increasing social care precept will not be nearly enough to address the £2.6 billion gap facing adult social care by 2020. Instead of exacerbating the postcode lottery, will the Secretary of State not commit to additional ring-fenced resources for social care to tackle this crisis?

Sajid Javid: In the last spending review, the Government allocated an additional £3.5 billion a year by 2020 to adult social care. Just a few weeks ago, I announced £900 million of additional help over the next two years. Local councils do have to play a role in this, and I note that in Sunderland the average council tax bill is down in real terms since 2010. If a local council in Sunderland chooses to allocate more, it can do that.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): For many of my constituents the fundamental problem in all too many cases is that we still separate healthcare funding and social care provision. That makes no sense to my constituents and increasingly little sense to me. I therefore urge the Secretary of State to speed up the integration of health and social care provision, so that we can actually deal with patients’ needs in the round and put them, rather than budgetary arguments, first.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, which is that adult social care is not all about money. Of course, money and resources have a huge role to play, but it is also about how those services are delivered. The many councils that are able to approach integration in a better way have seen significant efficiencies, and we can all learn from that.

Mr Speaker: I appeal to the Secretary of State to face the House, so that we can all benefit from his mellifluous tones.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Between 2010 and 2020, around £40 million will have been taken out of the adult social care budget in Hull. The effect could be seen this weekend in what is happening in our local NHS hospitals. Will the Secretary of State think again and make sure that the problems that local authorities such as Hull are facing are addressed by central Government ring-fenced money?

Sajid Javid: I am sure that the hon. Lady welcomes the changes to adult social care provision. That makes no sense to many of my constituents the fundamental problem in all too many cases is that we still separate healthcare funding and social care provision. That makes no sense to my constituents and increasingly little sense to me. I therefore urge the Secretary of State to speed up the integration of health and social care provision, so that we can actually deal with patients’ needs in the round and put them, rather than budgetary arguments, first.

Mr Speaker: I appeal to the Secretary of State to face the House, so that we can all benefit from his mellifluous tones.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I could not agree more with my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk). Most Members have had somebody come to their constituency surgery who desperately needs help, with local government and the health service agreeing that they need help with social care, but with both blaming each other, and it becoming a complete mess. Would it not be a good idea, on a cross-party basis, to look at a new model for social care?
Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to point that out, and I have seen many situations such as he describes in my constituency. He also highlights the need for all of us to talk about this issue to see what we can do, working together.

20. [908162] Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): According to Stoke-on-Trent’s clinical commissioning group, there is, on average, a 26-day delay between someone being ready to leave Royal Stoke University hospital and getting social care in place, and that despite a £6 million subsidy from the CCG. Is that the fault of Stoke-on-Trent City Council, or is it because of the Government’s lack of funding?

Sajid Javid: Again, the hon. Gentleman highlights the fact that for many areas, delivering adult social care is challenging, which is why I know he would welcome our recent announcement of additional funding on top of the funding settlement announced in the spending review in 2015. But the Government also recognise that there needs to be a long-term, sustainable solution, and I know that is the reform he would welcome.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): I spent a day with carers just before Christmas, seeing the amazing work they do across Rossendale. They, like me, feel frustrated that they are constantly under financial pressure, so will the Minister look at what can be done about increasing funding for social care, in addition to what we have already done, and making sure that the funding has a cast-iron ring fence to make sure that the money goes where it is needed most?

Sajid Javid: I can assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to look at the resources applied to adult social care, from both local councils and central Government, to make sure that they are adequate. We will also continue to push the case for reform to ensure that all councils realise that more can be done, besides just getting more funding.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that local authorities are able to move patients in need of social care from hospitals to a more appropriate facility in a timely manner, thus preventing bed-blocking?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that both my Department, working with local authorities, and the Department of Health have a role to play in doing just that; they are working together closely on integration plans with all local councils. Part of the funding—£1.5 billion a year by 2020, in the improved better care fund—is designed to do just what the hon. Lady suggests; it is money that goes towards trying to promote just such integration.

Kate Hollern: Library figures show that between November 2013 and November 2016, instances of bed-blocking for which social care needs were solely responsible increased by 89%. In the 12 months to November 2016 alone, bed-blocking has increased by 39%. Does the Minister recognise that the precept package brought forward by the Government in December is insufficient to solve the crisis in our social care system, and is putting further pressure on our already stretched NHS?

Sajid Javid: What the Minister recognises is that the additional funding announced in December will make a big difference: £240 million of additional money is coming in from the new homes bonus repurposing; and an additional almost £600—[Interruption]—It is new money. An additional almost £600 million is coming in from the precept changes. When it comes to using that money, we all want to see a reduction in delayed transfers of care. The hon. Lady will be aware of big differences between local councils on delayed transfers of care, and some councils can certainly learn from others.

Local Authorities: Long-term Funding

3. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What discussions he has had with local authorities on long-term funding certainty.

Sajid Javid: The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Ninety-seven per cent. of councils have accepted our historic offer of four-year funding certainty, and the Local Government Finance Bill will ensure that councils keep 100% of locally collected taxes by the end of this Parliament.

Nigel Huddleston: The Secretary of State will be particularly aware that Worcestershire is a very attractive place to live, work and visit, and a particularly attractive place to retire to, which is why we have a disproportionately large elderly population. How is the Department factoring into its long-term funding plans the additional needs of areas with a more elderly population?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. As a Worcestershire MP, I wholeheartedly agree with his opinion of our great county; it is a great place for anyone to visit, live and holiday in. I recognise that demographic pressures are affecting different areas in different ways, which is why we are undertaking a fair funding review to introduce a more up-to-date, transparent and fairer needs assessment formula—something that I know my hon. Friend will welcome.

Mrs Gillan: Mr Speaker, as you will know, the Secretary of State has received a proposal from Buckinghamshire County Council to create a new unitary authority to serve the whole county. He is also meeting the district councils, which are submitting to him a proposal for two unitary authorities. Will he confirm that he will give both those proposals equal and full consideration, including by consulting local residents, as happened in Dorset? Can he assure me that unitary status will not lead to any reduction in funding for Buckinghamshire residents?

Sajid Javid: I can give my right hon. Friend the assurance she seeks. Of course, I will give careful consideration to all proposals from local authorities, such as those in Buckinghamshire, including any financial implications. We need to ensure that any reform is right for local people and can deliver better services and strong local leadership.
**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): I should declare that I am an elected member of the council of the London Borough of Redbridge. Local authorities such as mine face a double whammy of pressures from an ageing population and a high birth rate, which lead to funding pressures on our local authority. Does the Secretary of State accept that even if local authorities like mine divert resources from other council services into adult social care and charge the maximum social care precept available, they will still face a shortfall in funding for vital services for older people? What is he going to do about that?

**Sajid Javid**: The measures we announced in December will help the hon. Gentleman’s local authority; they will help every local authority in the land to deliver more adult social care services. Nevertheless, as I have said, as well as more money, we need reform. Some councils need to learn from others.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): A 2015 Public Accounts Committee report outlined a 37% reduction in central Government support for local authorities between 2010 and 2016. What does the Secretary of State have to say to my Bristol South constituents, who are concerned about how the £64-million cuts announced by Bristol City Council last week will affect them?

**Sajid Javid**: I say to the hon. Lady’s Bristol South constituents, “Don’t forget where a Labour Government gets you.” The deepest deficit of any developed country, the biggest recession in almost 100 years and the largest banking bail-out—all that has meant that this Government have had to make some difficult decisions, and every part of local government has had to contribute to that.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the long-term financial stability of local government is a function of not only funding from Government but good management in local authorities? What does he think we can do to attract people with business experience to running good local government?

**Sajid Javid**: My hon. Friend makes a good point.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What plans has he to increase funding for social care?

**The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government** (Sajid Javid): The Government have listened to calls from local government and to representations from right hon. and hon. Members across the House. New changes outlined in the provisional local government finance settlement in December provide access to an additional £900 million over the next two years.

**Tom Brake**: The social care precept in Sutton would raise about £2.5 million, but Sutton is losing £8 million in revenue support grant. A one-off social care grant will give Sutton about £750,000, but Sutton is losing £1.5 million from the new homes bonus changes, which are paying for the one-off grant, resulting in a loss of £800,000. Does the Secretary of State agree that, as long as the Government are robbing Peter to pay Paul, we will see cancer operations cancelled and patients left in distress because of bed-blocking?

**Sajid Javid**: As a result of the spending review announcement of £3.5 billion extra to be paid into adult social care by 2020—£3.5 billion a year—and the announcement that I made a few weeks ago of £900 million over the next two years, all councils, including Sutton, will have more resources to deal with adult social care challenges.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): I know that the Secretary of State will agree that the progress made with Torbay’s integrated care organisation was very welcome, but does he also agree that it was concerning to see that very strict financial rules from NHS England are now prompting a renegotiation in terms of a risk agreement even though no extra money will be spent? Will he agree to work with the council, the trust and colleagues in the Health Department to see whether we can resolve this?

**Sajid Javid**: I am happy to work with my hon. Friend to see what can be done and to listen to the concerns that he raises. Torbay is a good example of how integration can work and how it can really help local people.

**Homelessness**

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows full well that leaving patients in hospital when they are medically fit to be discharged, as has happened to 130 people currently at Aintree hospital, is a very expensive way of looking after people. Why is he not shouting from the rooftops for the £4.6 billion that was cut from social care to be reinvested, so that councils can address the problem now and in the long term?

**Sajid Javid**: Helping with adult social care is about resources, which is why I know the hon. Gentleman would have welcomed the announcement a few weeks ago of an additional £900 million over the next two years. I am sure he will agree that it is also about reform, and that he will have noticed the big difference in delayed transfers of care between one authority and another.

**5.** **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What plans he has to increase funding for social care.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government** (Mr Marcus Jones): The Government are committed to tackling homelessness. We have launched a £50 million homelessness prevention package and are backing the most ambitious legislative reforms in decades through the Homelessness Reduction Bill. I am delighted that Chelmsford will be one of the country’s first homelessness prevention trailblazer areas announced by the Prime Minister last month.

**Sir Simon Burns** (Chelmsford) (Con): What recent steps his Department has taken to help rough sleepers and homeless people.

**6.** **The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government** (Sajid Javid): The Government have listened to calls from local government and to representations from right hon. and hon. Members across the House. New changes outlined in the provisional local government finance settlement in December provide access to an additional £900 million over the next two years.
Sir Simon Burns: I am very grateful to the Minister for his reply. Does he agree that in the 21st century rough sleeping is totally unacceptable? Will he tell me more about what is being done not only in England as a whole but in Chelmsford to end this stain on our society?

Mr Jones: The whole House will agree that rough sleeping is totally unacceptable and that we should do all we can to end it. Our £20 million rough sleeping grant will fund 54 projects working to provide rapid response support for rough sleepers across England. It will help to prevent people from spending a night on the streets in the first place. I am delighted to tell my right hon. Friend that Chelmsford will receive almost £900,000 funding for preventing homelessness in partnership with neighbouring local authorities.

Alison Thewliss: I am afraid that is completely inadequate. Since 2011-12, welfare reform has meant that homelessness services in Glasgow, Scotland’s largest city, have seen cuts of more than £6 million to their temporary accommodation budgets. Does the Minister not accept that really to help rough sleepers and people who are homeless there must be co-ordinated work across all Government Departments? We cannot have one Department undermining the services of another.

Andy Slaughter: Rather than patting themselves on the back, should not the Government be apologising for allowing rough sleeping to double since 2010? This is not an insoluble problem; it merely requires action such as that taken by the previous Labour Government, which cut street homelessness by three quarters. Will the Minister adopt the initiative announced last month by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) and commit to an extra 4,000 homes to end rough sleeping altogether?

Mr Jones: It will not be lost on the hon. Gentleman that under the Labour Government, in 2003, homelessness was at its peak. This Government are absolutely committed to making sure that we eradicate rough sleeping and we are working extremely hard, with a £20 million fund for local authorities, as I mentioned earlier, and £10 million for social impact bonds to get our most entrenched rough sleepers off the street.

High Street Store Vacancies

7. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What estimate his Department has made of the number of high street store vacancies.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): We have taken significant action to help high streets adapt to changing shopping habits and to thrive. Shop vacancy rates are well down from their peak in 2012 and figures from Savills estate agents show that investment in high street retail property last year was up 17% from the year before.

Justin Madders: High streets in my constituency continue to struggle, as they do up and down the country. My local authority does what it can, but the support it can give is limited. It needs Government intervention and support to make the necessary transformation. Will the Minister agree to meet me and other interested colleagues to see what can be done?
Andrew Percy: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman. The business rate revaluation will have a positive impact for his constituents, and I discussed the issue of high street regeneration with the chair of his local enterprise partnership, Christine Gaskell, just before Christmas, but I am more than happy to meet him to discuss that. We are also looking at proposals that we are working up with Revo on how we can share best practice, because this is very much a varied picture across the country.

14. [908155] Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Our small market towns are being stripped of their banks: there is no bank now in Caistor, and Market Rasen is down to one. What is the Minister’s policy to try to encourage more competition in the retail banking sector so that we can try to encourage banking in our rural towns?

Andrew Percy: This is an important point—the issue has affected my constituency—and one that I am happy to discuss further with the Treasury. The business rate revaluation will have a positive impact on retail property in my hon. Friend’s constituency, as it will across many parts of the north and midlands.

Social Care: Funding

8. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that adult social care is adequately funded.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): We recognise the pressures faced by the social care system. On top of the funding that we announced in 2015, which will deliver nearly £3.5 billion a year by 2019-20, we are providing an additional £900 million over the next two years for social care.

Helen Goodman: Unfortunately, Durham has already had to make £55 million-worth of cuts. The precept will bring in £4 million, but another £40 million of cuts are in the pipeline. Some villages will face private contractors being unable to afford to provide any social care whatsoever. May I suggest that the Minister go back to the Treasury and ask for another announcement on 8 March?

Mr Jones: The hon. Lady will know that Durham will benefit from the additional £900 million to which the Government are giving local authorities access over the next two years. It will also significantly benefit from the improved better care fund, which is £105 million this year, £825 million the following year and £1.5 billion in the last year of this Parliament.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Given that so much of the funding for adult social care goes towards care homes, and given that so many care homes are failing their Care Quality Commission inspections, will the ministerial team consider wrapping care home reform into the adult social care reform that has been announced? In particular, will they consider requiring local authorities to build new care homes, just as they have to build schools and GP surgeries?

Mr Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for her constructive suggestions—we are always willing to listen to those. As he might be aware, the Department of Health is looking carefully at how care homes are provided, and particularly at regulation and the role of the CQC.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Funding per head of population in Westminster and in Kensington and Chelsea is almost double that received by Enfield, and Enfield is facing spending pressures of £5.9 million in adult social care in 2017-18 alone. Can the Minister confirm not only that he will look at the ring-fencing issue, but that he is serious about properly reflecting the assessed needs of our communities in the future local government funding formula?

Mr Jones: I met the chief finance officer of Enfield Council last week, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), as part of the local government finance settlement consultation. The right hon. Lady will be aware that local authorities across the country will benefit from the £900 million that they will have access to over the next two years, and from the improved better care fund, which is ramping up quickly over the next three years.

Neighbourhood Plans

9. Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): What plans he has to enhance and extend neighbourhood plans.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): The Neighbourhood Planning Bill and my recent written ministerial statement will further strengthen neighbourhood planning, ensuring that communities have the ability to shape the development of their area, not speculative development.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the Minister for that welcome answer. It has been encouraging to watch local communities develop their neighbourhood plans over the past few years. Will the Minister clarify how much time councils and communities will have to update their neighbourhood and local plans once data on new housing numbers have been published, and will he ensure that neighbourhood and local plans carry full weight for that period?

Gavin Barwell: I can reassure my right hon. Friend on that point. The Government’s expectation is that plans should be reviewed every five years, but when new data come to light it does not mean that existing plans are automatically out of date.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister ensure that when we have neighbourhood plans we involve local and national businesses more in the planning procedure? So many of the global and national chains suck the money out of our communities, and many of them put little investment back. What incentives can he introduce?

Gavin Barwell: First, there is the possibility of having neighbourhood plans purely for business district areas, which the hon. Gentleman might want to look at in his constituency. There is also the wider issue of ensuring that we capture the uplift in value when businesses
apply for planning permission, and there is a review of the community infrastructure levy and section 106 on my desk at the moment.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will my hon. Friend pay tribute to the hundreds of people in Mid Sussex who have devoted a great deal of time to putting together neighbourhood plans, and will he assure us that in his White Paper steps will be taken to secure the integrity of the plans?

Gavin Barwell: I pay tribute not only to the people my right hon. Friend mentions but to him, because he has been a huge champion of neighbourhood planning in Mid Sussex and has spoken about it repeatedly. I hope that my written ministerial statement has helped addressed some of his concerns, but there will certainly be further action in the housing White Paper.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Pressure on local authority budgets is leading local authorities to encourage the building of high-cost homes to boost the council tax take. That completely misses the point regarding the local need for starter homes and affordable family homes. What can be done to encourage and, indeed, perhaps to incentivise local authorities to ensure that housing need is matched by housing provision?

Gavin Barwell: The national planning policy framework is very clear on that point. When local authorities conduct their assessments of housing need, they should not just look at the total number of homes required, but the right mix of housing to cater for the demographic profile including, for example, the number of elderly people who might need specialist housing. The hon. Lady is quite right to draw attention to that issue.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I very much welcome the increase in housing starts, the number of which has doubled since the first quarter of 2009. To get to the level we need, we need a resurgence of small and medium-sized house builders. Does the Minister agree that we need local authorities and local communities to allocate more small sites in their local plans and neighbourhood plans?

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are far too dependent, at this point in time, on a small number of large developers. Therefore, we need to ensure that the land that has attracted small developers is released and that those developers have access to finance.

House Building

10. Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): What steps he is taking to promote the building of more homes.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): Since July, we have announced: a £3 billion fund to support small and medium-sized enterprises; an additional £1.4 billion for affordable housing; a £2 billion accelerated construction programme; a £2.3 billion infrastructure fund; funding for starter homes; and support for 17 garden towns and villages. The White Paper will contain further measures.

Oliver Colville: As my hon. Friend knows, the all-party parliamentary group for excellence in the built environment, of which I am the chairman, published its findings into the quality of new build housing. Would he be willing to meet the all-party group to discuss our findings and our suggestions of inclusions in the forthcoming White Paper?

Gavin Barwell: I would be delighted. I have attended a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for the private rented sector, which my hon. Friend also chairs; he is a busy man. He is quite right to say that, as we address the fundamental challenge of getting the country to build the homes we desperately need, we must not lose sight of quality as well as quantity.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colville) is very busy. He has many commitments and an extremely full diary. I do not think that anybody doubted the point.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Is Westminster City Council right to expect other local authorities across the south-east and as far as the midlands to take on the responsibility of housing as well as providing education and social care for London’s people in housing need?

Gavin Barwell: I would think that London MPs, Westminster councillors and, indeed, everybody would expect that, as much as possible, local authorities should meet the need to house in their area those who are homeless in their area. Our guidance is clear about that. The fact that some local authorities have to place people outside their areas is an indictment of the failure of the country, over 30 or 40 years, to build enough homes. We are going to put that right.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Local authorities and communities are incentivised to deliver vital new homes through the new homes bonus. However, very few residents are aware of the new homes bonus, so do not see the gain of development. Does the Minister agree that local authorities should set out how they spend their new homes bonus in the annual council tax bill statement?

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which I am happy to look into. There is a wider issue of ensuring that communities see the benefit of new housing. With the community infrastructure levy and section 106 payments, we must ensure that communities know the benefits that they are getting in return for accepting housing.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Dudley would be able to do much more in the area if its budgets were not being cut by 20% compared with just 1% in Surrey and 2% in Buckinghamshire. That has put pressure on a whole range of council services, not just housing. For instance, libraries are closing and social services are under pressure. Over Christmas, hard-working, low-paid staff in Dudley had to take three days unpaid leave—effectively a pay cut of 1%—because of this Government’s cuts. How can Ministers sit there and tell me that the cuts they have imposed on Dudley are in any way fair?
Gavin Barwell: The hon. Gentleman is certainly creative. The question was actually about building more homes. I point out to him that, over the course of this Parliament, the Government are doubling the housing capital budget, which will enable more homes to be built in his area.

Business Rates

11. John Pugh (Southport) (LD): What progress has been made in the review of business rates. [908152]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): The Government concluded the business rates review in March 2016. Following the review, the Government announced a £6.7 billion cut in business rates over the next five years and a permanent doubling of small business rate relief. As a result, 600,000 small businesses will pay no business rates at all.

John Pugh: I thank the Minister, but has he done any serious analysis of the process in order to give any comfort to the hard-pressed average high street currently competing against the internet and trading in very, very difficult circumstances?

Mr Jones: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. There is no doubt that many external factors do challenge our high streets, but there is a significant package of revaluation, which is now online.

Homelessness

12. Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of homeless people sleeping rough between 2010 and 2015. [908153]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): No one should ever have to sleep rough. Our £20 million grant fund will help those new to the streets. The £10 million for eight social impact bonds covering 48 areas will build on the success of the world’s first social impact bond, which we funded in London. This has helped over 400 entrenched rough sleepers to get back on to their feet and into accommodation.

Holly Lynch: I appreciate that response, yet Calderdale Council tells me that the number of non-statutory rough sleepers in our district has never been higher. While local charities are doing everything they can to tackle homelessness, the council’s supporting people budget has been slashed by 50%. Does the Minister agree that unless we support and empower our local authorities to do this work properly, we stand no chance of reducing the numbers sleeping rough on our streets?

Mr Jones: As the hon. Lady will know, this Government are backing the Homelessness Reduction Bill, currently going through the House, which will put a number of obligations on local authorities to help people earlier so that they do not become homeless. The announcement on funding for that Bill will be made very shortly. We are also, as she has heard, providing £50 million to start that work at this point so that we do not waste time waiting for the legislation to come into effect.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): In Derby city we are currently looking at alternative ways of giving to homeless people, such as vouchers, an app, or through a website. Will the Minister consider looking at these alternative giving methods to see whether it is possible to take them forward?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It is generally for members of the public to consider the way in which they might want to give to homeless people. As I have said a number of times today, the Government are absolutely focused on helping rough sleepers. The £10 million being put into the social impact bond will help to get some of the most entrenched rough sleepers off the street, and I am sure that is what we all want to see.

Pub Closures: Permitted Development Rights

13. Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the effect of permitted development rights on pub closures. [908154]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): Pubs are at the heart of community life. That is why we have made provision for assets of community value to be placed on the register by communities that value their pub. That takes away the permitted development rights automatically.

Mr Shuker: The co-operative pub model is saving valuable locals right across the country, but the asset of community value designation process that the Minister mentions, which enables this in the first place, can often be far too clunky and lengthy. Would not a better approach be to remove permitted development rights and protect all pubs by default?

Andrew Percy: There are now already in excess of 1,750 pubs listed as assets of community value. The moment a nomination goes in, the permitted development rights are removed. Moreover, local authorities are free, if they wish, to apply for an article 4 direction to remove those rights across a whole area.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): As the hon. Gentleman now knows, the Minister for Housing and Planning was misled by the British Beer and Pub Association about the fact that removing permitted development rights would not have any effect on improvements to pubs, so will the Department now confirm that it would simply change the use class order?

Andrew Percy: As I have made clear, this is an area where we have to balance competing interests. I am keen to continue looking at it as I continue in this role. We want to support community pubs. That is why today I can announce to the House that we are providing £50,000 of funding to Pub is The Hub, which will help more pubs to be transformed and to be valued by their
communities. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans), who has lobbied me quite hard on this.

Private Rented Housing

16. **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to raise standards in the private rented sector. [908158]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning** (Gavin Barwell): We are in the process of introducing banning orders for serious offenders, civil penalties of up to £30,000, a database of rogue landlords, and mandatory licensing for smaller houses in multiple occupation; and we are banning letting agency fees.

**Mike Kane**: Manchester is doing some very innovative work on cracking down on rogue landlords, but there are issues with the geographical scope of the licensing scheme. Will the Minister meet me, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Residential Landlords Association to see how we can raise standards together?

**Gavin Barwell**: We have in the past provided £100,000 of funding to Manchester for this work. I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman. This is a critical area, and we need to drive out the rogue landlords so that decent landlords do not face unfair competition.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Peterborough City Council is just about to commence a selective licensing scheme to crack down on rapacious slum landlords and protect vulnerable tenants under the Housing Act 2004. Will the Minister keep under review the bureaucratic burden that falls on local authorities? The whole process, from start to finish, is not timely and takes far too long.

**Gavin Barwell**: I am very happy to give that undertaking, and to meet my hon. Friend if he wishes to discuss these matters in more detail.

Midlands Engine for Growth

18. **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the midlands engine for growth. [908160]

**The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government** (Sajid Javid): As announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor at the autumn statement, we will shortly publish a midlands engine strategy, reaffirming our commitment to the area.

Topical Questions

T1. [908180] **Mr Clive Bets** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government** (Sajid Javid): At DCLG, we are starting 2017 as we mean to go on. The housing White Paper is nearing completion. The Local Government Finance Bill was published last week and, as we have heard, it creates the framework for business rate retention. It also features what my briefing refers to as discretionary relief on public toilets, which is, I am sorry to say, not quite what the name suggests.

Mr Bets: I will try not to follow the Secretary of State’s joke.

I thank the Minister responsible for the northern powerhouse for his helpful comments in support of the Sheffield city region in the last few days. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether the Government want the city region deal to go ahead as agreed and that they do not support this vague concept of a mayor for Yorkshire, which will not deliver better local services or improve economic growth and which is, arguably, outwith the legal framework for mayoral combined authorities contained in the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016?

**Sajid Javid**: It is very good of the hon. Gentleman, the chair of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, to thank the Minister responsible for the northern powerhouse. We remain strongly committed to the devolution deal for the Sheffield city region. We will continue to work with local leaders, who have proposed a mayoral election for May 2018. We will also continue to discuss with local partners proposals for a devolution deal elsewhere in Yorkshire, including Leeds.

T4. [908183] **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to creating a housing market that works for everyone. In my own local authority area of North West Leicestershire, new housing starts are now 273% higher than they were in the year ending September 2010. May I give the Secretary of State a challenge as he sets out his new housing White Paper: can we do even better?

**The Minister for Housing and Planning** (Gavin Barwell): I hope we can rise to the challenge. If every local authority was building at the rate that my hon. Friend’s local authority is building, we would be building 370,000 homes a year. That is a sign that it is possible to build the homes that this country needs; it just requires the political will to do it.

**John Healey** (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): My question is for the Secretary of State: where is his housing White Paper? We were promised it in the autumn. We were then promised it alongside the autumn statement, then before the end of the year, and then first thing in
the new year. We were told that it was in the Government’s grid for publication today. It has been delayed more times than a trip on Southern rail. I say to the Secretary of State: what is the problem?

**Sajid Javid:** The right hon. Gentleman will not have to wait long for the housing White Paper. When he sees it, he will see that it does a lot more than happened under the previous Labour Government. When he was the Housing Minister, I understand house building fell to its lowest level since the 1970s.

**John Healey:** The right hon. Gentleman has shown us exactly what the problem is: the huge gap between the Government’s rhetoric on housing and their record. Under Labour, we saw 2 million new homes, 1 million more homeowners and the largest investment programme in social housing for a generation. For seven years under Tory Ministers, we have seen failure on all fronts—higher homelessness, fewer homeowners and less affordable housing. Even the Housing Minister has said that affordable housing is “unacceptably low” and “feeble”. Does the Secretary of State agree, and what is he going to do in his White Paper to deal with this crisis?

**Sajid Javid:** Under Labour, we saw housing affordability, measured by median income compared with the average house price, double—going up from three and a half times to seven times. We saw the number of first-time buyers fall by 55%, and the number of units available for social rent decline by 421,000. That is Labour’s record on housing.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Short questions and answers, please, because there is a lot of interest. A single sentence will do.

**T5. [908184]** **Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Chiltern and South Bucks District Councils are preparing a new local plan, and have consulted on the options for meeting development need using the green belt. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that green-belt land is vital to preserving the character of places such as Chesham and Amersham and the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty, and should not be developed other than in truly exceptional circumstances?

**Sajid Javid:** I agree with my right hon. Friend. The purposes of the green belt are very clear. It should preserve the setting and the special character of historic towns—for example, those in her constituency. Where councils look at the green belt, they should always make sure that the national planning policy framework rules are met: the circumstances must be exceptional, and brownfield land should always be prioritised.

**T2. [908181]** **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): The recent publication of the voluntary right-to-buy pilot schemes for housing association tenants shows that very few completions were achieved in return for the enormous time and effort expended. New affordable housing is a key element in Cambridgeshire’s devolution deal. Will the Minister promise no distraction from the opportunity this gives us to build the supply of homes needed in our area?

**Gavin Barwell:** Voluntary right to buy provides replacement affordable housing. The hon. Gentleman should be supporting it, because it helps people who could not otherwise own their home to do so and provides new affordable housing.

**T8. [908187]** **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Earlier this year, the Secretary of State announced an extra £7 billion fund to expand the Government’s affordable housing programme. I welcome this, and it will help my constituents. However, there is also a concern that the need for new homes will outweigh the need to protect our greenfield land, so will the Minister assure my constituents that he remains committed to it?

**Gavin Barwell:** I absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. I congratulate her on championing brownfield land. The new brownfield registers that we are introducing will help to ensure that development is, rightly, focused on brownfield first.

**T3. [908182]** **Christina Rees** (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that available housing provision is the key to reducing homelessness and that his Government should look to the Welsh Labour Government’s legislative pledges of £5.6 million in 2015 and £3 million in following years to fund affordable homes to rent as well as to buy?

**Gavin Barwell:** The hon. Lady will have heard, in the autumn statement, the Chancellor of the Exchequer adding £1.4 billion to the affordable housing budget. We are doubling the housing capital budget over this Parliament. That is not rhetoric, but proof of our commitment to delivering the housing that is needed.

**T9. [908188]** **Suella Fernandez** (Fareham) (Con): Together with the starter home land fund, the new locally led Welborne garden village in Fareham will deliver new homes and support first-time buyers. Will my hon. Friend explain how the Government are working with local authorities to deliver the new garden villages, and will he agree to visit Fareham to see how the local community will benefit from this new scheme?

**Gavin Barwell:** It was a pleasure to announce support for 14 new garden villages, which will between them provide 48,000 new homes, and it would be a pleasure to visit my hon. Friend’s constituency and see the progress being made.

**T6. [908185]** **Robert Flello** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Stoke-on-Trent City Council is proposing to cut children’s centres. Does the Secretary of State think that is acceptable?

**Sajid Javid:** Every council needs to provide certain statutory services, including children’s services. We want to make sure that every council is properly funded. Stoke-on-Trent council, like many others, has accepted the four-year settlement, and that is good news.

**T10. [908189]** **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): Labour city councillors in Lincoln are determined to build homes on the Swanpool floodplain in the heart of our city, even though a private developer decided that the site was unsuitable. What message will my right hon. Friend want to give Labour councillors such as ours who act in such a reckless manner?
**Sajid Javid:** I hope my hon. Friend will understand that I cannot comment on a specific planning case, but we have strict, clear rules that say that councils must consider strict tests under the national planning policy framework that protect people and property from flooding. Where those tests are not met, that development should not go ahead.

The Select Committee on Health described it as a “false economy” that will add to future health costs. What impact does the Minister believe those cuts will have on health inequalities, and will she meet me and representatives from Hounslow so that they can raise their concerns about the impact on children and others in the community?

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): A year ago, local authorities were hit with a £200 million in-year cut in public health support. The Select Committee on Health described it as a “false economy” that will add to future health costs. What impact does the Minister believe those cuts will have on health inequalities, and will she meet me and representatives from Hounslow so that they can raise their concerns about the impact on children and others in the community?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government** (Mr Marcus Jones): As 25% of Government expenditure takes place through local government, there will always be situations where funding has to be reduced. As the hon. Lady knows, the health budget is being increased by £10 billion across this Parliament. In terms of public health, I think the cuts she mentioned equate to about 1% to 2%, which was not ideal. I am sure that local government is more than able to meet the challenge.

**Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): While it may be true that Ministers have been in touch with councils directly hosting proposed new garden villages, they have not necessarily been in touch with neighbouring councils, which may be more affected by the proposals than those hosting the development. May I suggest that Ministers spread their nets a little wider when deciding which schemes to promote and, in my case, contact Basildon and Thurrock Councils as a matter of urgency?

**Gavin Barwell**: My hon. Friend has raised this issue with me outside the Chamber, and I will make sure that both he and the council have the information. The scheme has not yet gone through the planning systems; there will be every opportunity to address concerns.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): In 2009-10, there were 40,000 building starts for social rented homes. Last year that was down to 1,000. Why is that?

**Sajid Javid:** The number of socially rented homes declined by 421,000 during Labour’s time in office. Since the change of Government in 2010, we have invested billions in socially rented homes, including the additional £1.4 billion that was announced in the autumn statement.

**Ben Howlett** (Bath) (Con): Last week, Bath received £259,000 of funding as part of the rough sleeping grant. Will the Minister join me in endorsing the great work of the council and charities such as Julian House, the Genesis Trust and Developing Health and Independence, as they put together those plans to ensure that no one else ends up with a winter on the streets?

**Mr Marcus Jones:** I certainly endorse my hon. Friend’s comments. That was exactly what we wanted to achieve with the funding that we provided: local authorities working with charitable and third sector organisations to deliver the support that we need and all want for people who are rough sleeping and homeless.

**Chlöe Onoufrah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Today is Martin Luther King Day, which we have just celebrated in your state rooms, Mr Speaker, by launching Freedom City 2017, the year-long festival that commemorates the 50th anniversary of Dr King’s visit to Newcastle to receive an honorary doctorate from the university. The Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), the shadow Minister for diversity, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), the sadly outgoing US ambassador Matthew Barzun and you, Mr Speaker, all spoke to King’s great work and the challenges he highlighted of race, poverty and war. Mr Speaker, you emphasised the need to champion those values exemplified by King in our House and also our communities. Does the Minister agree that Freedom City 2017 provides an excellent opportunity to do just that?

**Sajid Javid:** I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Lady. She is quite right to point out the importance of Martin Luther King on this day, which is a celebration of his life and work. We would all do well to remember what he taught us, and one thing that he said is that we must live together as brothers or we all perish as fools. We can all learn from that, no matter who we are, whether in the US or the UK.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Will the housing White Paper envisage a greater role for the public sector?

**Gavin Barwell:** I can reassure my right hon. Friend that this Government want to see everybody get involved in building more homes, so if he is referring to local councils and their role, then absolutely: the more people who can get involved in building the homes we need, the better.

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Councils across the country are highlighting the enormous gap between what the social care precept raises and the increased costs of social care as a consequence of the increase in the minimum wage and increasing needs among the population, as well as the cuts that they—the councils—are already having to make. Does the Secretary of State accept that his approach to social care funding is simply not credible, and will he commit to taking a different approach to ensure that people across the country get the care that they need?

**Sajid Javid:** We have taken the pressures on our social care very seriously. The hon. Lady will know from the announcement of just a few weeks ago about an additional £900 million for the next two years, which will make a difference. We also accept that there is more to do.

Several hon. Members rose—

**Mr Speaker:** I want to hear the conscience of Christchurch. I call Mr Christopher Chope.
Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Last summer, the nine Dorset councils submitted a proposal to my right hon. Friend to establish a combined authority. Will he ensure that the order establishing that authority is brought forward in sufficient time to enable the authorities to be set up on 1 April this year?

Sajid Javid: We have only just received the proposal to which my hon. Friend refers. We want to make sure that we take the right amount of time to consider it carefully. Whatever the result, we will make sure that enough time is allowed for this House to do its business.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I welcome the fact that Bristol has been named as one of the trailblazers for homelessness prevention and is getting additional money for it. Does the Minister share my concern, however, that in some cases it is far more attractive for landlords and developers to move into providing houses in multiple occupation or emergency accommodation rather than providing decent, proper family homes?

Mr Marcus Jones: Yes, I certainly understand the hon. Lady’s point when it comes to the practice of flipping temporary accommodation for the uses that she mentions. We hope that the devolution of the temporary accommodation management fee will make it far more attractive for people to be able to maintain temporary accommodation in the way we want it to be provided.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The new garden village at Deenethorpe will bring thousands more new homes to East Northamptonshire. Will the Minister reassure my constituents that new infrastructure to support those new homes will be at the forefront of his mind as this project progresses?

Gavin Barwell: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance, given that it is part of the concept of garden villages. More generally, if we want communities to accept more housing, we have to make sure that we get the infrastructure in place at the same time. That is why the Chancellor’s announcement of a £2.3 billion housing infrastructure fund was so welcome.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry that we have run out of time. I shall, however, take one more question. I call Imran Hussain.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Last month, I asked the Health Secretary how many local authority leaders he had met to discuss social care. The answer was not very positive, so I ask this Secretary of State how many cash-strapped local authority leaders he is willing to meet to discuss the real crisis in social care.

Mr Marcus Jones: I have met a number of local authority leaders in the last few weeks, as a result of local government finance settlement consultations. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has done the same, and we will continue to meet local authority leaders and chief executives to understand the challenges that they face.
Points of Order

3.37 pm

Hon. Members: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I would like to save up the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin)—he is a specialist delicacy.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will have seen reports at the weekend that the Prime Minister is now blaming family doctors for the NHS crisis. It is not the fault of GPs that social care has been cut or that general practice is underfunded. Has the Prime Minister or the Health Secretary given you notice that they are going to come to the House to make a statement, or should we assume that they want to avoid scrutiny for their floundering response to this NHS crisis?

Mr Speaker: The answer is that I have received no indication of an intention for a Government Minister to make a statement on that matter. I have received notification of other intended statements for the coming days, but that is not among their number.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last Tuesday at Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions, the Foreign Secretary was asked whether the UK would be participating in yesterday’s summit in Paris on the Israeli-Palestine peace situation. He told us that we would be participating and would “reinforce our message”, yet we read in press reports today that, alone among the western nations, the UK had no Minister present, and only a civil servant was sent to observe without the authority to sign the final communiqué. Have you been given notice that the Foreign Secretary intends to make a statement on the summit, and if not, what can Members do to compel the Foreign Secretary to divulge the full intentions of his Department when answering questions?

Mr Speaker: In the short time—approximately 20 months, I think—for which I have known the hon. Gentleman, I have come to realise what a persistent fellow he is. In response to the last part of his question and, I think, with the location of the Table Office, in which he can submit such questions. Knowing the hon. Gentleman, I rather suspect that he will keep raising the matter.

I am, of course, grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his intention to raise this matter. He has registered it with force, and what he has said will have been heard on the Treasury Bench. If the Foreign Secretary feels that inadvertently the House has been misled—it is not immediately clear to me that the words were inaccurate; it may be that there has been a change of mind, which is not without precedent in our proceedings—no doubt he will take steps to correct the record. Meanwhile, the hon. Gentleman can go about his business with an additional glint in his eye and spring in his step in the knowledge that he has put his point forcefully on the record.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sure that the whole House, but you in particular, will want to join me in paying tribute to the great Professor Anthony King, who was one of our country’s foremost political academics, psephologists and commentators, and who made a huge contribution to public life. He helped to educate thousands of young people in Britain, including yourself, Mr Speaker, the Secretary of State for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and, of course, me—although, as I recall, Mr Speaker, you were the only one who got a first. I am sure that you and the whole House will want to pay tribute to the late Professor King.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and, more particularly, I rather imagine that Professor Anthony King’s widow, Jan, will be especially appreciative when she hears of the noble step that the hon. Gentleman has taken today. Colleagues will doubtless have noted that Professor King died last week, aged 82, after a stellar career and vocation as one of the most distinguished political scientists of this generation. He was a brilliant teacher, he was an outstanding communicator, not least on television when giving his analysis of by-elections, and he was a prodigious and illuminating writer. Personally, I feel every day a sense of gratitude to Tony for what he did for me; and God, I must have been an awkward student to teach 30 years ago—[Interruption.] And, indeed, I still am. He stuck with me, and I am hugely grateful.

The hon. Gentleman and I got to know each other at the University of Essex 30 years ago, and I say in affectionate tribute to him that he is as noisy today as he was when he used to heckle me in student union meetings between 1982 and 1985. Tony King was a great man who did wonders for the study and teaching of political science in the United Kingdom, and we should honour his memory.

BILL PRESENTED

ORGAN DONATION (DEEMED CONSENT)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Paul Flynn, supported by Kelvin Hopkins, Ronnie Cowan, Mark Durkan, Kerry McCarthy, Kate Green, Michael Fabricant, Mike Wood, Yvonne Fovargue, Dr Philippa Whitford and Siobhain McDonagh, presented a Bill to enable persons in England to withhold consent for organ donation and transplantation; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed (Bill 123).
The National Citizen Service is a huge success. More than 300,000 young people have taken part, and many of them say that the NCS has changed their lives forever. For those who do not know, the NCS is a summer programme that lasts for up to four weeks, with no cost to parents who cannot afford it. It is open to all 15 to 17-year-olds in England and Northern Ireland. Indeed, the foundational strength of the programme is that it brings together people from all backgrounds. There is a focus on fun, and personal and social development, along with the design and delivery of a social action project. As Michael Lynas, the chief executive of the NCS Trust, has written:“We build bridges across social divides and ladders to opportunity. We bring young people together in common purpose to change their perspectives and lives for good...Above all we try to show them that life is not a spectator sport.”

I got a sense of how transformational the programme is when I visited Liverpool last summer and met representatives of Everton football club’s NCS project. There was tremendous enthusiasm, and I was told by several people that they had become firm friends with neighbours from the same street whom they had not previously known at all. That is not untypical. An independent Ipsos MORI evaluation found that the vast majority of NCS graduates leave feeling more positive about people from dissimilar backgrounds and about themselves. Expanding the horizons of young people while increasing social cohesion is a massive win-win.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): May I take this opportunity to warmly thank NCS East for its superb work in helping young people in Peterborough to develop as good citizens, one of whom, Tapiwa Tandi, is beginning a work experience scheme with me tomorrow?

Karen Bradley: I suspect that a theme of this debate will be the experiences that we have all had in our constituencies with NCS graduates, and the enthusiasm and self-belief that doing NCS projects gives them. I commend my hon. Friend on taking his NCS graduate into his office. I look forward to hearing how that work experience goes.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I have also been impressed when I have visited NCS in Bradford, but I wonder what the Secretary of State’s response is to the National Audit Office report about the NCS, which says that it has not met its participation targets in six years and that the cost works out at an estimated £1,863 for every youngster who is expected to take part. What is the Government response to that NAO report?

Karen Bradley: I welcome the NAO report because it is important, with any programme of this type, that we understand value for money and what is being achieved. I am sure that my hon. Friend will recognise that this was a very ambitious target. We have had great success in getting towards that target, but there is still more to do. The Bill is important so that more of the young people such as those he has met in his constituency will have the chance to participate in the NCS.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the fact that more than 3,000 people from Lancashire have had the benefit of the NCS, including some 71 from my constituency last year—I saw the figures today? Has she, like me, been struck when she has visited NCS programmes by how well they have reached out to two particular groups: those from lower income families; and, most importantly, disabled constituents, who have been greatly involved in these programmes and have played a vital role in making sure that they are so successful?

Karen Bradley: I agree with my hon. Friend. He will know that the NCS has an above-average success rate in reaching those hardest-to-reach young people. We have all seen NCS projects in which there are young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, young people with disabilities and young people from more affluent backgrounds, all working together with the common purpose of achieving their social action project, and in doing so making lifelong friends. That work should be commended. I am very pleased to hear that 71 people from my hon. Friend’s constituency were involved last summer, and I am sure there will be more this summer.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I concur with all the positive things that have been said about the NCS. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking former Prime Minister David Cameron for all that he did to drive the programme forward, Lord Blunkett, who was also a key guiding hand behind the project, and my friend Michael Lynas, who has taken this from a small seed to the great success that we see today?

Karen Bradley: I will, of course, join my hon. Friend in so doing. Former Prime Minister David Cameron is now chair of the patrons board of NCS. The work that he achieved in government will have a lasting legacy. My hon. Friend is also right to suggest that the noble Lord Blunkett has been instrumental in this, as has Michael Lynas, the NCS chief executive. They have done great work to get this far. Let us remember that that has been achieved from a standing start, and that 300,000 young people have now gone through the programme. Congratulations are definitely in order.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): When I went along to the end-of-project session at Somerset College in Taunton Deane, I was impressed by the confidence of the children who had undertaken the course and the skills that they had gained. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in these days when we are trying to upskill our young people and to make them fit for business—even if it is just by teaching them to be polite and to communicate—we ought to promote this scheme much more widely because it has such a great future?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is why we want to grow the NCS as quickly as possible, in a way that is sustainable and that continues to be successful.
We have all seen the sense of self-worth and confidence that working in a team can give to young people, and I have seen them achieving some really stretching targets. That is a fantastic testament to the scheme, and we want to see more people taking part in it. The NCS can break down barriers just at the time when they could become entrenched, and 95% of participants said that the NCS had allowed them to get to know people whom they would not normally expect to meet. My hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) made that point a moment ago.

Although the programme is for young people, it is not only the young who benefit from it. For example, NCS participants have prepared and distributed care packages to the parents of premature babies in east Durham, raised funds for the Huntington’s Disease Association on Merseyside, and built a sensory garden for the residents of a Weymouth care home. Moreover, volunteering can become a lasting habit. The NCS Trust estimates that in the 16 months following the summer programmes, the 2013 and 2014 graduates did an additional 8 million hours of volunteering in their communities. The Government are determined that the NCS should become even more popular and successful, by nuts and bolts, which is what the Bill puts in place.

Several hon. Members rose—

Karen Bradley: I give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove).

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I, too, would like to thank and congratulate everyone involved in delivering the NCS in Corby and east Northamptonshire. My right hon. Friend has said a lot about the benefits of the scheme. Does she also agree that employability is one of its key achievements, as young people learn lots of skills that transfer well into the workplace?

Karen Bradley: I absolutely agree. The soft skills that the NCS can bring to young people make them much more employable and much more valuable in the workplace. That is exactly what we want to see from the NCS, among its many other benefits.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): When I visited Somerset’s NCS scheme in Exmoor last summer, I was struck by the number of students from previous years who had returned to be leaders and mentors. Is there any way in which the Secretary of State could reward those who go back as leaders and give them recognition for that further service?

Karen Bradley: We have announced a long-term review of young people in volunteering. My hon. Friend makes an interesting suggestion about the way in which the NCS can encourage volunteering within the scheme in future years.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the examples that she has set out demonstrate clearly the Government’s continuing commitment to the big society and that, in contrast to some of the mischievous reporting in some of the media, that is wholly compatible with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister’s welcome promotion of the shared society?

Karen Bradley: I agree with my right hon. Friend. This is an aspect of a country and a Government that work for everyone, and of the shared society that we all want to be part of. I shall now give way to my newly knighted hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Sir Julian Brazier).

Mr Speaker: A Kentish knight, no less.

Sir Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): We did that last week, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Not everyone was here then, so I thought that that the hon. Gentleman would welcome an encore.

Sir Julian Brazier: I am most grateful, Mr Speaker.

Speaking as a huge supporter of the NCS, locally as well and nationally, does my right hon. Friend agree that the adventure content is critical? We must be careful about the continuing erosion of adventure in residential centres up and down the country, in terms of both numbers and quality, if the NCS is to continue to deliver success.

Karen Bradley: I agree that the adventure side of the programme is incredibly important—it might mean that some young people get to reach the dizzying heights of being a knight of the realm like my hon. Friend—and represents an opportunity for young people to be away from home and to manage in an outward bounds situation. I met some young people from Liverpool who had camped in the Peak district, just outside my constituency, and they were astonished to discover just how hilly some bits of the country are and how cold they can be at times—although very beautiful, of course.

This short Bill is focused on establishing sound, transparent governance arrangements. It works in conjunction with a royal charter, making it clear that the NCS is above partisan politics. A draft of the charter was published as a Command Paper and laid before the House when the Bill was published. I have published an updated version today, which we will lay before both Houses, that reflects commitments that the Government made in the other place and will accompany the Bill as it goes through this House.

The Bill begins by outlining the royal charter and the functions of the NCS Trust, which will be a new body in a new form that is designed to last. However, we do not want to lose the talent and experience of those who work in the current body, which is also called the NCS Trust, who have overseen the fastest-growing youth movement in this country for 100 years. The Bill makes provision for schemes for the transfer of staff, property rights and liabilities from the current body to the new trust, and allows the Government to fund that trust out of money authorised by Parliament. It also allows the trust to charge participation fees at variable rates to maintain the principle that anyone can afford to take part. At present, the maximum fee is £50, but many participants pay no fee at all. The royal charter requires the trust to ensure equality of access to the NCS.
Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I visited an NCS scheme in Fareham this summer where 70 youngsters were engaged in a stimulating project that was helping the community. I applaud those who have led the success of this scheme, including Michael Lynam, whose steadfast commitment has been critical. In the light of the Casey review’s recommendations and findings about segregation among our young people, does my right hon. Friend agree that that participation fee—or lack of it—has been critical in enabling the breaking down of barriers so that people from different backgrounds, classes, religions and ethnicities can come together to restore civic pride and solidarity in our country?

Karen Bradley: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is important to make the point that money should never be a barrier to such social cohesion and integration. We want young people from all backgrounds to have the chance to participate in the NCS. It must never be the case that money is the barrier that prevents them from doing so.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The NCS represents an impressive cross-party effort. Its precursor came under the previous Labour Government in the form of the “Be Inspired” programme in which Lord Blunkett and Gordon Brown, among others, were involved. How much work will be done on successor programmes for the hundreds of thousands of young people who will be going through the NCS? I must declare an interest here: the UpRising leadership programme works closely with the NCS, and one issue is the need for mentoring to enable people to continue their progress. I will be delighted if the Secretary of State looks into the programme’s new initiative to recruit and train 1 million mentors over the next decade and to deploy them to organisations such as the NCS.

Karen Bradley: I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Mr Wilson), who has responsibility for civil society, has had discussions with the hon. Lady about precisely that point. We are looking at mentoring programmes and, of course, the #iwill programme is an important part of making sure that there are places for young people to continue developing the work that NCS starts.

It is vital that any expenditure of public money is transparent, accountable and proper, so the bulk of the Bill is a series of measures on that front. The NCS Trust must prepare annual accounts, which the National Audit Office will audit before they are laid before Parliament. At the start of every year, the trust must publish an annual report to make an assessment of value for money. Of course we will look at the findings of each year’s report to make an assessment of value for money.

Following an amendment in the House of Lords, the trust must also notify the Government of any police investigation into an allegation of criminal activity that could have serious consequences for the NCS. The trust will be subject to the Freedom of Information Act, the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Records Act 1958. Together, the measures will ensure that the NCS Trust works efficiently, effectively and transparently.

The Bill has one other purpose: to advertise NCS. The Bill allows Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to pass on information about the NCS to the young people, parents and carers whose addresses it holds. Receiving a national insurance number at the age of 16 is a rite of passage, and we want that letter to arrive with an invitation to participate in the NCS, too.

As the Government continue to work to build a shared society that works for every one of our constituents, the NCS has already transformed hundreds of thousands of lives. The Bill can ensure that it transforms millions more.

4.2 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab): I suspect that the House will not be subjected to too much of a sunburst this afternoon. Labour is delighted to support the Bill, and its passage through the Lords smoothed over some of the more contentious issues, so it is extremely welcome that the NCS therefore has strong support on both sides of the House. My one small regret is that the Secretary of State referred to a new draft of the royal charter, which was laid before the House only two minutes before this debate began. We have checked with the Vote Office, and it is not yet available in hard copy.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): We just got it. Here it is.

Mr Reed: My hon. Friend has just received a hard copy, but I have not had a chance to read it.

Karen Bradley: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman. I understand that there has been a problem in the post room, but the document is now available. I apologise if he did not receive it before the debate.

Mr Reed: I thank the Secretary of State for that. I look forward to reading it. I am sure she will tell me if any of my points have already been miraculously addressed in the new draft.

Before getting into the detail of the Bill, I will talk briefly about its context. The Secretary of State said that the Prime Minister mentioned the NCS in her speech on the shared society, and we need to make sure that that vision does not end up hollowed out like the previous Prime Minister’s big society. The big society
shrank down to little more than an attempt to replace paid professionals with unpaid volunteers, which is a shame because there is an urgent need to reshape politics in this country around people, family, community and shared institutions in a way that strengthens society and gives people more direct power. For all their talk, so far the Government have tended to do the opposite, rather than matching the power of the words they speak in this Chamber.

If we want people to feel they really have a share in society, they need two things: a voice to articulate what they are looking for; and the power to make it heard, be it at work, in their community or about the public services they use. In all that, there is a real big vision about national renewal based on sharing power, reshaping politics and opening up opportunity to everybody. We already see the potential of that in communities that have taken more control through projects such as tenant-led housing organisations, user-directed social care, community land trusts and community energy generation, to name just a few. The NCS can play a significant role in building young people’s capacity to participate; but the Government’s approach, including what we have heard of the “shared society” so far—I accept that that is not much yet—is still too narrow and too centralised to tear down the barriers that frustrate wider and deeper engagement by citizens. I hope that will change. The NCS will achieve great things, but it could achieve even more if the Government really understood the power and potential of communities freely co-operating for the common good, and allowed that principle to influence and shape the direction of Government policy right across the board.

Let me move on to some of the detail in the Bill, most of which, as I said earlier, is not contentious, unless the changes I have not seen have suddenly inserted a raft of things we are not expecting—I doubt that is the case. One of the most powerful aspects of the NCS is how it brings together young people from a range of different backgrounds. The divisions so starkly exposed by the EU referendum, and, I am sorry to say, widened by the Government’s unfair approach to funding cuts since 2010, show just how important it is that we promote better integration right across society.

I had the privilege of meeting some young people in Croydon who were taking part in the NCS, and their passion to make change real was tangible and moving. They had clearly learnt a lot from living, working, eating and facing challenges with other young people from backgrounds that were very different from their own. Let me give an example of why it is so important that we break down barriers. In some parts of urban Britain we see a growing problem with violent gang crime. Mercifully, the problem is still small at national level, but if you live in one of the neighbourhoods most affected, it is disfiguring and destructive in a way that is hard to imagine without having experienced it. In London, I have worked with people living on housing estates where violent, gang-related youth crime is endemic, but right next door there were streets full of better-off people leading completely different lives, with completely different expectations. The two communities live parallel lives that never touch. Young people on one estate that I visited spoke as if the borders of their world ended at the borders of the estate they lived in and the world of opportunity beyond was closed to them.

We have to break these barriers down, and I hope the NCS has a real role to play in that. I would like to hear the views of the Secretary of State or the Minister on strengthening the focus on integration in the Bill. It talks about “cohesion”, but not about the process of integration necessary to achieve it. A change along those lines in clause 1 has the support of a number of delivery organisations. We will revisit this in Committee, but I hope that any change can be achieved through cross-party consensus.

It is fundamentally important that the NCS continues to offer opportunities to young people from different backgrounds, so it is a concern that the proportion of participants from poorer backgrounds, as measured by eligibility for free school meals, has fallen since the NCS was created in 2011. Indeed, the National Audit Office states that “in many…areas a disproportionate number of young people from certain backgrounds participate”.

It is of course very important that the NCS is an organisation for every young person in the country, whatever their background.

Tim Loughton: It is slightly disappointing to hear the hon. Gentleman making quite a lot of negative comments about a scheme that I thought his party had come to support, after several years of trying on behalf of many of us. Does he not acknowledge that the number of young people going on this programme who qualify for free school meals has been put at 17%, which is more than double the proportion in society as a whole? In that respect, this programme is actually doing rather well.

Mr Reed: The points I am making are intended to strengthen and improve the NCS; if we do not make them, it may never change, so I hope the hon. Gentleman will join me in the spirit of seeking to offer constructive criticism to improve what the Government are doing.

Applications in general are below the target set by the Government—they were 13% behind in 2016. That must be addressed, and although the delivery organisations are aware of that, we look to the Government to provide the support that they need to reach more young people. In particular, we encourage the Minister to look again at introducing a specific duty on the NCS to promote the programme to young people from socially excluded backgrounds and explore new ways to reach them.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): To proceed in the tone that I thought had been set for the debate, does the hon. Gentleman recognise that the work the Government are doing, through the Bill, to authorise HMRC to work with NCS to reach more people is a key part of ensuring that the NCS reaches a far wider range of eligible young people? Hopefully that will increase participation rates, as well as diversity in the schemes.

Mr Reed: That is certainly helpful, but if that is the limit of the hon. Gentleman’s ambition for the NCS, he needs to find a little more of it, in the way that Opposition Members do.

A truly shared society requires everyone to have a voice and the power to assert it. There is no single model for achieving that: how we give people more
control depends on the circumstances and context in which we operate. When the state sets up new organisations or services, it often fails to give people on the receiving end a real say, despite the fact that organisations benefit from higher levels of input from their users. If the NCS is to remain relevant to young people and in touch with their lives, it is important that they have a real voice in what it does and how it operates, now and in future. That means giving young people a direct role in NCS governance and decision making.

I was involved in setting up one of the biggest community youth trusts in the country, the Young Lambeth Co-operative, which took control of a number of the council’s youth services. The intention in setting it up was to give young people a real voice by reserving half the positions on the governing board for them, and ensuring that those young people who were appointed properly represented young people from more deprived backgrounds who had the greatest need of the services on offer.

In the absence of a mutualised structure, which is not being proposed for the NCS, it would still be good to see the NCS take a similar approach to that of the Young Lambeth Co-operative and ensure that young people have a key role at every level. That will be critical to making the NCS credible and attractive to as wide a range of young people as possible, particularly those who are categorised as harder to reach. The governance changes in the version of the draft royal charter that I have seen are important. There is to be a new board of patrons, but the NCS would benefit from more young people, and fewer politicians, at the top.

The NCS has the Opposition’s full support. I am raising concerns in the spirit of constructive criticism, with the intention of improving the organisation’s operation. We want to see some changes in the Bill that we believe will strengthen the focus on integration, ensure that the NCS reaches as wide a range of young people as possible, and give young people a bigger voice at every level in the organisation. Such changes would help the NCS to meet its laudable objectives, and we hope that they can be achieved through consensus.

We live in a country with a generous and open spirit, full of talented and ambitious young people who want to make a difference to their own lives, their families, and the community around them. But to do more, they need a bigger voice and the power to make it heard. Civil society organisations such as the NCS have an important role to play in making that happen. Ours is already a sharing society in which people instinctively co-operate; it is government that needs to catch up. The governance and decision making.

The Bill may be small, but it has some very big ideas behind it: power, opportunity, community and contribution. Given the chance, young people and the NCS have much to teach us, and the Government, about those great national themes. We wish them every success in doing that in future.

Mr Speaker: Order. It might be helpful to the House if I say that there is no time limit on Back-Bench speeches at this stage, but that an informal limit involving a certain self-denying ordinance might help. An informal limit of 10 minutes per Back-Bench Member seems reasonable and well within the capacities of a Kentish knight. I call Sir Julian Brazier.

4.14 pm

Sir Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. The House must be getting very bored with that reminder, although I was extremely grateful for the much undeserved honour.

I welcome this Bill, as I am a strong supporter of the NCS. I had the opportunity to meet some of the 130 constituents who did their National Citizen Service last year, and I was very impressed. Clearly, they had enjoyed the earlier adventure training phase and were producing some really interesting ideas for working with local charities. That combination of challenging activity and a sense of service will be a very important part of our former Prime Minister’s legacy, and I was really delighted to see that he has agreed to be chairman of the patrons.

I will focus my remarks on the first bit of the programme—the adventure training. Although I strongly support what is being delivered and the very strong team headed by Michael Lynas and chairman, Stephen Greene, whom I had the opportunity to meet just before this debate, I am concerned that there are some wider trends that lie outside the strict confines of this Bill. However, knowing how tolerant you are, Mr Speaker, I hope that you will allow me to touch on those trends as they are highly relevant to the supply chain for the NCS.

Adventure training, which every NCS student does for at least one week, and sometimes two, usually at the beginning of the programme, develops team work and confidence. It involves pushing the boundaries and learning how to manage risk in a positive and constructive manner. It is very, very important and also increasingly rare. As far back as 12 years ago, the then Education Committee pointed out that this country, which produced Greene, whom I had the opportunity to meet just before this debate, I am concerned that there are some wider trends that lie outside the strict confines of this Bill. However, knowing how tolerant you are, Mr Speaker, I hope that you will allow me to touch on those trends as they are highly relevant to the supply chain for the NCS.

Five years ago, the English Outdoor Council produced a list of residential centres that deliver good quality adventure training. Of those 180 centres, 30 have since closed. Equally disturbing, a number of others have been taken over by providers, which are giving a good commercial offer in the sense that their insurance premiums are low because their risks are extremely low, but which, according to one expert in the field, typically deliver every meal indoors for the children. In other words, these so-called adventure opportunities involve nothing that lasts for more than two or three hours at a time.

The NCS is firmly aimed at the right end of the market. All the NCS students I have met have had extremely good experiences drawn from good parts of the sector, but we must be clear that that element is shrinking. The reasons for that are twofold: our litigious culture; and the worry about prosecution. Two surveys that have been done—one in 2003 by the Sport and Recreation Alliance and the other in 2006 by the Scouts—
revealed that the blame culture was the No. 1 concern among adult volunteers. We are also in the era of the corporate manslaughter charge, which is a very serious concern for the local authorities that run these providers.

I suggest that we have made some progress in rolling back the litigious culture. After an all-party effort behind a private Member’s Bill, which I was privileged to promote, the Labour Government introduced a small measure, called the Compensation Act 2006, with only one substantial clause that reminded the courts that if they make an award against an organisation, they need to take account of the damage to the wider interest in that activity. It had support on both sides of the House, but, interestingly, was opposed by a number of highly articulate lawyers on both sides of the House and in both Chambers.

The threat of prosecution remains serious. There has been a certain amount of banter in the media about stories alleging phony regulations and the Health and Safety Executive—I strongly welcome its new chairman, Martin Temple—has debunked lots of myths. The problem whenever I discuss this with people providing adventure training is never with regulation; no one has ever raised regulation with me as a problem in a serious adventure training context. The problem is the risk of prosecution if something goes wrong.

Perhaps the worst case of this was at a place called Bewerley Park. In 2005, a boy of 14 was drowned in a caving incident at Yorkshire’s top adventure training provider. The HSE decided to prosecute the local authority and the case took more than five years to come to court. Finally, in 2010, the local authority was acquitted, but that happened because a critical body called the Adventure Activities Licensing Authority, which considers standards in such organisations, had given the body a clean bill of health and testified in court that the standard of instruction and leadership was extremely high, that the freak and completely unpredicted weather conditions that had led to rapidly rising water could not have been anticipated and that in fact it was a remarkable achievement of the instructors that they got all but one of the children out alive. Had that prosecution gone the other way, we would have lost not only that centre but many others up and down the country would have decided that they were no longer willing to take the risks of continuing.

Sir Oliver Letwin: My hon. Friend and I have often discussed these issues. Does he agree that that example shows the importance of ensuring that the Adventure Activities Licensing Authority remains in a condition in which it can take such a stance?

Sir Julian Brazier: My right hon. Friend, who is an absolute expert on this matter and did so much in this area in his time as a Minister, not just with the National Citizen Service but in the adventure field more widely, anticipates my next sentence. That is why it is crucial that at a time when we are about to start a public consultation on the future of the AALA, which will be conducted by a panel appointed by the HSE, the licensing authority not only survives but has its brief expanded so that it can ask why such centres have been closing over the past few years and, crucially, ask not just whether the practice is safe in the centres but what the quality is of the adventure that is being delivered. It is very easy to make so-called adventure training safe if it is not adventurous, so the authority needs to be able to ask what the character-building quality of the activities is.

I am delighted to say that the HSE has taken the decision to include on the panel one outside member, Ian Lewis, the director of the Campaign for Adventure—one of the patrons of which is, I should mention, another former Prime Minister, Tony Blair. I very much hope that when we have a National Citizen Service whose patrons are headed by one former Prime Minister and the Campaign for Adventure is represented on the panel considering the future of the AALA, that panel will come up with a conclusion that will guarantee a future for the AALA that ensures it can continue to speak independently and expands its brief so that we discover why the centres are closing and get the focus back on the high-quality adventure that is so essential to the future of the National Citizen Service.

4.24 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): I very much welcome the Bill. It is a small Bill, and in many ways uncontroversial, its key strategic objective being to establish the effective governance of the National Citizen Service, but my sense is that seeing it in that way hides its true significance. What it really focuses on is how we live together, and there is no more important issue facing our country. How do we create a nation at ease with itself and foster a notion of service to others among our young people? Obviously that is vital, given the divisions in our society—so clearly exposed last year—around class, race, geography and religion, and a general fear that these tensions might continue to escalate. Those divisions suggest a brittle country, so resolving this and healing division will indeed take time, but the Bill will help. So although it is a small Bill, it is significant.

More generally, how do we ensure that our young people are knowledgeable about the country they inhabit in all its complexity, and how do we build an ethic of service among the younger generations? Really the clue is in the name: a programme of national service on behalf of our fellow citizens, the National Citizen Service. It is a simple notion, but an important one in shaping the character of our young people and the future character of our country more generally.

Across my east London constituency, which is one of the fastest changing communities in the UK, and one that has recently experienced issues with extremism and violence, I have seen at first hand the benefits of the programme: increasing the breadth of young people’s experiences; mixing with people from other backgrounds; and building links between generations, for example through new volunteer support for the elderly in the community. It is helping to integrate communities such as ours.

Across the country some 275,000 young people have already taken part in the programme, and a couple of the results are worth noting. An Ipsos MORI evaluation found that 82% of people leave the programme feeling more positive about people from different backgrounds and better prepared for the future. The programme is building a legacy of service and volunteering. I was struck by one statistic that the Minister mentioned earlier, which is that in the 16 months following participation in the programme, the cohort that went through in 2013
Jon Cruddas: I totally agree. If a stated objective of the Bill is to learn how to live together and all be virtuous citizens, it should not be beyond our collective wit to organise a few debates in Parliament every year so that we can test how successful we are, so I support my hon. Friend’s comments.

My four points begin with the question of links with public bodies. The original draft of the Bill included an obligation on public bodies, but that has gone. I can understand that public bodies might see this as a bit of an imposition, particularly as quite a bit is being thrown at local authorities at the moment, so there is no need to enshrine an obligation in the legislation. However, if we are to succeed, surely we must ensure that the programme is a core activity for our public institutions. I raised the matter with my local council and a number of schools, and found that it was not the concern that I thought it might be, not least when I found out that 95% of London schools are already involved in the programme, although I do wonder about the effect on the independent sector. We need to spell out the guidance for schools and local authorities on how to better engage with the NCS be published? More generally, I understand that nearly £20 million a year will be earmarked for advertising over the next four years to increase participation from 100,000 to some 300,000. That is a hugely ambitious task that raises the question of what role schools and colleges will have in the programme’s promotion.

Thirdly and briefly is the question of integration and inclusion. For a programme to have integration at its heart, it must include the hardest-to-reach young people. Doing so requires dedicated outreach teams and support workers on the programme. Should not some of the funding that delivery organisations receive be ring-fenced for this purpose to ensure that, in all areas of England and Northern Ireland, the NCS is genuinely a programme for all?

Finally, on the ambitions of the Bill, more than £1 billion over five years is a lot of money for a relatively young programme, especially given the austere times we live in. So is the Bill ambitious enough? For example, how does it link with wider questions of citizenship? Citizenship might well fall off the school curriculum, and that would appear at odds with the driving philosophy of the Bill and the programme. We regularly hear talk of a proposed year of service, advocated, for example, by the excellent City Year UK, although there is no mention of that in the Bill. In contrast, the NCS provides short programmes for 16 and 17-year-olds. It is a clearly defined programme but, if we were to be bolder, we might want to discuss certain issues. For example, City Year UK recruits young people to serve for a year in some of the most challenging communities, but the status of the volunteers is not clear. In other countries, such as the USA and France, full-time volunteering has a clearer legal status, and Governments are active in incentivising participation. Should we not consider a more systematic Government approach to the idea of a year of service including help with university fees and the like? As I understand it, full-time volunteers are currently characterised as NEETs—technically not in full-time education, employment or training. In other
countries, full-time volunteering has a proper legal status. Why should we not move in this direction? Where have the Government got to on the issue?

In conclusion, I admit that I am one of the few people left who does subscribe to the idea of the big society. The NCS is what the previous Prime Minister called “the Big Society in action”, of which I am very supportive. I think it a good thing that the recently departed Prime Minister has agreed to chair the NCS patrons.

The Bill, although small and technical, has a big ambition behind it to build virtuous citizens and help us to live together peacefully. It is a little Bill, but one that is hugely significant for the future character of the country we wish to build. Nothing could be more important. If the Bill helps the NCS to achieve and endure, it will have achieved plenty.

4.34 pm

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas), whose remarks I received warmly. Having believed that this was a Bill to which it was not possible to make any objection, I thought that the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) had to cast around fairly widely in order to disguise his enthusiasm for it. Four years ago, I had my first encounter with the NCS, and I decided then that it was a good thing. This Bill seems to be designed to make it more of a good thing, and that is why I welcome it so warmly.

I think back over years to when one of the siren calls that one heard from young people was, “There’s nothing to do here”, whether “here” was a town or a village, and so on. In reality, of course, there were things to do, but there was no obvious way of making a positive contribution to the community beyond, perhaps, the Scouts and the Girl Guides. Then from an older generation one would hear the call, “Youngsters these days need discipline: bring back national service” — something that our professional armed forces rather disdained as an idea. People would say, “Well, it did me good, and I’m sure it’s what everybody needs today.” That view began to fade, quite rightly, but talk there was of a civilian equivalent. Yet somehow it never got going. It is to the credit of the former Prime Minister, the then Member for Witney, that he took this up and made a real achievement of it. Many of us always felt that there was scope for it, perhaps because we were enthused by what the late President Kennedy did with the Peace Corps in the United States, and that is why I welcome the Bill so warmly.

Having had the pleasure and privilege of some involvement with voluntary organisations over the years, I believe that one thing we must be careful about is supposing that we can attach a precise value to the benefits of being involved with the NCS. How can we measure somebody’s contribution—the enthusiasm with which they go out to collect money for a cause that they have become familiar with, and the way in which that becomes an ongoing part of how they want to run their lives? How can we measure that? We cannot. We cannot measure how a person’s outlook on society has improved, how their lives? How can we measure that? We cannot. We cannot measure how a person’s outlook on society has improved, how their outlook on society has improved, and so on.

I have visited schemes throughout my constituency, and three of my children have attended the NCS or been a mentor on the NCS. The benefit is somewhat challenging, but every scheme is of some value. One of the fundamental benefits of the NCS is to level the playing field, both educationally and in ability. Does my right hon. Friend agree?
Sir Alan Haselhurst: My hon. Friend’s rather lengthy contribution has extended my speech. I absolutely applaud what she says, and I am grateful for her support for the remarks that I have just made.

The Local Government Association has expressed some concern about the idea that the money that will go into the NCS is money that the LGA will not get, or that the LGA might lose some money in the process. I do not think that any of us wants to decry what many local authorities, to their credit, do in providing youth services, and I have always been an advocate for such work. The NCS is a special organisation that in no way negates what local authorities do. We might actually find that more people want to take part in the various other youth services, thus extending the reach of those bodies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Sir Julian Brazier) raised the issue of safety, and of course that is important, but I hope that he did not overdo it. I thought about some of the schemes I have seen, where even the use of a fork in the earth to tidy up a community garden could cause an injury, or where someone on a street corner bravely advertising the fact that they are operating a car wash some little distance away could be knocked down in an accident. All sorts of horrors could befall people in the more ordinary things, not just in the high adventure activities. It is, of course, quite right that we should not assume that anything goes or allow people to be put at risk.

Sir Julian Brazier: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Alan Haselhurst: I was not really disagreeing with my hon. Friend, but I will give way to him.

Sir Julian Brazier: My right hon. Friend is, of course, absolutely right. My point is that we have to be very careful to make sure that an unhealthy obsession with trying to eliminate all risks does not end up squeezing the opportunities for real adventure out of children’s lives.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: I do agree with that. Of course, the adventure part of the NCS is distinct from the ordinary activities in which there could be a safety risk.

It seems to me that the real test to which we should apply our minds is whether the core programme is delivering—whether the numbers going through are continuing to rise. What I have found so encouraging is that those who have graduated, if that is the right word, are increasingly ready to take on a further role, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham, and come back as mentors, tutors and so on. I had the pleasure of meeting some of them earlier this afternoon, and it is great that they admit their eyes have been opened and their experience deepened and that they are so willing to pass that on. The best recruiters are those people going back to their schools to talk about it among their acquaintances and encourage further participation. If we keep on raising the numbers wanting to go into the NCS, we will do the quality of our social life in this country a great deal of good.

Schools should be encouraged. I heard what the Secretary of State said about the role of HMRC. Yes, that is good, but we need to get to the schools. If I may say so, the fact that only about 150 Members of this House have as yet found the opportunity to meet a group on an NCS project is way below what is needed. I encourage all colleagues to find an opportunity to do so, so that they are well informed from their own impression in their own constituency of what a good project and concept the NCS is.

It is absolutely right that we are conferring royal charter status on the NCS, which will give it a higher profile and make it more obviously a proper organisation in the eyes of anybody who might doubt it. Finally, we should build, with enthusiasm on our part, a movement that already seems to have established firm foundations.

4.46 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) and other hon. Members. I join them in welcoming the Bill and the provisions it puts in place, because I believe that the National Citizen Service should be a rite of passage for young people across our country. The Bill will embed the NCS as a national institution and make it an important part of our national fabric.

In Yorkshire, I have seen at first hand the great work that the challenge trust and the English Football League Trust do on behalf of the NCS. Last year, Barnsley football club’s community sport and education trust oversaw 326 people taking part in the scheme. The fact that this is well over double the number that took part in 2013 gives me confidence that, with the right support, the scheme will become more and more successful.

For many, the NCS is the first step on their youth social action journey, and their involvement in the programme embeds in them the value of service. I am very supportive of the role it plays, because the NCS is a part of the youth social action sector that is going from strength to strength. That fact is very clearly demonstrated by the good work of organisations such as City Year, V Inspired, the Prince’s Trust and the Scout Association. I could speak about the achievements of each of these organisations and many others at length, but I want to confine my remarks to the NCS and what makes it so special.

President Obama said in his farewell speech just the other day:

“For too many of us, it’s become safer to retreat into our own bubbles...surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook, and never challenge our assumptions.”

The NCS consistently pushes our young people out of such bubbles and brings young people together from different backgrounds, across socio-economic and ethnic lines, which must be both applauded and built on. This is a timely moment to be having this debate, because 2016 was a year when the divisions in our country became more apparent than ever. Accordingly, it is hugely important that national institutions such as the NCS exist, where people can come together and meaningfully engage with those from different backgrounds to bridge those divides.

I would like to draw the House’s attention, however, to research showing that the number of NCS graduates from hard-to-reach backgrounds has fallen since the introduction of the scheme. The hardest to reach are, by their very nature, hard to reach. Like my hon. Friend
the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), I would like the Government to consider what more can be done to make the NCS open to those who need and would benefit from it most. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister considered whether the language used in the royal charter laying out the primary functions and purpose of the NCS Trust is sufficiently focused on the integration aspect of the NCS. Social integration—the act of mixing and forging bonds with those from different backgrounds—is a process. Cohesive communities are the outcome.

For many young people, taking part in the NCS is the beginning of creating the diverse social networks they need to flourish. Therefore, we should focus on ensuring that the hardest-to-reach young people can take up the opportunity afforded to them by the NCS. Programme providers such as The Challenge are doing fantastic work to that end, employing dedicated personal coaches to support young people with complex needs prior to and after completing the NCS, to ensure as few barriers to entry as possible for these young people.

Jo Churchill: One of the mentors said to me that one of the young people who got the most out of her course was a young carer. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is perhaps a group that should be targeted? They often have a hard job accessing holidays or recreation or are unable to lift themselves out of their current environment in a way that is helpful and meaningful.

Dan Jarvis: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. If I might say so, I thought my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North was slightly unfairly chided for seeking to make the most constructive of contributions to this debate, because there is a consensus across the House that this is a great scheme and that young people benefit enormously from it. The challenge that Government and all of us find is that those who would perhaps benefit the most are, as I have said, the hardest to reach. Opposition Members are offering a constructive critique of the scheme—a scheme that we support and believe in—to ensure that it maximises the benefit for all those who we think would benefit from it.

Prior to the hon. Lady’s most helpful intervention, I was alluding to the incredibly important work done by The Challenge in dedicating personal coaches to support young people with complex needs and ensuring that they have the same opportunities as participants from more affluent backgrounds. For the programme to have integration at its heart, it must be a programme for all and providers must have adequate resource to focus their attention on this work. Although the NCS plays an important role in enabling social mobility, it should not be seen as a ready-made remedy to the problems caused by cuts to other youth services. It must be part of a sector-wide investment strategy.

My life both outside and inside politics has shown me the value of service and active citizenship. The National Citizen Service is a 21st-century manifestation of those values. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to the Opposition’s point—which, I think it is fair to say, was made most constructively—about the NCS’s role in facilitating integration and including the hardest-to-reach groups in our society, but most of all I look forward to the programme growing from strength to strength as a result of this Bill and the royal charter.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis). I speak both as a local Member of Parliament and as chairman of the all-party groups on heritage rail—the link will become clear in a moment—and on democratic participation.

This debate is being watched in the House and outside by those with an active involvement in the NCS, and they might think, “Why isn’t there a packed House to celebrate such an important scheme?” However, they should draw some comfort from the fact that that championing the NCS, it is not a contentious scheme, but one that has cross-party support. All right hon. and hon. Members want it to succeed. It is, in a way, a good sign that while there is not that much interest, there is not too much controversy about this Bill.

I welcome the fact that the Bill will place the NCS on a statutory footing and bring it close to being a national institution and a rite of passage for 15 to 17-year-olds. I want to join others in paying tribute to the former Prime Minister and Member for Witney, David Cameron, who was a great champion of the NCS, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), who is now a Minister in another Department but who did so much to get the NCS up and running in the last Parliament. I pay tribute to those working on the NCS at a national level and to those who, as we have heard, participate as volunteers and mentors in all the schemes. Without their great dedication, the schemes would not have been so successful. Finally, I pay tribute to the current Minister and Secretary of State for Education, and I set up the NCS; and the specific amendment tabled in the other place, which I also intend to put down, on volunteering for what is considered to be an industrial undertaking.

The NCS is often the first step for young people on their youth social action journey, and it places emphasis on creating more integrated and engaged citizens. The Prime Minister’s recent speech unveiling the shared values initiative and a rite of passage for 15 to 17-year-olds. I wish to deal with three issues today: the building of skills that our young people need for life in 21st-century Britain; the community cohesion and integration aspects of NCS; and the specific amendment tabled in the other place, which I also intend to put down, on volunteering for what is considered to be an industrial undertaking.

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The NCS is a vital extracurricular activity, but is also about civic engagement. Recent research shows that participants in the NCS are more likely to vote. Bite the Ballot, partners with the NCS via the Challenge Network from 2014, has provided the tools used to run sessions on political engagement. As a result, 95% of all
participants have gone on to register to vote. At a time when we often lament the fact that young people are not much engaged in the political process, that just shows one of the benefits of the NCS.

Through NCS programmes, young people are able to work with local businesses and social leaders to develop their resilience, grit—one of my favourite words—teamwork and leadership skills, and to discover more about their area through delivering local volunteering projects that matter to them. I recently met Education Business Partnership, the regional delivery partner of the NCS, in my own constituency, which has worked with more than 5,000 16 and 17-year-olds in the east midlands since 2011. It has been supported to carry out over 100,000 hours of social action.

In Loughborough, I have worked with a number of organisations that benefit from NCS social action, including Rainbows children’s hospice and the Falcon centre, which provides homeless people with accommodation. I suspect that all hon. Members in their places today, in common with my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst), will have met local NCS cohorts. I have met at least three of mine during their residential week in Leicester, at the end of their social action project to renovate the community room at Hind Leys College and the project at Fearon Hall in my constituency. The last one involved the great sacrifice of eating cupcakes on a Saturday morning. It was very difficult, and I was delighted that they had chosen to raise funds in that way.

There is an intensive nature to and seriousness behind the NCS programme. Hon. Members have already spoken about the levelling effects of the activities, and the setting of shared goals that contributes to the development of a common identity between the participants who often come from diverse backgrounds. People have been right to speak about the national importance of the NCS. The result of last year’s referendum has meant that discussions about national identity are ever more to the fore, and I believe that the mixing of people from different backgrounds is a vital part of what the NCS offers. I also welcome the fact that the Bill will encourage more young people to take advantage of the programme.

Schools are clearly an important way of reaching young people and informing them of the benefits of participating in the programme. When I was Secretary of State for Education, I had some conversations with the Minister. I was very much of the view that schools must move a way. One of the most important functions of the Bill is giving young people a stake in their local

5.3 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Ca-op): I join colleagues in taking a consensual and comradely approach to the Bill. I am extremely supportive of the National Citizen Service and the brilliant work that it does with young people in my constituency. Redcar’s youth unemployment rate is two and a half times the national average. Some 30 or 40 years ago, young people leaving school knew that they would have a guaranteed job at the steelworks, at ICI or on the docks, but those jobs and industries have gone, and young people now face a much more insecure and challenging environment for jobs and opportunities. My greatest fear is that those who are growing up in Redcar do not see that they have a future in the region, and believe that if they are to get on, they must move away. One of the most important functions of the NCS is giving young people a stake in their local

[Nicky Morgan]
communities and restoring civic pride. That is fundamental to communities such as mine when we are building for the future.

I have seen our NCS regenerate football clubs, paint meeting rooms for young carers and turn concrete road sides into gardens, and I have seen it raise a huge amount for fantastic local charities, organisations that deal with domestic violence, young carers, and a number of other worthwhile causes. The programme’s emphasis on the development of life and work skills, particularly self-esteem and confidence-building, and its encouragement of the next generation to take a stake in their communities are extremely valuable. I was privileged to attend some of the award ceremonies and to see young men and women stand up and address a room containing 200 or 300 people, which they openly admitted that they would never have done a few weeks before they started the programme. The programme gives them fantastic skills such as budgeting, project management and fundraising. Those skills are fundamental to young people’s success but, as we have heard, in an increasingly squeezed school curriculum, we do not have time to teach them. I therefore value the NCS highly and welcome the role that the Bill will play in raising it as a national institution that more young people can access.

I also share the view that many hon. Members have expressed that one of the greatest strengths of the NCS is the way in which it brings together young people from all walks of life, helping to bridge social divides and overcome prejudice. This ensures that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are able to access the same opportunities as those from wealthier and better-connected families. Social inclusion and social mobility are intrinsic to the principles of the NCS and I strongly believe that these principles must be maintained when it is placed on a statutory footing. It must not be the preserve of young people who are already confident enough to put up their hands or those whose parents have the sharpest elbows.

I know that the NCS is committed to making every effort to reach the most socially excluded young people. The National Audit Office report on the NCS that was published last week noted a higher percentage of participation rates from minority groups, such as those on free school meals, than in the wider population, which is a positive achievement, but we must make sure that this motive remains a key purpose after the transition of the NCS to a royal charter body—it cannot ever be relegated to something of lower importance. I therefore support the calls made by our Front-Bench spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), and by The Challenge for the wording of the royal charter specifically to reference social integration as one of the primary functions of the NCS programme. Furthermore, I support the case for funding to be specifically ring-fenced for targeting hard-to-reach groups. Those aims are fundamental to the NCS and it is important that they are formally written into the governance fabric of the new body.

I was also initially concerned that some of the Government’s proposals could place unnecessary burdens on schools and local authorities, which are already overstretched. It is a welcome change that no formal duties on either will be included in the Bill.

Ensuring that the programme grows sustainably will be a particular challenge, especially because the NAO has highlighted rising costs and lower than expected participation rates. One of the most important aspects of the Bill is to learn the lessons of the Kids Company debacle and to ensure that proper reporting and accounting structures are in place for this organisation, which receives a large amount of Government funding.

We should remember that although the NCS is important, it is not the only youth service in town. Other services play a vital role in diverting young people away from crime, supporting young carers and overcoming exclusion. They must not be deprived of the funding that they need to operate.

The Local Government Association survey to which the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) referred found that 90% of English councils had cut services for teenagers. That is a result of huge reductions in central Government funding. Research by UNISON estimates that between April 2010 and April 2016, £387 million was cut from youth service spending across the UK. Youth services of varying kinds play a vital role in our communities, providing real and ongoing benefits for the young people who need them. Crucially, in many cases, they result in savings for the taxpayer because they reduce demand for other public services further down the line. The importance of wider youth services must not be overlooked by the Government.

I am proud to say that I support the principles of the Bill. I am pleased that there is such wide cross-party support of the value of the NCS programme. With a bit of clearer language in the royal charter, its value would be greatly enhanced. Young people on Teesside have great energy, great ideas and an enormous amount to contribute to their local community and their country. I hope that the Bill will help more of them to fulfil their potential.

5.8 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley). I particularly want to highlight her comment that the National Citizen Service should not be the preserve of just those who are confident. Many young people who might lack confidence need encouragement to come forward.

Over the past couple of years, I have been delighted to attend a number of NCS events in Crawley. I have had the opportunity to present certificates to local graduates of the programme on a number of occasions. We often hear people say that our young people simply do not care about their local area and have no interest in getting involved in the community. Given our experiences, I am sure that everyone in the House would contest that assertion.

The National Citizen Service leads to increased community engagement, awareness and social action. I have seen this for myself from NCS participants in my constituency, where the initiative is delivered by the Crawley Town Community Foundation. Cohort after cohort have shown they are extremely committed to helping those less fortunate than themselves, and through the NCS programme, they continue to come up with ways to raise awareness and funds for important local causes. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations has previously called for more collaboration between the voluntary sector and the NCS, and such closer working together could lead to an even greater difference.
I am sure that other operators would be able to learn from what I have seen in Crawley. Last year, through their social action projects, NCS participants worked alongside a host of local good causes, including Crawley Open House, the Springboard Project, St Catherine’s Hospice, the Olive Tree Cancer Support Centre and Save the Children. I would like to use this opportunity not only to commend Crawley’s NCS graduates, but to thank them sincerely for raising more than £7,400 across the three NCS programmes last year, and for volunteering a total of over 7,500 hours of their time to help those local organisations. This consists of more than just fundraising; they have put together packs for the homeless and organised renovation work to help a charity as well.

A little over six months ago, our new Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), took office. Before entering No. 10 for the first time, she stood on the steps of Downing Street and talked about the importance of ensuring greater opportunity for all. The National Citizen Service helps with that opportunity. A key hallmark of the NCS is ensuring that young people are taught skills that they cannot learn in class. More than nine out of 10 participants believe that the NCS provides the opportunity to develop skills that will be useful in the future, and analysis has shown that in the year after participation, the majority of NCS graduates state that they have used those skills already. The programme increases wellbeing and lowers levels of anxiety, with the greatest impact being found among those from the poorest backgrounds.

Financial support is available for the one-off £50 fee. In fact, the National Audit Office states that the average contribution in 2016 was £30 as a result of concessions and bursaries. In contrast, estimates show that in 2016 the cost per participant will exceed £1,800—I am sure Members agree that that is an investment worth making. In 2015, 17% of NCS participants were eligible for free school meals, compared with around 10% of young people among the general population. Analysis of the summer 2014 programme has shown that the NCS is estimated to have delivered social benefits valued at between £70 million and £250 million, giving a benefit-to-cost ratio of between £1.12 and £3.98 for every £1 spent.

Research also shows that fewer than half of 18 to 24-year-olds voted at the last general election. While the NCS figures showing that participants are more likely to vote while taking part in the NCS. I am grateful to the Government for their continued enthusiasm for supporting the initiative and, like other right hon. and hon. Members, pay tribute to the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, for establishing the National Citizen Service and his ongoing involvement after leaving public office.

The running of the NCS is not simply a case of a host of local operators doing their own thing, independent of one another and of established charity groups. My own constituency’s local provider, the Crawley Town Community Foundation, works not only to help charities in West Sussex, but alongside the Football League Trust, which supports a host of league clubs in delivering the programme. Crawley Town football club has backed the NCS over the years, including by having the programme’s participants hold bucket collections for local good causes on match days and hosting the graduation ceremonies in the stadium suite overlooking the pitch. That commitment will go further with additional events and announcements in the near future. There is also regular exposure on the club’s website and in the matchday programme. The impact of the association with the local football club cannot be underestimated.

The Bill will place a duty on schools, colleges, and local and national Government to inform young people and their parents, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, of the skills and benefits that can be gained from the National Citizen Service. One of the most powerful ways in which the NCS can be promoted is directly by the very people who have taken part. Just under half of last year’s Crawley graduates are still involved in the scheme, which is the highest figure across Kent and Sussex. Will the Minister tell the House what assistance the Department may be able to give to NCS providers to ensure that that rate increases across the country? Will the Department go further to assist the NCS Trust in ensuring best practice?

This month, Crawley celebrates the 70th anniversary of its designation as a new town. It has been a time of reflection on not only the challenges facing us today, but what makes us such a strong community. The National Citizen Service helps and encourages social cohesion, social mobility and social engagement. The young adults who take part in such programmes—let us not forget the staff who help to deliver such schemes and therefore the opportunities—are people of whom we can all be proud. Long may their fine work continue.

5.16 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith). It has been heartening to hear widespread praise for the National Citizen Service and I want to join in that praise—it is an excellent scheme. The Secretary of State mentioned that it operates in England and in Northern Ireland, but I want to put on the record my praise for the excellent volunteering element of the Welsh baccalaureate. One good thing about such programmes is that we are able to share expertise and good ideas, wherever they come from, both within these islands and internationally. That is a great strength and has always been the case with the best volunteering programmes.

The Minister will be familiar with them, but I want to discuss some points made about the Bill by some voluntary sector organisations. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations spoke with some eloquence about the NCS being part of “a longer journey of social action and volunteering”, of diversity of participants being more important than numbers, and about how crucial it is that young people are involved in the design of the programme. The Charities Aid Foundation makes a plea in the form of asking for a new article to be inserted into the royal charter to ensure that the scheme is a way of encouraging younger people into other social programmes, such as charity trusteeship. Its point is that while 18 to 24-year-olds make up 12% of this country’s population, they make up less than 1% of charity trustees. It is important to develop the scheme and get its participants involved in
being trustees and in other leadership roles. Of course, many of us here who are in middle age will recognise that our days do not stay aged 15 to 17 forever. [Interruption.] One of my colleagues points out that not everyone here is in middle age.

How do we develop volunteering, and how do we develop a type of volunteering that brings people together? What is the next step for volunteering after this Bill? My hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) spoke powerfully about how volunteering does not have any legal status in this country. Indeed, volunteers aged 18 and over, or anyone else, could be designated as not in employment, education or training. For those aged 18-plus who go on volunteering programmes, there is no agreement that that should mean national insurance contributions and the like. We need to develop those ideas as we take forward the National Citizen Service.

Many Members on both sides of the House have spoken passionately today about integration, diversity and bringing people together. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) cited a moving quote by President Obama. This is not all about being in one’s own little bubble and talking to people who agree with ourselves; it is about coming together with different people. I remember a television programme from a few years ago—I think it was a “BBC Parliament when we are not here” type of programme—and sitting on a stage were former Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, who were discussing with young people some sort of leadership programme that they had established in the United States. I always remember former President Clinton talking about the idea of bringing together young African-Americans who are active in their community and getting them on the same programmes as young people involved in the Tea Party movement who believe that the world would be a better place if everything operated in their small town. He spoke about bringing together those energies and about how the synergy between them creates something better for society. I am not sure how many of those ideas are at play in the US at the moment, but what a fantastic idea it is to bring together different groups of young people so that they can share their different ideas. Who knows what might come out of that?

When we look at different sorts of schemes, we do not know where they will lead. For instance, I hope that one area we look at is volunteering for former young offenders and for people who have been in prison. That step, which is sometimes very great, can take people out of a life of recidivism in which they offend, go into jail, reoffend, go back into jail, and on and on. Is there a specific role for volunteering that can bridge that gap between prison and employment? We need to be thinking of that as a next step.

I warmly commend the Bill and the ideas behind it, and I hope the resourcing, the collaboration and the involvement with voluntary groups will be in place. There are so many ideas for us to think about in relation to volunteering and how it creates the sort of society that not everyone might want to see at the moment but that we are certainly going to need.

5.23 pm

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I am proud to be here to support the NCS Bill. The NCS is one of the best things done by the last Government, led by Prime Minister David Cameron, and I am delighted that it is being put on a statutory footing, safeguarding its future as a national institution. The NCS will give hundreds of thousands of young people the momentum they need for a lifetime commitment to volunteering.

I chaired the debating society at school, and indeed at university, and one motion that we used to debate was whether national service should be reinstated. It was difficult to argue for the motion, both because of the cost and because we did not need a large force prepared for military action, but there is a lot of evidence for the other benefits of national service, which I can see in the National Citizen Service. When I was researching the motion on national service I needed to go no further than my late father, who did national service in the 1950s with the Royal Marines and the Durham Light Infantry. He would always tell me what a great social leveller national service was, because in basic training someone could be in a dorm with people from Eton, stockbrokers and electricians—people from all walks of life and every conceivable background. Any pre-existing airs and graces someone had would quickly be squashed by a diet of exercise, hard work and learning new skills, and having to live, eat, sleep and work—do everything together—as a team. People who had been through national service were better able to adapt to the challenges life threw at them, and to work together and interact better with people from all different walks of life.

Let us wind forward 50 years to the NCS. Although it has none of the military training of national service, it does have those positive features we saw with that: the levelling effects, with individuals from all different walks of life coming together, where people are pushed out of their comfort zone and engaged in challenging activities on an equal footing; and the social atmosphere of people living, eating and cooking together with others from every walk of life. In addition, the NCS has provided 8 million hours of voluntary work in communities in the UK. Graduates of the NCS are likely to contribute six hours more per month of voluntary work than people who have not been through the scheme. Eight out of 10 graduates of the NCS also said that they are more likely to get on with people from different backgrounds whom they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to meet.

In Kingston upon Thames, in my constituency, I have been to see the NCS in action in both the years I have been an MP. In 2015, I went to see volunteers doing their voluntary week, when they were helping with the Weir Archer Academy’s disability sports taster day. Last year, I was one of the dragons at the NCS “Dragons’ Den”, where groups bid for extra funding for their social action campaigning projects. On both those occasions, I took time to speak to the young people involved, and two things came up time and again: that the NCS programme had brought them out of their shell, giving them a confidence they had lacked before; and that they had the opportunity to mix with people from the same borough whom they had never met before. These were people who had been to different schools, different types of schools, and were from different backgrounds. In the same way as President John F. Kennedy’s Peace Corps and President Lyndon B. Johnson’s AmeriCorps did, the NCS brings together young people to do good things in their communities and in the world, and to come back with a mindset to help their local communities.
The National Citizen Service also does a huge amount of social integration, which is why organisations such as The Challenge, which supports many of the NCS projects in urban areas such as London, are calling for social integration to be added to community cohesion as one of the stated aims of the NCS in the draft royal charter. The Prime Minister has spoken of the importance of social integration. In my view, the best way to get social integration right is to start when people are young and to give them opportunities to integrate that do not exist readily in every community. In her report on social integration, Dame Louise Casey noted the role of the NCS in “improving understanding and relationships between young people from different backgrounds.”

Some 30% of NCS participants are from ethnic minorities, with the figure in Kingston being 65%, and 17% are on free school meals. The low admission fee, which can be waived if parental circumstances require it, is undoubtedly very important in achieving that, which is why the huge financial investment in the NCS for the lifetime of this Parliament is crucial. The NCS can and should become one of the key tools of social integration, so I am delighted it is being expanded and put on a statutory footing today.

Before I conclude, I want to make it clear to other organisations that encourage volunteer service and teach young people life skills that the focus on the NCS in no way denigrates the fantastic work that they do. I include among those organisations Girlguiding; the Scouts; the International Citizen Service in my constituency, which is run by Voluntary Service Overseas; and many other charities, such as Restless Development, formerly Students Partnership Worldwide, with which I spent several months as part of a charity project in Tamil Nadu in south India. All are part of the rich tapestry of volunteering and voluntary services for the youth of today, but, with funding behind it and the statutory footing it is going to receive today, the NCS will lead the way.

The NCS should make sure that, when it puts young people into voluntary placements, it works with local small charities. That is important first, because such charities often have much less by way of human and financial resources than the large national charities, so they could really do with additional man-hours from young, enthusiastic NCS volunteers; and secondly, because if the NCS participant is going to develop a long-term relationship with a charity or voluntary organisation, it is much better that it is a local one in the community where they are based, so that they can continue to serve.

The NCS is the fastest growing youth movement of its kind for a century. I hope that it becomes a rite of passage and a national institution, like the Peace Corps and the AmeriCorps are in the US. I hope that it gives passage and a national institution, like the Peace Corps is run by Voluntary Service Overseas; and many other organisations. I also agree with what he said about the contribution made by the Scouts and Girlguiding, and by the other organisations. I also agree with his really good point about how the Peace Corps and the AmeriCorps in America contribute to many of the aims we seek to pursue here in Parliament today. I say to the Minister that all Opposition Members, along with our Front-Bench team, very much welcome the Bill, which we think is an important step forward in achieving the goals we all share.

At a time when Brexit quite rightly dominates the national debate and many of our debates in Parliament, we should say to the media and the public at large that alongside some of the questions and important debates take place. The Government make important statements and introduce important Bills, and we respond. Today is one such occasion. The NCS is a hugely important initiative, and the Government are seeking, through the Bill, to develop and build on the progress that has already been made. Other Members have recounted their experiences of going to see the work done in their areas, and I have seen for myself in Nottingham that there is no shortage of brilliance in some of the work that takes place. I have seen the influence of the programme on young people from different backgrounds.

There is a word that I do not think has been used yet, but that is of particular importance. When I went to the graduation ceremony in Nottingham, I saw the self-esteem that it brought to people. If there is one thing that holds back many of our young people—alongside opportunity, background and so on—it is a lack of self-confidence, of self-esteem, and of belief that they have something positive to offer. In many circumstances, the NCS has generated that self-esteem, and the belief that they have worth and something to offer. If that will help them through their lives, it is an enormous step forward.

The other reason why this debate is important is that there are clearly different views—in this House, in the country and, indeed, around the world—on Brexit and its implications and consequences, but there is no division between us about the need to continue to promote people coming together and the universal values of tolerance, self-respect, and respecting others, whatever their ethnic background or religion. The NCS has at its heart the promotion of those universal values. At a time when there is some concern about tolerance and about divisions in our community, surely it is right for us as a Parliament to say, “Look at this as a model for the way that we want our country and our communities to go.”

The scheme is hugely important.

I offer this challenge not just to the Government, but to all of us and to this Parliament. According to the National Audit Office report, 96,000 people are participating in the scheme at the present time. It is the Government’s intention, and an intention that we all support, for that to rise to some 360,000 by 2020-21. That requires, as the NAO points out, 40% annual growth. As this Bill goes through Committee, it will be a challenge to look at how we will achieve that and how we will increase those participation rates. We also need to look at the barriers to participation. The NAO report points out a couple of things: the importance of brand awareness and the need to try to ensure that more people are aware of the opportunities available through the NCS, and, importantly and significantly, access to schools and how we promote that. I am sure that much good work is done in schools, but, alongside that, we need to do more. All of us need to understand that we need to promote more effectively the NCS, what it is and what opportunities it offers.
Jo Churchill: That 40% is a large growth, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that part of that broadening of numbers will mean that there will need to be a large number of additional volunteering projects from which those children can benefit? That is something that those of us in this Chamber can help with, but I would be interested to know how the Government will fulfil that need so that we get more children helping in those residential homes, playgroups and all the other groups right across the spectrum.

Vernon Coaker: That is a very good and well-made point, and the Minister will have heard it.

The challenge for us is to see how we can increase the number of volunteering opportunities, and how we as a Parliament can challenge ourselves to deliver the objectives. It is not a criticism to turn around and say that we have not got the numbers that we would all like; it is a challenge. It is not for us to say that the Government are wicked and the Opposition are terrible. It is for us as a Parliament to say that this is a collective view about what is good for our country and for our young people, and therefore what do we have to do to achieve our objectives? That is the big challenge for us. Imaginative and different things need to be considered.

There are 1.5 million 16 and 17-year-olds in our country—my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) looked that up for me—every one of whom would benefit from an NCS-type programme. We are talking about how we increase participation to 360,000—again, I say to the Minister that I am not criticising him—and how that is a massive challenge and yet we all agree that it is something that we would like our young people to experience. How do we deliver that? That is the challenge and the question that we need to ask ourselves.

Finally, this business of integration and of how we bring people together is so important. Members have talked about the need to reach the hard-to-reach groups and about the worrying statistics in the NAO report. Clearly, participation is an issue, whether it is about the hard to reach or other young groups. Integration is hugely important, whether that is between ethnic groups, social groups, hard-to-reach groups and people who are well off, and so on. I say to the Minister that we should also consider integration between the regional divides that there appear to be in our country, and the divide between urban and rural areas. The divide is not just between white and black and all those other areas in which we would wish to see it overcome—what about the generational divide?

Tim Loughton: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point that I will discuss further if I catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker. He talks about bringing people together from different parts of society and also from different parts of the country, and one of the original ambitions, which is yet to be achieved, was about the fact that although people in my constituency in Sussex come from different parts of society, they do not mix with his constituents in Nottinghamshire, and vice versa. We need to extend the scheme so that we can bring people from different parts of the country and different parts of the kingdom together to share that experience.

Vernon Coaker: I agree absolutely, and that is the point I am making.

One of the most interesting things—I am sure that we have all done it—is getting young people talking to old people because, with their different perspective, they bring history alive. As a former history teacher, I know that when older people talked to young people about history it brought it alive to them. Those ways of bringing people together and overcoming division, whether it is between social classes, regions or generations, are one of the great strengths of the NCS. We need to be more open in saying that we have a huge ambition for ourselves and our country. We should not be afraid of having that ambition. The challenge is in how we deliver it, and is not something we should shy from.

5.41 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker).

I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. We should recognise all the work that has gone into the NCS programme from those who work on and have developed the scheme. I add my thanks for all the work that David Cameron has done and continues to do with the NCS. Before I came to this place, I was involved in a number of social action projects, as my hon. Friends will probably be aware, both in the UK and overseas. One thing that I took away from that was that although we had some young people and some older people, a social action project can bring together people from all walks of life. They find themselves in a challenging situation, experiencing things that they have never experienced before; there is a lot that we can all learn from social action projects.

In the summer of 2015, just over a year ago, I was invited to join young people who were taking part in an NCS project in my Aldridge-Brownhills constituency at a place called the Hothouse, on the Redhouse estate in Aldridge. I think it is fair to say that I turned up with all my usual enthusiasm for all things social action and, much to the surprise of some of my constituents and to some of the young people too, was prepared to get stuck in with more than a little bit of painting. What I took away was that these young people, who were from different schools and had been brought together by the NCS programme, were working together as a group. Members of the community came into the Hothouse during the time that they were undertaking the project. The Hothouse is a very special place in the constituency. It is at the heart of the Redhouse estate and the heart of the community, and does a lot of support work. It was a good example of the NCS at the heart of the local community, with people of different ages and from different backgrounds working together, and—this is the important thing—doing so for the mutual benefit of the community. It is a great example of how social interaction and integration really can work. That is what is so special and unique about the NCS. We must hold on to that ability to reach out to a broad base of young people as we move forward.

We know that the NCS already reaches out, but we must do all we can to build on that further. The programme is reaching out to hard-to-reach groups, such as those on free school meals and black and minority ethnic communities—the figures are really good—but I just wonder whether we need to find ways to reach out to other groups, such as the families sometimes described...
as “just about managing” or the young people who might not see the NCS as something for them, perhaps because they lack the confidence to put their name forward. We must do all we can to ensure that those people have that opportunity if the NCS is to be a truly national service—I think that is what it is edging towards, and what it has every potential to become.

The Bill is an important step towards making the NCS a national institution. As we have heard this afternoon, the NCS is often the first step in young people’s participation in social action. As I have seen for myself, it can make a huge contribution to volunteering capacity, social integration and social cohesion within communities. According to the research I have done, a typical programme is 30 hours long. Thirty times 30,000 young people adds up to an awful lot of time spent in the community working on social action and building social capacity—my maths is not good enough to work out quite how many hours that is, but it is safe to say that it is makes a massive contribution to our country.

In 2016, 78 young people from Aldridge-Brownhills took part, and across Birmingham and the Black country the total was 5,786. That is terrific, but I want us to see more. I want us to ensure that it will reach out to young people from all walks of life and achieve more. When I was doing my research, I was interested to find out how many schools in my constituency were involved in the project. I was really pleased to learn that all of them had been involved. That is a good example of how the NCS is starting to reach out across all schools and groups of young people in my patch.

We have heard this afternoon about the Casey review into opportunity and integration in the UK. I want to reiterate one of the points it made. It stated that the NCS programme is “having a positive impact in improving understanding and relationships between young people from different backgrounds.” That is really important.

However, it is not just about the social action and the doing in the community; it is about so many other things, such as intergenerational integration, social integration and community cohesion. The hon. Member for Gedling spoke at length about the impact of Brexit and the need to bring our country together, and the Prime Minister has spoken about the need to bring communities and the country together. I think that the NCS has an important role to play in that.

As has been said this afternoon, and as I have seen myself, it is also about developing those life skills that are not always taught in school or even at home. They can be taught and developed through the NCS programme. I believe in an environment where people feel safe to develop those skills and learn from one another.

The NCS programme is an excellent opportunity for young people to experience social action in a way that, bit by bit, across communities and across the country, is really making a difference and contributing to social cohesion and integration. As I said earlier, I hope the Bill can build on that. The programme is not just about the young people of today or the young people of tomorrow. It is about the future that we all want: a country that works together and is cohesive. We must not forget that at the heart of the NCS is, and should be, the fact that young people come together from all walks of life. It does not matter whether they are black or white, working class or middle class; whatever background they come from, they all have the opportunity to take part in the NCS programme.

5.50 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am proud not only to be part of the debate and to see this Bill come of age—and the NCS comes of age with the Bill, just as the NCS is a coming-of-age project—but of the small part I played in its genesis. I was there back in 2005 when it was a germ of an idea from the then Prime Minister. He spoke to a number of youth leaders and tasked Paul Oginsky, who later became David Cameron’s youth adviser and who runs the youth training organisation, Personal Development Point, with developing a programme. I was asked to be part of that and we published, in, I think, 2008; “It’s time to inspire Britain’s teenagers”, which was effectively a White Paper that raised and consulted on the whole subject of what became the NCS.

The scheme was designed on the principles laid out in that unofficial White Paper with the help of people such as Steve Hilton, whom some may remember and who had an even more ambitious idea for the scheme, which was that it should take at least six weeks throughout the summer, be called national service, be much closer to the original scheme of which it has some echoes, and be compulsory. After a great deal of research—I remember spending many weekends with groups of fantastically gobby young people from Leeds, Liverpool and London who had some amazing ideas about how such a scheme should develop—we put together what then became the NCS.

The NCS was intended to be a rites of passage scheme. In this country, we transition into adulthood really badly. In other cultures and other countries, there is a point in a teenager’s life at which they can be said to transition into adulthood and gain the society’s respect as an adult. Here, we do not really do that. Too often, growing up is characterised by negatives. Did a young person become an adult when they had their first fag behind the bike shed, when they became a teenage pregnancy statistic or some other negative? Too often, that is how we judge and gauge the progress of young people. The NCS scheme is all about positives. If young people go through a scheme that is designed to be rigorous and challenging, and make those sacrifices as part of it, they deserve the right to be respected and valued as an adult with a voice in society. That was one of the guiding principles behind the scheme.

The scheme was absolutely about social mixing. For many years, we have had many other good schemes, but none is as successful at social mixing as the NCS has become. Too often, kids from the same school or the same neighbourhood may go out on an outward bound project or be part of some local youth organisation. But not often enough are they mixed up with people they would never come across ordinarily or pass the time of day with in the street—people from the other side of town, the other side of the tracks or the other side of the country. Social mixing was at the heart of all this. It was also about challenging young people and taking them out of their comfort zone. I have been on many NCS challenges over many years and it is not a holiday
What a fantastic billboard and advert that is for the Citizen Service, set up by and run by young people. It was a big sign saying, “This project is part of the National good examples from the Secretary of State. There will sexual health—a huge variety of constructive stuff that its young people do, while too often being denigrated by the rest of society, particularly the media. Proportionately, young people are much more likely than any other generation to give up their time volunteering, yet they are not given the credit for it. The NCS is one way of making that much more high profile.

When the first pilot started in 2009, 160 young people went through it. I feared at the time that it would perhaps be used as a cheap summer holiday camp by some of the middle classes. How wrong I was. On that first pilot, 60% of the young people were black girls from inner cities, who did fantastically well. We had to encourage the middle classes and others, saying “Look, you can get involved in this too”, and eventually that happened.

Then in 2010 we came into government, and the responsibility for the scheme was shared between the Cabinet Office and the Department for Education. On a very small budget to start with, and certainly with no budget for promoting and publicising it, the scheme really took off. At a difficult time of austerity, a lot of money was put into it. At a time when youth services were being unduly and unfairly hit through local authority cuts in funding, the scheme got off the ground. Six years on, more than 300,000 teenagers have taken part in it, some 93,000 of them in the past calendar year.

The hon. Member for Gedling is right: the cohort is about 720,000, and the scheme should absolutely be available to all of them. To be realistic, we need to make sure that we do not diminish or dilute the quality of what is offered. The only thing holding the programme back is the availability of good-quality, well-trained leaders. I do not want to try to reach an artificial target, when to do so might dilute the value and the quality of the programme. There is a big question mark over the capability of the the NCS to continue to train up leaders within the organisation—and, as we have heard, to ensure that NCS graduates come back as youth leaders—rather than poaching them from other youth groups, which would not be helpful.

To return to the figures for the social and ethnic mix, 30% of the young people doing the scheme at the moment are from BME communities, and 17%—more than double the percentage in the population—qualify for free school meals. Many of us have been to the graduation ceremonies, where young people get up on stage to be given their certificate and, in many cases, to strut their stuff. I went to a ceremony at Wembley stadium for 1,000 young people who had graduated from the various football schemes. Every one of them got up in front of the 1,000 people in the audience and did their bit. It was a hugely uplifting and emotional sight.

Numerous parents come up to me after such ceremonies and say, “This is the best scheme that my son or daughter has ever been on. Why do you keep it such a secret?” That is part of the problem. The scheme is hugely undersold given the outcomes, the achievements and the good that it does. As was envisaged, I want some really good examples of the social action projects that have come about through the NCS to feature in television programmes and in national newspapers and magazines. I want a competition every year, as there was, between the best social action projects in certain categories. We need an equivalent of the Oscars for the
National Citizen Service to show people what is being achieved by the most inspiring and dedicated young people, and by all those behind them.

I am a big supporter of the NCS and of the Bill, but I have a couple of technical comments about the Bill. Clause 1(2) states that:

“For the purposes of this section...’young people’ means 16 and 17 year olds, but may also include other persons who are 15 years old or have attained the age of 18 but are under the age of 25”.

I do not know many 16 or 17-year-olds, or 15 or 18-year-olds, who are not under the age of 25, so I am not quite sure what that clause is doing there. The other point I want to make about subsection (2) is that it talks only about England. We know that the scheme at the moment is confined to England. We have tried to extend it to other parts of the kingdom, but of course it is a devolved matter. Northern Ireland, in particular, showed a lot of interest in the scheme. I hope that the National Citizen Service can become a United Kingdom-wide programme with the buy-in of the Assemblies and Parliaments in the other parts of the United Kingdom, and I hope that we will not need new legislation to make that possible. The Bill, in its terminology, limits the scheme to England.

The clauses about preparing accounts, business plans and annual reports are all standard. To be constructively critical, however—I raised this point with the Secretary of State earlier—this is not just about numbers, the quality of this specific programme or the amount of money we are spending on it; it needs to be seen in the context of the wider youth offer. As was raised in the other place, there needs to be a mechanism that allows us to judge the quality of what the NCS is achieving against other youth programmes, and to compare the value for money we are getting from it against investments in other youth organisations.

The NCS cannot be seen as a stand-alone intervention for young people: it is not there just for its own sake. It starts only at the age of 16 or thereabouts, but the problems it tries to address start earlier and need early intervention. Some 42% of young people, being more fully committed to social action, began getting involved before the age of 10. The Scouts point out that the NCS three-week programme costs about £1,500 per person—the National Audit Office has come up with a new report that three-week programme costs about £1,500 per person—the National Audit Office has come up with a new report that raises the cost to £1,862—and claim that they can establish a place for a young person in an area of deprivation for between £400 and £550, but there are 45,000 people on their waiting lists to join because they do not have sufficient people to be scout leaders. That is fine: there are places for both organisations, particularly if the NCS is providing leaders, as was intended, not just for the NCS but to help all the other youth and community organisations. If it works properly, the NCS is a recruiting sergeant for a whole host of other youth organisations, whose expansion may often be curtailed by the lack of youth leaders and properly trained youth experts.

My plea is that we need more detail to make the NCS and not quite sure what that clause is doing there. The other point I want to make about subsection (2) is that it talks only about England. We know that the scheme at the moment is confined to England. We have tried to extend it to other parts of the kingdom, but of course it is a devolved matter. Northern Ireland, in particular, showed a lot of interest in the scheme. I hope that the National Citizen Service can become a United Kingdom-wide programme with the buy-in of the Assemblies and Parliaments in the other parts of the United Kingdom, and I hope that we will not need new legislation to make that possible. The Bill, in its terminology, limits the scheme to England.

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My plea is that we need more detail to make the NCS more sustainable and more complementary to, rather than conflictual with, other youth organisations that are doing some really good stuff in other parts of the kingdom. We need to make sure that we can justify its expense and its quality in the greater context of what else is going on. There is a lot of ambition in the NCS, much of which has already come about, but we need to do much more to make it more widely available to a great many more young people who can benefit from it, just as 300,000 have so far, as the evidence shows. We need guarantees about value for money and quality across the whole sector and about the sustainability of ongoing volunteering among NCS graduates. Such volunteering is not just for the duration of the scheme itself, and social action projects are not just for a matter of weeks, but for perpetuity, with other local organisations—with the local authority, local businesses and local volunteers—helping to run those projects for the NCS cohorts in between other summer experiences.

I wish the Bill well. Questions will come up in Committee that will add yet further to the quality of the programme and, more importantly, to the enthusiasm of other people involved in helping young people in our society. Lots of good things came out of the Brexit debate, which has been mentioned even on this subject, but which I have avoided so far, but if we can all agree on one good thing that did so it was that the turnout of young people in the Brexit referendum—it was not called that, but that is what it became—was some 63%, against a turnout of young people in a normal general election of some 43%. The NCS can be part of the solution to persuading and encouraging young people to be part of decision making in our society. It is a great example of involving young people in its design, and it should be a great example of young people continuing to be involved in the fabric of the future of our country as a whole.

6.8 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Like everyone else who has spoken, I welcome the Bill, which will secure the future of the NCS through a royal charter. I join hon. Members in congratulating former Prime Minister David Cameron on his role as the driving force behind the scheme.

My constituency has had considerable success with the NCS. When the scheme started, just 45 people joined the initial cohort, but the number of participants has now increased to more than 1,200. One of the reasons why is the dedicated and dynamic leadership of Lee Stephens, who is sitting in the Public Gallery. I pay tribute to him for showing his dedication by not only leading the scheme, but sitting through the whole of this debate, as well as the preceding Question Time.

The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) mentioned the divides in our country and how the scheme brings people together. He spoke of rural, urban and regional divides. Representing a coastal community with the problems of poor educational standards and the like, I recognise the important role that the NCS has played. Those who participate gain new skills, enhance their CVs and are helped with the transition from school to further education. The value of the scheme has been recognised, certainly in the North East Lincolnshire part of my constituency, by the fact that every secondary school and academy has signed up to the programme, along with the two colleges, which are both working to integrate the NCS into their curriculums.

Only last Friday I visited my old school, Havelock school in Grimsby, where the headteacher explained to me the difficulties she has with a catchment area that is, shall we say, in one of the poor towns. It includes the East Marsh ward of Grimsby, which is ranked among...
the 20th poorest wards in the country by various socioeconomic indicators. There is no doubt that the NCS has played a major part in involving young people from all parts of the community in the Cleethorpes constituency and the surrounding areas.

Over the past three or four years, I have visited many projects in the constituency. They include, to mention just three, the St Andrew’s hospice in Grimsby, the Harbour Place centre for the homeless and the Alzheimer’s Society, which a number of young people did some work for. Indeed, I recall a year or two ago visiting a care home at which young people were working where some residents were suffering from dementia. It is important that young people realise that that is a growing problem in our ageing society. Many of those young people went on to work with those sufferers when the scheme finished, which is a great tribute to them and those who organised it. There have also been schemes such as tidying up local cemeteries, and I also remember visiting a very enthusiastic group last summer that was involved in repainting New Waltham village hall in very vivid colours. The list could go on.

To turn to more technical aspects of the Bill, I particularly welcome clauses 5 and 6. They relate to the business plan and the annual report, both of which will focus attention each year on the targets, helping to ensure that the scheme does not run out of steam but continues to prosper.

Young people can get a bad press but, as we all know, the vast majority are a credit to their families and their local communities. Society today faces many challenges, as it always has. If we can develop the natural skills and enthusiasm of our young people, they will make a major contribution, through the NCS, to society. The scheme gives them a sense of satisfaction, a growing sense of self-confidence and a realisation that by giving to the community in which they live, they can not only fulfil many of their own aspirations, but contribute greatly to the society and community in which they live.

I give my wholehearted support to the scheme. Many of us will have seen groups of young people and individuals who have prospered and gone on to greater things as a result of the NCS. I welcome the Bill and urge Ministers to take note of what has been said. This is a debate in which there has been mutual support and respect for the Bill from all parts of the House. At a time when we have been talking about divisions and trying to bring a sense of self-confidence and a realisation that by giving to the community in which they live, they can not only fulfil many of their own aspirations, but contribute greatly to the society and community in which they live.

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6.15 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I share the sentiments expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) as he described some of the NCS social action projects in his constituency. In fact, I have agreed with almost everything that has been said today by Members on both sides of the House. I agreed with my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) when he spoke in his comprehensive speech about the jigsaw of empowerment for young people to which the NCS contributes. I agreed with the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) about the importance of coming together and learning tolerance. I also agreed with the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) about the power of the NCS to inspire volunteering, although she was holding her papers so far from her face that I wondered whether, in the spirit of the NCS and volunteering, I should have dashed across the Floor and offered to lend her my specs.

Today, we celebrate the transformation of the NCS from an idea to something that has shaped the lives of more than 300,000 young people and now heads towards gaining royal charter status—an extraordinary journey. The three key aspects of the NCS—social cohesion, social mobility and social engagement—can be seen through various statistics. I was surprised by the fact that 30% of all participants are from ethnic minorities. All those three things can be brought alive by any of us who have hosted sessions with NCS groups or given out certificates at an NCS graduation.

I will never forget meeting a father whose daughter did her NCS with Gloucestershire College in 2012. He told me that his daughter had changed completely after going on that course, that she had seen much more of life than she had before and that she was now much more confident. According to him, it was all “down to the NCS”. It should come as no surprise that an independent evaluation of the NCS found that nine out of 10 young people feel that they have learned important skills for the future. It is no surprise either that three out of four feel more confident about getting a job later on.

The figures show some room for improvement, but I say that in the spirit of a sports coach telling the winner of an Olympic gold medal, “You can do better than that.” That was roughly the thrust of and ambition behind the contribution from the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed)—there is always room for improvement.

Today is a good moment to look back to the start of the NCS when none of the success was predictable or even expected. It is right to congratulate former Prime Minister David Cameron on his vision, and all those involved in the difficult business of a start-up. I thank those in the Cabinet Office at the time—my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd)—and it was good to hear the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) saying the same thing from the Opposition Benches. I thank all the civil servants involved in putting the programme together.

In the five years of the NCS’s existence, the number of participants from Gloucestershire and Gloucester has expanded rapidly. So far, there have been 1,192 participants, which I believe puts us, as a county, at 30th out of 127, so just inside the top quartile. Of those, 216 this year alone came from my Gloucester constituency. I have been absolutely delighted by that, and I am delighted to support, contribute and encourage participation in the NCS. If I could wave just one magic wand, it would be quite simply to involve every teenager in our city of Gloucester and throughout the country in joining the NCS programme.

Two groups this year went on the Pelican tall ship—up the mast, manning the crow’s nest and working night shifts—and that shows how comfort zones have been stretched. Such experiences will stay in the minds of the participants forever. My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Sir Julian Brazier), who also represents a
cathedral city, made a plea for retaining adventure training, and I am sure he would heartily approve of such experiences.

Work for the community is also incredibly important, such as the redecoration of the Gloucester city farm community café or the work for Teens in Crisis on making a video to promote its online counselling service. In fact, participants from the Gloucestershire College courses alone have raised some £60,000 of cash and £24,000 of goods for good causes in our city and county. That really has made a difference. Putting the NCS on a permanent footing, following the Ipsos MORI evaluation and the report by the National Audit Office, will mean building on success, and increasing scale and transparency.

Let me comment briefly on the room for improvement that constitutes the second aspect of the debate. I agree that if the average cost to the taxpayer is £1,800 for each participant, it must be possible to reduce that, making the programme available to as many people as possible but not, I hope, at the price of squeezing out some of the more expensive adventures. I also hope that the letter from HMRC—presumably the same letter that gives national insurance numbers, which means no extra cost—will inspire more participation and get the message out more widely.

I am not entirely sure about widening the eligible age group to include people up to 25. The social benefits that are gained when teenagers from all and any backgrounds spend a month together are huge and proven, but I fear that mixing 25-year-olds and 16-year-olds would introduce more difficult dynamics. The Minister shakes his head, which I will take as an indication that that will not happen.

There is certainly room for improvement in one respect. If the figure is correct, participation by Members of Parliament stands at only 25%. I think that all who have spoken today would agree that this is a rite of passage that we should all directly support.

I have some sympathy with the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) about measurement, but I believe that there is something important that can be captured, if not precisely measured: what happens to people who have been on an NCS course in terms of the volunteering habit acquired, the confidence gained and, ultimately, the jobs won. It is the young themselves who will put a value on the NCS through their recommendations to those younger than them and their analysis of what has led to their future growth.

There is no doubt that the NCS has been a success. Its founders and everyone else involved should be proud, but we should not forget to congratulate those who make it happen on the ground: the colleges, charities but we should not forget to congratulate those who

6.22 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). I wish that he had that magic wand, because I know that he is a real champion of young people. I have seen him do a huge amount of work in his constituency to create opportunities that young people often seize and from which they benefit directly. It is a wonder that he has not yet been made a Minister.

I am delighted to speak in the debate. The NCS has come a long way since the 2009 pilots. Nearly 300,000 young people have benefited from the opportunity, and 93,000 did so in 2016 alone. I am staggered that only 25% of Members of Parliament have had an opportunity to see at first hand the fantastic work that is going on in our communities. I have had the pleasure of experiencing every stage of the transformation: I have been on assault courses, I have been a dragon, I have been a mentor, I have taken part in dodgeball—I have still not forgiven the five-year-old who took me out in about 20 seconds—I have attended the graduation ceremonies, and I have bought a lot of cakes in the charity sales.

I speak not just as a Member of Parliament and a local resident, but as a former employer who employed a great many young people. I was particularly impressed by the genuine, total transformation of the young people who had taken advantage of this fantastic opportunity. A number of Members have already highlighted many of the skills involved: team skills, confidence, the public speaking ability referred to by the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley)—many of us could learn from some of those skills—and the ability to understand and appreciate their local communities. We have seen that that has led to 8 million additional hours of voluntary work within our local communities, which is fantastic. There is also the issue of maturity, of building young people’s life skills that are important in transitioning from school into the real world and securing first jobs.

The NCS logo is “NCS Yes”, which genuinely refers to the opportunities for those who apply.

I noticed from the graduation ceremonies just how proud parents are in the transformation of their children. They talk about how nervous their children were about signing up, and how even at the last minute they questioned whether it was the right thing to do. I must give credit to the NCS website; most things vaguely connected to the Government do not do particularly well when it comes to the internet and website presence, but the NCS website is fantastic. It has lots of FAQs and success stories, and it is bright, confident and enthusiastic. We can see why those nervous youngsters take the brave step of signing up.

What surprises people about the NCS is that the young people do not all sign up together. It is often assumed that the young people all know each other—perhaps they are all in the same class at a local college that has collectively decided to go. In fact, it is actually a random collection of people stepping outside their comfort zones and giving up their valuable summer
holidays to do something constructive. Yes, it is enjoyable, but often they do not realise how enjoyable it is until the end.

I want the NCS to succeed even more, and to match the ambition shown by our Secretary of State and our Minister. They are so passionate about the opportunities created. I want to see their passion fulfilled, and I have a few small requests.

First, a number of speakers have highlighted how we would like every young person to have this opportunity but many are not aware of the scheme. There has been a problem in promoting the scheme. I welcome the fact that in the planned royal charter every young child will be written to with all the information set out; I used to love getting post when I was younger, so this brings back happy memories. That will give every child the opportunity to sign up. I also urge that that information should be extended to schools, to remind them of the bursaries that are available. I have spoken to a number of headteachers in my constituency to say what an opportunity this would be for children from more challenged backgrounds, and many of those heads were not aware that there was a bursary scheme and wrongly presumed this was something their children would not be able to afford.

All the speakers have highlighted some of the brilliant social action projects that have taken place. I have seen some fantastic ones, but I do think the NCS nationally needs to do a bit more to build a database, because sometimes groups have struggled to come up with meaningful projects. The best cases are where there is a tangible link between the members of the group. For example, a confident young girl was presenting to me to say why the group had chosen the Swindon women’s refuge. I had not appreciated the fact that she was so passionate about that because when she was younger her family had had to use that refuge. She had personally benefited from that service, and had convinced her friends and colleagues that they should put all their energies into this refuge. They therefore had an extra incentive to go and make a difference.

I also think there should be more information on how best to deliver social action projects. I have seen some fantastic ones that have engaged with the business community and called in favours. One of the great things about young people is that they are very cheeky, and when deploying that with their endless enthusiasm and energy they have had some very successful social action projects. But I have also seen some lost, and a little confused about what to do, which has meant that they have missed an opportunity to really make a difference. I would also encourage the bringing in of mentors wherever possible to road test the ideas before starting to deliver the social action project. There are countless local businesspeople who would be more than happy to give up their time to support these fantastic aims.

Finally, I want to talk about quality. I have been visiting such schemes since 2012 so have seen every part of the process repeatedly, and I have seen some fantastic projects and some less good ones. I am concerned that in recent years, with some of the changes to some of the contractors, a number of the staff delivering the schemes are a little too young. Initially, in Swindon, it was delivered by New College and Swindon College. They are two well-established colleges, and the staff involved were lecturers doing additional work over the summer. They instantly had the respect of the young adults, which is a particular challenge at the beginning, as those young people have not quite developed all the skills that they will have acquired by the end. Some college staff struggle to hold the line; they are a little too integrated with the students. It is important that we get that right. The advantage of having those colleges involved is that they already have the buy-in of the students. It is no surprise that the numbers have fallen away since the colleges ceased to lead on this. That has also led to a lack of local knowledge. This is a vital matter. I know that ensuring that we do not have a postcode lottery is complicated, but there needs to be some really deep thinking in the procurement exercise.

Many speakers have talked about the £1,800 cost, and one of the challenges is finding facilities for the scheme to use. I do not really understand why the NCS providers should have to pay to hire facilities when we have fantastic college and school facilities that are often empty during the school holidays when the NCS courses take place. They could use those existing facilities without being charged for them, freeing up that money to be deployed to provide additional support elsewhere in the programme.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I would like to echo some of my hon. Friend’s thoughts. Katy Stockdale leads the Huddersfield Community Trust NCS, which had 455 graduates last year. I remember the project at Beechwood care home, where they worked on disability access with local businesses and other local volunteers. People donated wood, stone and fountains, and the project had a lasting effect. My hon. Friend makes a good point about ensuring that all these projects are highlighted.

Justin Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for that really powerful intervention. He highlights the real boost that these projects can bring to the local community, and the difference that the team in his area has made is a credit to it.

Many speakers have been tempted to suggest how we can tweak what we are doing and how we can empower people. The dreaded “Brexit” word was even mentioned. Please do not do this. Please do not ruin something that is working so well. There is nothing worse than out-of-touch adults prescribing what young people want. The vast majority of this country’s youth clubs started to fail because “right-on” adults decided to prescribe what the young people should be doing. This scheme is a success because the students have been allowed to shape it. The NCS Youth Board is integral to what the scheme delivers. Its members know best because they have done it, they are young and they still understand what young people want. I know that we are well meaning, but please let the young people decide how to do this. Our involvement should be as mentors and supporters, showcasing the work and highlighting in the local media the very best that our young people can offer. That is something that the parents are extremely grateful for.

6.32 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): It has been fantastic to sit through the debate and hear so much passion for this amazing organisation, the National Citizen Service. It is a huge pleasure to follow my hon. Friends the Members for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham), as well as the many other Members
on both sides of the House who have contributed to the debate. They have all been huge advocates during their time in Parliament for engaging with young people in their constituencies. It has sometimes been a little bit awkward for me, aged 30, to speak to an NCS group about what young people are thinking, because I was about 10 years older than them when I first went to an NCS event. However, we in this place have to do an awful lot more to engage with young people, and I believe that the NCS plays a huge part in the work that Members of Parliament do in that regard. I echo the comments that Members on both sides of the House have made about the fact that we should do more to engage with and attend NCS events. That is for sure.

I rise today to speak in support of this fantastic Bill. I should really declare an interest, in that I am very, very jealous of what the National Citizen Service does. I have seen at first hand some of the amazing things that happen at an NCS week away or day away. Like my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) I would probably end up having to be pushed up the rock-climbing face. Something that has perhaps not been mentioned today, and that underpins what the NCS does, is the element of fun. The main reason that young people want to get involved in the NCS is that it is fun. They enjoy getting involved. This is not about the Government telling young people that they have to join the NCS; this happens through word of mouth. The rampant rise about which we have heard across the House today comes as a result of young people who have been through the programme telling other young people that they enjoyed it, that they had a great time and that others should join up. That is why we have seen such a huge increase in the number of people joining the NCS programmes.

For the past two years, I have had the honour of presenting NCS graduation certificates for Joining Forces Training, which runs the NCS programme in my constituency. These ex-servicemen are really starting to promote their work, which has been so successful that it is being expanded into other areas, such as the east of England. Joining Forces Training has designed a range of programmes for young people and adults to help them succeed and progress in life. One example from the graduation ceremony that I attended early last year really sticks in my mind and shows how great the NCS is: a young man stood up to make a speech and said that if it was not for Joining Forces and the NCS programme, he would not be able to speak in front of the 200-strong audience of parents and his peers—a difficult thing for any young person to do. He had previously struggled in conversations with two or three people and could not imagine speaking to such a large audience. The NCS programme gave him the confidence to push boundaries that he had never expected to exceed. I am pleased that this Bill will give even more young people the chance to develop skills that will help them later in life. Where else do 15 to 17-year-olds, whatever their background, get the opportunity to develop key life skills in a safe environment away from their parents?

In Bath, the NCS provider is dedicated to inspiring the next generation. NCS is a fantastic programme for challenging and developing young people individually in addition to building greater social cohesion, as many hon. Members have said, by mixing teams and getting young people to think about their local community. I asked Ed Hodges, the director of Joining Forces Training, why he thinks NCS makes such a positive contribution and he told me:

“One of the most rewarding aspects of the programme is the response you get from parents, teachers and most importantly the young people who take part. You see them grow in confidence, whether overcoming their fear of heights or standing in front of their peers and pitching an idea, and to see them grow as a team to plan and deliver some outstanding projects is great to be a part of.”

Young people also receive a session on democracy and how they can participate in bringing about positive change even before they reach voting age. They have contributed to some fantastic local and national campaigns and can look further afield into how they can make a positive difference to the world through global campaigns, which the International Citizen Service can enable them to do. In fact, one thing that sticks out for me given the current debates about international development is that on asking those young people what they would like to see prioritised in Government spending, they say that they would like to see not 0.7% but 10% spent on international aid. That might give good hope to the Secretary of State for International Development in the next Budget discussions.

I hope that the royal charter and the clear statement that the NCS is open to all will mean that more children from a wide variety of backgrounds, including those who are less fortunate, will take up the chance to join the scheme. I also support the use of HMRC to get out information to all young people alongside their national insurance number when they turn 16. That is an excellent way of publicising the opportunities available to all young people, enabling even more to benefit from this excellent scheme.

As many hon. Members have said, this is probably the least divisive debate that we have had in this place. The NCS is an excellent initiative that is going from strength to strength, and the Bill will give more young people the chance to take part. Joining Forces Training in Bath has made a fantastic contribution to the city and has delivered so much change into people’s lives. I look forward to supporting it over the years as the programme develops.
As good as the statistics are, and as fantastic as the experience gained by all these young people will be, the Opposition are still concerned about social action, civil society and youth opportunities on a wider scale. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) made an important point about not just staying within our bubbles. We have already heard the slogan of a new shared society many times from Government Members. Civil society and the work of the NCS fit into that, but the reality we are facing is one of slashed funding for youth services, failure to develop citizenship education and an Office for Civil Society that is being moved around Departments when it should be working across Whitehall.

To that end, although the Opposition will not be dividing the House on Second Reading, we have concerns about the future course that Government policy might take. The issue of youth action is much wider than this Bill alone. In each of our constituencies we see local youth organisations working tirelessly to provide opportunities to our young people. I am sure that either we in this Chamber or our children have benefited from such opportunities—we have heard great examples today—but, with funding being slashed across the country, local youth services are closing, particularly in areas of high deprivation. The new shared society has a lot of work to do if it is to deliver for our young people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) spoke with passion about the importance of creating a cohesive society, and I am pleased to see that our National Citizen Service goes some way towards doing that. However, I will outline some of our concerns on the Bill. First, as many hon. Members have said today, the NCS finds its unique selling point in its ability to successfully mix people from all backgrounds and to allow young people to interact with others with whom they might otherwise never have had the opportunity to build relationships. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) talked about that with passion and eloquence. I was able to do it from a young age through sport, and it is such a pleasure to stand here speaking about the NCS in the knowledge that young people from across the country are also benefiting from that interaction, which is nothing but a positive not only for the individuals themselves but for society as a whole.

Having said that, I do not believe that the Bill goes far enough in emphasising the importance of that interaction. I and others, both Members of this House and those who deliver the programmes on the ground, would have hoped to see the Bill’s wording include “social integration.” Will the Minister commit to that? Otherwise, the unique nature of the NCS risks being watered down, which would benefit nobody.

Secondly, I do not wish to be accused of stating the obvious, but the hardest-to-reach young people are called that for a reason: they are the hardest to reach. I say that not to add a bit of humour to the debate but to reiterate what others have said today about inclusion within the NCS. My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) made a wonderful analogy stressing the importance of inclusion, with which I wholeheartedly agree. With another approximately 170,000 young people set to participate in the NCS over the next three years, the Bill has a duty to ensure that barriers to participation are broken down, not raised. The hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) cited the wonderful example of young people pushing boundaries.

The National Audit Office report on the scheme is concerning. It states that, in order to meet spending review targets, spending per participant must fall by 29%, which is a significant cut that, if not managed well, could have a detrimental effect on those who participate in the scheme. Recruitment of the hardest to reach inevitably costs more, because more outreach must be conducted and more time must be taken. Without that, the NCS runs the risk of becoming yet another opportunity for the few, which I am sure would disappoint us all.

To run the risk of stating the obvious again, barriers are what keep people away. Barriers are what stop people applying, or even knowing about the NCS. However, perhaps the Government need to hear the obvious. Dedicated work to include the hardest-to-reach groups is a necessity, as we are already seeing a falling percentage of NCS graduates coming from the lowest-income families. Will the Minister commit to ring-fencing a proportion of funding to engage with the hardest-to-reach groups?

Thirdly, I must pay tribute to the outstanding work of so many volunteer centres and civil society organisations, which provide so many opportunities to young people and whose staff work tirelessly to ensure the best programmes are available. Without those organisations many young people would be left with little to do in their communities. With the commitment of a funding injection of £1 billion, there is concern that this will squeeze out other youth service operators, as well as other operators who support the work of the NCS, and that they will not receive adequate resources to be able to do that to best effect. I was, however, pleased to learn that the Minister for Civil Society has written to the chair of the NCS Trust to outline his expectation that the trust will report on relationships with the voluntary sector. It would be comforting to hear this commitment again today from the Government, so as to ensure the continued good working relationship with voluntary organisations.

Finally, integration and inclusion should come at not only participant level, but all levels of the NCS. All too often, young people are looked over for governance roles, but there would be nowhere better suited for a young person to play an active role in the development of a programme and organisation than in this instance.

Jason McCartney: There was a bit of a bleak outlook in what the hon. Lady was saying there. I think the NCS is amazingly transformative, and certainly in Huddersfield it is bringing people from all communities together. Would she say a few words about her personal experiences of attending graduations in her constituency and about how well the NCS is doing in her part of the world?

Dr Allin-Khan: First, I agree that the NCS is a wonderful programme that should be supported, as indeed Labour does. But I would not be doing my role justice and we would not be doing our role justice if we were not to ensure the best possible outcome for all NCS participants and graduates. The hon. Gentleman asks about work in my constituency, so I can tell him that I have had the absolute pleasure of meeting people who have completed the NCS. In fact, over the summer a group of young
people in Tooting were holding a food drive in a local supermarket as part of their social action project and I personally contributed to the food collection. [Interruption]

Let me continue by saying that the NCS develops the skills and confidence of young people, many of whom go on to graduate and work in future NCS cycles. Why should this development not lead to more young people on the board of patrons or being consulted on to inform plans and improvements? I am sure the Minister would agree about that. I wish to put on the record the fact that I support the call from the National Council for Voluntary Organisations for focus groups of young people to be brought together to inform a review of the social action element of the programme—as I said, I participated in that element in my community. These are young people who have lived these experiences, so why not capture that and learn from them directly? Does the Minister agree about that? What recommendations will be made to the NCS Trust on the inclusion of more young people in the development of the NCS going forward?

Young people harness so much positivity, passion, energy and drive that we should not seek to bottle this; we should seek to ensure it has the opportunity to be expressed. The NCS provides that, and providing opportunities for social action ensures it. We in this House have a responsibility to the young people in all of our constituencies to ensure that no barriers are set in place, and no opportunity is passed by to upskill them or develop their confidence. The NCS should be seen as an entry point to a longer journey of social action and volunteering. To do this, we need to ensure that all aspects of the NCS are high quality, that no participant feels their experience has not been the best it could be and that the NCS focuses on impact for both the participant and the community. As a starting point, the NCS should lead in to future opportunities for involvement in communities. I hope today the Government can see this as a wider opportunity outside of this Bill. The increased promotion of social action and volunteering is not a negative one. My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) made an excellent point about ensuring that the legacy continues.

There are 1.8 billion young people in the world today, and we are at a peak of youth; it is estimated that at no other time will there be more young people in the world. If we do not harness their passion, creativity and drive for change now, when will we? This Bill is a good step forward in ensuring that we do that here. I just hope the Government listen to our concerns, and the concerns of those in the voluntary sector, so to ensure that we can harness the potential of young people to the fullest. They are our future politicians, after all.

6.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr Rob Wilson): I thank all Members who have taken part in the debate. Not only that, but I thank them and all the others who have helped to make the NCS a success so far. I have been delighted to see how many Members have embraced the NCS in their own constituencies by visiting events, encouraging participants and taking part in “Dragons’ Den”-style panels that award funding to young people’s social action projects. It is fitting that a programme that unites people from different backgrounds should be endorsed by both sides of the House. We will no doubt have debates and discussions—indeed, we already are—but I hope we can continue with the Bill in the spirit that has been discussed, with the common goal of making the NCS the best possible experience for future generations.

The NCS should be one experience among others. As Minister for Civil Society, I had the pleasure of seeing in action a huge number of programmes run by really excellent organisations. The NCS is not here to compete with other opportunities for young people—quite the opposite. I want the NCS to give young people an appetite for service, for other opportunities and for trying new things. Our vision is for the NCS to be a common experience for all, with scouts, cadets and other people who are familiar with service in the same team, sharing their experience with people who have never done anything like it before.

The NCS sees people with different backgrounds, faiths and interests coming together at a formative age and learning the effect they can have on the community around them. The independent evaluations show that we should not underestimate the impact of these four weeks on the young people involved. We can take the participants’ own words for it. NCS providers ask their graduates what they would say to someone considering the NCS, and one said:

“It is the most amazing experience you will ever have. Take it with both hands and mould your future.”

It is crucial that we get the delivery of this amazing experience absolutely right. Together with the royal charter, the Bill is designed to create a delivery body that the public will trust, and that spends money wisely and has the right priorities.

I turn to the issues raised by the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) earlier in the debate. Many Members spoke about social integration, a subject that the Bill and royal charter already cover extensively. The royal charter includes an objective “to promote social cohesion by ensuring equality of access to the programmes by participants regardless of their background or circumstances”.

The Bill requires the National Citizen Service Trust to report on the extent to which participants from different backgrounds have mixed on the programmes. There are many excellent examples of social integration in practice on NCS programmes, including specific interfaith NCS groups. The NCS will continue to play an important role in promoting social integration, but I am of course willing to consider what has been said today.

On the duty to promote the NCS to people from disadvantaged backgrounds, the trust’s primary functions include enabling participants from different backgrounds to work together. The trust is tasked to be absolutely focused on promoting NCS to young people, regardless of their background.

On the National Audit Office report and some backgrounds being disproportionately represented, the NCS is working to increase the representation of disadvantaged people. There is a higher proportion of participants on free school meals than in the general population, and eight out of 10 participants feel more positive about people from different backgrounds as a result of their involvement, according to the 2014 Ipsos MORI survey.
Young people are at the centre of the NCS. There is a national youth board that feeds views into the trust from 19 regional youth boards throughout the country. There are also 120 NCS leaders—the hon. Member for Croydon North has spoken to them here in the House—who are ambassadors for the programmes and represent the interests of their peers. Under the new arrangements, a new board will be appointed as part of the process and will look at all suggestions for whom that might include.

My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Sir Julian Brazier) made some excellent points about adventure training and the challenges that that represents for residential centres. That matter is not within the scope of this Bill, but I am happy to look at the issues he raises.

The hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) was right to highlight the non-partisan basis of the Bill and the royal charter. The aim is to strike the balance between independence of the NCS Trust and the accountability that it has to Parliament. He did raise a number of issues, including whether the annual report should be debated in this House. Of course the Bill requires the report to be laid before Parliament, so that Parliament can debate it if it so wishes.

Officials in the Office for Civil Society are drafting non-statutory guidance for local authorities and schools on the benefits of the NCS and how they can engage further with the programme. On ring-fenced funding, particularly for the hard-to-reach students, the Bill gives the trust the freedom to set its own commissioning practices, but requires it to report on the mix of its participants from different backgrounds so that we can assess it on outcomes—we are interested in outcomes rather than inputs.

Mr Wilson: We want to ensure that there is the right balance between independence and accountability. To make the guidance statutory would enforce what the NCS Trust has to do and that could be a problem. We do not really want to go down that route.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) for the fantastic support that he has given to the NCS. He quite rightly paid fulsome tribute to the former Prime Minister, who is the reason why this transformational programme has seen the light of day. I did like the idea of building a movement. He asked about the threats to other parts of the sector. May I say to him that the trust is part of Generation Change, which is a group of youth organisations that is looking collectively to increase the scale, quality and status of youth social action programmes? The trust is committed to helping the NCS become a gateway to other programmes and opportunities, helping young people to see volunteering as a habit for a lifetime.

A number of Members talked about the detriment to other local authority services. This is additional funding that we have announced. There is also funding for other programmes such as #iwill and the Youth Investment Fund, and that is additional to local authority funding. There are some very good examples of local authority provision on youth services.

Mr Wilson: I only have a couple of minutes available, so I will push on.

We want the NCS to be accessible to every young person. A number of Members have asked about young carers and young offenders. There is a place for all of them on this scheme; every young person who wants a place can have one. My right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) mentioned heritage railways. Lord Ashton has asked the Office of Rail and Road to look into that, so I hope that that reassures her.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) asked about assistance for NCS providers to keep up the rate of participation and to promote best practice. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is working with the trust to issue guidance to the NCS providers to help them build relationships with local authorities, schools and other local organisations. That will ensure that NCS social action projects take on the needs of communities and that young people can participate in even greater numbers than now.

There were a number of questions about the devolved Administrations of Scotland and Wales. The NCS Bill will help the NCS Trust to continue to deliver the NCS programme across England. The Government would welcome the expansion of the NCS in the future, and the devolved Administrations are considering how the programme would work for them.

Northern Ireland is supportive of the NCS. Co-operation Ireland is a separate provider of the NCS in Northern Ireland. It is a charity that supports the peace process and it has unique and long-standing expertise. The Government have licensed the NCS intellectual property rights to Northern Ireland to allow the delivery of the programme.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) asked about the devolved Administrations, and the Bill extends to England and Wales as they are one jurisdiction but applies only to England as this is where the NCS Trust operates. The majority of the Bill therefore relates to England only, but there are some provisions relating to reserved matters, such as the clause pertaining to HMRC, that mean that the Bill as a whole does not meet the test to be certified as England-only. Though HMRC would only write to people in England, the functions of HMRC are a wholly reserved matter.

As for the question of why the same outcomes could not be achieved by running the same programme through the scouts or cadets, the recent NAO report finds that the NCS is distinct from other programmes, particularly as regards its focus on mixing people from different backgrounds. It is available, affordable and has a distinct combination of personal development and the chance to mix with people from other backgrounds. It is designed to be a single unifying rite of passage for young people that sits alongside the many other fantastic opportunities for young people.

This is a small Bill, but it is very important. It sets the framework for the delivery of a programme that will influence hundreds of thousands of young people—indeed millions—over that course. Alongside the royal charter, it will ensure that there is a body that the public can trust that provides value for money and a quality programme. Public confidence is key to the success of the NCS.
The Bill will help the NCS grow and become a rite of passage for future generations. Establishing the NCS for the long term is, in a small way, part of defining what sort of nation we want to be in the future. That is a nation that invests in young people, fosters social integration and believes in the values of service. More than 300,000 young people have benefited from the NCS already. The Bill is our opportunity to secure the same life-changing experience for generations to come: a National Citizen Service for everyone and a commitment to greater social cohesion, social mobility and social engagement. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

NATIONAL CITIZEN SERVICE BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the National Citizen Service Bill [Lords]:

Committal

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 26 January 2017.

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

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

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

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

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

Other proceedings

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

—(Graham Stuart.)

Question agreed to.

NATIONAL CITIZEN SERVICE BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

Queen’s recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the National Citizen Service Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State.—(Graham Stuart.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Combined Authorities (Overview and Scrutiny Committees, Access to Information and Audit Committees) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 28 November 2016, be approved.—(Graham Stuart.)

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 5 to 7 together.

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That James Gray be discharged from the Administration Committee and Mary Robinson be added.

FINANCE COMMITTEE

That Jake Berry be discharged from the Finance Committee and Stephen McPartland be added.

REGULATORY REFORM COMMITTEE

That Andrew Percy and Christopher Pincher be discharged from the Regulatory Reform Committee and Stephen McPartland and Mark Menzies be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)
Defibrillators in Public Areas

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

7.3 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Defibrillators save lives. That is the truth that drives the work of the Oliver King Foundation, a charity that campaigns to ensure that defibrillators are available in public places and that people are trained to use them. Every year, ambulance services in the UK treat about 30,000 people for a non-hospital cardiac arrest, but fewer than 10% of them survive—fewer than one in 10. Of the average 82 people who suffer cardiac arrest outside hospital every day in the UK, just eight live.

Cardio pulmonary resuscitation is often championed as the best way to treat cardiac arrest before the emergency services arrive. Indeed, in some cases it can double the likelihood of survival. But even then the chances of resuscitation are still as low as 20%, and that is only in some cases. Clearly CPR alone is not enough.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): A little over a year ago, on 7 December 2015, my 28-year-old son had a cardiac arrest. He is one of the few lucky ones who got to hospital in time and survived. He has his own defibrillator, but does the hon. Lady agree that, in conjunction with defibrillator training, it is incredibly important that people are trained in CPR? In my son’s case, his girlfriend was trained in CPR and saw him through the process until the paramedics arrived.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman has had a frightening experience in his family, and also learnt the incredible importance of not only having defibrillators available, but having people who know how to use them. I could hardly better his family’s example of how important that is.

A study by the British Heart Foundation found that for every single minute without defibrillation, chances of survival fall by between 7% and 10%. The Care Quality Commission sets a response target of eight minutes for emergency ambulance services, but we know that ambulances cannot possibly arrive within that time in every case. Even if they did, the chances of survival without immediate defibrillation and CPR will have already plummeted to 20% or lower. Access to a defibrillator can therefore make a huge difference. If cardiac arrest is recognised, basic first aid is given, 999 is called and CPR is applied, in combination with rapid and effective defibrillation, the chances of survival can exceed 50%. In fact, in some cases it can be as high as 80%. However, immediate action is vital. A defibrillator must be at hand for those survival rates to be realised.

Three people who know that better than most are my constituents Mark, Joanne and Ben King. In 2011, Mark and Joanne King lost their son Oliver, and Ben lost his brother. Oliver tragically died following a sudden cardiac arrest while racing in, and winning, a school swimming competition. He was just 12 years old. He had a hidden heart condition, and without access to a defibrillator at school his chances of survival on that day were dramatically reduced. Had he lived, this Saturday would have been his 18th birthday.

I never met Oliver, but I have been struck by talking to those who knew him well. He was clearly a very happy and popular boy, judging by the tributes that poured in from those who knew him following the shock of that terrible day. He was known as a big character at King David High School. His teachers recall his “uncompromising zest for life” and how he was loved and respected by boys and girls and teachers alike. His best friend David recalls Oliver’s charm and how it was deployed on more than one occasion to get him out of a tricky situation. This year is particularly difficult for David, as he will be celebrating the milestone of turning 18 without his best friend.

Everyone mentions Oliver’s love of football—he was a staunch Evertonian. His family and friends all recall his great talent and potential on the pitch. One of his teachers describes him as “a sportsman at heart and a natural at whatever he turned his hand to”.

Above all, Oliver was caring, loving and incredibly close to his family: “family was everything to Oliver.”

It goes without saying that Oliver’s death left many who knew and loved him with a great sense of loss. His family and friends are sadly not alone in going through this terrible ordeal. As well as the thousands of people who die every year following sudden cardiac arrest, there are thousands more who are now faced with the agonising reality of living without their loved one.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for bringing this important subject to the House and for her good fortune in having, potentially, three and a half hours in which to debate it. She has given an emotional case of somebody for whom, for the sake of a relatively simple and inexpensive bit of kit, the outcome might have been different. Does she agree that public buildings—certainly places such as schools—should automatically be fitted with a defibrillator?

Will the hon. Lady pay tribute to Sompting Big Local in my constituency, which has a lottery grant for the enhancement of the village? Its first priority was to install four defibrillators in every corner of the village, including one outside the local pharmacy, because it saw it as a worthwhile thing to do. Many other people have imaginatively used things such as redundant telephone boxes by replacing them with defibrillators as an obvious help point for local people. Should not we just be doing those things automatically?

Maria Eagle: I agree very much with the hon. Gentleman. He has set out an example from his constituency. Around the country, there are many ways in which communities are starting to ensure that they have access to defibrillators so that, if needed, they are there. I welcome that. We should try to ensure that defibrillators are available throughout our land—up and down, north and south, and east and west. What happened to Oliver is not as rare as we might hope. In the UK, some 270 young people tragically die every year of sudden cardiac arrest while at school. That furthers the hon. Gentleman’s point that having defibrillators routinely available in schools seems to be a no-brainer.

In 2012, Oliver’s parents, Mark and Joanne, set up the Oliver King Foundation in memory of their son. It aims to raise awareness of the conditions that lead to
sudden cardiac arrest, which is vital as the family did not know that Oliver had any condition that might have led to what happened. If they had known, probably with the diagnosis of a simple electrocardiogram test, they may well have been able to take steps that could have avoided what happened. Other aims of the foundation are to purchase and place defibrillators in schools and sports centres, to train staff how to use them and to hold screening events to enable simple, painless ECG testing to help diagnose such conditions and ensure that what happened to Oliver does not happen to the children of other families.

Mark and Joanne have done an incredible job. Their aim is simple: to ensure that no more families have to go through what they did, knowing that the death of a son, daughter, mother, father or friend may have been prevented. They campaign tirelessly and effectively to ensure that every school in the country is equipped with an automated external defibrillator. They have the support of more than 200 hon. and right hon. Members of this House, across parties.

Automated external defibrillators are specifically designed for use by non-medically trained people. They are remarkable, life-saving machines that are not difficult to use. The machine will apply an electrical pulse only when it detects an irregular heart rate and it talks the user through the process, step by step. However, at about £1,200, AEDs are not cheap and, even if provided, some people are often afraid of using them. As a result, many schools and high-risk public areas in the UK are still not equipped with them. As a direct result of the work of the Oliver King Foundation, more than 800 schools and public places now have this life-saving kit and people who are confident to use it. In Liverpool, Oliver’s home city, not a single school is now without one thanks to the work of the foundation and Liverpool City Council.

The foundation has also managed to train 15,000 people around the country in how to use an AED, thus making sure that in sudden difficult circumstances the confidence is there to use this life-saving kit. As a direct result, 11 lives have been saved that would otherwise have been lost, including an elderly gentleman who suffered a heart attack at his local gym. Thanks to the staff’s quick thinking and use of the gym’s defibrillator, he was sat up and talking by the time the emergency services arrived. In Woolton in my constituency, where Oliver used to live, an AED provided by the foundation arrived. In Woolton in my constituency, where Oliver used to live, an AED provided by the foundation was deployed three times this December alone. If the defibrillator is available and training is provided, people will use one: it is as simple as that.

However, we cannot and should not be reliant on charities to do all the heavy lifting and work in this policy area. In November, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) introduced the Defibrillators (Availability) Bill under the 10-minute rule procedure, with the purpose being to “increase the rates of survival rates from non-hospital cardiac arrests across the UK”.

Its objective is basically to do for the nation what the OK Foundation has done for Liverpool and is continuing to do in its work in other places: providing defibrillators in public places and training people to use them.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I am not sure whether the hon. Lady is aware of the impact that these defibrillators have in cardiac ambulances. When I qualified, an ambulance just picked someone up and took them to a hospital, but the big, boxy ambulances have more equipment in them than was in a casualty unit in those days. Even in professional hands, this technology has transformed out-of-hospital cardiac arrest.

Maria Eagle: I thank the hon. Lady for that very useful information, from her own experience as a doctor. It is important that the availability of this kit is widened across our society in order to save lives.

Current legislation surrounding public access to defibrillators is practically non-existent. Last year, the Government produced a guide for schools recommending the purchase of AEDs. While I welcome that move to highlight the issue, the Government should do more. Will the Minister undertake to meet Mark and Joanne and the OK Foundation to discuss a realistic programme of providing AEDs in public places and training for people such that they feel confident to use them? Will he facilitate a meeting with the Prime Minister? I know that the OK Foundation would welcome an opportunity to argue its case at the highest possible level of Government.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for raising such an important issue in this Adjournment debate. I, too, pay tribute to the Oliver King Foundation for all its hard work. This is one of those rare occasions when there is cross-party agreement. We agree on the need for these defibrillators, but the Bill that will come here for its Second Reading on 27 January is unlikely to make progress simply because of its nature as a ten-minute rule Bill. Does she agree that it would be good if the Government adopted the Bill, because this procedure does save lives, it is relatively cheap to introduce, and it would make a difference to young people? As she eloquently explained, 12 young lives are lost each week through these incidents.

Maria Eagle: I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing forward her Bill. Yes, it was done under the 10-minute rule procedure, but it is now there, and I echo her call for the Government to adopt it. As she realistically observed, the only reason it may not progress in this Session is that there is no time given its position on the list for private Member’s Bill Fridays. The Government could transform that in an instant by taking on board aspects of the Bill—or the whole Bill, preferably—and putting them into some of their own legislation. The Minister might have something to say about that.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the eloquent and forceful speech she is making. She has already paid tribute to the King family. May I add my tribute to them for their great dignity and the constructive way in which they have taken the issue forward? I agree with the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) that the ten-minute rule Bill has virtually no chance of getting on to the statute book, but the Government could, if they had a mind to, adopt it and turn it into a Government Bill. Of course, if it is defective in any way, it could be amended, but nevertheless the spirit of it could be carried forward.
Maria Eagle: My right hon. Friend is completely correct on both those things. I know that he knows the King family, as many of us on Merseyside do. Many colleagues from across the House have met either the family or the campaigners associated with the Oliver King Foundation, which does a stunning job of getting across its campaigning efforts and its ask to Members across the House.

Losing Oliver was devastating for Mark, Joanne and Ben, and for Oliver’s friends and his local community. Who knows what he would have been capable of achieving, had he lived? It would have been something remarkable. I have no doubt, given the way in which he had started off in life.

I would like to finish by saying how much I admire the positive and successful way in which Oliver King’s family and friends have channelled their grief into ensuring that no other family has to endure what they did. They have done such good work in Liverpool and elsewhere, and they are moving on to other places to start installing AEDs in schools, sports centres and other public places. Only the Government can help them to achieve their goal nationwide, and I very much hope that the Minister, in his reply, will want to take the opportunity to announce a Government initiative to make that dream a reality. I think it would be a fitting tribute to Oliver King.

7.21 pm

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) for her excellent and thorough speech. I want to make only a few points. I absolutely agree that this is such a vital matter that it is for the Government to take some initiative. Although charities—including, as I have learned, the Oliver King Foundation—do amazing work, the matter is so important that it must be overseen by the Government.

In my constituency, thanks to the British Heart Foundation, we have some amazing kits for CPR work. I have had great fun going round businesses that have taken up my offer of hiring out those kits for nothing. They do the training in their lunchtime or before work, and in 20 minutes they are confident about doing CPR. They have done such good work in Liverpool and elsewhere, and they are moving on to other places to start installing AEDs in schools, sports centres and other public places. Only the Government can help them to achieve their goal nationwide, and I very much hope that the Minister, in his reply, will want to take the opportunity to announce a Government initiative to make that dream a reality. I think it would be a fitting tribute to Oliver King.

7.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): The hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) started her excellent speech by saying that defibrillators save lives. We accept that; there is no question but that that is the case. Before I respond to the points that she and my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) made, I want to add my congratulations to the Oliver King Foundation on its work, and to the family on turning a terrible tragedy into something positive. We have heard about what has been achieved in Liverpool, as well as more widely.

One of the asks of the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood was that I meet her and the family to talk about how to take this matter forward. I confirm that I would be very happy to do so. Indeed, the sports Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who is with me on the Front Bench today, also feels passionately about this matter, which was in the sport strategy that was published about a year ago. I am happy to set up such a meeting. I am not in a position to set out tonight the Government’s view if the private Member’s Bill does not go through, but if the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood organises the meeting, I would be happy for it to be more widely attended by interested Members.

Mr George Howarth: I think the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) accepts, as I certainly do, that although a ten-minute rule Bill might have been a good way to raise the issue, it is not a suitable vehicle for taking this forward. The request is that the Minister and the Department look at the Bill as it stands, and that, if it needs to be amended or redrafted, they suggest ways of doing so, or even take it on themselves. The Government should bring a measure forward, rather than leaving this to a legislative vehicle that simply will not work.

David Mowat: As I have said, I am not in a position to say tonight what the Government will do in respect of the Bill. I am willing to say that we will meet and talk about it after this debate. As I will come on to say, there is a question about the extent to which defibrillators should be mandatory, as was raised in relation to schools, versus dealing with this through guidelines and other forms of help. I will try to make some of those points later.

The hon. Member for Garston and Halewood made the point that the survival rate of people who have an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest is in the order of about 10%,
It varies a little by ambulance service—it can be between 7% and 12%—and if we could get all ambulance services up to 12%, that in itself would save many lives. There is no question but that if defibrillators were available in time, the figure would be at least doubled and perhaps increased by more than that. We also accept the figure from the British Heart Foundation, which I think she cited, that every minute of delay reduces the probability of success by something like 10%.

We need to achieve two things: we need to create more access to defibrillators; and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), who is not now in the Chamber, said in relation to the incident in his family, we also need to increase training and CPR awareness. I recall doing CPR training and being taken through all this two years ago in a church hall in Warrington. It really did not take very long, and I hope I can still remember how to do it. Using these things must be done in parallel with other training. I understand that some defibrillators work fairly easily without too much training, but experience of and ability in CPR buys time, which is what we need to achieve.

I will talk about what the Government are doing in relation to public places, schools, the workplace more generally and, as I have mentioned, sports. I will also take a few minutes at the end of my speech—I do not think that we will be here until 10 o’clock—to talk about screening, which was mentioned as something we ought to consider.

Since 2007, ambulance trusts have had responsibility for the defibrillators around the country. That is because they are where 999 calls go, and they ought to know where the nearest defibrillator is when they get one. If there is a code or the defibrillator is locked, they are responsible for that. In addition, the British Heart Foundation in England—this is also happening in Scotland—is trying to create a database of the defibrillators that we believe are out there. The BHF thinks that there are something like 14,000 defibrillators. Unfortunately, for historical reasons that have grown up over time, there could be maintenance issues with some of them. We need to bring all that up to date, and the BHF is leading the charge on that.

In the past two years, the Government have allocated £1 million per annum for defibrillators in public places. That money is for England only and has led to some success. We had 700 new defibrillators last year as well as the cabinets that go with them, in addition to a range of CPR training, and we expect the same thing to happen this year. That represents an appreciable increase in the number of defibrillators. As I have said, we are doing that because we believe that defibrillators save lives, as does the training around them.

The Member for Garston and Halewood talked about schools. She rightly said that schools have been issued with guidance saying that we expect them to consider the installation of defibrillators, but it is also true to say that not every school has a defibrillator. The hon. Lady also talked about defibrillators costing in excess of £1,000. The scheme that we have put in place for schools uses NHS Supply Chain, which means that they can source a defibrillator for something like £435, which is clearly better than £1,000. I accept that that still comes out of a school’s budget, but nevertheless a great number of schools are taking that up. Schools can also apply to the British Heart Foundation scheme that we talked about earlier, provided that the defibrillator is publicly accessible, which in many cases it would be. However, I accept that we have not mandated such provision, as the Bill asks us to—I will talk about that a little later.

There are workplace health and safety aspects that every employer must consider. We have put in place a requirement that, from 1 January this year, everybody in a workplace who is first aid-accredited—obviously health and safety regulations require that there are such people—must have defibrillation training and be in a position to use those facilities. That is now happening, and it includes everybody who will have to do a first aid refresher course.

As I mentioned, sport is a priority area. Sports governing bodies will have formal responsibility, and many sports are taking this forward. We know of the incidents that have occurred. I think it was Fabrice Muamba during a Tottenham game who was saved by a combination of a defibrillator and a doctor in the crowd who knew CPR, and rugby league and rugby union are also involved. The Football Association has made available a £1.2 million grant to buy 1,300 defibrillators for use at football grounds up and down the country—and not just at the very large grounds. I am involved at Warrington Town football club, and we will be getting a defibrillator under that scheme as well. All FA-accredited coaches will also have to be CPR trained.

I know from the sports Minister that the sport strategy has made defibrillators in sports a priority. She has nominated Baroness Grey-Thompson to take this forward, in terms of putting a duty of care on the various governing bodies. It is an area of priority.

It is also important to understand more about sudden cardiac arrest and to make progress through research. The Government have provided funds through the National Institute of Health Research particularly to deal with the genetic aspects of the condition, given that it has a generic element. Work on gene discovery is also going on at the Oxford Biomedical Research Centre. I am not saying that we are close to a solution or a clear way forward, but this is a research priority. If we understood the genetics better, it would help us to do screening better, so let me move on to screening.

There is a school of thought that screening for children’s genetic predisposition to heart problems could make a difference. In 2015, the UK’s screening authority, the screening committee, considered screening people between the ages of 12 and 39. It did not support that, however, and I believe that that position is consistent with that of every other country in Europe. We have looked into this, and my understanding is that no other country carries out such screening. A number of reasons have been given: it is difficult to get clarity about the numbers of people who would be affected; there is concern that even if screening were to identify people with a potential weakness, there is no consensus on how that should be managed; and, finally, there is a significant concern about the efficacy of a test, especially regarding the number of false negatives and false positives, which it was felt could do more harm than good. If peer-reviewed evidence came forward, based on the findings of places that had conducted screening work, the matter would be reconsidered, but without that, it will not be looked at again until 2018. That leaves us with the issue of how
to make more progress on the number of defibrillators available. Perhaps the difference between the hon. Lady’s remarks and my response is not whether it is a good thing to make progress on defibrillators, but whether the Government should mandate putting defibrillators in every school and sports facility.

**Maria Caulfield:** I understand the Minister’s concern about whether this should be mandated. However, these days we would never operate a school without a smoke alarm or fire extinguishers, and we would not put children on a school bus without seat belts. For me, defibrillators are as essential a piece of safety equipment as any of those things.

**David Mowat:** I accept that. As I say, the guidelines are clear: any school can make use of the NHS Supply Chain facility to put in a defibrillator for £400 or so.

**Mr George Howarth:** The Minister talked about screening, which my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) also mentioned. Although I understand the conclusions and the advice that has already been given, to ensure that there is no confusion, is it not appropriate that if somebody has already been affected, screening should be available to their family, particularly their siblings?

**David Mowat:** I accept that. Also, a number of sports governing bodies offer screening for people who participate in their sports, but of course that is not the national screening of all 12 to 39-year-olds, which was the issue that was looked at.

Let me finish by reiterating my willingness to meet the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood, other Members and people from the Oliver King Foundation.

**Maria Eagle:** I conveyed a request for the Prime Minister to meet the Oliver King Foundation and Oliver’s parents. Could the Minister help me to facilitate that?

**David Mowat:** I can do many things, but I cannot answer for the Prime Minister. I think I am right in saying that those people met the Secretary of State a couple of years ago. Perhaps when we meet, however, they can start at the bottom end of the food chain before working their way upwards.

When the Government invest in any aspect of health, whether it be cancer drugs or access to GPs, efficacy and cost-effectiveness must be evaluated. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence uses the criterion “quality-adjusted life years”. Investment in defibrillators must be judged against investment in other necessities, such as cancer drugs, but it is clear from what has been said in a debate that has attracted interest on both sides of the House and the border that defibrillators save money as we start to save lives. The Government accept that, and I want us to make progress in this regard.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.40 pm

*House adjourned.*
House of Commons  
Tuesday 17 January 2017  
The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock  

PRAYERS  
[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions  

TREASURY  
The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Ayrshire Growth Deal  

1. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What discussions he has had with his Cabinet colleagues on the Ayrshire Growth Deal.  

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): We have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on how the Government can boost growth and productivity across Scotland and the UK. The Government are discussing city deals for Edinburgh and Stirling, and we are looking forward to receiving proposals from the Tay cities. The Government are focused on taking those deals forward as we look to agree city deals for all of Scotland’s great cities.

Patricia Gibson: Would the Chief Secretary to the Treasury agree that the Ayrshire growth deal would generate investment and create the economic conditions to achieve a step change throughout Ayrshire, an area of huge potential? Will he commit today to working actively and constructively with the four Ayrshire MPs, the three Ayrshire local authorities and the Scottish Government to support the deal, to the benefit of the whole county of Ayrshire?

Mr Gauke: Up to this point, growth deals have been city growth deals and, by definition, have focused on cities. As I said earlier, we have made a lot of progress on all the Scottish cities. Of course, it is open to the Scottish Government to take forward projects to enable growth in the county of Ayrshire, if they wish to do so.

Small Businesses  

2. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What support the Government are providing to small businesses.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): The Government absolutely recognise the key role that small businesses play in the economy, which is why, for example, at the autumn statement we announced an additional £400 million for the British Business Bank to help growing firms to access finance. Of course, we have taken a number of other steps, including introducing the seed enterprise investment scheme.

Craig Tracey: Does the Financial Secretary agree that independent retail stores, such as Chalk & Linen in my constituency, add greatly to the character and vitality of our towns and high streets, and that the Government should do all they can to support them?

Jane Ellison: As a former co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on retail, I could not agree more that independent retail, and retail generally, is a vital sector. My hon. Friend is right that we want to support independent retailers on our high streets, which is why, from April, 600,000 of the smallest businesses—occupiers of a third of all properties—will not have to pay business rates as part of the £6.7 billion business rates package that will kick in over the next few years. I hope that he agrees that that is a helpful bit of support for key local businesses.

Maria Caulfield: I recently attended my local chamber of commerce’s breakfast meeting in Seaford, and I met many small businesses that are pleased that the economy is doing so well and is being so expertly led by this Government. However, they have some concerns about the introduction of quarterly tax returns and the impact that would have on the costs of small businesses. They suggest the introduction of a threshold for the smallest businesses. Will the Minister consider that?

Jane Ellison: I, too, have a good relationship with my local chamber of commerce; we get vital feedback from our chambers of commerce. Of course, we are not introducing quarterly tax returns; my hon. Friend is referring to the “making tax digital” project. Although the Treasury Committee recently said that the long-term future can, and probably should, be digital, we understand that we need to look carefully at the consultation responses and at the concerns of small businesses. Of course, we have already exempted a number of the smallest businesses from the threshold, but we are looking carefully at the consultation responses and at the Select Committee’s report. We do not recognise the figure from the Federation of Small Businesses on the cost, and we have not seen the assumptions that underpin it; if I am to address those concerns, seeing those would be helpful.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): Small businesses in Doncaster face a worrying skills shortage. Will the Minister support those businesses by impressing on her colleagues in the Department for Education the need for a speedy decision on Doncaster’s university technical college, to give the go-ahead for the money? Will she have a word, please?

Jane Ellison: I am very happy to raise that issue with colleagues. More broadly, the Government absolutely support the skills agenda, which we have made a real priority. If we are to close the productivity gap in this country, investing in skills and high-quality apprenticeships is clearly key. We have taken a lot of action in that regard.
Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The most useful thing that the Treasury could do for small manufacturers in my constituency would be to announce an objective of staying in the customs union. Up to now, the Treasury has been a beacon in saying that it wants decisions based on analysis, not on rhetoric and ideology. Can the Minister assure the House that that is still under consideration?

Jane Ellison: Again, these are issues that we are looking at carefully; the Chancellor has had a series of roundtable meetings with different sectors and industries in recent months, as have all of us Ministers. We are looking carefully at what those detailed issues are. Of course, much more will be said on this and discussed in the House later today, but we are clear that we want to understand the detailed issues that businesses face so that as we move forward to make our future outside the European Union, we can resolve the practical issues that businesses will face in a way that helps the British economy.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Access to capital is vital for small businesses in my constituency and across the country, and a refusal from a big bank should not be the end of the line. Will the Minister continue to support the bank referral scheme, which helps so many small businesses to access alternative sources of finance?

Jane Ellison: Absolutely we will. The Government’s finance platform referral policy helps small and medium-sized enterprises whose finance applications have been declined by their bank to explore alternative options. It requires the major banks to refer SMEs that are rejected for finance—with their permission—to finance platforms. We can do a range of other things to support the good point that my hon. Friend makes. I encourage all Members with SMEs in their area that have had finance applications rejected to refer them to some of these schemes, because they are making a difference.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Many small businesses in the Northern Isles are in the tourism sector. Given the Chancellor’s reported comments at the weekend, will the Government look again at the opportunities presented by the tourism industry’s proposals for a lower rate of VAT on that sector?

Jane Ellison: The House will not be surprised to learn that the Treasury is receiving a number of suggestions as to what might happen to VAT when we are no longer members of the EU, and I am aware of the pressure from and representations made by the tourism industry. I am meeting the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee tomorrow; this is likely to be one of the issues on its mind. Of course we look at these issues carefully, but we are still members of the EU, and all our legal obligations and so on remain while that is the case.

Science and Technology: Innovation

3. Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to encourage investment in innovative UK science and technology projects.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): As announced at the autumn statement, the Government are significantly increasing investment in research and development, which is rising by an extra £2 billion a year by 2020-21. That is the largest increase over a Parliament since records began in 1979. This includes an industrial strategy challenge fund, which will support collaboration between businesses and the UK’s world-leading science base. That will ensure that the UK remains an attractive place for business to invest in innovative research, and that the next generation of discoveries are made, developed and produced in the UK.

Nusrat Ghani: I thank the Minister for his answer. Scientifica, one of the largest employers in my constituency, won both business of the year and export business of the year for 2016 at the British Chambers of Commerce’s annual awards. I will be incredibly proud to join Scientifica when it opens the London stock exchange in March. Will he join me in congratulating Scientifica, and will he pledge to continue supporting such businesses, which export the best of British scientific innovation, collaboration and enterprise to the rest of the world?

Mr Gauke: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Scientifica, and I am happy to make that pledge. At the spending review, we committed to a £175 million reinvestment in UK Trade & Investment, now part of the Department for International Trade, to drive UK exports. We remain committed to ensuring that UK exporters receive world-class support. Indeed, as the Prime Minister will make clear today, maintaining the UK as one of the best places in the world for science and innovation is a priority for us.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): On Friday, I visited Wirecard, an innovative financial technology company in the emerging payments sector; it is based in Newcastle. It is concerned that leaving the European single market, and in particular the passporting rights, will diminish investment in fintech, an area in which this country leads, and which is growing in Newcastle and the north-east. What reassurance will the Minister give Wirecard?

Mr Gauke: As the hon. Lady will be aware, the Prime Minister will have just begun making a speech on this matter, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union will make a statement to the House later. Let me just say that the UK is in a very strong position on fintech, and on ensuring that this successful sector is a priority. Indeed, the Minister for Trade and Investment, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), led a delegation of 33 companies to India, where the focus was, among other things, on this sector and promoting the best of British businesses. We will continue to ensure that the UK remains a strong place for the sector.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the fact that Cheltenham’s GCHQ cyber-accelerator is now up and running? Does he agree that that key element of the Government’s £1.9 billion national cyber-security programme will allow start-ups to gain access to GCHQ’s world-beating personnel and digital expertise to bring jobs and opportunity to Gloucestershire?
Mr Gauke: Yes. I certainly welcome what my hon. Friend said about the opportunities here. He highlights an important sector that has significant potential for the UK and for Gloucestershire.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): What discussions have taken place in Northern Ireland with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ensure that catapult projects will happen in Northern Ireland just as much as in the rest of the UK, to help our science and business development?

Mr Gauke: We are, of course, determined to ensure that all of the UK is a good place for these businesses to develop, and to encourage the development of technology and businesses that are based on it. The future of the United Kingdom has to be as a highly skilled, technologically advanced, outward-looking country. We have engaged with all the devolved Administrations to further that aim.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): We Labour Members believe that encouraging investment is essential to making our economy more productive, and we recognise that that will be especially important post Brexit. Does the Treasury have a genuine indicator of how foreign direct investment has been affected by the referendum result, given that it was recently revealed that the Department for International Trade’s figures incorrectly include decisions taken before the vote for Brexit?

Mr Gauke: We are at an early stage, in terms of the impact on foreign direct investment. On the level of business investment since the referendum, the numbers have held up pretty strongly, although, as I say, it is early days and early data. The hon. Gentleman says he welcomes business investment in this country; he should listen to some of the things his party leadership is saying, which would do nothing but drive business out of the United Kingdom.

Sovereign Debt

4. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce sovereign debt.

Mr Hammond: The way it works is that the pricing of new Government debt is determined by the auctions around new issuance, which, clearly, is bought at current exchange rates by foreign purchasers of debt. The hon. Lady makes a good and important point: currency volatility, rather than the actual level of the currency, does introduce an additional dimension for foreign purchasers of UK Government debt. I have said many times that the process that we are embarked on of negotiating our exit from the European Union creates some uncertainty, some of which we have seen manifesting itself in the currency markets. The sooner we can get through that period of uncertainty and have clarity about our future relationships with the European Union, the better for markets, business and people in this country. The purpose of the speech that the Prime Minister is making right now is to start to give some clarity to the situation.

Leaving the EU: UK Economy

5. William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to improve the resilience of the economy in preparation for the UK leaving the EU.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): We have committed to returning the public finances to balance as soon as possible in the next Parliament, and to reducing the structural deficit to below 2% of GDP by the end of this Parliament. As I have said, that strikes the right balance between restoring the public finances to health and giving ourselves enough flexibility to allow us, if necessary, to support the economy in the short term as we go through this period of greater uncertainty. We have also been able to commit an additional £23 billion to a national productivity investment fund to improve our economic productivity.

William Wragg: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the resilience of our economy is best served by what the Prime Minister has said today, which is that Britain will be leaving the single market with no ifs and no buts?

Mr Hammond: For six months, we have kept open as many options as possible while we review the way forward in this negotiation with the European Union. We have heard very clearly the views and the political red lines expressed by other European leaders. We want to work with those leaders and to recognise and respect their political red lines. That is why the Prime Minister is setting out right now a position on which we will go forward, understanding that we cannot be members of the single market because of the political red lines...
around the four freedoms that other European leaders have set. She is expressing an ambitious agenda for a comprehensive free trade arrangement with the European Union that will allow our companies to trade in Europe, and European companies to trade in Britain, while minimising disruption to business patterns and to pan-European supply chains.

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): EU banks use passport arrangements to operate in the UK, and so provide us with jobs and the Exchequer with revenue. Given what the Prime Minister is saying at this moment, those arrangements are clearly at risk. How hopeful is the Chancellor that passporting will survive the exit from the European Union?

**Mr Hammond:** As the right hon. Gentleman says, EU banks use passporting to operate in the UK, and of course, vice versa. UK banks use passporting to operate in the European Union. It is important that EU banks are able to continue operating in the UK, and that UK banks are able to continue operating in the EU. He will know that City, UK, the lead City pressure group on this issue, took the strategic decision last week to stop pushing for passporting rights and to focus instead on what I would describe as an enhanced equivalence regime. The important thing is not the mechanism, but the end result, and that is what the Prime Minister will set out today.

**Mr Andrew Tyrie** (Chichester) (Con): The Treasury Committee has challenged whether the Office for Budget Responsibility’s sustainability reports—the latest such report was published just an hour ago—are worth the effort, given that they amount to 50-year forecasting. The OBR’s latest effort does not even try to take account of Brexit at all. It is required to do this work by statute. Does the Chancellor not think that it might be a good idea to revisit that commitment?

**Mr Hammond:** My right hon. Friend has a point in one sense, in that economic forecasters admit that even with a five-year forecast, there will be a high degree of uncertainty about accuracy. On a 50-year forecast, there will be a very high degree of uncertainty indeed, but we will see how the debate goes on the fiscal sustainability report that is published today. I suspect that it will act as a very useful catalyst for discussing some of the really important strategic issues that we face as a nation, not in the white heat of immediate political debate, but over a much longer term—over a 50-year period—so that we can think about where we go in the balance between public spending and taxation, and how we support our vital public services.

24. [908223] **Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The financial services industry employs 40,000 people in Edinburgh alone. Given the Chancellor’s comments on the single market, what impact does he think leaving it will have on jobs in Scotland?

**Mr Hammond:** My assessment is that by setting out our agenda and by setting out clear objectives, as the Prime Minister is right now, we are meeting the first ask of our European partners, which is to be clear about what we want. We are recognising the political red lines they have set out and saying that we will respect them. That is the first step towards sensible engagement with our European Union partners to reach an outcome that is positive for the UK and for the European Union. That of course must include freedom for financial services firms to continue doing their business.

**Mr Speaker:** I was going to call the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), but he does not seem to be standing—

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab) rose—

**Mr Speaker:** Go on, get in there man.

15. [908214] **Mr Cunningham:** What provisions has the Chancellor made for universities in this country after 2020? Will he match pound for pound the lack of EU money?

**Mr Hammond:** What we have said is that where EU funding is awarded to projects involving universities, businesses, external research institutes and farmers between now and the point of our departure from the European Union, provided those awards meet our value-for-money criteria and have the support of the UK or devolved Administration Department responsible, the Treasury will underwrite those awards. We expect that in any settlement with the European Union, the Commission will go on paying those awards after we have left, but if it does not we will stand behind them.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Many small businesses in Kettering are supplied by other British firms and sell their goods and services to British consumers, yet all are affected by often unnecessary EU regulation. Will the Chancellor join efforts post-Brexit to reduce this burden as quickly as possible?

**Mr Hammond:** The remedy to the problem my hon. Friend sets out will lie in the hands of this Parliament once we repatriate the acquis in the great repeal Bill.

**Stewart Hosie** (Dundee East) (SNP): In the seven years to 2014, Scotland’s trade with the EU rose by 20%, twice the rate of growth in trade to the rest of the UK and vital for a resilient economy. Today’s hard Tory Brexit puts that at risk, but is this not also a kick in the teeth to many of those who voted leave believing that a European economic area/European Free Trade Association-type arrangement would be put in place to mitigate the damage done?

**Mr Hammond:** I reject the hon. Gentleman’s analysis. We are engaging constructively with the real world and recognising the political red lines of our European Union partners. If we do not recognise them, frankly, we are hanging our heads against a brick wall. They have to recognise our political red lines, we have to recognise theirs, and then we need to work together to find a pragmatic solution that works for all the people of the UK within those red lines, and that is what we are doing.

**Stewart Hosie:** As we are looking for a pragmatic solution, Scotland’s trade with the rest of the world over the same timeframe grew by 50%, driven by EU trade agreements. Given that it takes an average of
28 months to conclude a single agreement, how many pragmatic decades does the Chancellor believe it will take to put in place the trade agreements that we need to mitigate the damage of a hard Tory Brexit?

Mr Hammond: I am disappointed to hear the hon. Gentleman resorting to the soundbite; he is normally better than that. The discussions I have had with third countries that have free trade agreements with the European Union suggest that there is a strong appetite for a quick and simple agreement with the UK so that, as we leave the European Union, we can immediately enter into a successor agreement with those countries—Korea, for example—that will allow us to continue trading with them on the same terms.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): At the weekend, the Chancellor told a German newspaper—not this House, you will notice, Mr Speaker—that he is prepared to turn this country into a tax haven. If that means competing with the likes of Ireland on a 12.5% corporation tax rate on top of existing Tory tax cuts it means, according to the House of Commons Library, giving away more than £100 billion to corporations over the next five. That is equivalent to almost 5p on the basic rate of income tax. How then does the Chancellor ever propose to solve the funding crisis in the NHS and social care, given that this morning the Office for Budget Responsibility thinks that public finances are on an unsustainable path?

Mr Hammond: Let us take that question apart. There are two points. First, the OBR’s 50-year forecast sets out a possible outcome if the Government take no action. As I made very clear in the autumn statement, we are acutely aware that action will be required in order to return the public finances to balance. Secondly, with regard to my interview with "Welt am Sonntag", what I said very clearly—I am sorry if this did not come across in the UK reporting, but the right hon. Gentleman should read the original—was that Britain wants to remain in the European mainstream, with its economic and social model, but that can happen only if we get a sensible Brexit deal for continued access to the European market. If we do not, the people of this country will not simply lie down and accept that they will be poorer. We will do whatever it takes to maintain our competitiveness and protect our standard of living.

John McDonnell: The threat is there on the record: this country will be a tax haven, according to the threats the Chancellor has issued today. We know from what the Prime Minister is saying right now that she is intent on pulling up the drawbridge and leaving the single market, and possibly the customs union, cutting us off from one of the largest markets on the planet, threatening jobs and public finances. This is not a clean Brexit; it is an extremely messy Brexit. We can already see the consequences in the rise in the rate of inflation. With real living standards squeezed by this policy announcement, is it not time for the Chancellor—I appeal to him—to reconsider his cuts to in-work benefits and withdraw them in full in the Budget in March?

Mr Hammond: No. What the Prime Minister is setting out today is an ambitious agenda for a Britain engaged in the world, and a Britain engaged with the European Union. What she is setting out is a broad-based offer for future collaboration on trade, investment, security, education, technical and scientific areas, and many other matters. We want to remain engaged with the European Union, and I am confident that the approach the Prime Minister is setting out today will allow us successfully to negotiate a comprehensive future relationship with the European Union.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We do need to speed up, so short, sharp questions and comparably pithy replies are the order of the day.

Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor

6. David Mackintosh (Northampton South) (Con): What steps he is taking to develop the Oxford to Cambridge growth corridor.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): At the autumn statement, the Government backed recommendations made by the National Infrastructure Commission to invest £140 million in the Cambridge/Milton Keynes/Oxford corridor. That includes development funding for the expressway road scheme and £100 million to accelerate construction of the east-west rail line. The Government support the commission’s ongoing work, looking at a range of delivery models for housing and transport in the corridor.

David Mackintosh: How does my right hon. Friend envisage that benefiting the economy in Northamptonshire?

Mr Gauke: It is worth pointing out that in the terms of reference for the National Infrastructure Commission’s report the Government noted that the area contained four of the UK’s fastest growing and most productive places—Oxford, Cambridge, Milton Keynes and Northampton. We agree with the commission that transport investment is key to maximising growth potential in the area. We will invest in the east-west rail line and the expressway, which will better connect parts of the region with one another and with the rest of the country, supporting growth and jobs. The commission will issue its final report later this year, including work on delivery options for housing and transport, and we will carefully consider those recommendations.

Single Market

7. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of losing access to the single market on the chemical industry and the wider economy.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): The Government absolutely recognise the significant contribution that the chemicals industry makes to the UK economy, and of course the complex supply chains between the UK and the EU. The hon. Gentleman will have heard the Chancellor’s words just now about the importance we attach to getting the best possible market access, and the Prime Minister is talking about that this morning. We are looking at a comprehensive range of analysis to inform our position as we go into those negotiations but, as the Prime Minister is laying out, clarity and certainty are one of the industry’s big asks.
Alex Cunningham: The Chemical Industries Association’s Brexit manifesto shows how the chemical industry could help to sustain and enhance the UK as a location for future investment in jobs while playing a leading part in addressing global environmental challenges. Has the Minister read the manifesto? What is she doing to reassure the chemical industry that its very specific needs are at the forefront of her mind as the Government develop their strategy?

Jane Ellison: Rather than just reading the manifesto, Ministers have actually been meeting the chemical industry. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), met the Chemical Industries Association on 17 November. All these issues were explored in some detail and a good, productive conversation was had.

Sir Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend’s typically constructive approach, but does she recall the clinical trials directive that destroyed much of the pharmaceutical industry in this country overnight, including Pfizer’s site in east Kent?

Jane Ellison: As I recall, the original directive did have some negative effects, but it was improved on in subsequent negotiations to ensure that it did not have the same effect.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Voters partly backed leave on the basis of the £350 million economic boost that our NHS is still waiting for. Where, therefore, is the democratic mandate for this Conservative version of hard Brexit—leaving the customs union and the single market—that the Chancellor himself has accepted damages the economy and that puts jobs in my Tooting constituency at risk?

Mr Speaker: With particular reference to any concerns about employment in the chemical industry, preferably in—

Dr Allin-Khan rose—

Mr Speaker: No, the hon. Lady does not need to add anything. I am sure that she meant to mention it in her question. It was an error of omission—only a matter of time.

Jane Ellison: Of course. As colleagues across the House will realise, getting the best deal for Britain means getting the best deal for all our major companies and industries. That, in turn, allows us to carry on investing the record amounts that we have in the NHS to date.

Mr Speaker: On the chemical industry, I feel sure—Mr David Nuttall.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Yes, indeed. Does my hon. Friend agree that when we leave the European Union, the fact that this Parliament will be free to redraft the registration, evaluation and authorisation of chemicals regulation, which has long been identified as one of the most burdensome of all EU regulations, will be of enormous benefit to small and medium-sized businesses in the chemical industry, particularly those that only operate within the UK?

Jane Ellison: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. A discussion about the REACH regulation was on the agenda when the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union met the chemical industry and, of course, it will continue to form part of our discussions.

US Banks: UK Operations

8. Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Whether he has made an assessment of the potential merits of introducing additional rules to ring-fence the operations of US banks in the UK. [908207]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): US banks operating in the UK are regulated by the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Financial Conduct Authority. The UK’s ring-fencing regime applies to all banks operating in the UK that are above the threshold of holding £25 billion of core deposits.

Philip Boswell: Does the Minister agree that the likely rolling back of the Dodd–Frank Act in the US, combined with the watering down of banking conduct reform, could result in deregulated American banks with high-risk lending patterns operating in the UK?

Simon Kirby: The UK and US financial sectors have significantly increased their resilience since the crisis, and the PRA has the powers it needs to regulate overseas firms operating in the UK to ensure the stability of the UK financial system.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to ensure that banks meet the 2019 deadline for separating retail banking from riskier investment banking activity?

Simon Kirby: That is well under way and we are keeping a close eye on it.

Household Debt

9. Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of high levels of household debt on the economy. [908208]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Households’ financial positions have improved. Household debt has fallen from 160% of household income in quarter 1 2008 to 144% in Q3 2016. UK households have undertaken the second-largest amount of deleveraging in the G7. However, we should be alert to signs of a recent reduction in the level of household savings. The savings ratio is now—in Q3 2016—at 5.6%, which is down from 6.6% in Q3 2015.

Clive Efford: Notwithstanding that, household debt is very high, and housing costs are a big proportion of households’ expenditure. Has the Chancellor made an assessment of the impact of an interest rate increase on growth, given that that growth is driven by consumer spending?

Mr Hammond: Yes. The Bank of England makes regular assessments of the impact of changes in interest rates—that is a central part of the modelling work that it does. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that one
of the drivers of the relatively high household debt levels in this country is our housing model, with relatively high percentages of home ownership.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The Governor of the Bank of England has identified that two of the most serious challenges to the economy today are levels of household debt and the falling pound. Both of those are made worse by the widespread belief among the general public that interest rates are not going to go up. What more can the Government and the Governor of the Bank of England do to signal to the public that interest rates will rise, and not fall, in the near future?

Mr Hammond: That is not a matter for the Government, because, as my hon. Friend knows very well, interest rates are a matter for the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England, and it is up to the Governor and individual members of the Monetary Policy Committee to signal as they see fit.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): TUC analysis published last week showed that unsecured household debt is at a record high. Even the Bank of England voiced concern yesterday that the UK was relying on consumer spending rather than exports and investment to boost growth, which bodes poorly for the future. Does the Chancellor acknowledge that such high levels of household debt are indicative of the fact that the Government’s economic strategy simply is not working, especially for most families who are now struggling to get by on their incomes alone?

Mr Hammond: No, I do not accept that at all. What I do accept is that the extraordinary performance of the UK economy over the last six months, which has defied many predictions, has been largely driven by consumer behaviour. As I just set out in my response to the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford), the savings ratio has declined, so consumers are feeling confident, and they have been spending money rather than saving it over the last six months.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I invite the Chancellor to meet struggling families in my constituency and, indeed, across the rest of Britain. Even the Office for National Statistics reported on 10 January that non-retired households have less money on average than before the economic crash. Chronic low pay, lack of opportunity and Government cuts to support mean that they are desperately trying to find ways to make ends meet on a monthly basis using debt. Will the Chancellor therefore confirm what protection he will offer these families should inflation rise significantly as a result of the pound’s weakness since Brexit and, indeed, in the light of the Bank of England’s suggestion yesterday that interest rates could go up?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady is right, of course, that the declining value of sterling will have an impact on inflation, and we have to take that into account as it feeds through the economy. The OBR signalled in its autumn statement report how it expects that to occur. At the time of the Budget on 8 March, we will get new reports from the OBR in the light of currency movements since the autumn statement, and I will report to the House again then.

10. Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): What progress has been made on improving access to online and in-branch banking for carers.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): Banks are required to treat customers fairly and ensure that vulnerable customers have appropriate access to banking. My hon. Friend and I met recently to discuss this, and I am pleased to hear that both the Financial Conduct Authority and the British Bankers Association have offered to meet my hon. Friend to discuss it further.

Stuart Andrew: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for meeting my constituent Annie Dransfield, who, as a carer for her adult son, manages his finances in the hope that he will be able to live as independent a life as possible, but she has real issues trying to access his online banking. Given the increasing number of carers in the country, does my hon. Friend agree that the banking industry should do all it can for these very important customers?

Simon Kirby: The FCA and BBA are both looking at ways to make it easier for trusted friends or family to help people to manage their money safely, and I wish my hon. Friend luck with his meetings.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As my brother’s appointee after he suffered severe head trauma in an accident 11 years ago, I can see many avenues by which carers’ time is taken up dealing with red tape. Will the Minister outline his view on how things such as online banking can be kept safe but made simpler for carers with regard to multiple usernames?

Simon Kirby: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we have discussed this. It is the very issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) will be discussing with the BBA and the FCA, and the Government are keeping a close eye on it.

Housing Supply

11. Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to increase housing supply in (a) Peterborough and (b) England.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): Progress has been made since 2010, with housing starts now at an eight-year high. However, the scale of the challenge requires us to go further. That was why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced in the autumn statement that the Government will invest £5.3 billion in housing. This includes investing £2.3 billion in the new housing infrastructure fund, which will deliver up to 100,000 homes in high-demand areas, an additional £1.4 billion to deliver 40,000 new affordable homes, and £1.7 billion to deliver a programme of accelerated construction on public land.

Mr Jackson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that supporting the off-site construction of new homes, as we have been doing in Peterborough, is one important way to get more good-quality homes built quickly?
Mr Gauke: I do agree that we should explore the potential of modern methods of construction, including off-site construction. We should also ensure that the Government support new entrants into the market, particularly SME builders. The accelerated construction programme announced by my right hon. Friend the Communities and Local Government Secretary in October, which aims to speed up the build-out of homes on public land, will include an element of off-site construction. The Department for Communities and Local Government is actively considering ways of encouraging diversification in the house building market.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Oh, we had better get the fellow in; otherwise he will be very unhappy. I do not like to see the hon. Gentleman unhappy. I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As someone who chairs a national charity based in Peterborough, and also as the Member of Parliament for Huddersfield, may I back the people who have been saying not only that we need a more diverse housing market and better provision, but that the future must be lower-cost housing and off-site construction, and to a highly sustainable standard?

Mr Gauke: I thank that we can agree on all that; there is consensus on this point. We do need to build more homes. Building more homes more cheaply, but of high quality and on a sustainable basis, is something on which I hope the whole House can agree.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): In my constituency, we face high levels of proposed new housing. Can the Minister assure me that that will be matched with increased investment in our local infrastructure?

Mr Gauke: I draw my hon. Friend’s attention to the housing infrastructure fund, which demonstrates the Government’s determination to ensure that when new housing is built in areas of high demand, we also deliver the infrastructure to support that housing. That will have a beneficial effect by getting more houses built, and also ensuring that the appropriate infrastructure is in place.

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

Mr Speaker: Order. This is about Peterborough and England, not Kilmarnock and Loudoun—or even Scotland. I am going to save the hon. Gentleman up for a later occasion. We look forward to that with eager anticipation.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): For many in my constituency, home ownership is but a pipe dream, with more people renting privately than owning their own homes. What steps is the Minister considering to encourage private landlords at least to offer longer tenancies for these very many private renters in London and in Hackney South?

Mr Gauke: We look to put in place measures to support all sectors and all types of housing. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that private rented housing is a really important sector. However, I am sure that she agrees that we have to be careful about some of the proposals on rent controls that float around, which would be damaging for the private rented sector.

Value of the Pound

13. Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of recent trends in the value of the pound on the economy; and if he will make a statement.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The Government do not comment on currency movements and we do not target an exchange rate, but I will tell the House that the pound has spiked in the last few minutes while the Prime Minister has been speaking. The vote to leave the EU has obviously caused some uncertainty in the movements of financial markets. More generally, the fundamentals of our economy over the last couple of years have been strong.

Mr Speaker: I think what the Chancellor means is that he does not comment on currency movements unless he does.

Fiona Mactaggart: But is it not the case that No. 10’s office briefed that the pound would fall as a result of the Prime Minister’s remarks today? Did it do that in a cynical attempt to get the soundbite that the Chancellor has just sought to achieve?

Mr Hammond: I draw a distinction between providing the House with information and commenting on that information—I would not dream of doing the latter. The other thing I would not dream of commenting on is any operations that No. 10 might undertake, which are well beyond my pay grade.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The depreciation of the pound during the past few months has been of significant benefit to west midlands exporters, particularly those exporting outside the European Union. Does the Chancellor agree that whatever arrangements we come to for access to the single market after we leave the European Union, they must not constrain west midlands exporters from growing their trade outside the European Union?

Mr Hammond: On the contrary, the arrangements must support west midlands exporters in that endeavour. We still have a very large current account external deficit, and we need to bring our trade into better balance. One of our objectives in concluding the exit arrangements from the European Union will be to support that.

Concentrix

14. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Whether the Government plan to publish a timetable for investigating HM Revenue and Customs’ contract with Concentrix.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): The independent National Audit Office has in fact published its report on HMRC’s contract with Concentrix today. HMRC senior managers will attend a Public Accounts Committee hearing on 25 January, at which the report will be discussed.
Gerald Jones: Given the report released this morning, which the Minister mentioned, and the fact that the whole debacle has caused undue stress to thousands of people across the country, including in my constituency, what specific lessons has she and the Department learned?

Jane Ellison: There are a number of things. I reflected on them during the Opposition day debate on this subject when, as Labour Front Benchers will remember, I accepted their motion. We have of course learned a number of lessons, including on how Ministers monitor colleagues’ views about the way in which we deal with their concerns on behalf of their constituents. HMRC has confirmed that it is not planning a contract of this nature for this particular operation, but it will have more to say when it responds both to the PAC and to the report.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Given the NAO’s excoriating report on Concentrix’s failure to achieve savings targets, performance targets, serviceable staffing levels, sufficient levels of training, call handling accuracy, proficient contract management and competent decision making—while, unbelievably, increasing its commission almost threefold—would not the Chancellor’s time be better spent concentrating on getting a modicum of efficiency into HMRC, rather than popping off to Davos for a winter sojourn?

Jane Ellison: First, I want to say that many tens of thousands of people work for HMRC. It would do their morale a power of good if people in this House reflected on their current excellent performance and the improvements they have made on customer service compared with two years ago. I want to compliment them publicly on the improvements they have made.

We have accepted that mistakes were made on Concentrix, and that is the reason why the agreement was terminated. We will reflect on that further when we respond to the National Audit Office report.

Topical Questions

T1. [908190] Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal responsibility remains delivering near-term measures to ensure stability and resilience as the UK exits the EU, while also addressing the UK’s long-term productivity challenge. My immediate focus is on preparing the last ever spring Budget for delivery on 8 March.

Carol Monaghan: Many of my constituents are concerned about the future of the Green Investment Bank in relation to possible asset stripping, the worth of the golden share and the suitability of the buyer. What is the Department doing to ensure that the UK taxpayer is given a fair deal on the sale of the bank and the bank retains its green focus?

Mr Hammond: Those are two of the criteria that we have set: there should be value for money for the taxpayer, and the bank’s focus for future operations should be retained and protected. We are reviewing the sale process as it goes forward, and we will make sure that those outcomes are protected.

T2. [908191] Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): The latest fiscal sustainability report was published by the Office for Budget Responsibility just over an hour ago. Knowing what a quick reader my right hon. Friend is, what assessment has he made of the implications for the long-term health of the public finances?

Mr Hammond: I am not only a quick reader, but able to read the report while also answering questions in the House.

The OBR’s report shows that, under certain circumstances, the UK public finances will come under increasing pressure over the next 50 years. As I said earlier, this creates a catalyst for a discussion, which we need to have, about how we maintain the sustainability of our crucial public services, given the pressures, including demographic pressures, that they will face. I believe that the report serves a useful purpose. Given that the point 50 years out is sufficiently far away, I hope that we will be able to have a mature, cross-party discussion about how we address these issues in the long term.

T5. [908194] Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): The autumn statement revealed the Brexit bombshell that growth will be a massive 2.4% lower than previously predicted. What further impact does the Chancellor expect that leaving the single market will have on GDP growth in the years to come?

Mr Hammond: The Office for Budget Responsibility set out its projections under different scenarios at the autumn statement. It is the OBR that makes the forecasts. It will, of course, produce a revised set of forecasts that will be published on 8 March—Budget day.

T4. [908193] Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Businesses, including restaurants and guest houses in my constituency, curtail their business to keep within the VAT threshold as soon as the opportunity arises: VAT is projected to raise £138 billion for the public finances this year. We have one of the highest thresholds in the EU, but I am always happy to listen to colleagues. I know that the concerns of the tourism industry are to the fore in the minds of many colleagues.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): I thank my hon. Friend for that point, which I am happy to discuss. It is worth putting on record that VAT is projected to raise £138 billion for the public finances this year. We have one of the highest thresholds in the EU, but I am always happy to listen to colleagues. I know that the concerns of the tourism industry are to the fore in the minds of many colleagues.

T6. [908195] Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Last week, the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority began a statutory consultation on UK Government plans to cut final salary pensions across the nuclear estate, which will have an impact on 16,000 workers, including hundreds in my constituency. Is the Chancellor aware that this is a betrayal of promises made by Margaret Thatcher to nuclear workers when the electricity industry was privatised?
The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): The Government and the relevant agency recognise the importance of the employees who work in this sector, but it is necessary to have terms and conditions that reflect the modern situation that applies across the economy as a whole.

T7. [908196] Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): The Solent region has a deficit of 6% in its gross value added compared with the rest of the south-east. Much of that is due to the lack of investment in local transport infrastructure; for example, there has been no significant rail investment for 50 years. Can Ministers confirm that the new national productivity investment fund can be used to address that deficit?

Mr Gauke: I can say to my hon. Friend that the very purpose of the national productivity investment fund is to support economic growth across all regions of the country. Further details specifying how and where the fund will be invested will be set out by the relevant Departments and agencies in due course. The Solent will not be forgotten, and we are taking action to improve rail services, with a new franchise expected to deliver more services and quicker journey times on South West Trains.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is simply not good enough to throw Concentrix under the bus. Today’s National Audit Office report finds that HMRC was at fault in the writing of the contract, in failing to monitor it, and in intervening to make things worse after a poor performance in summer 2015. Who at HMRC will be held accountable for the gross failings of this contract from beginning to end?

Jane Ellison: The hon. Lady and I have debated this issue. We are looking at the significant criticisms in the report. We have accepted a number of the criticisms that have been made about the handling of this matter, but a lot of money has been saved by addressing error and fraud in the tax credits system. HMRC will respond in more detail at next week’s PAC hearing, and I will be considering the report in detail.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): The Help to Buy scheme has helped more than 220,000 households to buy a home, including more than 180,000 first-time buyers. In the autumn statement, the Chancellor announced that the Government will invest an additional £1.4 billion in affordable housing to deliver 40,000 new homes for shared ownership, rent to buy and affordable rent, bringing the total funding of the affordable homes programme to £7.1 billion.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Will the Chancellor state unequivocally the Government’s commitment to the 0.7% aid target in this and future spending rounds?

Mr Philip Hammond: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the 0.7% target is enshrined in primary legislation, and the Government have no intention of changing that.

T9. [908198] Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): The Government are investing in major infrastructure projects, including Heathrow airport, HS2 and, I hope, a new A36-A46 link road through my constituency. What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that we provide sufficient funds so that this work can be conducted in a timely fashion?

Mr Gauke: The Government are committed to supporting the skills we need to deliver our national infrastructure. In the transport infrastructure skills strategy for 2016, we committed to creating 30,000 road and rail apprenticeships by the end of the Parliament. In addition, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is investing £40 million in the national college for high-speed rail, with additional funding for the college coming from local government and industry. Finally, Heathrow airport has committed to double the number of its apprentices to 10,000 by the time the new third runway is operational.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne) (Lab): Changes to the rateable value for solar panels for organisations mean that business rates for organisations with solar rooftop installations, such as schools, hospitals and SMEs, could increase dramatically—six to eightfold—in April. Do the Government recognise the huge damage that this will cause to organisations that have installed panels in good faith, as well as the solar panel industry?

Jane Ellison: The installation of solar panels is only one of the factors that determines the rateable value. That said, a £3.4 billion transitional relief scheme will support businesses facing an increase in business rate bills, while businesses with solar panels will also benefit from the £6.7 billion package—the biggest ever—to reduce business rates.

T10. [908199] Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): The Government will be aware that north Wales has among the lowest productivity rates in the UK, at about 73% of the UK average. With that in mind, what plans do they have to work with the six north Wales councils, the Mersey Dee alliance and the Cheshire and Warrington local enterprise partnership to deliver a local growth deal?

Mr Gauke: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that Treasury Ministers have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues about how the Government can boost growth and productivity across Wales and the UK. At autumn statement 2016, the Government confirmed that the door was still open for a growth deal with north Wales, and we are committed to negotiating a city deal for the Swansea Bay city region in south Wales. I look forward to receiving proposals from partners in the north Wales region over the coming months.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is always very well briefed for these topical questions—reading out the screed! Very good.
Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The International Monetary Fund yesterday highlighted widening inequality and stagnation as key drivers of social dislocation, while the Institute for Fiscal Studies has recently warned of the biggest pay squeeze in the UK for 70 years. What is the Chancellor’s strategy to ensure that growth in our economy benefits everybody?

Mr Philip Hammond: Income inequality has been falling, but of course we face challenges as the depreciation of sterling works its way into inflation in the economy. That is an issue on which we will remain very much focused, and I will address it in more detail in the Budget.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Alongside other elements driving recent extremely successful purchasing managers’ index surveys were seven consecutive months of export growth. Does the Minister agree that this is a fine way to underpin our already record rates of employment?

Simon Kirby: I agree. The PMI surveys show significant resilience in the UK economy since the referendum. The Prime Minister recently made it clear that we will make a success of leaving the EU.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Given the Chief Secretary’s earlier comments about attempts to stimulate house building, can he guarantee that at the end of this Parliament the supply of rented homes will be larger than it was at the beginning?

Mr Gauke: We are likely to build more affordable homes in this Parliament than have been built since the 1970s.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): There are currently 87,000 ultra-low emission vehicles on our roads, but the Committee on Climate Change says that we need 1.7 million by 2020. What more can the Treasury do to underpin our already record rates of employment?

Mr Philip Hammond: I recognise my hon. Friend’s concern. This matter was on my agenda when I was Transport Secretary in 2010. The roll-out of ultra-low emission vehicles has been disappointing—it has not been as fast as I would have hoped—and that will be one of the issues we consider as we try to respond to concerns about air quality, which have been reinforced by recent court decisions requiring the Government to review their approach on that.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In his previous Budget, the Chancellor stuck in a £7 billion investment line for the year 2021-22, which is beyond the remit of this Parliament, so will he explain what that money is for?

Mr Hammond: It is customary to present forecasts for fiscal events over the forecast period which, as we progress through this Parliament, will stretch beyond its end. That is how it has always been done, and it would not be helpful to give the House only a shorter horizon.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. This is a London-related question. Major infrastructure investment will form a vital part of our economy in post-Brexit Britain. Will my right hon. Friend confirm his support for London’s major infrastructure project—Crossrail 2?

Mr Hammond: The Government will, of course, consider all proposals for infrastructure investment on their merits. When the industrial strategy Green Paper is published, it will set out the Government’s approach to prioritising infrastructure to support the economy.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): When the Chancellor considers the effect of bringing in quarterly reporting, will he look at the figures showing that only 25% of our smaller businesses have maintained electronic accounting records and that 38% lack basic digital skills? Will he listen to what the Chair of the Treasury Committee said when he described this as a potential “disaster”?

Jane Ellison: I always listen to what the Chair of the Treasury Committee says. I am considering the Committee’s very useful report carefully. Of course, it acknowledged that the digitisation of the tax service represents the direction in which we should be travelling, but we are looking carefully at the possible impacts on small businesses, many thousands of which we have already exempted through our existing announcements.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. On the subject of berries, does my right hon. Friend the Chancellor share my concern that too many JAMs are becoming jam tomorrow with the ballooning of household debt? What steps will he take to stop inappropriate and irresponsible lending by credit card companies and banks to low-income households?

Mr Philip Hammond: The Government and the regulatory authorities take appropriate measures to prevent inappropriate lending and to make sure that credit products are not mis-sold, and we will continue to do so.

Several hon. Members: rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) always looks so happy. We will make him happier by calling him.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker; it is your presence that makes me happy.

While the Chancellor has been answering questions, the Prime Minister has said in her Lancaster House speech that the UK will most likely continue to pay into EU budgets. Will the Chancellor acquaint the House of that?

Mr Hammond: We have always said that if, as part of our future arrangements with our former European Union partners, we continue to collaborate in certain areas, such as scientific and technical research programmes, we will of course have to expect to contribute. All this is
for the negotiations ahead. The Prime Minister has today set out a 12-point plan for Britain's future relationship with the European Union, which is exactly what our partners have been demanding from us. I hope that this will now signal the beginning of serious engagement on Britain's future relations.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I heard this morning that an overseas insurance company had chosen Zurich over London as its European base because it felt that the Swiss authorities were much quicker to engage with it than the London authorities. Will the Chancellor ensure that we are the most competitive financial services market in the world and that we really take overseas investment seriously?

Mr Hammond: Of course. I thought that my hon. Friend was going to tell me that the company had chosen an EU location over London, so I am interested to hear him say that it has chosen Zurich—the only other possible non-EU location. I will look at the issue that he raises. It is our objective to have the most attractive location on this continent for inward investment and for foreign businesses to do their business.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Inflation is still below the Monetary Policy Committee's official target, and the economy has long been at greater and more worrying risk of deflation than inflation. Will the Chancellor therefore be seeking to dissuade the Governor of the Bank of England from any thoughts of raising interest rates, which would simply inflict wholly unnecessary damage on the economy?

Mr Hammond: No. It is not for me to dissuade or persuade the Governor of the Bank of England in relation to interest rate policy. However, I will say this to reassure the hon. Gentleman: although this morning's inflation figure—1.6%, as measured on the consumer prices index—is below the Bank of England's target rate, the forecasts of the OBR and, indeed, the Bank suggest that the figure will meet and exceed the target rate later in the year.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Finally, I call Yvonne Fovargue.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): More than a year ago, the Treasury promised to consult on breathing space to assist people in debt and protect them from interest and other charges while they seek help. In view of the high levels of personal debt, will the Minister commit himself to proceeding with that as a matter of urgency?

Simon Kirby: I can tell the hon. Lady that we are looking closely at the issue and will see some progress in the very near future.
Northern Ireland Assembly Election

12.41 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement about forthcoming elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

As the House knows, Martin McGuinness resigned as Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland on Monday 9 January, as a result of which the First Minister also ceased to hold office. That began a seven-day period in which both positions had to be filled, or it would fall to me to fulfill my statutory obligation as Secretary of State to call a fresh election to the Assembly.

Over the past week, I have engaged intensively with Northern Ireland’s political parties to establish whether any basis exists to resolve the tensions within the Executive without triggering an election. I have remained in close contact with the Irish Foreign Minister, Charlie Flanagan. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been kept fully informed, and has had conversations with the former First and Deputy First Ministers and the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny. Regrettably, despite all our collective efforts, it has not proved possible to find an agreed way forward in the time available. In the Northern Ireland Assembly yesterday, the Democratic Unionist party nominated Arlene Foster as First Minister, while Sinn Féin declined to nominate anyone to the post of Deputy First Minister.

I have some discretion in law over the setting of a date for an election, but, given the circumstances in which we find ourselves in Northern Ireland, I can see no case for delay. As a result, once the final deadline had passed at 5 pm yesterday, I proposed Thursday 2 March as the date of the Assembly election. The Assembly itself will be dissolved from 26 January, which means that the last sitting day will be 25 January. That will allow time for any urgent remaining business to be conducted before the election campaign begins in earnest.

I am now taking forward the process of submitting an Order in Council for approval by Her Majesty the Queen, on the advice of the Privy Council, formally setting in law the dates for both the dissolution and the election. In setting those dates, I have consulted the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, who has given me assurances on operational matters relating to the running of the election. The decisions that I have made have also been informed by my ongoing discussions with Northern Ireland’s political leadership.

As all Members will understand, elections are, by their nature, hotly contested. That is part of the essence of our democracy. No one expects debates about the key issues in Northern Ireland to be anything less than robust. I do, however, wish to stress the following.

This election is about the future of Northern Ireland and its political institutions. That means not just the Assembly, but all the arrangements that have been put in place to reflect relationships throughout these islands. That is why it will be vital for the campaign to be conducted respectfully and in ways that do not simply exacerbate tensions and division. Once the campaign is over, we need to be in a position to re-establish strong and stable devolved government in Northern Ireland.

Let me be very clear: I am not contemplating any outcome other than the re-establishment of strong and stable devolved government. For all the reasons I set out in my statement last week, devolution remains this Government’s strongly preferred option for Northern Ireland. It is about delivering a better future for the people of Northern Ireland and meeting their expectations. For our part, the UK Government will continue to stand by our commitments under the Belfast agreement and its successors, and we will do all we can to safeguard political stability.

Over the past decade Northern Ireland has enjoyed the longest run of unbroken devolved government since before the demise of the old Stormont Parliament in 1972. It has not always been easy, with more than a few bumps in the road, but, with strong leadership, issues that might once have brought the institutions down have been resolved through dialogue. And Northern Ireland has been able to present itself to the world in a way that would have been unrecognisable a few years ago: a modern, dynamic and outward-looking Northern Ireland that is a great place to live, work, invest and do business.

Northern Ireland has come so far, and we cannot allow the gains that have been made to be derailed. So, yes, we have an election, but once this election is over we need to be in a position to continue building a Northern Ireland that works for everyone. That is the responsibility on all of us, and we all need to rise to that challenge.

In that spirit, Mr Speaker, I commend this statement to the House.

12.47 pm

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement.

Like most of us, I am saddened that we are here today, and I know that so many good people in Northern Ireland will feel exactly the same, with deep regret that we have reached this impasse. I have personally been involved for almost three decades in Northern Ireland-related issues, and if I have learnt one thing it is that political vacuums should be avoided at all costs. So I say to the Secretary of State today that he must not only make sure that he is willing to fill that vacuum, but work with all parties to try to seek a way forward so that we avoid the nightmare scenario of six weeks of increasingly bitter campaigning which leaves us in the same place as when it started, with no solution in place to heal the huge divide and to bring together those elected to represent all the people of Northern Ireland.

I realise that the tension of an election dominates people’s minds and the news agenda may well be focused on other issues, but I suggest that for the sake of all of us on these islands we highlight the critical importance of maintaining devolved and functioning government in Northern Ireland. I want to see young men and women from Blaydon continuing to go to Belfast with rucksacks on their backs; I do not want to go back to the days when they went there with rifles over their shoulders. Anyone who thinks that this is some form of local difficulty in Northern Ireland should think again.

I want to see the continuing peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland that is helping to grow the economy and the life chances of all who live there. I want the world to look at Northern Ireland and rightly applaud the success we have witnessed over the past decades.
I hope none of us wants to see a divided Northern Ireland that turns in on itself, as, sadly, we have seen so often in the past.

There are huge issues facing the people of Northern Ireland: our exit from the European Union and the real changes this will bring to everybody’s everyday lives; the uncertain position from the Government on the UK’s only land border with Europe; how to keep improving economic performance; and, critically, how we deal with Northern Ireland’s unique and painful past. Without a stable, workable Government, all these issues will be much harder to progress.

Last week, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister assured me and the House that there would be scope for the Northern Ireland voice to be heard in the run-up to our negotiations on the EU, via a Joint Ministerial Council. If that is the case, there is no reason for the Secretary of State not to engage with the parties and communities over the next eight weeks, in order to resolve the issues that have led to this breakdown. He must not let the election be an excuse for not getting people together.

Let us be clear: what is happening in Northern Ireland is not just about who is or is not the First Minister or Deputy First Minister, or the debacle that is the renewable heat incentive scheme. There are other real underlying issues, including how we support victims of the troubles; women’s rights; equality for LGBT communities; the treatment of ethnic minorities and migrant groups; and, above all, how we deal with Northern Ireland’s past and the crucial issue of trust and mutual respect. The Secretary of State has a responsibility to ensure that the Government deal with all parties in Northern Ireland on an equal basis. That is clearly a matter of huge concern to a number of the parties there.

I give due credit to the Secretary of State for the calm and measured tone that he has adopted so far, and I will not deny myself the optimism that those of us who love Northern Ireland still feel. To that end, I can assure the House that we in Labour will do everything we can to help, but all the parties need to look at what they can do to prevent the present impasse from degenerating into total collapse. Let me make it clear that we need to avoid a return to direct rule if at all possible. We need Northern Ireland politicians to stand up and be counted, to recognise their responsibility and to accept that the vehicle for addressing the concerns and needs of their communities is the Assembly and its Executive. The need for the continuation of the Assembly should be the No. 1 priority for them all, and for us in Westminster. The imposition of direct rule will serve no one. In the weeks to come, we should not let any personal political positioning, posturing or differences get in the way of the return of a working Government in Northern Ireland.

James Brokenshire: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s comments and his emphasis on the need to return to shared government in Northern Ireland at the earliest possible opportunity. I welcome his support and his comments underlining the shared responsibility that we all keenly feel in seeking to achieve that outcome by using the time ahead as effectively as possible. He is aware that there is a relatively short period of time following an election—around three weeks—in which to form an Executive. We need to use all the time, up to polling day and beyond, to try to bring people together and to retain the sense of dialogue, difficult and challenging though that might be during an election period. It is important that we continue to do that.

We recognise that political stability is the primary responsibility of Governments. I have had discussions with all the parties since my last statement, and I have focused on engaging widely in order to encourage and promote a way forward. That is absolutely what I will continue to do in the time ahead. No one should prejudge the outcome of the election. We should be absolutely focused on seeking to get the right outcome, which is the continuation of devolved government in Northern Ireland. That is in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland as it will allow things to move forward. As the hon. Gentleman said, we must work collectively to that end and approach this in a positive way if we are to achieve that outcome.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I returned from Londonderry this morning following meetings there yesterday. I witnessed a great sense of frustration there about what is happening, and a great sense of disappointment that the Assembly is yet again under threat and has indeed fallen. Does the Secretary of State agree with me—and, indeed, with the proposal from the shadow Secretary of State—that the coming weeks should be used to explore all the possibilities? None of us wants to see a return to direct rule, but the worry is that there is a strong possibility that the election—which the Secretary of State is obliged to hold—will deliver the parties back to Stormont in roughly the same numbers as now. What is the likelihood of making progress under such similar arrangements? Surely we should use the coming weeks to put in place a plan B under which we could continue with some form of devolved government and not bring powers back to this House, because direct rule is not a satisfactory way of running Northern Ireland.

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. He rightly identifies the maintenance of devolved government in Northern Ireland as the key issue. He is also right to say that we must use the available time to ensure that communication lines and dialogue remain open during the election period, however difficult that might appear. Equally, the issues relating to trust and confidence in the institutions, and in the ability of parties to work together in the shared government arrangement, will still need to be resolved. The question of how we can use this time to bring people together must be at the forefront of our minds.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me notice of his statement. I support the calls made yesterday for the election to be conducted in a manner that looks to the future and anticipates difficult but reasonable negotiations for the establishment of an effective Administration after the election. No one will get everything that they want from this election or from the formation of the new Executive, but the people whom the politicians serve deserve our best and most faithful efforts. The victory in this election should belong to the people, not to political parties.
This election has been brought about by circumstances that have their genesis in Belfast and that will also have their solutions in Belfast. We will be onlookers to a great extent, but there are some areas in which the efforts made here might help. I am pleased that dialogue between the Secretary of State and the parties in Northern Ireland will continue throughout the election period, so that the ground is prepared for the negotiations over holding office in March. Can he tell us whether he will take those opportunities to reassure the parties that funding will not be cut, particularly from the support for addressing the legacy issues? The Assembly suffers from the austerity fetish as much as the rest of the UK, but it carries additional burdens and needs those extra resources.

The past couple of months in the Assembly have been marked by some serious allegations. What support will the Secretary of State be able to offer the Assembly to have those allegations properly investigated and to find resolutions? The uncertainty of this election, with the peculiarities surrounding it, adds to the uncertainty of the Brexit mess. What support can the Government offer to people and businesses in Northern Ireland to smooth the next few months? Also, will he clarify what special arrangements he is putting in place to consult on the Brexit negotiations while the election is ongoing?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for highlighting the issues relating to the nature of the elections. I think we all recognize what is at stake here. I can assure her that we will be doing our part to maintain communication channels and open dialogue. We will continue to encourage the parties to think carefully about the nature of the campaign ahead and about how best to bring people back together afterwards to get on with the process of devolved government in Northern Ireland. She asked a number of more detailed questions. On the question of legacy, she will know that it remains this Government’s intent to give effect to the Stormont House agreement. Indeed, the funding commitments that were made in respect of that remain firmly in place.

In respect of support for the investigations and inquiry into the allegations that have provided the trigger, or the catalyst, for the situation we find ourselves in, I continue to believe that the best solution for this lies within Northern Ireland. This is a devolved matter; and it still seems right that the answers should come from that direction. I remain open to working with the parties on a cross-community basis to see what support can be given because, ultimately, getting answers on these issues is what matters.

On the UK’s departure from the European Union, as hon. and right hon. Members will have heard, the Prime Minister set out a very clear position on this Government’s approach. Indeed, she emphasised the issues on the common travel area and on strengthening the Union, too. Hon. and right hon. Members will have plenty of opportunity to raise further questions on that later today.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): To the extent that the Secretary of State has a locus in this matter, may I make a fervent plea that he should protect the interests of former British soldiers currently being charged by the Sinn Féin-supporting Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland with murder for events that took place more than 40 years ago? Is he aware that it appears that the Director of Public Prosecutions issued a notice to news desks, not for publication, stating:

“We would advise that if you publish an article which alleges lack of impartiality on the part of the Director or any other prosecutor that the appropriate legal action will be taken and we will make use of this correspondence in that regard and in relation to a claim for aggravated and exemplary damages”?

Is that not an attempt to muzzle Parliament and, indeed, to question the right of this House to support those soldiers who sought to bring about peace in Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: In my usual way I have been, as I think the House would acknowledge, extremely generous to the hon. Gentleman. He has asked a most interesting question, and he has delivered it with his usual eloquence, but it does suffer from one disadvantage, which is that it has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the statement made by the Secretary of State. Nevertheless, I have indulged the hon. Gentleman, and he can thank me on a daily basis.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend raises the important issue of legacy. As I indicated to the House last week, I will never tire of praising the work of our armed forces personnel in securing the peace, the stability and the arrangements that we see in Northern Ireland today. Yes, I do have some concerns about imbalance within the system, which is why I believe it is right that we move forward with the Stormont House agreement and the legacy bodies that are set up there. I will not comment on any individual decisions. Indeed, justice is devolved in Northern Ireland. It is independent, and has its own processes that remain in place in an independent way. I hear clearly his very general and very firm point on balance within the overall system, which is something that I am very keen to address.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Democratic Unionist party has worked tirelessly in recent years to move Northern Ireland forward, to make devolution work and to create the conditions for stable government in Northern Ireland, so we are deeply disappointed, frustrated and, indeed, angered by the decision of Sinn Féin to walk away from devolved government and to cause this election. What is the election about? It is fairly clear that it is not about the renewable heat incentive issue; had it been, we could have got on with sorting it out. Indeed, the election will serve to disrupt and delay sorting out those issues.

The election is about Sinn Féin seeking opportune political advantage, seeking to overturn the result of the election held just a few months ago, seeking to gain a list of concessions from the Government on legacy issues, such as rewriting the past and putting more soldiers and policemen in the dock, and other issues, and seeking other concessions from the DUP. Let us be very clear that we will work through this election, and afterwards, to create a stable devolved Government in Northern Ireland, but let this House and the people of Northern Ireland know that, just as we have not given in to Sinn Féin’s demands in the past, we will not bow down and give in to Sinn Féin’s unreasonable demands going forward, because that is what this election is all about.
James Brokenshire: I recognise that there are strongly held views on all sides, and as we enter the election period, I am sure these issues will be hotly and keenly contested. From what the right hon. Gentleman says, I welcome the willingness to engage, the willingness to work things through and the desire to get back to stable, shared devolved government. We all have that focus in our minds when looking to the future of Northern Ireland and how we can get on with governing in the best interests of all Northern Ireland.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that an unencumbered, unhindered press is vital to the future elections? Does he agree that any chilling effect or threat could undermine the very democratic essence of these elections? We must have a free and fair press.

James Brokenshire: I am sure that the issues around the election will be keenly and hotly contested. From all my experience of the press in Northern Ireland, it is fair, free and open, with wide debates contained within it. The Government certainly see those building blocks in the freedom of the press and, indeed, in the strength of our judiciary and legal processes, and we want to see that those pillars of our democracy are upheld.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): In truth, Northern Ireland has lurched from one political crisis to another in recent years. Is it not time that the Government urgently reviewed the constitutional arrangements covering power sharing, including issues such as the title of First and Deputy First Minister and a whole range of other issues? Is that not how the Government could add value in terms of long-term stability?

James Brokenshire: We need to be very careful about the approach we take at the moment. We are now embarking on an election and, as I said, I do not want to prejudge the outcome of that election or, indeed, the discussions that take place during this period and through and beyond the short window of time that we have after the election period. We will do all we can as the UK Government, and we hold a primary responsibility to provide political stability within Northern Ireland. Clearly, the parties will need to discuss things through an open dialogue that I hope brings people back together, but at this stage, in seeking to open and widen the debate, we need to be very focused on the task at hand in bringing people back together again. Yes, the UK Government will play their part in supporting the Belfast agreement and its successors, bringing an element of stability and getting devolved government back in Northern Ireland, which is what we all want to see.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Having served on three tours in Northern Ireland, I congratulate the Secretary of State on his calm and measured approach in these difficult circumstances. Does he share my concern that if indeed the resignation of Mr McGuinness was political and not because of the environmental issue, the intent of Sinn Féin is to hold these elections and then not to reappoint, which would put pressure on my right hon. Friend to resort to direct rule, with all the consequences of that? Does he share my concern that that is a real possibility?

James Brokenshire: I have said that an election campaign that seeks to divide and to make it that much harder to bring people back together again afterwards is clearly a risk, and one that I am concerned about. Again, I encourage people to think about these issues very carefully. It is clear that the issues at stake here go much wider than simply the renewable heat incentive scheme, which was perhaps the catalyst that crystallised this. We need to be very careful, and we need to appreciate what is at stake here. Again, it is so important that people are able to work together and to maintain communication and dialogue so that we see the return of shared government in Northern Ireland for all communities at the earliest possible opportunity.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): The Secretary of State has quite rightly said that trust and confidence in the institutions in Northern Ireland have to be rebuilt. One of the best ways of doing that is transparency, including transparency on the renewable heat incentive scheme and, with the greatest of respect to him, on the political parties operating in Northern Ireland, and on the donations to them. Sinn Féin has precipitated this election. The people in Northern Ireland are entitled to know who is funding Sinn Féin, who is funding this premature Assembly election and, by the same token, who is sponsoring and funding the other political parties in Northern Ireland. Please do not tell me that that is a good idea and that the Secretary of State will reflect on it. What is he going to do about it?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady has rightly made the point on political donations and transparency over a number of weeks and months, and I have a huge amount of sympathy for the view she rightly takes. That was why I wrote to all the party leaders a short time ago to ask them to come back to me with their views by the end of this month so that we can move things forward. It is right that we look at that reform and start to put in place changes that give that greater transparency to politics in Northern Ireland. That is why I have written, and I look forward to receiving the responses so that we can move forward.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend’s calm and measured approach to this problem. Will he update the House on what he will do to facilitate the voice of Northern Ireland, from politicians, being heard in the run-up to triggering article 50? Obviously, the Assembly will be removed quickly, an election will be held and then there will be a short period before we trigger article 50. We want to make sure that the voice of Northern Ireland is heard in our approach to our future.

James Brokenshire: It is important to recognise that although an election has been called, Ministers other than the First Minister and Deputy First Minister remain in place in the Executive, and therefore we will continue to invite the Executive to send representation to each of the meetings that will continue through the Joint Ministerial Committee or through other means. That approach will be taken as we look towards the triggering of article 50, but obviously I will continue to have engagements across the community, with business, with the voluntary and community sectors, and more broadly, to ensure that we continue to listen to and reflect upon the views of people in Northern Ireland as we look to the negotiations ahead.
Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): Will the Secretary of State share with us more of his thoughts on what he expects to happen after an election in Northern Ireland? Does he accept that the problems will remain? Without his calling a public inquiry on the RHI or, if he cannot find a way to do that, his making it clear that he fully supports a public inquiry, public confidence in our political settlement will sink even lower, making restoration of the Executive even more difficult. That is what people have been telling me on the streets during the past few days and the past week. They said that they need clarity, as we are having an election in a fog.

James Brokenshire: Clearly, RHI scheme issues have been very much at the heart of what has led to the election that I have now called. It is right that we get answers on that, because it is crucial to re-establishing trust and confidence, seeing accountability and giving answers to the public about what has taken place. As I have said, it is right for that to come from Northern Ireland, as much as is possible, as this was a devolved issue and something that related to decisions within Northern Ireland. But I stand ready to work with people and consider options on a cross-community basis where support is commanded across the community. This is about how we get those answers and inject confidence back into the whole process.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure the Secretary of State and others in the House may reflect on the irony that this election has been caused by the resignation of a man who spent a lot of his life trying to use violence to overcome the democratic will of the people of Northern Ireland to be part of this United Kingdom. Will he also agree that it is vital that work is done to ensure that in dealing with the legacies of the past there is an equity once this election is out of the way, so that those who put their lives on the line to defend this democracy are not unduly hounded by these legal processes?

James Brokenshire: It is right that we have a system that is fair, balanced and proportionate. I have been clear about that on a number of occasions and about why I strongly believe that the Stormont House agreement and the legacy institutions contemplated within that provide a real framework and way forward to achieve that. I am concerned that there is an imbalance in the system, with a focus on state-based actors, and getting answers for those who lost loved ones as a consequence of terrorist atrocities is essential. That is why I want to see this moving forward and why we strongly believe change is required.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): We all wish everyone in Northern Ireland well in trying to resolve these current difficulties. May I press the Secretary of State on what he is doing on working in partnership with the Irish Government? The British and Irish Governments are co-guarantors of the Good Friday agreement, so what plans does he have to work with the Irish Government to help to resolve these difficulties? Is he planning a summit? Is he planning talks? Is he calling everybody in? What concrete measures is he planning to take to work with the Irish Government to help to resolve these difficulties?

James Brokenshire: As I have indicated to the House, I have had regular ongoing communication with Charlie Flanagan, the Irish Foreign Minister, and the Prime Minister and Taoiseach have had conversations. I certainly intend to meet Charlie Flanagan in the very near future so that we can assess the current situation and determine how our two Governments can seek to encourage and promote, and bring people together in a way that leads to, the maintenance and continuation of devolved government in Northern Ireland.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What alternative to direct rule would be available if these elections did not result in an immediate power-sharing Government?

James Brokenshire: I have said that I think it would be premature and wrong to contemplate something other than devolved government in Northern Ireland—that is where we need to have all our focus in the weeks ahead. I am talking about encouraging the parties, dialogue and communication, which is absolutely necessary. Although others will say, “What if this, what if that, what if we don’t get to a position where we have that?”. I am not contemplating that. I am not contemplating that we use the time available to us to maintain devolved government, get people back into that power-sharing arrangement and get on with what the people of Northern Ireland want, which is having that settled situation, taking Northern Ireland forward and seeing that positive, optimistic Northern Ireland which I know is there and which has so much more to give.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Central to those political institutions has been the principle of power sharing, so what efforts will the Secretary of State and the British Government, working with the Irish Government, make to ensure that the principles of power sharing, mutual understanding and respect for political difference, which have withered away over the past number of months, will be strictly adhered to following these elections? What work with the Irish Government will take place within the next few weeks to do just that?

James Brokenshire: I have already indicated to the House the dialogue and discussion we have had with the Irish Government, the work that we will continue and the discussions that we continue to have. I stress, as I said in my statement, that this Government remain committed to the Belfast agreement and its successors—and all of what that means. Therefore, we will play our part to support the parties, discussion and dialogue, so that we move to that stable devolved government position that underpins so much of the positive work that we see in Northern Ireland. We wish to return to that period of stability which is what everybody would wish to see.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Foreign direct investment in Northern Ireland has been a great success in recent years, so will my right hon. Friend reassure me that he and his office will do all they can to maintain that positive momentum during this period of political instability?

James Brokenshire: Absolutely. I can give that assurance to my hon. Friend, because Northern Ireland has seen so much success in terms of foreign direct investment;
I believe it is the region with the greatest foreign direct investment outside the City of London, which underlines the huge potential that I see and the huge ability for Northern Ireland to continue to flourish and do so much more. We absolutely will continue to underline that message.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): May I echo the comments made by the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell)? He and I, and many others in this House, have worked hard to bring the peace process to where it today, and we have taken risks, and I despair of where we are just now. May I say to the Secretary of State that if he is going to sit on his hands for the next six weeks and do nothing about the current crisis, he can forget getting devolution up and running three weeks after an election? I support the suggestion made by the hon. Gentleman, for which there is cross-community support: let this Government get on with holding the public inquiry on the RHI scheme that Sinn Féin has blocked.

James Brokenshire: The Government will continue to do all they can to support the parties in finding their way through to a resolution. As I have indicated in answers to previous questions, I remain open to considering issues that command cross-community support in order to find answers and get to the root of the issues in respect of the RHI inquiry. I will continue to hear the points that are made on a cross-community basis because, ultimately, whatever is done must command confidence and support in Northern Ireland if it is to be successful.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The connections between the people of Merseyside and the people of Northern Ireland are many, and they run deep. May I press the Secretary of State on what he is doing, given the current political situation and the effect on Stormont’s budget, to absolutely ensure that the people of Northern Ireland do not lose out?

James Brokenshire: The clearest way for the people of Northern Ireland not to lose out is for devolved government to be re-established at the earliest possible opportunity. That way, work can continue, budgets can be set and programmes can be put in place to take Northern Ireland further forward. That is why I make the point in such clear terms about the focus, attention and effort that we give to working with the parties to encourage dialogue and discussion, and to bring people together. That is the most powerful and effective way to give effect to what the hon. Lady said.

James Brokenshire: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman about that sense of trust, which has clearly broken down in Northern Ireland, hence the situation in which we find ourselves. I hear his point about the need for answers, transparency and an inquiry. As I have indicated, I strongly believe that the best way to achieve that is by Northern Ireland doing that itself, because that is where the issues arose and where devolution is holding fire. As I have already indicated to other parties, I will listen to and reflect on suggestions and proposals that come forward on a cross-community basis, because ultimately that is what will be needed not only to command confidence and respect, and ensure that any investigations or inquiries are balanced and actually get to the answers that people want, but to ensure that accountability is shown.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has my support as he charts the course set by the Good Friday and St Andrews agreements in re-establishing the devolved institutions, but the Prime Minister’s commitment today to a hard Brexit will cause widespread concern in Northern Ireland. Will he outline how he will work in full partnership with the Irish Government on this matter while the Assembly and Executive are not functioning?

James Brokenshire: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s support for our work to ensure the return of stable devolved government. I do not, though, recognise his characterisation of what the Prime Minister has said. She has set out a bold, positive vision of what this country can and will be outside the European Union, but yes, of course, there is a negotiation to come. We have, of course, had initial dialogue and discussion with the Irish Government on how we get the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland. That was reflected in what the Prime Minister said today about the common travel area and strengthening the Union. That is precisely the approach we will take.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Would the Secretary of State care to outline what exactly people will be voting for if Sinn Féin refuse to work with the Democratic Unionist party, set impossible criteria, or ask for impossible concessions? How is the Secretary of State ensuring that Sinn Féin are not calling the shots, if I can use that pun, when it comes to who is elected to the Government of Northern Ireland, and that the electorate know that their vote will not be ignored because of the petty machinations of a party that simply wants its own way and does not like being challenged by a strong DUP team?

James Brokenshire: Ultimately, the election will be about the future direction of Northern Ireland. As we are in a democracy, I am sure the issues will be debated to and fro in the coming weeks—that is absolutely the whole point of the political and democratic system that we operate under. So much is at stake here. As I said yesterday, I encourage people to take part and vote in the election.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The people of Northern Ireland are magnificent. They have got used to living with a sense of peace over the past 18 years. They need hope going forward. I just listened to the
Prime Minister’s speech, in which she talked about making practical arrangements for the border, and making that a priority. In today’s context, those are warm words. She has had a phone call, but she should be here, and she should have been there. I have listened to the Secretary of State talk about his phone call and his activity over the past week, and with due respect, I think that is wholly inadequate. The elections are about not only the future of Northern Ireland but all our futures—those on the island of Ireland, and those who live on this island. What meetings will the Secretary of State have with the Irish Government and the Taoiseach in the next few weeks, and what will those conversations involve? What hope can he offer today to the people of Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: As I have indicated, the Government’s clear intent and focus is on seeing the return of devolved government in Northern Ireland. That is what is absolutely in the best interests of Northern Ireland, which is why I will continue to do all I can to bring together the political parties. Ultimately, that political division has been part of the issues at stake. Yes, of course, as I have indicated to the House today, we have had considerable dialogue and discussion with the Irish Government, and we will continue to keep them closely informed. As I indicated to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), I intend to meet the Irish Foreign Minister very shortly to discuss the position and how we can work together and ultimately re-establish devolved government and the sense of the politics moving forward. We should be positive about what we can achieve. I am certainly not going into this issue in a negative way; it is all about how we can get on with it and make it happen.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State has said today that he is committed to any action having cross-community support in Northern Ireland. As this crisis has been brought about by Sinn Féin’s demand for more security forces personnel to be taken to court and put in the dock, and for politically motivated inquests into deaths caused by the security forces, will he give a commitment today that there will be no more for politically motivated inquests, that security forces files with national security implications will be released, and that he will not persuade Sinn Féin to re-enter government at the expense of soldiers being dragged through the courts?

James Brokenshire: On the issue of legacy, the Stormont House agreement, to which all the parties signed up, provided the right framework and the right way forward. I hold stark national security responsibilities that I feel very keenly about, in terms of safety on the streets of Northern Ireland here and now, and what that means more broadly. On the issue of legacy, it is important that we are able to find a way forward that is more balanced and proportionate, and that sees Northern Ireland looking to the future, rather than the past. We must focus on providing that framework, so that we can move things forward in that way. The hon. Gentleman will well know the issues and bodies set out previously, and, indeed, the way in which engagement has taken place over many months. I believe there is a way forward, but we need to have the framework, the intent, and the balanced and proportionate approach that I continue to underline.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the effect of the political instability on potential investment in Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: I have had some discussions with business representatives. It is important that we get back to stable devolved government at the earliest opportunity. Again, that is the most powerful way to underline Northern Ireland’s moving forward. There is so much that we can be positive about, including the jobs that have been created and the foreign direct investment made. There are so many fantastic businesses in Northern Ireland, too. That is what we should be celebrating. It is that positive, optimistic viewpoint of Northern Ireland’s economy that we should be advancing.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): After the Assembly election in March, agreement will need to be reached on a new power-sharing Executive. However, if that does not happen, there is a very real possibility of a return to direct rule from Westminster. Does the Secretary of State think that it is acceptable for the people of Northern Ireland, who voted to remain in the European Union, to witness the triggering of article 50 while they live in total political limbo?

James Brokenshire: That underlines my general point on the need to get back to devolved government at the earliest opportunity, but as I have indicated, we intend to trigger article 50 by no later than the end of March; that is the approach that we have taken, and that is the work that continues. Invitations to appropriate meetings will continue to be made to the Executive, notwithstanding the current situation.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Further to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), there are concerns in my constituency that the Government’s eagerness to set up an Assembly immediately after the elections could lead to them contemplating some form of side-deal with republicans to get it up and running. May I gently warn the Secretary of State that that will be unacceptable?

James Brokenshire: There is a limited period under law in which to form a new Executive; it is around three weeks following a poll. That is why I make the point about maintaining open dialogue and thinking about how we can bring parties together. There has to be a sense of commanding support from across the community, which is why we need to listen very keenly and intently to the voices of the hon. Gentleman’s party and other parties on the process ahead. I stress the need to hold dialogue and discussions, and to focus on the principles in the Belfast agreement and its successors—those things to which all parties have signed up. That provides us with the framework, and we need to get on and do it.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): As we face this phase of challenges, it is right that we should mourn the passing of Dermot Gallagher, former doyen of the Department of Foreign Affairs and one of the lynchpins for so much of this process, bringing us from transfixed to transformative to transformations. We need to emulate his purposeful ethic in the time ahead. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam. Will the Secretary of State recognise that, after the elections, there will be negotiations, and that
those negotiations will have to be more inclusive, more comprehensive and more fundamental than what passed for negotiations in Stormont House? The outcome will have to be more robust and more reliable than the political Febreze that we got with the “Fresh Start” agreement.

James Brokenshire: I certainly pay tribute to Dermot Gallagher, and send my condolences to his friends and family and all those who remember him and his contribution. As I have said, I do not want to prejudge the outcome of this election, nor indeed of discussions that will take place. I earnestly want that to be achieved throughout this election period, in whatever way possible. I also want to see that in the discussions that take place afterwards. We must achieve a position that creates stability and a sense of shared power arrangements, as that will allow Northern Ireland to move on. That must be our focus and our intention, and it is why I make the point about being very thoughtful and conscious the nature of the campaign, so that we can bring people back together afterwards.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State confirm that after the election, the framework of a devolved Assembly and of a shared Executive will be the settled framework for moving forward, and that joint authority with the Republic of Ireland, or wholesale renegotiation of agreements already in place, do not form part of his plan for moving forward? If he does not give expression to that certainty, further drift will occur; we must nip it in the bud now.

James Brokenshire: I can confirm that that is absolutely my intent. It is absolutely the approach that I take. It is about getting through the election, and seeing the re-establishment of the Executive and of the devolved government that we have had. Although I hear all of the broader talk, that must be our focus: how we re-establish trust and confidence in our institutions and systems, so that Northern Ireland can move forward.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): The Ulster Unionist party wants a strong and stable devolved Government who work for everyone, but this crisis is about trust between the two main parties in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State said that he was committed to the Belfast agreement and all its successors, yet this morning on the radio, we heard a Democratic Unionist party Executive Minister say that he had no intention of implementing the St Andrew’s agreement in full. Surely it undermines all agreements if parties are not willing to tie themselves to what they have agreed. Will the Secretary of State look at the structures of the Belfast agreement, and at how we can get back to the joint election of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister?

James Brokenshire: I did not hear the comments this morning, so it is difficult for me to comment directly, but as I have said, the UK Government stand by their commitments under the Belfast agreement and its successors and the framework that is set in place. The question is how we use the time ahead to look at ways to bridge gaps and put devolved power-sharing arrangements in place at the earliest opportunity. Obviously, I will continue to discuss that with all parties.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree that in the past months and years, problems, even major ones, have been resolved when all parties dedicated themselves to working through them? Yesterday, a Sinn Féin Deputy First Minister refused to be re-nominated; Sinn Féin have indicated that they will not nominate even after the election. Walking away is not a solution, but working through the problems most certainly is.

James Brokenshire: Division has existed in Northern Ireland in the past, and some people said then that it could not be bridged, yet Northern Ireland has shown what can be done. We need to reflect on Northern Ireland’s past, the political achievements reached, and the strengths of dialogue, discussion and bringing people together as we look to the future and at what can be achieved. I hope that we will see a return of devolved government.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that Belfast politicians regularly quote the dogs in the street, but if they were to summarise the Northern Ireland Office’s position in this, it would be “barking mad”. This is not the time for him to be a bystander in these discussions. He should not fail to recognise what the Prime Minister recognised last week, which is that no one can or should benefit from the instability, and from wrecking the progress and the political institutions that we have fought so hard to obtain for Northern Ireland.

James Brokenshire: I am not, and will not be, a bystander in relation to these issues. It is important that the UK Government play their role in supporting the parties, and in fulfilling our obligations relating to providing political stability in Northern Ireland. That is what we will use the time ahead to achieve. The issues at stake are significant, and those relating to the political future of Northern Ireland are very clear. That is why I make these points about the collective responsibilities that we all have in taking this forward, and about getting back to that positive outlook for Northern Ireland that the people of Northern Ireland would like to see.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State said in his statement that, with strong leadership, issues that might once have brought down institutions have been resolved through dialogue. Can he therefore assure the House that, with the Taoiseach, the Prime Minister will give that strong leadership? As vice-chairman of the all-party group on Ireland and the Irish in Britain, I echo the sentiment of the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), the chair of the all-party group, in calling on the Prime Minister to put her foot on the pedal and get that 100% support.

James Brokenshire: I underline for the hon. Gentleman the Prime Minister’s commitment to these issues. She has been kept very closely informed and updated, and has had discussions with the former First Minister and Deputy First Minister, and indeed the Taoiseach. We are committed as a Government to a return to devolved government and a positive outcome after these elections have taken place. That is what the people of Northern
Ireland want, and what we all want. We have a shared and collective drive to achieve that, and we all need to focus on achieving it.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order relating to the next statement, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I gather that this point of order relates to the next immediate piece of business, and therefore, exceptionally, I will take it now.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you for your generosity, Mr Speaker. As I am sure you will agree,

“In our constitution, Parliament is supposed to be sovereign...We...need a system that gives Parliament real powers over ministers...and the transparency to restore public trust”—not my words, but those of the now Prime Minister in 2007. I will be scrutinising a Minister shortly on the implications of Brexit for Wales, but do you share my concern that on one of the most fundamental issues facing this country in a generation, the Prime Minister chose to be accountable not to the House this morning, but to the media and foreign ambassadors? Churchill would not have done it; Thatcher would not have done it; but it seems that when it comes to this House, this lady is not for turning up.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I do not have all the precedents in front of me, but I think that there has been a developing phenomenon in recent decades whereby, under successive Governments, important statements have sometimes been made outside the House that we would have welcomed being made first inside the House. I am pragmatic in these matters and say to the hon. Gentleman and others who might share his concern that when I heard of the Prime Minister’s important speech, scheduled for today, my first concern was that a senior member of the Government should come to the House on the same day to address us on the same matter. I had contact with the powers that be to make precisely that point, I am pleased to say that we have in our midst, and in my line of vision, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, whom, I rather imagine, the hon. Gentleman will wish in due course to interrogate. Meanwhile, let us hear from the Secretary of State.

New Partnership with the EU

1.41 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): I say to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who has just made a point of order, that I spent many years sitting on the Opposition Benches—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Making that point.

Mr Davis: Not making that point, but making a rather more pertinent one, which was that we did not have the opportunity at all to interrogate Mr Tony Blair after he had been on the radio and television. But today is a parliamentary day and I wish to share with Parliament what I think are some important points.

I would like to update the House on the Government’s plans for exiting the European Union. Today, the Prime Minister is setting out a plan for Britain. It is a plan to ensure that we embrace this moment of change to build a confident, global trading nation that seizes the new opportunities before it, and a fairer, stronger society at home, embracing bold economic and social reform. It is a plan that recognises that the referendum vote was not one to pull up drawbridges and retreat from the world, but rather a vote of confidence in the UK’s ability to prosper and succeed.

It is a plan to build a strong, new partnership with our European partners while reaching beyond the borders of Europe, too, forging deeper links with old allies and new ones. Today we set out 12 objectives for the negotiation to come. They answer the questions of those who have been asking what we intend while not undermining the UK’s negotiating position. We are clear that what we seek is that new partnership: not partial EU membership, not a model adopted by other countries, not a position that means we are half-in, half-out. Let me address each of our aims in turn.

First, we will provide certainty wherever possible while recognising that we are about to enter a two-sided negotiation. We have already made announcements about agriculture payments and student funding. Our proposal to shift the acquis—the body of EU law—into UK law at the point of exit is designed to make the process as smooth as possible. At the point of exit, the same rules and laws will apply, and it will then be for this Parliament to determine changes in the country’s interests, for we also intend to take control of our own laws and end the authority of the European Court of Justice in the UK. Laws will be made in this Parliament, and in the devolved Assemblies, and interpreted by our judges, not those in Luxembourg.

We will aim to strengthen the Union between our four nations. We will continue to engage with the devolved Administrations, and we will ensure that as powers are returned from Brussels to the UK, the right powers come to Westminster and the right powers are passed to Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. Another key objective will be to maintain the common travel area between the UK and the Republic of Ireland. No one wants to see a return to the borders of the past.

In terms of immigration, we will remain an open, tolerant nation. We will continue to welcome the brightest and the best, and to ensure that immigration continues
to bring benefits in terms of addressing skills shortages where they exist, but we will manage our immigration system properly, which means that free movement to the UK from the European Union cannot continue as before. We want to guarantee the rights of EU citizens who are already in this country and already make such a great contribution to our society, in tandem with similar protections for the rights of UK citizens in EU countries. We would like to resolve that issue at the earliest possible moment.

UK law already goes further in many areas than EU minimums, but as we shift the body of EU law into UK law we will ensure that workers’ rights are not just protected but enhanced. In terms of trade, we want to build a more open, outward-looking, confident nation that is a global champion for free trade. Membership of the EU’s internal market means accepting its four freedoms, in terms of the movement of goods, services, capital and people, and complying with the EU’s rules and regulations. That would, effectively, mean not leaving the EU at all, so we do not propose to maintain membership of the EU’s single market. Instead, we will seek the broadest possible access to it through a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU. We want it to cover goods and services and to be as ambitious as possible.

This is not a zero-sum game. It should be in the interest of both the UK and the EU. It is in all our interests that financial services continue to be provided freely across borders, that integrated supply chains are not disrupted and that trade continues in as barrier-free a way as possible. Although we will seek the most open possible market with the European Union, we also want to further trade links with the rest of the world, so we will deliver the freedom for the UK to strike trade agreements with other countries. The Department for International Trade has already started to prepare the ground and it is clear there is enormous interest around the globe in forging new links with the UK.

Full membership of the EU’s customs union would prohibit new international deals, so we do not intend to remain part of the common commercial policy or to be bound by the common external tariff. Instead, we will seek a customs agreement with the EU with the aim of ensuring that cross-border trade remains as barrier-free as possible. Clearly, how that is achieved is a matter for negotiation.

The UK is one of the best places in the world for science and innovation, with some of the best universities in the world, so we must continue to collaborate with our European allies. When it comes to crime, terrorism and security, we will aim to further co-operation with EU countries. We will seek practical arrangements in these areas to ensure that we keep our continent secure and defend our shared values.

Finally, in terms of our exit, we have said repeatedly that it will be in no one’s interests for it to be disorderly, with any sort of “cliff edge”—the words used by the Opposition—as we leave the European Union. We intend to reach broad agreement about the terms of our new partnership with the EU by the end of the two-year negotiation triggered by article 50, but then we will aim to deliver an orderly process of implementation. That does not mean an unlimited transitional period where the destination is not clear, but time for both the UK and EU member states to prepare for new arrangements, whether that be in terms of customs arrangements, the regulation of financial services, co-operation over criminal justice, or immigration controls.

Those are the aims and objectives we set today for the negotiation to come. Our objectives are clear: to deliver certainty and clarity wherever we can; to take control of our own laws; to protect and strengthen the Union; to maintain the common travel area with the Republic of Ireland; to control immigration; to protect the rights of EU nationals in the UK and UK nationals in the EU; to protect workers’ rights; to allow free trade with European markets; to forge new trade deals with other countries; to boost science and innovation; to protect and enhance co-operation over crime, terrorism and security; and to make our exit smooth and orderly. That is the outline of an ambitious new partnership between the UK and the countries of the EU.

We are under no illusions: agreeing terms that work for both the UK and the 27 nations of the European Union will be challenging, and no doubt there will be bumps on the road once talks begin. We must embark on the negotiation, however, clear that no deal is better than a bad deal. As the Prime Minister has made clear today, the UK could not accept a punitive approach, so let me be clear that we do not expect that outcome.

We are confident that if we approach the talks in a spirit of good will, we can deliver a positive deal that works for the mutual benefit of all. It is absolutely in our interests that the EU succeeds, and it is absolutely in the EU’s interests that we succeed too. That will be one of our central messages: we do not want the European Union to fail; we want it to prosper politically and economically, and we will seek to convince our allies that a strong new partnership with the UK will help it to do that.

Our approach is not about cherry-picking; it is about reaching a deal that fits the aims of both sides. We understand that the EU wants to preserve its four freedoms and chart its own course. That is not a project that the UK will now be a part of, so we will leave the single market and the institutions of the European Union. We will make our own laws and decisions about immigration. Let me be crystal clear, if there has been any doubt: the final deal agreed between the UK and the EU will be put to a vote in both Houses of Parliament before it takes effect.

To conclude, we are leaving the European Union but we are not leaving Europe. We will continue to be reliable partners, willing allies and close friends with our European neighbours. We will be ready for any outcome, but we anticipate success, not failure. The UK will embrace its new place in the world with optimism, strength and confidence.

1.51 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. The speech that the Prime Minister has just made is the most important she has ever given. It was about the future of our relationship with the EU and our position in the world. The place for such a speech is here, at the Dispatch Box. That is not just a convention; it is so that MPs across the House can question the Prime Minister on their constituents’ behalf about her plans for their future, and there are many questions.
For many months Labour has been demanding the fullest possible access to the single market, emphasising the risks of leaving the customs union, arguing for a collaborative relationship with our EU partners, and emphasising the need for transitional arrangements and to entrench workers’ rights. Today the Prime Minister has rightly accepted those in her plan, and I acknowledge that, but she has given little detail about how that is to be achieved, and there are some unanswered questions and big gaps. In truth, it is a half-in, half-out plan.

Let me give an example. The Prime Minister says that she does not want the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, but she wants a comprehensive trade agreement. Sooner or later, she and others will have to face up to the fact that any such agreement will have a disputes resolution clause, and that will have to be independent of this country; it will not be by reason and resolution in the High Court in London according to English law. She has avoided fronting up to some of these essential questions.

If the Prime Minister achieves all that she has set out to achieve, she will fall far short of the hard Brexit that many businesses and trade unions have feared—the Brexit of no deal, a bare trade agreement, out of any customs union and from arm’s length from our EU relations. It is good that she has ruled out that hard Brexit at this stage. However, as she knows, setting out ambitions is the easy bit; delivery is much more difficult. She is taking the precarious course of taking the UK out of single market membership and changing the customs arrangements. That will cause concern to businesses, as the Secretary of State knows, and trade unions. The Prime Minister should have been more ambitious.

However, I accept that form follows function, so let me set out in terms what Labour will hold the Prime Minister to account for, as far as trade is concerned: tariff-free access to the single market; access to the single market unencumbered by impediment—that is what was in the exchange of letters with Nissan, and it is what all businesses want, and what all trade unions want for those dealing in goods and services; alignment of regulatory bodies to avoid dual bureaucracy or, worse, divergence; and a deal that works for goods and services. That is a very serious threat. That model—a shared single market membership and changing the customs arrangements. That will cause concern to businesses, as the Secretary of State knows, and trade unions. The Prime Minister should have been more ambitious.

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Let me touch on wider issues. The UK and the EU have hugely benefited from our collaborative work in the fields of criminal justice, anti-terrorism, research, medicine, science, technology, arts and culture, and much else. We should be seeking to preserve that collaboration, not destroy it, yet the Prime Minister said today:

“We do not seek to hold onto bits of membership as we leave.”

Let me give some examples of the bits that she should seek to retain—

Mr Speaker: Well, not many and not for long. [Interruption.] Order. The hon. Gentleman is a learned, celebrated and cerebral individual, and I do not want to interrupt him, but the convention is that the reply is normally half the length of the statement. I can indulge him modestly—there is usually a bit of latitude—but I was a bit concerned when he said “some examples”, particularly as he is a lawyer.

Keir Starmer: Mr Speaker, let me give three examples without the details: the European Aviation Safety Agency, which deals with safety; the European Medicines Agency; and Europol, which I worked with for many years. Those are the bits of the EU that we should be seeking to retain, not throw away.

It was the previous Prime Minister who got us to this place without any forethought or planning. This Prime Minister has now chosen a risky implementation plan. She owns the consequences now, in 2019 and beyond.

Mr Davis: When we started down this route, I said to the House that the Government had been given a national instruction that we would attempt to interpret in the national interest. That seemed to me to be the right approach. Rather than a 52/48 approach, it is an approach that encompasses everybody’s interests. I hope that we have done that today.

The hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) is a very talented man, and his questions were as forensic as we would expect. He asked about membership of the single market, so we answered that. We laid out the claims on the customs union, which was another of his questions. He asked for detail to scrutinise the plan to see where we are going. Within the context of not undermining our negotiation, that is entirely what we have tried to do. I had hoped to see some Opposition Members support what we think is a responsible, thoughtful but realistic plan that takes on board the instruction that we have been given by the British people to take us out of the European Union, but in a way that preserves our interests as best we can, whether security interests, economic interests or whatever.

Let me deal with some of the specific points raised by the hon. and learned Gentleman. I will put aside my disappointment at the tone. He says that a free trade agreement will need to have a disputes resolution procedure. So it will; they nearly all do. It does not have to be the European Court of Justice, though. We can agree that that encompasses everybody’s interests. I hope that we have done that today.

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Now, on this question of threats, this was not a threat. It was the Chancellor saying in an interview, “Well, if you go down the route of a punitive approach, this is the consequence and this is what will happen.” Nations defend themselves. Nobody says it is what we want to do. It is specifically not what we want to do. We want the freest, most friendly possible relationship we can get, and that is what we will set out to do.

The other areas, including questions on matters such as criminal justice, home affairs issues and so on, will develop as we go through the negotiation. The Prime Minister is a very distinguished ex-Home Secretary—the longest-lasting Home Secretary in modern times—and she has as good a grip of our home affairs needs as the ex-Director of Public Prosecutions has. He can take it as read that we will, over time in this House and, most particularly, in the negotiating chamber with the Europeans, address all the issues he raised. I happen to think that they will have as much interest in resolving those issues as we do. The negotiation is predicated on us doing what is in the interests of everybody: ourselves, the Europeans and all our neighbours in our part of the globe. That is what we intend to do and what we intend to deliver on.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will acknowledge that the Prime Minister’s speech is principled, reasonable and statesmanlike. The 27 member states’ Heads of Government said only a few weeks ago at the last Council summit that there would be no access to the single market unless we accepted all the four freedoms. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that presents a difficulty? Will he accept, therefore, that it is essential that we clear that obstacle?

Mr Davis: I have tried throughout the past six months not to respond to the sometimes emotional comments from various people around the continent. I am slightly surprised in my hon. Friend, however, because he of all people would pull me up if I confused access to the single market with membership of the single market. Pretty much every country in the world that is not subject to sanctions has access to the single market. We will have access to the single market. The question is about the terms. My job and the job, frankly, of everybody, including the Opposition, is to persuade our opposite numbers in Europe that it is also in their interests that we all have equal access to each other’s markets, and that is what I intend to do.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his speech, and for recognising the correct place to make this statement; it certainly was not at Lancaster House. Today, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have completed an unholy trinity of worthless Westminster promises to the people of Scotland. They promised to take account of the 62% remain vote in Scotland and to consider all options for Scotland’s future. They have broken that promise today. They promised during the referendum campaign and in their election manifesto that leaving the EU does not mean we have to leave the single market. Today they are breaking that promise. As for the promise they made in 2014 that remaining in the United Kingdom would guarantee Scotland’s place in Europe—well, we all know where that has gone. I hope the Secretary of State will pass the message back to his boss that if she insists on giving Scotland only one option to remain in the European Union, Scotland will take that option.

We know with certainty that Brexit means hard Tory Brexit. We do not know what it might be disguised as, but we know what it will be. Will the Secretary of State accept, even at this late stage, that the promises that he and Prime Minister made must be honoured? Exactly how does he propose to recognise the 62% remain vote in Scotland and the overwhelming—nay, unanimous—view in Scotland that our membership of the single market and free movement of people into and out of Scotland are essential for our wellbeing? Has he actually read the Scottish Government’s paper, “Scotland’s place in Europe”?

Mr Davis indicated assent.

Peter Grant: Given that he is nodding, will he give an undertaking that the paper will be properly and thoroughly discussed at the Joint Ministerial Committee meeting next week? Finally, will he give an undertaking that before any non-returnable steps are taken, the Parliaments of all our devolved nations will be given a chance, even on an advisory basis, to consider the Government’s plans before they are implemented?

Mr Davis: It has been my privilege to chair the Joint Ministerial Committee on EU Negotiations on which Mike Russell broadly represents the Scottish Government’s position. I gave him an undertaking that we would debate that paper at the next JMC (EN), as it is known in Whitehall jargon, and that is what we will do. I have been very careful not to comment publicly on it because, as I said, we want to give it the most open debate possible. There are parts of it with which I disagree and parts with which I agree. On the question of the protection of workers’ rights or the maintenance of our terrific universities, I am entirely on side with the paper. I suspect that Mr Russell might be surprised by how pro-devolution I am. Nothing will be taken away from the devolved Administrations and, indeed, we have to decide what passes to them from the European Union. That will be a rational debate based around the interests of the United Kingdom and of Scotland. The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) must take it as read that we will take very seriously the idea that we do not allow any part of the United Kingdom or any nation of the United Kingdom—Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland or England—to lose out in this process. We are determined in that.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I will continue to campaign for our membership of the single market and to make the positive case for immigration because I believe in the free movement of people from the European Union, but may I make it very clear that I welcome the Prime Minister’s—I nearly said Her Majesty’s—speech and the statement made by the Secretary of State? It is realistic and provides much-needed clarity. The tone is to be hugely welcomed as it marks a genuine desire to bring about a consensus and to reunite our country. In that spirit, would my right hon. Friend commit—this is not unreasonable—to putting those 12 objectives into a White Paper and bringing it to this House so that we
can finally debate the single market, the customs union and the free movement of people? So far, we have not and many of us feel that Parliament has been deliberately precluded from all this.

**Mr Davis:** First, on my right hon. Friend’s slip of the tongue, I often make the same mistake; it is probably why I am where I am. [Laughter.] Look, I will go to the substance of my right hon. Friend’s request. The Prime Minister and I have tried today to answer all the questions we are able to without undermining the negotiation. Regarding debates in the House and in this Chamber, I can see entirely a place for debating the very things my right hon. Friend mentioned, and that is what I will seek to get.

**Edward Miliband** (Doncaster North) (Lab): The Secretary of State and the Prime Minister have both more or less admitted today what has been obvious for months—that it will take more than two years to have a trade deal with the EU ready to go. But there follows a crucial question for many businesses up and down the country, which is what the arrangements will be when we leave the EU and that trade deal is not yet complete. From listening to the Secretary of State and reading the Prime Minister’s speech, we are none the wiser what that will be. Will the Secretary of State enlighten us on that crucial point, which matters hugely to families and businesses?

**Mr Davis:** I will correct one or two things the right hon. Gentleman got wrong about what I said. He is wrong to interpret what I said as any suggestion that we will not be able to negotiate this outcome in the timetable in front of us. I said the issue was that we would look at implementation issues, because they may well take time. I cited some of them—borders, customs and various other aspects that might take time to put into effect. It will be in the joint interests of the European Union and ourselves to put those in place. But more widely, I cannot think how I could have been clearer. I have answered every single question, with one exception, that the Labour spokesman put to us. I have tried to answer as many as I can of the ones the Select Committee put to us. We have been very clear. I do not think anybody out there will believe the Labour party now when it says, “We don’t know what the negotiating strategy is.” It is as plain as a pikestaff, and the right hon. Gentleman should recognise that.

**Mr Andrew Tyrie** (Chichester) (Con): The Prime Minister has indeed given clarity: we are leaving the single market, and we are leaving the customs union. But further to the point that has just been asked, in the implementation phase the Prime Minister has proposed after article 50—that period of adjustment to a deal—will all the detailed terms already have been finalised, or are the details of the so-called bold and ambitious deal, as she put it, to be worked out during the implementation phase?

**Mr Davis:** My right hon. Friend wrote a very wise paper, which I referred to in a previous exchange here. He will recognise that the negotiating balance changes at the end of the two-year period, so it is very important that we conclude the deal by then. The implementation is a different matter; it may take time, and it does take time, but we cannot control that, whether we are putting in place a new customs arrangement or whatever it might be. So there are practicalities there, and it is the practicalities that will drive this.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): While the Prime Minister has made things clearer today, and I welcome, in particular, the commitment that Parliament will have a vote on the final deal and that the Government will seek transitional arrangements—both things that the Select Committee called for in its first report—there is one big issue where there is still uncertainty for businesses, and that is the continuation of tariff-free and barrier-free trade. Given the Government’s unequivocal commitment today to that goal, will the Secretary of State tell the House whether, if remaining in the customs union turns out to be the only way of ensuring that—because what we ask for is not necessarily what we will get—that is what the Government will do to honour that commitment to British businesses?

**Mr Davis:** What the Government will do is abide by the instruction given to them by the British people, and that instruction was to leave the European Union. I am afraid that is inconsistent with membership of the market. But what we have said in terms is that we intend to deliver the very thing the right hon. Gentleman says British business is uncertain about, and that is tariff-free and barrier-free access to the European market.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May I, too, welcome the increased clarity the Prime Minister has brought to the EU debate today? I just hope that the 27 remaining countries in the EU will take this opportunity to embrace the positive spirit in which this plan has been put forward. The Prime Minister said in her speech that she was putting “the preservation of our precious Union at the heart of everything”. In that spirit, may I ask the Secretary of State whether those parts of the country that are net beneficiaries of funds from the EU, such as Wales and Cornwall, will continue to get that level of funding so that they, too, can take advantage of the great opportunities ahead?

**Mr Davis:** The aim of our entire strategy is to improve the economic prospects of the country, and to do that for everybody. Our Prime Minister has been very forward in talking about the benefits for all. One of the things that has passed almost unremarked but was, in fact, remarkable was the speed with which the Treasury stepped in very early on—on universities, farming and structural funds. It made a decision in four weeks, in the middle of August—something I cannot remember in my lifetime in this Parliament, which is quite long. I think my right hon. Friend can take it as read that we will do everything possible to make sure that all parts of the United Kingdom benefit from this policy.

**Mr Douglas Carswell** (Clacton) (UKIP): I applaud the Prime Minister’s speech and her vision of a liberal Brexit. Can the Minister confirm that, where mutual co-operation is needed between the EU and the UK after we have left, such as on intelligence sharing, arrangements will be put in place on the basis of bilateral treaties, rather than supranational legislation with us as the supplicant?
Mr Davis: One of the things the Prime Minister has made plain is that we are not the supplicant, either in this negotiation or in what follows. Britain is the intelligence superpower in Europe; we are critical to the defence of Europe from terrorist threat, and we are critical to the military support of Europe and to dealing with migration, with our Navy at work. Those things will continue; they are very often on a bilateral basis anyway, but they will be done on a treaty basis that is equal to both sides.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I think we should loyally support the Government. [Laughter.] Will the Secretary of State confirm that insisting on controlling our own borders and insisting on doing international trade deals are inconsistent not just with membership of the European Union but with the customs union and the single market? So I agree that, after the welcome tone of today’s speech, it is not hard Brexit—it is full Brexit.

Mr Davis: With respect to my hon. Friend’s opening remarks, my health is fragile these days, so will he be careful about making such assertions about supporting the Government? However, it is plain that we have endeavoured to put together the option that gives the best outcome for Britain while obeying the decision of the people. That is what we have done, and it will work.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister, in the first part of her speech, made a welcome commitment to enhance and protect workers’ rights, but at the end she was threatening to take them away, undercut the rest of Europe and rip up the British economic model if we do not get what we want. Can the Secretary of State now withdraw that threat and be clear that Britain will not do that, because if the Government are prepared to rip up workers’ rights as soon as the negotiations get difficult, how can we trust them to ensure that the rest of Britain’s interests are protected if the negotiations get difficult?

Mr Davis: I will say to the right hon. Lady what I said to the head of the TUC only a couple of weeks ago: there is no circumstance under which we will rip up workers’ rights. That is my commitment from the beginning in this job, and it will be my commitment for as long as I am in it.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): The Governor of the Bank of England recently told the Treasury Committee that the financial stability risks to the eurozone are greater than those faced by the UK. Will the Secretary of State undertake to offer the European Union a full agreement to ensure that, through the withdrawal agreement, the eurozone continues to enjoy access to the City of London?

Mr Davis: The Governor and my hon. Friend make a very good point. The existence of the City of London ensures a pool of liquidity and an almost bottomless source of low-cost finance for most of the industries of Europe, so countries have every interest in doing the deal we have described. I reiterate that that is what we are relying on: that it is in everybody’s interests to do this—economically, socially and in terms of financial stability.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): As the Secretary of State knows, I support reforming freedom of movement, but in a way that does least damage to the economy, and particularly the regional economy. I see in the Prime Minister’s speech today that she makes specific mention of protecting the interests of Cardiff, Edinburgh, Belfast and the City of London, but there is no mention at all of the north-west of England, Greater Manchester or, indeed, any English region. Rather than leaving these crucial decisions to a London-centric, right-wing clique around the Prime Minister, is it not time now to open up this debate, give Greater Manchester a voice in it and establish a Brexit committee for the nations and regions?

Mr Davis: If the right hon. Gentleman is not careful, I shall invite him to jump on the M62 and come to visit me at my home in Yorkshire—that right-wing bastion in the north of England. What would I say to him is this: as he might imagine, I am acutely conscious of the needs of the north, and what I am intending to do—I had not intended to announce it today, but I will, since he has asked—after the mayoral elections is to get all the mayors of the north to come and have a meeting in York to talk about precisely that.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It is a magnificent plan, but before the Secretary of State negotiates it, may I urge on him enormous patience, because our partners will first want to discuss the money—the division of the assets and liabilities?

Mr Davis: I almost reiterate the answer I gave to the previous question, which is that I am from Yorkshire, and we are known to be just like the Scots but a lot less generous.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Today’s speech is a result of what we get when immigration policy is allowed to dictate economic policy rather than considering these crucial questions of immigration and economics together. The Prime Minister set out a plan to leave the European Union but did not set out a plan to keep anything like the current access to our biggest single market for jobs, businesses and trade. During the referendum campaign she said that pulling out of the single market would mean a loss of investors and going backwards on international trade. So what economic assessment did the Government make of the impact of today’s speech on jobs, trade and prosperity—or was the speech made without any such assessment at all?

Mr Davis: First, the outcome of the referendum last year was not principally about immigration, although a very large part of it was; it was principally about control of our country. If we talk to the people who voted, they would say that that is what they were concerned about, and that is what this is about. Since I was party to the writing of this speech, I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that we had the economic future of the country, the security of the country, the sovereignty of the country and our part in the world all squarely in our sights when we wrote it.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My right hon. Friend made it clear in his statement that “no deal is better than a bad deal”. In the unlikely—I am sure—event
that we were to get a bad deal and the House were to vote against it, what would be the impact on our status within the European Union?

Mr Davis: The referendum last year set in motion a circumstance where the UK is going to leave the European Union, and the vote will not change that. We want to have a vote so that the House can be behind and support the policy that we are quite sure it will approve of when we get there.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister’s speech today in the sense that it gives certainty to the millions of Labour supporters who voted to leave and now know that, “Taking back control”, is not just a slogan but actually means something. Will the Secretary of State assure us that in this interim period before we leave the EU, we will continue to work to negotiate trade deals with other countries—some of which might be nearly finished—so that we are ready to go when we actually leave?

Mr Davis: Of course we will do that; the hon. Lady is entirely right. We are constrained by a thing called the duty of sincere co-operation, which requires us not to do things that jeopardise actions by the European Union, so if the European Union currently has a trade deal in negotiation, we have to be very careful about how we impact on that. Of course we cannot actually sign anything until the day we leave, but I have a very strong suspicion that there will be a lot of things ready to sign on the very next day.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I apologise, Mr Speaker, for being unavoidably rather late in the Chamber. While I welcome the tone of the Prime Minister’s statement today and the commitments to free trade, internationalism and so on, which are very welcome, does my right hon. Friend agree that when he is negotiating free trade agreements or customs unions with any other country or group of countries, the parties both agree to be bound by sets of rules which neither of them is going to change? Any agreement involves submitting to some means of resolution of disputes, be it arbitration, a court of law, or the World Trade Organisation rules. What do I not understand when reading the Prime Minister’s statement or listening to my right hon. Friend is which country in the world is going to enter into a trade agreement with this country on the basis that the use of these levers on the basis that it might start a trade war? Does he not accept that the sure way of getting intransigence from the EU is to throw away this economic deterrent that we have at our disposal?

Mr Davis: I am mildly disappointed but not surprised. What is perhaps surprising is that whenever we hear somebody threaten some sort of punishment sanction, the Opposition never say a word. This is something in the national interest, and every single member of our nation stands to gain by that.

Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I welcome the detailed plan set out by the Prime Minister for a post-Brexit Britain that means that we are a self-governing democracy and a firm friend to Europe but also with a global perspective. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is absolutely vital that this is a positive vision, because that is how we can unite the country and make sure that Britain goes from strength to strength?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend—my old friend—goes right to the heart of this. The purpose of this, and the reason we addressed the questions put by the Opposition, was that we wanted to get people behind a vision of Britain that is going to be in everybody’s interest—north and south; England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; every part of the country, rich and poor—and that is what we intend to do.
Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): In 45 minutes, the Prime Minister has not delivered a plan—she has delivered a Pandora’s box. Let us talk of just one example raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). The Prime Minister said that she wants us to leave the common commercial policy and the common external tariff but to have associate membership of the customs union—a type of membership that does not yet exist and that nobody else has. Can the Secretary of State tell us exactly what this means for deals like the Nissan deal on which thousands of jobs depend, or any others that are in train—or simply, what cake is it that he wants to have and eat this time?

Mr Davis: First, Nissan has decided to enlarge its investment in Britain, so it is clearly persuaded of this circumstance. Secondly, we have said from the beginning that the relationship—the new partnership—that we want to have with the European Union will be unique; it will be brand new. It is unique in many ways. Let me give the hon. Lady one example. In the trade deal that we are seeking to arrive at, we will have the same standards of production applying to all of Britain that apply to the European Union now. There is no other trade deal in the world like that. The same thing applies to the customs agreement. We are in a position where currently we have no customs barriers, so why should we not have a completely frictionless one when we get to the end of the deal?

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that having a strong, fair and global Britain must include showing support for EU nationals currently living and working in our communities? To that end, does he agree that we should unilaterally guarantee their rights, which would demonstrate our good will with a clear statement of intent?

Mr Davis: We have what we have done is to seek at the earliest possible opportunity to try to establish with the national Governments of those EU nationals an agreement covering those EU nationals, which we will introduce. We will have the same standards of production applying to all of Britain that apply to the European Union now. There is no other trade deal in the world like that. The same thing applies to the customs agreement. We are in a position where currently we have no customs barriers, so why should we not have a completely frictionless one when we get to the end of the deal?

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Members should not assume that we will do anything other than interpret that immigration policy in the UK’s national interests. We are a science superpower, and that science superpower status depends on our access to talent—our ability to get people to come and work in our universities, win Nobel prizes and do what they do very well here—and that is very much square and centre in what we are attempting to achieve.

**Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab):** The Secretary of State was an early advocate of a White Paper. Downing Street has made it clear that there will be no White Paper, and that the Prime Minister’s speech is all we are going to get. Is he disappointed by that, and will he go back and ask her to think again so that we can have meaningful debates, with votes, ahead of the final agreement?

**Mr Davis:** Frankly, the hon. Lady should read the speech. It is almost 7,000 words of very closely argued strategy on our approach to the European Union. It answers all her questions that we can answer at this stage, and that is what we set out to do. We set out to help Parliament with its decisions, and I think that is what we have done.

**Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con):** The hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) suggested that the European Court of Justice would retain jurisdiction over disputes in respect of the trade deal. Given that the Canada trade deal contained an arbitration clause, does the Secretary of State think that that is absolutely necessary?

**Mr Davis:** There is always an arbitration clause in any trade deal, but who carries out the arbitration forms part of the deal. That is what we will agree, and I think it is incredibly unlikely that it will be the European Court of Justice.

**Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green):** May I suggest to the Secretary of State that his Government’s threat to turn Britain into a corporate tax haven floating off the edge of Europe is not what people voted for on 23 June, and that people also did not vote to wreck our environmental protections? Will the Government therefore introduce a new environmental protection Bill, as advocated by the Environmental Audit Committee, so that vital safeguards for nature are neither quietly dropped through secondary legislation, nor bargained away in the rush to conclude new trade deals, for example with the US?

**Mr Davis:** The way in which we have—very clearly, I think—structured this with the great repeal Bill is so that all existing protections in law will be put into British law, and anything thereafter will be for this Parliament to decide, which has not been true for about 40 years.

**Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con):** In the Secretary of State’s long and distinguished political career, did he ever think that in his political lifetime a British Prime Minister would make such a splendid speech on the EU, totally in line with the British people?

**Mr Davis:** Absolutely not. Sadly, however, that will not get me a pay increase.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** Russia has been up to its usual tricks in trying to stir up trouble between Serbia and Kosovo this week, and it is of course trying to face down the United States of America and, for that matter, other members of NATO on the border with Poland and Estonia. I believe that the bedrock of our national security is NATO—I hope my party does, too—but on coming back from the EU, successive Foreign Secretaries, Home Secretaries and Prime Ministers have come to this House and said that they are proud to have been able to make sure that the EU keeps strong sanctions in place against Russian territorial aggression. How will we be able to do that in future when we have left the European Union?

**Mr Davis:** We will be able to do that by bilateral negotiation, but let me go back to the fundamentals of what the hon. Gentleman said. He is right that we need to contain Russian expansionism, and that that is an important part of this country’s role in the world. One of the most important parts of what was an incredibly important speech was where the Prime Minister made it very plain that we will continue to be a good global citizen and a good European citizen, particularly on matters of regional security.

**James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con):** I welcome today’s statement and the clarity it brings. In the black country and the wider west midlands economy, businesses have driven export growth, particularly outside the European Union. Does the Secretary of State agree that any agreement on access to the single market must not constrain the ability of west midlands exporters to continue to ply their trade outside the EU and grow their exports?

**Mr Davis:** My hon. Friend makes a point that goes to the heart of the approach to the customs union. The reason we are not going to be a part of the common commercial policy is to enable us to make the deals that enable black country industrialists to make the maximum out of international trade.

**Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP):** EU workers in Scotland contribute £7.5 billion to our economy, not to mention the huge contribution they make to our social fabric. What is the Secretary of State going to do to protect their rights and Scotland’s place in Europe, which they voted for by a majority in the EU referendum?

**Mr Davis:** There is a part of the Scottish Government’s report that relates to this issue. As I said to one of my colleagues earlier, we will not be managing the immigration policy or migration policy in a way that harms the national interest. That means not causing labour shortages or shortages of talent and so on. That applies not just globally, but to each nation state of the United Kingdom.

**Victoria Atkins (Louth and Hornsea) (Con):** I welcome the Prime Minister’s plan for Britain and her speech today. I represent a rural constituency that has a long history—and future—of agriculture. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that agriculture will be central in any trade negotiations, and that the high quality of food standards for which British farming is famed will be a key principle in those negotiations?
Mr Davis: Very simply, the answer is yes. We are a large market for European agriculture and food production, but they are a large market for us too, and we will keep that in mind.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): On rethinking immigration policy, will Ministers consider allowing EU citizens to come to the UK if they have a firm job offer in the UK as part of the quid pro quo for barrier-free access to the single market, which the Secretary of State said is his goal?

Mr Davis: If I remember correctly from the Prime Minister’s speech, she made the point that this is not at all a policy to shut out Europeans; it is a policy to deliver the best interests of the United Kingdom and the best interests of the European Union. We will therefore keep that in mind.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s speech and her plans. Does my right hon. Friend agree that his negotiations will be greatly enhanced by his commitment to working with British business, and that the Government’s commitment to shaping a modern industrial strategy with British business will provide a clear vision for our post-Brexit economic future?

Mr Davis: The two policies, the industrial policy and the negotiating policy with the European Union, fit together hand in glove. My hon. Friend is quite right. We have paid an enormous amount of attention to business, finance, manufacturing, aviation, energy and so on—every single sector; 51 different sectors—to get the best possible deal that suits all of them. We will continue to do so.

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): Trading with the EU under WTO rules would be vastly inferior to our current arrangements, with 10% tariffs on cars, 13% tariffs on clothes and up to 40% tariffs on the agricultural produce the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) was talking about. For the sake of clarity, will the Secretary of State be absolutely clear: does the Prime Minister’s commitment to an interim implementation arrangement amount to the Government ruling out leaving the EU with no deal at all, and amount to the Government ruling out ending up trading under WTO rules, because that would be very, very damaging for jobs and businesses in this country?

Mr Davis: What the Prime Minister said in terms is that a bad deal is worse than no deal for a variety of reasons, one of which is that if you walk into a negotiation with no other option you will not do very well.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s tone this morning in the building formerly known as Stafford House. Does the Secretary of State agree that the issue of no cliff edge and of a really well worked out implementation plan is incredibly important, not just for businesses but for the entire economy and all the people of the United Kingdom—and, indeed, of the EU?

Mr Davis: As ever, my hon. Friend is right. The point I tried to make earlier—I think it was made this morning, too—is that this is not only important to us, but to the European Union.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): If we are looking for things that unite us and enable us to exit the European Union more smoothly, may I suggest to the Secretary of State that he starts talking to the Home Office and to Ministers who deal with universities to find a way to properly remove the numbers of international students from the immigration figures?

Mr Davis: Having explained earlier how I got the job by being oleaginous to the boss, I think answering that question would lose me the job because that is a matter for the Home Office. As I said earlier in answer to other questions, the right hon. Lady can be sure that the operation of the immigration policy after we depart the European Union will be in the national interest. That includes in the interest of our incredibly powerful and effective university sector.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): As the shadow Minister said, this is not a hard Brexit and nor is it a soft Brexit. This is a plan for Britain on Brexit. The pound is up almost 3% since the Prime Minister’s announcement this morning, so I urge my right hon. Friend not to give in to the voices opposite who want a constant commentary, but to carry on the very clear strategy, laid out since he took the post, of making announcements when there is something to announce. The markets today prove that that stability works.

Mr Davis: I am slightly loth to pin the entire effectiveness of the strategy on the currency markets, although I have to say that the two speeches have managed to move the pound by a total of 5%. I have made more money on that than in the rest of my entire industrial career! But I take the point. This is a very important issue and we must not give a running commentary on it. However, the Opposition had a point: clarity is worth while and that has been demonstrated today.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): The Prime Minister said in her speech that we are leaving the single market and that she is going to negotiate a free trade agreement with the EU. She said that the free trade agreement “may take in elements of current single market arrangements in certain areas”.

She continued: “If so...it is reasonable that we should make an appropriate contribution.”

Will the Secretary of State today confirm that the Government are considering continuing to make a financial contribution on that basis to the EU?

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman should have listened to the questions, when the Prime Minister elaborated and pointed out that there are elements of the European Union where it is to our benefit—some of the research arrangements and so on. We are not in the business of going into great detail beyond that. As I have said before, we are not closing doors but nor are we committing to things at this point.
Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Well done the Prime Minister; well done my right hon. Friend. Does he share my optimism that access to the European markets will not be affected by our departure? The millions of European workers will not allow their politicians or their bureaucrats to threaten their livelihoods simply to punish the United Kingdom.

Mr Davis: I am sure my hon. Friend is right and I particularly like the opening part of his question.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): I commend the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) for her sanity and common sense, and the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) for bringing a degree of integrity to the discussion.

Does the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU recognise that I, and thousands of others in Northern Ireland, will not be leaving the EU willingly? We recognise the very significant benefits that have flowed from EU membership. We hold EU passports and we intend to retain them. What arrangements will he make to accommodate the people like me and the 70% of my constituents who voted to remain in the EU and intend to retain the benefits? Will he, while he is at it, perhaps tell us how he intends Northern Ireland to have its voice heard at Joint Ministerial Committee meetings and in the negotiations generally over the next three months?

Mr Davis: Since the beginning of this process—since I took up my post—we have put the preservation of the stability and the interests of Northern Ireland pretty much at the top of the tree of the negotiations, particularly on issues such as maintaining an open border and preserving the economic basis of Northern Ireland, which is very dependent on trade with the Republic of Ireland. On the JMC, I do not know if it has gone yet but yesterday I approved a letter to the Northern Ireland Executive—although the next Government are now subject to an election, most Ministers are still in place—asking that during the interim period they send representatives, whether ministerial or otherwise, so that we are always across the interests of Northern Ireland. The hon. Gentleman must take it as read that I am absolutely committed to maintaining the stability, peace and prosperity we have got used to in the last several years.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): As the Secretary of State said, giving up our membership of the EU and the single market is not incompatible with our negotiating access to the single market, either in whole or in part, but has he yet considered the red lines he might put down on what we pay for such access?

Mr Davis: I have considered them, but the idea that I might talk about them is another matter. There is a naive belief in modern politics that we have to establish, in some butch way, red lines. If we were to establish a red line, we would invite those with whom we are negotiating to make that red line very expensive. I do not therefore intend to get into the business of laying out red lines here, there and everywhere; I intend to get the best possible outcome for the country.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said we will be leaving the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, but will the Secretary of State, who has been a strong advocate of human rights, confirm that we will not be leaving the European convention on human rights?

Mr Davis: As the right hon. Lady knows, I have history in this area. They are completely separate entities, and the latter has nothing to do with this.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I wholeheartedly welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement and that of the Prime Minister. Steel production is hugely important in Corby and east Northamptonshire, so will he pledge to continue to consult widely on the future of the steel industry to ensure that we get these arrangements right, because this is a vital and strategically important industry for our country?

Mr Davis: The short answer is yes.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Secretary of State talked about bumps in the road, but this threatens to be a head-on car crash for Wales, where trade with Europe supports 200,000 jobs. Does the Secretary of State have any idea how many jobs will be lost in Wales as a result of the Government’s chosen path?

Mr Davis: The intention is none. To that end, the JMC will be considering a submission from the Government of Wales in—I think—the meeting after next.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I believe that the Prime Minister’s plan is a pragmatic one setting out our ambition to continue to attract the best talent, to have access to the single market and to ensure a phased implementation. It certainly recognises the ambitions of the financial services industry. Will my right hon. Friend confirm to the House that he will follow the Prime Minister’s lead, put the needs of the financial services industry at the forefront of his negotiations and secure mutual recognition and equivalence in those negotiations?

Mr Davis: Following my earlier oleaginous comments, of course I will follow the Prime Minister’s lead. Yes, financial services are an enormously important industry, supporting—all with the associated service industries that support it—1.9 million jobs, so we will treat it as incredibly important. It also generates a great deal of revenue for the Treasury, however, so even if I did not pay attention to it, I am sure the Chancellor would.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Some 58% of north-east exports are destined for the EU—10% more than the UK average—which leaves our region the most exposed to leaving the single market, so will the Secretary of State say what assessment he has made of the risks and what conversations he has had with business organisations and others in the north-east to ensure that our voice is heard in these discussions and that the jobs that depend on our access to the single market are not put at risk?

Mr Davis: I am not a southerner, so the hon. Lady will understand that I come at this with a slightly different view from some. Companies such as Nissan clearly took a view too. I want to make it clear to the hon. Lady that the aim of this strategy is to deliver the
maximum possible access to the EU marketplace, as well as access to other global marketplaces. Those two things will be to the benefit of the north-east as much as anywhere else.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Nearly 70% of my constituents voted to leave the EU, so I very much welcome the Prime Minister’s speech today and my right hon. Friend’s statement outlining the plan for delivering exit. On trade, will he outline in a little more detail how the Government will ensure that businesses such as those in Cannock Chase can make the most of global trade opportunities as we exit the EU?

Mr Davis: Strictly speaking, my hon. Friend should address that question to the Department for International Trade. One element of its work involves negotiating new deals, but the other involves facilitating access to those markets, particularly for medium-sized businesses—the ones where we underperform—so it will be doing that as well.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The second of the Prime Minister’s Brexit principles is that leaving the EU will mean that our laws will be made in Westminster, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. In the spirit of principle 1, which is that the Government will provide certainty wherever they can, will the Secretary of State now provide details to the House of what further devolution—the right powers, as he called them—there will be to the devolved Administrations following our exit from the EU?

Mr Davis: First, not a single power will come away from the devolved Administrations—[Interruption.] Yes, but if one were to listen to people sometimes, one might think we were going to strip the Scottish Parliament of powers, which is not true. Secondly, on the hon. Lady’s specific question, I can give the principles but not the details at this stage: my presumption is that we will devolve wherever possible, so long as it does not undermine the UK single market, which is incredibly important to Scotland—about five times more important than the European single market—so long as it preserves the Government’s ability to carry out international negotiations and so long as we can meet international standards. Those are very important. Subject to that, however, I am on her side in terms of devolving.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I totally agree with my right hon. Friend that the UK is one of the best places for innovation and science, not least because we have many world-class universities, including in my hometown of Huddersfield. Is that not exactly why our European allies will be eager to build a strong new relationship?

Mr Davis: Of course. If the European negotiators take a rational approach, we will do this deal inside the two years, and it will be good for both sides.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): No deal might be better than a bad deal, but is not the reality that no deal means that, despite their best efforts, the British Government have been unable to conclude what they regard as a satisfactory outcome to the negotiations, leaving us therefore with what the other 27 members want to impose on us, and does that not sound like a pretty bad deal?

Mr Davis: No. Being left with what the 27 nations want to impose on us is the definition of a bad deal.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State shares my enthusiasm for the clarity in the Prime Minister’s speech today on her vision for a global Britain, and freedom from the customs union and the constraints of single market membership, but how will he impart that same enthusiasm to our EU friends and partners as we approach this future in order that they might realise it is as good for them as it is for us—that it is a positive-sum game?

Mr Davis: That last point is the most persuasive: it is a positive-sum game, and will be to their benefit as well. The EU has had a difficult five years in economic terms, so if anyone has an appetite for more jobs, business and trade, it is the EU, and we are its biggest market.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): EU procurement rules have led to the privatisation of parts of the health service, including part of the ambulance service in the east midlands. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that when these negotiations are concluded and put in front of Parliament, we will have the opportunity, if we so choose, to renationalise the entirety of the health service, and indeed the rail industry, without EU procurement rules getting in the way?

Mr Davis: What the hon. Gentleman will understand better than most is that once we have exited the European Union, every change in law will be subject to this Parliament’s decision.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I very much welcome the Prime Minister’s speech today, and indeed my right hon. Friend’s statement. Over the weekend, the New Zealand Prime Minister visited London and expressed a desire for a trade deal, and US President-elect Trump also wants a swift deal with the UK. There seems to be some confusion, so can my right hon. Friend confirm that we cannot negotiate global free trade deals if we remain members of the customs union?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The common commercial policy prevents us from making such deals, which is why we have come to the conclusion that we have.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The 12-point fantasy wish list includes the UK doing away with free movement, coming out of the customs union and leaving the single market, yet we are to maintain a common travel area and free movement with Ireland. How can that work for Ireland, when we are constantly told that such arrangements would not be possible between Scotland and England?

Mr Davis: That was an interestingly conflated question. If I remember correctly, the common travel area started in 1923 and has nothing to do with the European Union.
William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): My right hon. Friend is the man with the plan. [Interruption. Opposition Members may mock if they wish, but will my right hon. Friend ensure that those wanting a running commentary will not get their way in wrecking the negotiation?]

Mr Davis: Of course.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): The Secretary of State and indeed the Prime Minister are very keen to repeat that no one wants a return to the borders of the past between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Of course no one wants a return to those borders, with Army patrols and all the rest of it, but the reality is that we cannot have a return to the border of the past because we do not have the Army watchtowers. They have gone, but dissident republicans have not; they have murdered two prison officers in the last four years in Northern Ireland, so this is a really serious issue.

I do not want to go back to that very hard type of border, but the border is porous in South Armagh, and there is 300 miles of porous border. If we are not going back to the boards of the past, are the British Government proposing to outsource our immigration control to the Irish Government when it comes to Limerick, Dublin and Shannon? What are the British Government going to do? I hope that some light is thrown on this in this debate today, because I am so tired of hearing that soundbite: “No one wishes to return to the borders of the past.”

Mr Davis: The first thing to say is that there is, of course, an open border now. I do not wish to give the hon. Lady soundbites, but there are other open borders in Europe—though perhaps not in places with quite the same security issues—such as those between Norway and Sweden, where customs and excise work across the border, but it is frictionless. That is what we would aim for. On the security front, the hon. Lady’s question is more one for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Some 44% of our exports go to the European Union. Does the Secretary of State agree that in many respects, that figure is part of the problem, given that just 7% of the world’s population live in the EU? Does he agree that today’s decision to come out of the single market gives us a wonderful opportunity to be more global and international with our trading partners? [Interruption.]

Mr Davis: Yes, it is a really difficult one. My hon. Friend will know better than me that over the last 16 or 17 years, the balance of our exports to Europe and the rest of the world has almost turned around. It was about 60:40 in favour of Europe 20 years ago; it is now almost 60:40 the other way. That reflects the much higher growth rates in global markets than in the European Union. This is one of the opportunities arising from our exit from the European Union.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Prime Minister has come up with this wish list and a threat of a scorched earth policy of slashing taxes and protections, and inevitably public services, if she does not get what she wants. Many of the Secretary of State’s colleagues would regard that as an ideal scenario—as the economic model that they would love to see implemented—so how will he square those things during the negotiations, and ensure that we hold out for the best deal, rather than this deal, which would be absolutely terrible for this country?

Mr Davis: It would help the hon. Lady if she read the speech with a slightly more impartial view. It says in terms that our preferred outcome is the freest possible open market with the European Union, as well as the rest of the world, and that is what we intend to achieve.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Whether we like it or not, it is a statement of economic fact that a large part of our economy is heavily dependent on hard-working, unskilled migrants from the European Union. Does my right hon. Friend accept that there is still likely to be some unskilled migration into this country after we leave the EU? If so, will it be the case, as at present, that unskilled migrants can come to this country legally only from the EU, or will our migration system be global, too?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right that a level of unskilled migration is likely to continue. Where from and how it is to be controlled will be matters for the new immigration policy, which will be under the control of this House—a point to which I keep returning. My job is to return the policy here; it will then be the job of this House to make the right decision in the British national interest, and I am sure that it will.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): My constituency voted, as Members know, more strongly than anywhere else in the country to leave the European Union, and I know that many people in Boston and Skegness will welcome the clarity and tone of today’s announcement. Does the Secretary of State agree that when the people of Boston and Skegness voted for this country to be able to control its immigration policy and do our own trade deals, they were voting knowingly to leave the customs union and the single market?

Mr Davis: I do not want to get into trying to interpret everybody’s inner thinking, but the simple truth is that advocates on both sides of the argument made it plain during the campaign that they thought leaving the European Union meant leaving the single market. I cannot think that the decision was made in ignorance.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that maintaining the common travel area between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is an objective, and he has mentioned the history, but for the first time ever, one partner will be a member of the European Union and one will not. Can he give some clarity to people such as myself, who are by a porous border with the Republic of Ireland, on whether the common travel area will mean the free movement of people, or the free movement of people, goods and capital? Many people who travel do so with goods under these arrangements. Will Welsh ports be subject to customs?

Mr Davis: Let me pick up both parts of the question. The hon. Gentleman is right: only one of the two countries in the area will be in the European Union.
Mr Davis: With great respect to my hon. Friend, I will not go into every single sector of the negotiation, but it is pretty plain that we have a very strong hand on fisheries.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is a pity that the Secretary of State was unable to be present for the statement by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. If he had been present, he would have recognised that the White Paper—that is what the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union called it—is a catastrophe. Will he assure us that the Ireland Act 1949, which he has mentioned and on which I have pressed him several times, will not be revoked either before or after Brexit, and that the United Kingdom Government will confirm that they will not impose a hard border with their closest European Union member, Ireland?

Mr Davis: I think I have said that many times.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): When Switzerland voted in 2014 to restrict immigration, its future participation in key EU research programmes was thrown into doubt. Just a few weeks from the deadline, it has reached a compromise that allows it full participation, in return for free movement with some tweaks. Our science, research and university sector demands no less. Today, however, the Prime Minister offered no more than an aspiration: she offered no plan at all for the sector. Two years of uncertainty will do huge damage. Just how much damage to one of our key sectors are the Government prepared to countenance?

Mr Davis: As nonsense questions go, that pretty much takes the biscuit. We have made very plain indeed what we intend in this regard. We are a dominant scientific power in the European Union. We have worked night and day to ensure that we guarantee the position of students and research grants, and we will continue to do so. If the hon. Gentleman plays that down, he will harm the very sector that he is supposedly trying to protect.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Given that nearly everything that has been said by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State today is incompatible with the Scottish Government’s “Scotland in Europe” compromise document, how do the UK Government plan to honour the promise to take those proposals seriously, unless they now plan to explore all options to support continuing Scottish membership of the single market?

Mr Davis: As I said in an earlier answer, that paper will come before us in a few days’ time. It has, of course, more than one component. The hon. Gentleman talks as though it were only about the so-called—opt-out, do they call it? But it also contains questions about devolution, and the treatment of employment and immigration, all of which we will discuss at that time. We will treat those questions seriously, as we always have.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): At the weekend it was reported that Michel Barnier, the EU’s negotiator, was prepared to contemplate a special deal for the City, and the UK Government have indicated
Minister have the political will to support it?

Mr Davis: This is very unusual for the hon. and learned Lady, but she has not quite got Michel Barnier’s statement right. What he is reported to have said, although I think he subsequently denied it, is that he saw that there would be risks to the financial stability of the European Union if it did not maintain open access for the City of London. The hon. and learned Lady was also wrong in saying that we had talked about special deals for any sector. We have not. [Interjection.] The aim of the British Government is to ensure that the whole economy succeeds as a result of this policy, not just one part of it; and that includes Scotland.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that no deal is better than a bad deal, but what he has not made clear is that no deal is a bad deal. Given that the Chancellor told the Treasury Committee that the Prime Minister should enter the negotiations with the widest possible range of options available, why have the Government today chosen to rule out the best possible deal with the European Union, which is membership of the single market, membership of the customs union, and, as a result, free-flowing goods and trade with the largest single market in the world on our own doorstep and access for British businesses to half a billion customers?

Mr Davis: I do not know where the hon. Gentleman was on 23 June, but the British people pretty much rejected that.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Brexit is a bigger factor in the political discoloration in Northern Ireland at the moment, partly because common membership of the EU and its institutions was absolutely germane to the Good Friday agreement. The Secretary of State needs to recognise that any negotiations that follow these elections and precede the restoration of our institutions will involve returning to and renewing fundamentals of the Good Friday agreement. That means that people will be looking at strand 2, and the need to ensure that the island of Ireland can work and be worked as part of the European economic area in the future.

The question of when powers over rights are transferred or devolved after the great repeal Bill will be a key political issue. No one in Northern Ireland will trust the House of Commons with the dilution of rights before powers are devolved when any attempt to improve them can be vetoed by the Democratic Unionist party, as we have seen in the past. It would be like asking Attila the Hun to mind your horse.

Mr Davis: I am not entirely sure that I understand the reference, but one of the reasons why I wrote to the Northern Ireland Executive was to ensure that we had representation in the Joint Ministerial Committee during the election process. I do not foresee the removal of any rights, and, as I said to a Labour Member earlier, this is one area in which we expect a great deal of co-operation from the European Commission to secure an outcome that will be beneficial for everyone.

Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State tell the House why on earth the other 27 members of the European Union should give the UK the benefits of single market membership without the costs? A bespoke deal that provides barrier-free and tariff-free access to the single market sets a precedent, and offers other EU states an incentive to leave the European Union. How is that good for them?

Mr Davis: Let me, at the risk of repeating myself, pick one industry and one country. The German car industry sells 800,000 cars a year to the United Kingdom, and I think it has every interest in keeping that market open.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): The Prime Minister ended her speech this morning on a very gracious note: she said that the victors in the Brexit debate in the UK should be magnanimous towards those who lost. I put it to the Secretary of State that magnanimity means accepting that Scotland wants to stay in the single market and that the discussions from now on should at least leave the door open to that ask from Scotland.

Mr Davis: As I said earlier, and as I have said to Mike Russell, I have not commented publicly on the report even though I have read it in detail because I want to have an open discussion about it later. That does not mean that we are going to agree on everything, but we are going to treat it with respect.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The EU is in the process of concluding international trade deals with, for example, Japan and Canada, which the UK Government have warmly supported, believing they will be good for the UK economy; I understand that the UK Government estimate that the Japanese deal could be worth £5 billion annually to the British economy. How quickly can those deals be replaced when we leave the EU, and what modelling have the Government done of the potential cost to our economy if they cannot quickly be replaced with new deals?

Mr Davis: There is little point in modelling what is not going to happen. For many of the most important deals for us, the expectation is that we will get, as it were, an immediate transfer, and then we will start talking about improving the deals between us. Not all EU trade deals have been that beneficial for Britain, and we could certainly improve some of them.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I noted the Secretary of State’s assertion about controlling our own laws and ending the authority of the European Court of Justice in the United Kingdom, and I want to put it on the record that I support that proposal. When that takes place, what will be the authority or standing of any decision relative to the United Kingdom that has already been taken by the Court?

Mr Davis: I assume the hon. Gentleman is talking about the standing of case law. That will be frozen at the point when we leave, and whether we change that will then be up to us in this House.
Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Free trade in goods is much easier to achieve than the free flow of services where non-tariff barriers are the problem. How will the Government seek to ensure the continued success over time of UK financial service exports to Europe when we no longer get a say in the regulatory harmonisation that has facilitated that success so far?

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman may have noticed that last week TheCityUK, which obviously has an interest in the area he refers to, was talking about mutual recognition and external equivalence, as it were, rather than passporting. We have not arrived at a conclusion on that yet, but he is right that the goods side of it will be easier. That is partly because the single market is very incomplete in services. However, notwithstanding that, we have been very successful in this area, and he may take it as read that we will continue to facilitate that success.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that my constituency had the largest leave vote in Northern Ireland, and one of the largest in the United Kingdom by dint thereof. Will he confirm that he will not fall for some flawed, special status, hokey-cokey, half-in, half-out arrangement that is currently being sought by some people, and instead give my constituents absolute clarity and certainty that the Brexit deal will apply to all of Northern Ireland in the same way as it will apply to the people in his constituency?

Mr Davis: Yes, it will apply across the whole United Kingdom I think, but, as I have said, I am trying not to prejudice other discussions. What I will say to the hon. Gentleman is this: in what we are doing in this negotiation, the interests of Northern Ireland and his constituency will be at the forefront of our thoughts.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Three quarters of my fellow citizens in the great city of Edinburgh voted not to turn their back on the EU, Mr Speaker, so you will forgive me if I wholeheartedly do not welcome today’s statements. However, I welcome the Secretary of State’s now repeated suggestion that he will take seriously the proposals of the Scottish Government, so let me press him on this matter. Some in his party have said that there can be no differential arrangements in the regions and nations of the United Kingdom post-Brexit on principle, even when it can be demonstrated that they will benefit the UK as a whole. Does he share that view, or will he consider proposals on their merits?

Mr Davis: I have said already that we will respect the view of the Scottish Government on this, but I have also said that that does not mean that we will agree on all parts. Let me mention one practical issue that I, if nobody else, have to deal with. The leading Norwegian members of EFTA have said that the aspect the hon. Gentleman refers to will not work for them, and the Spanish Europe Minister has said that it will not work for them either. We clearly have a few hurdles to get over before that becomes a runner.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The new Britannic isolation that the Government now seek must not be at the expense of EU nationals in this country—or indeed, I accept, UK nationals in Europe. The Secretary of State has said that he has tried to resolve this issue and wanted to do so some time ago, so can he tell us exactly what the problem is? What barrier is in the way that is stopping him resolving that, and how do we best get it lifted?

Mr Davis: It requires all members of the European Union together to agree.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The Prime Minister’s fixation with leaving the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice clearly jeopardises the extent of our ongoing co-operation in EU justice and home affairs issues, which she says she values. If those ambitions collide, surely the Secretary of State will agree that security co-operation must trump leaving the European Court’s jurisdiction.

Mr Davis: We have security arrangements with other allies—America for a start—which do not run into that problem, so I would not think that that is an issue.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): “No deal is better than a bad deal”: I am slightly perplexed by that. How could a negotiated deal possibly be worse than something that the Secretary of State refers to as a “cliff edge”? Is he really that bad at negotiation?

Mr Davis: Another hon. Member referred to a deal in which we had to take all sorts of penalties from all sorts of European nations. That would be a bad deal.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Of all the laws and regulations that will be democratically repatriated to this Parliament by the great repeal Bill, which is the first that the Secretary of State himself would like to see reformed or repealed? When the great repeal Bill goes through, can he guarantee that the rights of this Parliament to scrutinise legislation will be maintained and the great repeal Bill will not be the great power grab?

Mr Davis: On the question about the first one to repeal, I do not really have a favourite, but I will tell the hon. Gentleman the last one: the protection of the employment rights of United Kingdom citizens both in Scotland and in the rest of the UK, because I made the promise from the first day in this job that that is one thing we are not going to change.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: I will come to the hon. Lady in a moment. I am most grateful to the Secretary of State for the experience of the last one hour and 46 minutes in which we could treat of these matters, and I am advised that no fewer than 84 Back-Bench Members had the opportunity to question the right hon. Gentleman. I hope there has been a decent exploration of the issues, and I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the strength of his knee muscles.
Point of Order

3.28 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last week during Department for Work and Pensions questions, I asked the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work how people with mental health issues could continue to receive appropriate support if the Glasgow jobcentres were closed. The Minister responded by saying that “my hon. Friend the Minister for Welfare Reform has met Scottish Ministers to discuss the issue.”—[Official Report, 9 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 15.]

First, there is currently no Minister for Welfare Reform. Secondly, I have been informed by Scottish ministerial colleagues that no such meetings have taken place. Would it be in order for the Minister to come back to the Chamber to clarify the situation?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her point of order, to which I was about to respond, but I see that the Minister in question is on the Treasury Bench and is anxious to catch my eye. I do not want to disappoint her.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. In my answer, I said: “My hon. Friend the Minister for Employment has met all the MPs who are concerned about those locations across Glasgow, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Welfare Reform has met Scottish Ministers to discuss the issue.”—[Official Report, 9 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 15.]

I was referring to the Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery, and I should have said “the Minister for Welfare Delivery”. The Minister for Welfare Reform is in the House of Lords. For that, I profusely apologise. On these matters and others, not least the devolution of welfare, our doors are always open for meetings with Scottish Ministers, and good outcomes are contingent on good dialogue. I would not want this point of order to give a contrary impression.

Mr Speaker: That was a gracious acknowledgement of the situation by the Minister, and I feel that honour has been served.

Carol Monaghan indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: The nod of the head from the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) confirms that she is content with that outcome. I thank the Minister, and we will leave it there. If there are no further points of order, we come now to the ten-minute rule motion, for which the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) has been patiently waiting for nearly two hours.

Burial Rights Reform

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

3.30 pm

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to enable a person to make his or her instructions concerning burial and related matters binding on their personal representative or beneficiary; to enable a person to make provision about the use of a burial space he or she acquired while living after the person’s burial; and for connected purposes.

It has been a surprising two months for me in Parliament, because I have been talking a lot about death. It is not a subject we talk a lot about inside or outside Parliament. Given that we all die, it should be a surprise that we do not talk more about it, but apart from the times when we are near to death or personally affected by it, or when some of us plan for it in a will, death is not on the agenda. There will be an opportunity in the week of 8 May, Death Awareness Week, to talk more about death. I commend that opportunity to hon. Members. Let us hope, Mr Speaker, that that week will not coincide with the final moments of our beloved Arsenal’s ambitions.

Last month, I steered through Parliament a private Bill that gives our local New Southgate cemetery the power to reuse very old graves, and that provision will probably need to be replicated across the UK to provide sufficient space for burials. This month, my attention has been turned to burial rights by the distressing case of my constituent, Marion, and her family. They are watching this debate from the Gallery today. After Marion’s father died in 2009, her mother gave money to her sister to buy him a plot on her behalf. Unbeknown to the mother, her daughter had registered the grave in her own name and gained exclusive rights to decide who is buried there and what monument is placed on the grave.

When Marion’s mother died, she assumed ownership of her late husband’s grave and Marion was her appointed next of kin. Her dying wish was to have her ashes scattered on her late husband’s grave. It was only when Marion contacted the cemetery to make the necessary arrangements that it came to light that her sister, who is now estranged from the rest of the family, was the grave owner. She has refused to allow her mother’s ashes to be scattered on her father’s grave or even to allow a memorial stone to be erected. Marion and her family have asked me to change the law so the wishes of those like her late mother can be properly respected and not thwarted by another family member who owns the grave.

A recent high-profile case stemmed from the discovery of Richard III’s remains in 2012. A lengthy court battle ensued, with descendants of the notorious king pitted against the less notorious Lord Chancellor at that time, my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling). The descendants’ attempt to have their ancestor laid to rest in York Minster, where he is alleged to have made plans to be buried some 550 years ago, was unsuccessful. The High Court chose to move his body in Leicester where his remains were found, due to a lack of clearly expressed burial wishes. Given my interest in football, I could express that as a result that benefited from a home advantage: Leicester 1, York 0.
My Bill is concerned less with such high-profile cases than with the many examples that we find in all our constituencies, if we dig deep, of traumatic disputes when relatives are unable to fulfil the wishes of a departed loved one. Another example involves a constituent whose nan died leaving four daughters behind. A decision was made to put the deeds of the grave in the name of the youngest daughter. Unfortunately, she became unwell and uncontactable. So when the late nan’s sister died, having expressed a wish to be interred in the family grave, there were problems. It took six years to sort the matter out and get an updated headstone on the grave.

A grave owner should not be able to block other family members from having access to their family grave. I have read on various forums of family disputes arising from remarriage when, say, the father dies and the stepmother arranges the funeral, pays for the grave and registers ownership in her name. She gains exclusive rights to erect a memorial and pass on future use of the grave to her own family, at the exclusion of her late husband’s family.

Or there is the example of a grave plot that has been put in the name of the eldest son on the insistence of the funeral directors. The aggrieved younger sister is now concerned that, if her brother dies and is buried in the family plot, the right will pass to her sister-in-law: “I would be left with nowhere to be buried and I don’t have any other family.”

A family in the constituency of one of the Bill’s sponsors, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), have had issues with accessing a cemetery after moving to a nearby village—the scattering and interring was bureaucratic and expensive.

The issue of a family in Sussex has also been raised with me. The affordable interment of a family member’s ashes in a grave has been refused because the relative moved out of the parish in retirement and lived 0.3 miles from the requisite boundary, despite being resident in the village for 50 years.

Finally, there is the connected issue of funeral arrangements. There are cases in which the wishes of the deceased, such as for a particular religious funeral, may be at odds with the religion or otherwise of the surviving family. As has been mentioned in the House on many occasions, there are also cases where a funeral costs too much and leads to funeral poverty, which was so well highlighted by the experience and brave campaign of the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris).

Arrangements for funerals and burials have become over-bureaucratic and expensive, and in some cases contrary to the wishes of the person who has died. We can and must do better. We cannot say that we have not been warned. In 2004 the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, said:

“Our burial law is out of date and needs reform.”

Successive Governments have looked at the issue of burial rights, but in 2007 the then Government concluded that there is public support for reform but that it is not a priority. My Bill would provide an opportunity to give clarity to relatives who are confused and aggrieved by the opaque laws on funeral and burial arrangements.

The law is clear, to the extent that dead bodies unsurprisingly have no rights. In common law there is no property in a dead body, which is described appropriately coldly as “worthless”. The overriding legal maxim is that the only lawful possessor of a corpse is the earth. Perhaps more surprising is that there are no laws governing funerals, only the disposal of bodies. Even a will setting out a person’s funeral wishes is arguably not legally binding because wills are all about property and therefore not about a dead body. Recent court cases have tried to apply the Human Rights Act 1998 to assume rights over a dead body, but the law is unclear. To follow a theme that we have no doubt heard today, it is about time that Parliament took control of the issue of burial rights or, more to the point, enabled the wishes of a person who has died to take control.

It is entirely for the person who has exclusive right of burial to decide who is buried in a grave and what memorial is placed. That normally happens without any concern and is organised by the next of kin carrying out the wishes of the deceased. The problem is that the exclusive right of burial is determined by whoever buys the lease for the grave plot. If a person’s name is not on the deed, they have no right to be buried there or to have a memorial or inscription put on the grave.

My Bill would ensure that a person’s burial wishes are properly carried out by surviving relatives and that the ownership of a grave does not lead to exclusive rights being gained by one family member to use against another family member. At present, the only answer when there is a family dispute about grave ownership is to consult a solicitor and conduct expensive litigation. However, the issue of respecting the wishes of the deceased demands a less contentious approach. My Bill would ensure that a statutory requirement is imposed on the parties involved in burial arrangements to take greater responsibility for considering the deceased’s wishes for burial arrangements and to give greater significance to any existing will or public register.

My Bill proposes a public burial register similar to the organ donation register. Such a register would allow burial wishes to be clearly identified without necessarily having a will, thereby avoiding subsequent family dispute. A clearly expressed, binding declaration of our final wishes would remove the pressures of burial-related decision making at such a testing time.

Our final wishes are arguably our most important. My Bill would help to give such wishes clarity and protection by the law. There is no better way to honour the dead than to give life to their final wishes.

3.39 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrows) for advancing this cause today, but I cannot agree with him, and I shall explain why. I have probably conducted more funerals than anybody else in this Chamber, when I was a curate at All Saints, High Wycombe. At the first funeral I did, the undertaker put his glasses in his top pocket as he leant over to let the coffin down into the grave and the glasses fell on top of the coffin, so he then had to clamber in on top. The second funeral I conducted the family all shouted, “How on earth did you get here?...
We locked you in the bathroom.” He said, “You didn’t lock the bathroom window, so I climbed out and down the ivy.”

I have seen a lot of funerals, so I know the pain and difficulty of which the hon. Gentleman speaks. My beef is not particularly with the remedy he is seeking, although I think that burial reform and funeral reform in general need to be conducted on the basis of a Law Commission proposal, so as to bind the whole of the legal profession and take the matter out of party political discussion. My beef is more to do with the fact that he started, as we start every ten-minute rule Bill debate, by begging leave to introduce his Bill, and I do not think we should give him that leave.

I say that for the simple reason that we have only five more Fridays when we will be sitting before the end of this Session, so any Bill will have to become law during those; it will have had to have gone through all the stages in this House and in the House of Lords, otherwise it will simply fall. There are 73 private Members’ Bills on the Order Paper already seeking a Second Reading on those five days. That is in addition to quite a lot of Bills that have already received their Second Reading, one of which, the Homelessness Reduction Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), is in Committee—I believe it will be coming out of Committee tomorrow. In the normal process, it should be the Awards for Valour (Protection) Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson), that then goes into Committee, followed, one would have thought, by the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass), the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill. So far, the Government have not brought forward a money resolution for that and are not saying whether they are going to let that happen.

In addition, only this week the Government have said that they have turned their back on the reforms to the private Members’ Bills process that the Procedure Committee has called for in successive years and in successive Parliaments. So the truth of the matter is that even if every element of what the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate is proposing were right, it is an act of deception for the House to send it on to its next stage, by allowing him to present his Bill, because it has absolutely no chance of getting anywhere. I make this speech for the simple reason that we could use our Friday mornings better. We should not have a system of private Members’ Bills that means we completely waste our time and deceive the public about the true process of what is happening in this House. Consequently, I say that I disagree with the hon. Gentleman but I applaud his motives.

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

That Mr David Burrowes, Dr Matthew Offord, Robert Felloo, Nusrat Ghani, Mr Ranil Jayawardena, Michael Tomlinson, Will Quince, Caroline Ansell, Mike Kane, Mims Davies, Frank Field and Stephen Timms present the Bill.

Mr David Burrowes accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed (Bill 124).*

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**Opposition Day**

**[18th Allotted Day]**

**Leaving the EU: the Rural Economy**

[Relevant document: The Sixth Report of the Environmental Audit Committee, The Future of the Natural Environment after the EU Referendum, HC 599.]

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.45 pm

**Calum Kerr** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House is concerned at the possible impact upon the rural economy of the Government’s aim for the UK to leave the EU; and calls upon the Government to present to Parliament a clear statement of its aims for the rural economy in negotiations with the EU prior to triggering Article 50, and to give assurances on the future of agriculture, particularly with regard to funding, and fisheries after 2020.

We want to use this debate to consider the significant and tangible benefits that EU membership has afforded the Scottish rural community through funding, trade and freedom of movement. Those benefits must be acknowledged and the Government must offer, prior to the triggering of Article 50, a clear statement on how they intend to mitigate the impact of leaving the EU on rural areas. They must do so now because the combined threat of the loss of direct funding, an end to tariff-free trading and the abolition of the free movement of people could have devastating consequences for rural communities throughout Scotland and, indeed, the rest of the UK.

The Prime Minister set out 12 points in her speech, but people in my constituency are not reassured, because it lacked detail and certainty. We are told that Brexit is about a more global Britain, and that the process will represent a clean break. Well, let me be absolutely clear in stating how far removed from reality that rhetoric is. Under the Government’s current direction of travel, Brexit will not be a clean break for the sheep farmers in my constituency, whose produce could face prohibitive tariffs and whose direct support payments could be wiped out.

Brexit will not be a clean break for the fish processors in Shetland—where in 2015 more fish was landed than in the entirety of England and Wales—whose access to the largest seafood market in the world is now under question. Nor will it be a clean break for the soft-fruit farmer in Angus when the plug is pulled on the seasonal labour that his business needs to function. It will not be a clean break for the most remote highland communities, which are now contemplating the loss of hundreds of millions of pounds of European regional development funding. We again find ourselves facing a combination of Tory indifference to the needs of the Scottish economy, and a dramatic democratic deficit.

**William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): The hon. Gentleman and his party are optimistic people and rays of sunshine in this House. Can he see any possible benefit to the Scottish rural economy from leaving...
the EU? I am thinking particularly of fisheries, the European policy for which decimated the Scottish fishing industry.

Calum Kerr: If the hon. Gentleman spends a little more time with us, he will find that we are optimists at heart, but this debate is about the realities and the implications for the rural economy. I will, with great delight, return to fisheries later in my speech.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Calum Kerr: No: I would like to make a little more progress, but I promise to give way in time.

As the many complex challenges of Brexit pile up, we need to remember that real political leadership is about finding solutions, not soundbites.

John Redwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Calum Kerr: I promise I will in one moment.

This debate is necessary to ensure that the Government do not overlook or downplay all the possible outcomes of Brexit. They must not walk away from the policy vacuum that is opening up before our eyes.

John Redwood: Is the hon. Gentleman telling the House that if we devolve more agricultural powers to the Scottish nationalists, they will not be able to think of a single way in which they could improve policy to help their farmers?

Calum Kerr: The right hon. Gentleman, who is highly respected, usually makes excellent contributions, but I am afraid that that was a poor one. There are many ways in which we would be delighted to improve agricultural policy, so long as his Government do not make a power grab as powers are returned from Brussels.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend also agree that something like 70% of farmers’ incomes come through the common agricultural policy, which is not subject to the Barnett formula, but it may be if it all comes back to the UK, which would lead to a significant reduction in funds available to rural Scotland?

Calum Kerr: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent contribution, which brings me on to one of the first areas that I want to look at. Nowhere is the policy vacuum more apparent than on the issue of farm payments. Whatever its flaws—

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on making some very compelling points. We have a similar situation in Northern Ireland where 80% of farm incomes are dependent on European resources. Does he agree that there is a fear that that sort of funding is not likely to come from the Treasury, thus undermining our local rural economy and our agricultural enterprises?

Calum Kerr: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady. It is something on which I would like us to focus in this debate. I am talking about the importance of these support payments to the prosperity not just of farming, but of the whole rural community.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Calum Kerr: I wish to make a bit more progress. We have two debates squeezed in today.

As I was saying, nowhere is the policy vacuum more apparent than on the issue of farm payments. Whatever the flaws, the money invested in Scotland and indeed in all the rural communities in the UK through the CAP are absolutely vital in underpinning the rural economy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Mike Weir) mentioned, farm payments account for two thirds of total net farm income in Scotland. We have about 35% of the population, but 32.5% of the land mass, and our distinct topography means that Scotland received 16.5% of UK CAP funds.

Jake Berry: Like farmers in Lancashire, many farmers in Scotland are involved in upland sheep farming, which I am sure all Members will acknowledge is often a very, very difficult business. Does he not think that, if we leave the European Union, there will be an opportunity for the Government to refocus support on those most marginal farms that he is talking about—specifically the uphill farms in Lancashire and Scotland? Farmers in Lancashire are hoping for more from Brexit, just as farmers in Scotland will be hoping for more from Scexit?

Calum Kerr: Hill farming—sheep farming—is one of our most fragile industries. I have deep concerns about its support in the future. I want to make a point about the level of funding because we need the Government to step up. I would like to talk about lamb when we look at trade, because it is one of the most threatened trade areas.

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): My hon. Friend spoke earlier about the lack of detail in the Prime Minister’s statement. Does he agree that the Government should have taken cognisance of the resulting report of the Environmental Audit Committee inquiry into the future of the natural environment after the EU referendum as summarised in a letter to the Secretary of State—I have it here—from the British Ecological Society, the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, the Landscape Institute and the Institution of Environmental Scientists? These are the people we should be listening to, and these are the details that the Government should be including in their letters.

Calum Kerr: My hon. Friend’s point is well made.

Agriculture is already a devolved area. As powers are repatriated from Brussels, it is essential that they go directly to the Scottish Government. Any power grab from a Westminster Government would be totally unacceptable. We absolutely understand the need for levels of commonality, but that is not a justification for a power grab by Westminster.
We need a commitment from this Government that the existing allocation of funds will not be tampered with. The starting point for funds to be delivered to Scotland is once the convergence uplift is added to the 16.5%. Throughout last year’s referendum campaign, the Secretary of State and her farming Minister, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who is, I understand, in Scotland, argued for Brexit and it is now incumbent on them to take responsibility for the commitments made during that campaign. Last March, the farming Minister said:

“The UK government will continue to give farmers and the environment as much support—or perhaps even more—as they get now”.

Yet this commitment appears already to have been abandoned.

Earlier this month, the Secretary of State, the farming Minister and I were all at the Oxford conference, and both the Secretary of State and the farming Minister refused to confirm that funding would at least match current levels beyond 2020. Will the Secretary of State take the opportunity today to make a clear commitment that, as the farming Minister promised, Brexit will not result in a reduction in the level of funding available for farmers? Or is this another Brexit broken promise?

We acknowledge that the CAP is far from perfect and we recognise that we now have an opportunity to design a new and better system, but we also recognise that there must be a route to sustainable farming without direct income support because there must be an evolution that takes great care over the fragility of the rural economy. It is also important to note that the CAP is about much more than farming. In Scotland, EU funding has helped to support the roll-out of superfast broadband, business development, housing investment and measures to address rural fuel poverty, in addition to improvements in infrastructure and transport through pillar two regional development funds. We need the Government to explain whether they will match the funding for such programmes and, if they will, the more detail we can have from the Secretary of State, the better.

Another area in which the rural economy has benefited massively from EU membership is freedom of movement. For significant portions of the Scottish rural economy, access to a seasonal workforce is a vital factor in keeping their operations sustainable. At any one time, between 5,000 and 15,000 non-UK EU workers are employed in Scottish agriculture alone. We support continued freedom of movement because it is a system that works not just for farming and food production but for a range of sectors in rural Scotland, especially in fragile and often ageing populations.

Mike Weir: I represent Angus, which, along with the constituencies of my hon. Friends who represent Perthshire, has the highest number of economic migrants into Scotland, because they work in the horticultural industry. Many industries could not survive without that labour. Members talk about the unemployed taking the jobs, but there are more migrant workers working in that industry than there are unemployed people in our areas, even if all those unemployed people could take up the jobs. We need these people and the Government must take that into account. At the recent Oxford conference, the Secretary of State hinted that there might be some relaxation in that regard and I would be grateful if she gave more detail when she speaks.

Calum Kerr: My hon. Friend’s contribution reinforces the point I was making and gives it a bit more colour.

Given the announcements today and the consensus in Scotland against a hard Brexit, we must have powers over immigration devolved to the Scottish Parliament in order to pursue our own distinct policy—[Interruption.] Government Members might laugh, but I respectfully suggest that they go and read “Scotland’s Place in Europe”—that is what a plan for Brexit looks like.

In the meantime, I know that the Secretary of State understands the importance of seasonal workers, in particular, to the rural economy, so I would like to hear today what steps the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is taking to ensure that the rural economy does not grind to a halt, because seasonal workers are already beginning to look elsewhere.

One area that Government Members get very excited about, because there are opportunities, is fishing. We welcome the chance to move beyond the common fisheries policy, but we on the Scottish National party Benches will not forget the circumstances in which it was first imposed on Scotland. Ted Heath, a Conservative Prime Minister, sacrificed the Scottish fishing industry in order to gain entry to the European Economic Community—[Interruption.] Government Members might not like it, but that is why we are in this position, so we will take no lectures from them.

I note that the farming Minister has just arrived. I welcome him to his place and hope that he enjoyed his visit to Scotland—hopefully he was learning about the importance of honouring the level of payments that Scottish communities currently receive.

The legacy of that deal means that today over half the fish caught in our waters are caught by foreign vessels. Brexit will clearly mean the re-establishment of our exclusive economic zone, but the process is key. As with Norway, the Faroes and Iceland, access to the EEZ should be negotiated on an annual basis and led by Scottish Ministers. Those negotiations must not form part of Brexit talks. Scottish fishermen want to hear a clear commitment from the Secretary of State to the Scottish fishing industry, and indeed to the UK fishing industry, that it will not be just another pawn in the Brexit negotiations?

Finally, I would like to turn to trade and, in particular, the important question of access to the single market. I think that the numbers speak for themselves. Overall, 69% of Scotland’s overseas food exports go to the EU, and they were worth £724 million in 2015.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): On trade, two thirds of Scottish exports go to the rest of the UK and only 15% go to other EU countries, so why is the SNP suggesting that Scotland should stay in Europe but come out of the UK?

Calum Kerr: I do not understand why Government Members do not get this. It is as though they think that if we become independent we would float off into the Atlantic. That is not what happens. Are you saying that Ireland will be able to trade freely with the UK and the EU, as the Brexit Minister said, but somehow Scotland would not? I hate to break it to you, but we buy more from you than you do from us.
Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I cannot let the hon. Gentleman get away with saying “you.” I know what he meant, but maybe he could say it the right way, just to keep me happy.

Calum Kerr: Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am getting rather over-excited, but I will always be passionate when defending my constituency and rural Scotland against those who want to do it harm based on a hard-right, Tory Brexit.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Shiekh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; he is being generous. On the subject of trade, does he agree that actually the EU is Scotland’ s growth market area? The recent success of fields of opportunity but in the press conference afterwards, she admitted that UK exports would decline if tariffs were erected. That is the prospect of a hard Brexit could have on the Scottish rural economy or will they be content to make a desert of rural Scotland in the name of Brexit?

4.7 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” to the end of the Question and add:

“recognises the importance of the rural economy to the UK, not least the food, farming and fishing sector which is worth £108 billion to the economy and employs 3.8 million people in communities across the whole of the UK; welcomes the continuity and certainty that the Government has provided by guaranteeing the same level of funding to the agricultural sector that it would have received under Pillar 1 of the Common Agricultural Policy until the end of the current Multiannual Financial Framework in 2020; further welcomes the Government’s undertaking that all structural and investment fund projects, including agri-environment schemes and schemes under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund that offer good value and fit with domestic objectives and are signed while the UK remains a member of the EU will be honoured for their lifetime even when this is beyond the UK’s departure from the EU; welcomes the opportunity that leaving the EU will bring to improve the management of fisheries in UK waters and to champion sustainable fishing, supports the continued investment in superfast broadband and the introduction of a Universal Service Obligation; shares the Government’s commitment to securing a deal in leaving the EU that works for all parts of the UK; and notes that one of the best ways of supporting rural communities is by having a strong economy that works for everyone.”

It will not surprise the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) that I do not quite see it in the same way that he does. I thank him for giving us the opportunity to debate the rural economy, which is a vital part of our national economy. Hon. Members of all parties will know how diverse the rural economy is, and much of it is underpinned by our food, farming and fisheries sectors. Those industries have shaped all four parts of the UK and continue to do so. They are central to our heritage, landscapes and economic wellbeing, generating £110 billion for the economy each year and employing one in eight of us in all parts of the UK. We should all be proud of the world-class food and drink those industries produce and the role they play in our national life. The rural economy matters enormously.

Although leaving the EU offers huge opportunities to the farming and fisheries sector, it is vital that we provide the industry with as much continuity and certainty as we can. That is why we have already provided reassurance to all farmers across the UK that they will receive the same level of financial support under pillar one until 2020. For rural development programmes, agri-environment schemes and the European maritime and fisheries fund, we will guarantee projects that are signed before we leave the EU for their lifetime, even when this stretches beyond our departure from the EU.
The Government will also ensure that the devolved Administrations are funded to meet the commitments they have made under current EU budget allocations. Given that the administration of EU funding is devolved, it will be for those Administrations to decide the criteria used to assess projects.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I would like to believe the promises the Government are making, but, of course, the Government have form. If we go back to the convergence uplift criteria, Scotland was supposed to be rewarded with £223 million of funds from the EU, but we are getting only 16%. We were promised a review in 2016—it has not happened. When will it happen, and when will our crofters and farmers get what is due to them? The real question on the devolution of agriculture to the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament is about making sure we get the correct funding—it is about what happens not up to 2020 but after that.

Andrea Leadsom: I do recognise the hon. Gentleman’s point, and it is something I continue to look closely at in my Department. I will keep him up to date with progress on it.

Leaving the EU will give us the chance to develop policies for the rural economy that are bespoke to the needs of this country rather than the different approaches and circumstances of 28 different member states. As Secretary of State, I have made very clear my two long-term ambitions: first, to make a resounding success of our world-leading food, farming and fisheries industry—producing more, selling more and exporting more of our great British food; and, secondly, to become the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we found it in. These ambitions look far beyond tomorrow; they are about long-lasting change and real reform. They form the bedrock of a balanced approach to policy, and the success of one is integral to the success of the other.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that one of the difficulties the agricultural sector faces under current EU legislation is with honest food labelling. Some food sold as British in this country is not, under EU regulations, necessarily grown in Britain—it may well have been grown or farmed a long way overseas. One real opportunity on leaving the European Union is that we can have honest food labelling so that we know that food is necessarily grown, farmed and produced in this country.

Andrea Leadsom: I share my hon. Friend’s concerns. This is something we have improved on greatly through voluntary and compulsory schemes for labelling, and we continue to look at that, particularly as we leave the EU, so he is right.

That brings me to the mechanics of our departure from the EU. The great repeal Bill will transpose the body of EU legislation into UK law. We will then be able to change or amend it, as UK law, at our leisure. We will soon be publishing a Green Paper consulting on a framework for our 25-year plan for the environment. This will help to inform our decisions, better connect current and future generations to the environment, and ensure that investment is directed to where it will have the biggest impact on the environment. I am sure all hon. Members will agree that our constituents want clean beaches, clean air, clean water, good soil and healthy biodiversity, whether we are a member of the EU or not, and I can assure hon. Members of my full commitment to that.

John Redwood: Will my right hon. Friend also make it a priority to publish proposals for a British fishing industry that will allow us to catch more of our own fish and protect our fishing grounds for the future?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend makes a good point about the potential for all UK fishing. I hope that our policies, when we come to them after consultation, will enable us to deliver exactly what he asks for.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Today, the Prime Minister made a passing reference to Spanish fishermen and their interests when she was talking about doing a deal with the EU. That suggests that fishing is already in play in these negotiations, so can the Secretary of State clarify what the Prime Minister is offering Spanish fishermen and why our fishermen are being used as pawns in this process already?

Andrea Leadsom: I can assure the hon. Lady that, as she will appreciate, we are not entering into any negotiations until we have triggered article 50. We are, however, consulting our colleagues very widely in the devolved Administrations, and any negotiating positions will be discussed with them, so she does not need to worry about that.

A healthier environment will enable our world-leading food, farming and fishing industry to go from strength to strength. As pledged in our manifesto, our upcoming Green Paper on food, farming and fisheries will set out a framework for the future of these industries over the next 25 years. We will consult widely on that Green Paper.

Jake Berry: Clearly, in relation to the environment, there are decisions that may still properly be made at a European level, but some decisions made in Europe damage our farming industry in Lancashire. A perfect example is that in Rossendale and Darwen: farming of commons is what most upland farmers do, and each movement of the cattle between commons is counted. A farmer may have 15 movements in the life of his herd, reducing the price that he gets at market. Will my right hon. Friend commit to making sure that this is altered?

Andrea Leadsom: There is a lengthy answer to that but also a much shorter one, which is that the opportunities that arise from leaving the EU include points such as that which my hon. Friend raises. During consultation on our food, farming and fisheries Green Paper, there will be the opportunity to make those points and to seek remedies.

I want to give a few examples of how our departure from the EU gives us some very specific opportunities: first, to design a domestic successor to the common agricultural policy that meets our needs rather than those of farmers across the entire European Union; secondly, to ensure that our fisheries industries are competitive, sustainable and profitable; and, thirdly, to make our environment cleaner, healthier and more...
productive. Ours will be a system that is fit for the 21st century, tailored to our priorities and those of our farmers, our fishermen, and our environment.

The UK guarantee on funding was my first priority on arriving at DEFRA in the summer. It provides crucial certainty to farmers and the wider rural economy. I am conscious, however, that many farmers and rural businesses plan much further ahead and work to much longer investment cycles, so it is vital that we start planning now for life beyond 2020. It is important that we think carefully about what happens next and develop the ideas and solutions for a world-leading food and farming industry and an environment that is left in a better state than when we inherited it. That will involve focusing on the industry’s resilience, unlocking further productivity, and building environmental considerations into our policies from the outset.

I believe that the fundamentals of our food and farming sectors are strong. Food and drink is the largest manufacturing sector in the UK—bigger than cars and aerospace combined—and leaving the EU will provide more opportunities for the sector to thrive. It is important to take stock of how much we already export beyond the EU: 69% of exports of Scotch whisky go to non-EU countries; 59% of salmon exports, which are predominantly from Scotland, go to non-EU countries; and non-EU dairy exports are up by over 90%. Leaving the EU will allow us to shape our own trade and investment opportunities, encourage even greater openness with partners, in Europe and beyond—[Interruption.] I sincerely hope that the hon. Gentleman who is shouting are going to read this in Hansard since they are obviously not interested in any of my words in the Chamber.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrea Leadsom: I will give way once they have listened to me for a moment.

Leaving the EU will allow us to shape our own trade and investment opportunities, encourage even greater openness with partners, in Europe and beyond, and put Britain firmly at the forefront of global trade and investment. The recent launch of our international action plan for exports, with nine campaigns across a number of global markets, demonstrates our ambition in this area—an ambition that builds on our strength as a great, outward-looking trading nation.

Scotland has always been at the heart of this success, accounting for 30% of the UK’s total exports of food, feed and drink in 2015. One of the highlights of my trip to Vietnam last year was a lunch to promote fabulous Scottish smoked salmon and Aberdeen Angus beef to Vietnamese food importers.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Secretary of State mentions planning and careful thinking going forward to 2020, but what planning and careful thinking have been done for the crofters of Na h-Eileanan an Iar and the west highlands, and what will post-2020 mean for them and their futures?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend the Minister of State met the National Farmers Union of Scotland yesterday, as I did recently, so we have taken informal advice. At the same time, I have made it very clear—unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman was not listening—that the consultation on our Green Paper on the long-term future of food, farming and fisheries is the perfect opportunity for him to represent his crofters’ interests and for them to feed into the consultation, and we would welcome such an opportunity. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Hon. Members ought to have the courtesy to listen to the Secretary of State.

Andrea Leadsom: Scotland has a rich and varied agricultural heritage, including the grain-producing lowlands in the east, and beef and lamb production in the uplands. It is no surprise that Scotland has a number of world-beating brands, including Scotch beef, Shetland lamb, Stornoway black pudding and Orkney Scottish island cheddar. On my last trip to Scotland, I met representatives from key industries and trade bodies that are vital to the Scottish rural economy, including NFU Scotland and Scotland Food and Drink. I was given a guided tour of Paterson Arran, which has grown into one of Scotland’s best-known independent food companies, with a turnover of almost £24 million in 2015. I was also fortunate to be shown around the Glenmorangie bottling plant in Livingston. Scotch whisky is a phenomenal global success, accounting for about one fifth of all UK food and drink exports, worth £3.9 billion in 2015.

On working with the devolved Administrations, I regularly meet my ministerial counterparts in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and I look forward to welcoming them to London for further discussions next week. I am determined that we secure a deal on leaving the EU that works for all parts of the UK and recognises the contribution that all corners of this country make to our economic success.

Leaving the EU is DEFRA’s biggest focus, as it is the Whitehall Department most affected by the EU, but alongside this, the day-to-day work of DEFRA continues to focus on achieving the right conditions for a thriving rural economy. Although much of rural policy is devolved, in August 2015 we published the rural productivity plan for England to set the right conditions for businesses in rural areas in England to prosper and grow. Across the board, Government policies will help rural communities: having an industrial strategy that works for all areas; delivering 3 million apprenticeship starts in England by 2020, including trebling the number in food, farming and agri-tech; and building more homes and providing better access to services.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an important point. Does she believe, as I do, that the huge opportunities for rural diversification will strengthen our rural economies and communities? Not the least of those opportunities are outdoor recreation and other activities, which can create meaningful experiences for people, that will help the rural economy, as well as physical health and wellbeing?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Reconnecting with nature and the outdoors is incredibly good for wellbeing. We expect and anticipate that the success of rural tourism will continue as we seek to become a more outward-looking nation.
Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Secretary of State is making a very powerful point. Does she agree that there are huge opportunities in rural industries in relation to renewable energy, many of which are based in the rural economy, and that we should build on this and sell our technology and our innovation on the world stage, which will help with climate change across the globe as well?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is quite right. The UK is the scene of incredibly successful renewable energy schemes. Many offshore wind projects are in fact in Scotland, and they have brought prosperity to some key areas in that nation.

Increasing connectivity right across the UK is vital both for businesses to be competitive and for communities to thrive. We are investing over £780 million to make superfast broadband of at least 24 megabits per second available to 95% of UK premises by 2017. Reaching the 5% that this figure does not cover is absolutely key and that is why I welcome the Better Broadband scheme. Under the scheme, those who cannot get a broadband speed of at least 2 megabits per second qualify for a subsidised broadband connection, with a grant of up to £350 available. I do encourage anyone who is eligible to contact their local authority.

We are also working to introduce a broadband universal service obligation by 2020, at a minimum of 10 megabits per second. An additional £442 million will make superfast broadband available to a further 2% of premises in the UK. This will be complemented by a further £1 billion broadband infrastructure investment, as announced in the autumn statement. For areas with poor mobile coverage, planning reforms came into force in November to facilitate the building of taller masts, and to make upgrading and sharing of infrastructure easier. I assure Members across the House that better connectivity, the key to unlocking the full potential and productivity of rural areas, will remain a priority for the Government.

In conclusion, our goal is to secure a deal that works for all parts of the UK. Promoting our great British food at the same time as improving our environment is central to building a strong economy that works for everyone.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the Opposition spokesman, it will be obvious that a great many Members wish to speak and that we have a very short time for this debate. I warn Members that initially there will be a time limit of four minutes and that that is likely to be reduced to three minutes. If Members make lots of interventions they will find that they will be called later in the debate than they otherwise would have been. No time limit, however, applies to Rachael Maskell.

4.26 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): If I may, as this is my first opportunity to do so, I would like to pay my personal respects to Katie Rough. Katie lived in my constituency and died tragically in York just over a week ago. The whole city has been shocked and saddened by the loss of such a precious little life. Yesterday would have been Katie’s eighth birthday, and I joined with her community in Westfield to celebrate her life alongside her parents and friends. I am sure the whole House would want Alison and Paul Rough to know that they are very much in our thoughts and prayers. May Katie rest in peace.

We live in challenging times, in which it is often difficult to see over the horizon, and yet we have a duty to steer a steady path to achieve the best outcome for our nation. The country voted to leave the European Union on 23 June, so we now have a responsibility to take the whole country forward together—the 100%—to provide economic and national security for all, and to cut deals with the EU and others to ensure that our export focus remains robust.

Seven months have passed since the vote, and negotiations are due to begin in just a couple of months’ time, so where is the plan from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs? I have heard plenty of platitudes from the Conservative party. I have listened to dogmatic ideology about cutting red tape. There have been utterances about aspiration and the “fantastic opportunity” before us, but all is meaningless without even a shred of a DEFRA plan being shared. Those words no longer wash with farmers. Farmers do not work with esoteric concepts; they live in a real, tough, cut-throat and challenging world where straight talking is what matters. So where is that DEFRA plan we have been promised? Of course we should have had it before the referendum, and we continue to hear talk of the two seriously delayed 25-year plans but farmers need a plan now, so that they can shape their agribusinesses and give them the best possible chance to succeed. The year 2020 is just around the corner and provides little security for so many.

The whole food and farming sector needs security now, security through transition and security for the long term. It is challenging enough for the farming community at the best of times. That is why so many voted to leave the EU, in the hope that surely things could not be worse, but being kept in the dark, not knowing what the Government plan to do, is even more worrying. Farmers at the Oxford farming conference showed their vote of confidence in the Secretary of State; only the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), eventually came to her rescue by putting a sole arm in the air to show support for his boss.

Farmers need clarity. The success of the food and farming industry, which we must celebrate, has been down to the sheer grit and determination of farmers in making a success of their businesses, but let us not get away from the fact that it is tough out there: incomes are falling and debts are rising. Incomes were down by a shocking 29% last year, and a fifth of farmers are struggling just to pay their bills. The average debt for a farming business is now £188,500, and too many have gone out of business altogether, including more than 1,000 dairy farmers in the last three years. Not all farmers are thriving, or even surviving.

Not every problem can be blamed on the EU. For sure, there are some regulations that farmers would happily see the back of. With 1,200 regulations to analyse, of course we would want to see some go, but rather than picking out one or two by name, the Secretary of State should first set out the strategy, and then test
each regulation against the criteria, not take a piecemeal approach with no systematic logic applied. Ever since I was appointed to my brief, I have been asking how the Government will police regulations and prosecute those who breach them outside the EU framework. Answers are needed, as this will be a matter for the UK alone.

All this has little relevance, however, if the big question is not answered: what will replace the common agricultural policy? What succeeds CAP is not subject to any negotiation with the EU, so what has been agreed with the Treasury? With subsidies accounting for over half the income and investment resources of farmers, they need to know what will take its place. What will the criteria be, how will they access funding and how can they start shaping their businesses now, in line with the new criteria, so that by 2020 they can be on the firmer financial footing possible? What has the Treasury agreed? What has the Secretary of State determined?

If Labour were in power today, we would be launching our rural investment bank, and building sustainability for businesses and the environment, and resilience across farming. We would be giving farmers the stability and security they need to plan their future, along with the business support they need and the infrastructure and technological investment to drive productivity.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady agree that there are grave concerns about early pest and disease intelligence from Europe, which might become much less accessible, alongside investment in research and development, which might fall without access to EU funding?

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is our co-operation across Europe that has built the resilience of farming, and the huge knowledge base that we all take advantage of, so of course the relationships we maintain with the science and research base across the EU will be absolutely vital to the success of farming in the future.

Of course, our fishermen and women are searching for answers, too. I have always believed that honesty is the best policy to abide by. It is time the Government clearly set out for those working across the fishing industry what they can expect to change after we leave the EU. The building of a sustainable fishing industry in an international context is vital if the industry is to survive, but as has always been the case, it is the responsibility of the UK Government to make sure that small fishing fleets have access to stock.

Accessing global markets is vital for the future of the UK food and drink and farming sectors, but again I have to ask the Secretary of State what the strategy is. It surely cannot be her role to conduct the global auction on every food product, promoting her favourite brands, such as Snowdonia cheese or Walkers shortbread. What is the approach to help every farmer to access tariff-free global markets? She cannot skip over the EU as if it no longer exists. Some 72% of our food and non-alcoholic drink exports go to the EU, and farmers want the security of knowing that they will have tariff-free access to this market. That is why Labour has been explicitly clear: “We want you to have access to the single market and tariff-free trade.” We must warn the Prime Minister, who, from what she has said today, is steering towards a hard Brexit, not to create more barriers or impossible competition for the agricultural and food sectors.

The other pressing issue is labour. Free movement has enabled 98% of the UK farmers’ seasonal workers to come from the EU (80,000) people coming to pick our fruit and veg each year. On this point, we must be clear. This is absolutely not about taking anybody’s job from anyone else. These are jobs that failed to be recruited for locally. This is not an issue on which farmers can afford to wait and see what happens, because they need to know what they will reap before they sow. Seasonal labour is already in short supply as a result of last June’s vote, and the fall in the pound has made other countries more attractive to seasonal workers. The xenophobia is keeping some away—and xenophobia has no place anywhere in our country. We owe it to those who come here to make it clear not only that they are welcome, but that we recognise the valuable role they play in our food and farming sector and in the wider economy.

For those in the EU who have made the decision to work in the UK, the Government should grant them the right to stay now. Indecision and delay is resulting in many leaving and keeping others away. I know that the meat sector has highlighted the serious risk that the dithering over these rights is causing to its sustainability—and the meat sector is not alone. Today, the Prime Minister had the opportunity to provide businesses and workers from the EU with the stability they need, but when she was asked specifically on the point, she yet again ducked the question.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my disappointment that, apart from passing reference to the word “agriculture” in the preamble to the Prime Minister’s speech, there was nothing about the environment, food or farming in the 12 objectives that she set out? Does my hon. Friend think that the Prime Minister should be according these subjects far more importance?

Rachael Maskell: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, and I have certainly scoured the speech to try to find the word “environment” in it, but it was not there. I have serious concerns that the environmental protections that we currently enjoy from the EU will not be there for the future. Of course, as we go forward and the EU makes more progress in these areas, there was no guarantee in the Prime Minister’s contribution today that that will be part of her 12-point negotiating plan or strategy. [Interruption.] I hear the Secretary of State saying that it is non-negotiable, but if it is a key point on which we expect to make progress, we need to see it in the 12-point plan. Clearly, the Prime Minister missed the opportunity to make clear the importance she would place on the environment; that was not stated.

Philip Boswell: Does the hon. Lady share my concern about the staggering fact that the Government have not incorporated at least some of the recommendations for future land management that were suggested earlier this month in a letter to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs from the Institution of Environmental Sciences and other professional bodies about the still foggy post-Brexit plan—
Interventions have been far too long. It is simply not fair for the hon. Gentleman to take the time of other Members who are waiting to make speeches. It is simply not courteous—no matter how important his point might appear to be.

Rachael Maskell: We see yet again the lack of certainty being given, so a valid point has been made.

Let me raise a further point, about apprenticeships, with the Secretary of State. I am sorry, but apprenticeships are not about simply filling unskilled labour gaps; they are about sustaining people in skills development and training in their field, so that they can have a career ahead of them. The suggestion that they will fill the posts that 80,000 workers currently hold is not appropriate and not what apprenticeships are for.

Farmers need real solutions, so why not reintroduce the seasonal agricultural workers scheme? I know that the Government scrapped it in 2013, but it would provide a lifeline to farmers now and would be far better than leaving fruit and veg rotting in fields this summer. On behalf of all farmers, especially those who may be watching and listening to us speak here today, I sincerely hope that the Secretary of State finally provides a solution to this issue.

We also have a wider biodiversity system to protect. Farmers are the great conservationists of our nation. They, along with many non-governmental organisations, are the ones investing in and restoring our natural habitats, leveraging in environmental sustainability. With more support, they will go further still. We know there is far more to be achieved. We cannot return to being the dirty man of Europe; nor can we stand by and sign trade deals for soil, air or water quality. As responsible global stewards, we must stem pollution and drive forward progressive environmental standards. If the Government are pinning all their hopes on a deal with the next United States Administration, I urge them to think again.

As we debate rural communities, we cannot ignore all the other needs that they are still calling on the Government to address. As the Secretary of State said, access to broadband is an important issue, as is mobile connectivity, and rural communities are among the 5% of the population who have no access. Access to jobs, housing and transport are essential, as well as good public services. However, our ambition must go further. We must aim to halt the urban drift and rebuild rural communities, sustaining rural business and investing in new businesses, so that we pull ourselves back into the countryside and take the unsustainable strain from urban Britain. All those aims are important, and Labour Members understand how vital investment in rural communities is. No one will see a Labour Government cutting the budget for our national parks by 40%, as this Government have.

So what will the Secretary of State do? It is a shame that the Government amendment fails to recognise the unique needs of rural communities and the central role of investment in strengthening the wider economy. The huge challenges faced by rural economies require clear interventions, not complacency, and the shocking disparities between rural and urban environments must be addressed.

There is no such thing as a single, monolithic rural economy in the UK. There is great diversity, not just between communities but within them. I have focused much of my speech on farming, because that is where the challenges are most pressing, but we must remember that there is more to life in rural and coastal communities than farming and fishing alone. If the Government truly intend to deliver for rural communities, that will require a far more sustained effort than simply addressing immediate, short-term challenges in isolation. We need a proper, cross-Government strategy. This Government’s abolition of Labour’s Commission for Rural Communities and their establishment of the much-diminished policy unit in its place has weakened rural communities through a lack of both capacity and expertise.

Many of the issues that are being raised today are long-standing and cannot be blamed on the EU alone, but the turmoil that the Government are now creating through uncertainty is causing an escalating risk for this sector. Those who work across the rural landscape, or who fish in our seas, felt left behind by a Tory Government who failed to invest in their industry and their communities. That must change. With Labour, people would be confident that it would, and that farming would become far more stable, secure and sustainable.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I already have to reduce the speaking time limit, before I have even imposed it. The time limit will now be three minutes.

4.34 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): It is very nice to follow the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). I believe that she mentioned her “urban drip”, which I think was a very unfair way of referring to the Leader of the Opposition.

I have a very small farm in North Herefordshire where I raise Hereford cattle, which, as the Secretary of State ought to know, are the finest and most popular beef breed in the world. The assumption made in the motion that Brexit is something for farmers to be scared of is far too pessimistic. There are risks, but there are also opportunities.

The European Union has subsidised farms for years under the common agricultural policy. We have seen our farmers fall from pole position, and we are now behind some of our European partners in respect of profitability and innovation. Leaving the EU, and thus ending the common agricultural policy, should therefore not be a cause for concern in itself. Indeed, farmers and research organisations such as Linking Environment and Farming, or LEAF, have noted that Brexit is far more of an opportunity than a risk. We currently have a common agricultural policy that compromises for 28 states containing 12 million farmers with an average farm size of 15 hectares, or 37 acres. The United Kingdom has an average farm size of 84 hectares, or 207 acres. Now we are able to create a uniquely helpful agricultural policy for our farmers, prioritising the goals that we most want to achieve. It is important that we have an agricultural policy that works for our farmers, for we need their contributions, but it must also work for voters, the environment and all of us who need a healthy diet. That is particularly true as the NHS faces pressure from type 2 diabetes and other diet and exercise-related illnesses.
It is true that the reliability and predictability of funding is a major worry for farmers. However, the Secretary of State made it very clear in her conference speech that agricultural support would continue until 2020. By then we will have had enough time to prepare for a new agricultural policy which will work for this country.

The Government have already indicated that they are keen to cut back on ridiculous levels of EU bureaucracy, but we must be aware that within DEFRA there are evil individuals who are still rolling out hideous EU regulation by increasing the area suppressed by nitrate vulnerable zones. These are the nastiest and most ridiculous rules and need to be frozen or rolled back, but instead they are being increased, which is beyond scandalous. The civil servants who have recommended these roll-outs should be sacked, and if that involves getting in touch with the Prime Minister to ensure that it is done, so be it, because it is absolutely against the will of the people and the Government.

I have placed on the record in this House multiple times the eminently sensible and straightforward position that this country stands to gain nothing from the Government setting out our negotiating position before the negotiations commence. The EU negotiators would gain the upper hand.

4.46 pm

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I am desperately disappointed that the Prime Minister signalled today that she intends to pull the UK out of the single market as well as out of the EU. Those who potentially have the most to lose from this hard Brexit approach include Scotland’s beef and sheep farmers. We have been farming beef in Aberdeenshire for thousands of years. Farming is a way of life more than a job, and we produce some of the best beef in the world for premium markets.

I am not going to repeat the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr), because he made the case well, but I will say the following in response to the Secretary of State. Scotland exported beef and lamb worth £73 million to EU countries in 2015. It is important to realise that more than 90% of Scotland’s red meat exports go to EU countries, and Switzerland, Norway and Monaco are at the top of the non-EU destinations.

Over the last 10 years Scotland’s food and drink exports have grown substantially, and our biggest growth markets have been in the EU, with a massive 20% growth over the last decade, a much higher rate than in other markets, including the UK market. That is why retaining access to the single market is so important to our future economic security, especially in rural areas where livelihoods are so affected by trade.

The other commodity produced on a large scale in my constituency is fish. We have a huge catching sector; up to a quarter of the UK’s fish is landed in my constituency. But for every one in the fishing sector there are four or five in the processing industry, and that sector supports thousands of jobs across Scotland and a wider supply chain.

The vast majority of fishermen voted to leave the EU—and given the way they were sold out in 1972 and shoe-horned into the common fisheries policy, who can blame them? The catching sector sees many potential gains from being outside the CFP, not least a big bonanza on the horizon if it can secure extra quota. However, it is a very different story for the processing sector, where the opportunities are tempered by some significant drawbacks from a hard Brexit, as against a Norwegian-style deal that keeps our foot in the door of the single market. One of the major employers in my constituency has already come out and said publicly that we need to protect our position in the single market because we have a market advantage there.

We need to remember that two thirds of our fish exports go to the EU, so this is a huge issue for some employers. We exported nearly £450 million-worth of fish to the EU in 2015. That is a big chunk of our food exports; we cannot afford to jeopardise trade. While we probably cannot avoid tariffs at this stage, we can avoid non-tariff barriers such as rules of origin or the requirement for export health certificates at £300 a consignment, adding costs and bureaucracy that we do not need. That would leave an open goal for our Norwegian, Icelandic and Faroese competitors.

During the Brexit campaign, when I talked to people in the fishing industry who were ardent Brexiteers, they consistently held up Norway as the model they wanted to emulate, but that is no longer an option in this post-Brexit mission creep situation. The biggest risk now is, as I said to the Secretary of State, our Government selling us down the river, which was suggested might be happening in respect of the Prime Minister’s speech earlier today.

4.49 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It was my privilege, in opposition and in government, to work with Sir Jim Paice. He and I might have voted to remain in the European Union, but we both had deep reservations about the common agricultural policy and desperately wanted the farming community to embrace the concept of changing the narrative and changing the ask of Government. We have to deal with the continuing acceptance of words such as “subsidy” as part of the lexicon of modern agriculture. We have to change the narrative. My message to Ministers today is: please be bold. We do not want a son of CAP, or a CAP-plus. We do not want a system that simply perpetuates what has happened in the past. We must look at this as an opportunity to introduce a rural policy that is an economic policy, an environmental policy and a social policy.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that support will still be needed for hill farmers in places such as Wales and Scotland after Brexit?

Richard Benyon: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I will talk about that precise issue.

I would like to have had the opportunity today to talk about innovations in farming. Precision satellite-assisted farming has become old news, with the internet of things and incredible changes in technology bringing huge advances in agriculture. This is an opportunity for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to be at the heart of those changes and to support farming enterprise.

The impact of globalisation and the machinations of the CAP have caused the number of smaller farmers to plummet. This is bad news for the fabric of rural Britain, for rural communities and for the environment.
We now have a chance to avoid some of the failures that have afflicted rural policy making for decades, including grants to drain moorlands followed a decade or so later by grants to fill them in; grants to rip out hedges followed a decade or two later by grants to replant them; and incentives to plant thousands of acres of Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine in areas such as the flow country in northern Scotland. The list of lamentable policy making goes on, so please can we get it right, most importantly in the uplands?

We need to be very worried about what is happening in the Lake district. Hill farming created the wilderness and pasture that still defines the Lake district landscape. The hefted flocks and those who shepherd them are as much a part of that landscape as the woods and the open fell. That was what Wordsworth loved about the lakes. It was also what led Beatrix Potter, an expert Herdwick sheep farmer, to save 14 farms and to give them, their sheep and 4,000 acres of land to the National Trust. Her intention was for the National Trust, and us, to preserve this rural heritage for the nation. She expected us—as millions of people do today—to maintain those fragile social structures in rural areas and to preserve the skills we need to sustain some of our most treasured landscapes.

There is, however, a vision that treats sheep farmers as the enemy and aims to turn the fells into a Petri dish for nature free of human intervention. This sees the replacing of the unique blend of the wild and the pastured that has defined the Lake district for 2,000 years with something that is frankly shameful. Allowing Ministers to recognise that small farms, particularly those in our uplands, are the most economically fragile and arguably the most socially valuable should be key to any new post-Brexit model of rural support. Being mindful of what our countryside is, and seeking to protect and enhance the most stunning landscapes in the world while assisting the industry to innovate and to be more efficient and market responsive, has to be the goal. I urge Ministers to take this opportunity to be bold and to create something better than what we have had.

4.53 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I want to speak about the Environment Audit Committee's report, "The Future of the Natural Environment after the EU Referendum", which is tagged in this debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), both of whom are in the Chamber today. Our report, produced by a cross-party group of MPs, found that changes from Brexit could put our countryside, farming and wildlife at risk, that protections for Britain's wildlife and special places currently guaranteed under European law could end up as "zombie legislation", even with the great repeal Bill, and that the Government should safeguard protections for Britain's wildlife and special places in a new environmental protection Act. I will talk a little about that, but first I will address the issues around agriculture.

The Committee found that farmers face triple jeopardy from leaving the EU. Let us not forget that farms and farm businesses account for up to 25% of all UK businesses. First, the CAP provides 50% to 60%, on average, of UK farm incomes, and the figures will be much higher for certain farmers. The loss of the CAP threatens the viability of some farms.

Secondly, the new trade agreements could threaten incomes if they result in tariff or non-tariff barriers to export. At the moment, 95% of lamb exports go to the EU. If we are exposed to a common EU customs tariff, it could mean charges of up to 30% according to the Country Land and Business Association. Thirdly, any new trade deals with the rest of the world, such as that proposed yesterday by Mr Trump, could lead to competition from countries with lower animal welfare, environmental and food safety standards.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union told the House that he will do everything necessary to protect the stability of the financial services sector, and again we heard reassurances to the car industry in the UK, but there have been no such reassurances to the 25% of UK businesses that are classed as rural businesses. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said during a question and answer session at the Oxford farming conference that farm exports to the EU will decline post-Brexit. She also did not give my Committee any clarity on whether there will be subsidies for farmers after we leave the EU, and the Committee wants to see clearly defined objectives for future subsidies, such as promoting biodiversity, preventing flooding and repairing peat bogs.

Kerry McCarthy: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that, when the Environment Secretary gave evidence to the Committee, she said that up to a third of environmental legislation will not be covered by the great repeal Bill? That leaves a huge vacuum for environmental protection.

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend is right. Our Committee discovered that copying EU legislation into UK law will not be enough for up to a third of the UK's environmental protections. There is a risk that the legislation will be transposed but will no longer be updated because there is no body to update it, will not be enforced because there is no body with the legal duty to enforce it and can be eroded through statutory instruments with minimal parliamentary scrutiny.

Of course, we have had calls from some parts of the Conservative party for a sunset clause in the great repeal Bill, which is another thing from which the Secretary of State did not distance herself when she appeared before our Committee. That is why we want a new environmental protection Act to be passed before we leave the European Union. If the Government are to achieve their manifesto commitment for this to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than it found it, they must set out how they will provide an equivalent, or hopefully better, level of protection when we leave the EU. This House will have a vital role in providing clear-sighted scrutiny, rather than cheerleading, as that debate goes forward.

4.57 pm

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I received a letter from a local farmer last year. He had been informed that he could no longer grow cabbages because the EU considered them to be too similar to cauliflowers for compliance with the three-crop rule. Turnips, he was helpfully advised, would be more acceptable. Agriculture and food and drink are great British success stories, yet for half a century they have been held back by the ceaseless meddling of Brussels's self-appointed vegetable police.
There are three simple reasons why leaving the EU represents an opportunity for the rural economy. Every year UK farmers receive some £3 billion of payments from the CAP, and some people act as if that money is a gift bestowed upon us by Brussels. The truth is that that money is the money of British taxpayers, who every year make a net contribution of £9 billion to the EU budget. With that money returned, we could fund Britain’s agricultural policy three times over. The difference will be that we have the freedom to provide funding for British farmers, and for the needs of British farmers, without smothering them with European regulations that they do not need.

The second benefit to our rural economy will be for the food industry and trade. Food demand is projected to grow by 70% in the coming decades, which is a huge opportunity for British food producers. The demand is being driven by China, Brazil, the US and India, all of which are countries that the EU has entirely failed to sign a free trade agreement with. With British trade policy back in British hands, we can sign a new generation of free trade agreements, allowing our companies to fulfil their enormous potential abroad. Lastly, rural businesses will gain enormously from the freedoms Brexit will give us to invest in infrastructure.

After we leave the EU, that box-ticking bureaucracy, a Government elected by the British people will be able to help to fund the roll-out of better broadband to rural areas without having to wait a year for compliance with the European Union’s inflexible state aid rules. As wonderful as Provence is, it is not the Yorkshire dales. As dramatic as Seville’s orange groves are, they are not Dartmoor and Exmoor. Our rural areas are not the same as those of the 27 other European countries. Outside the EU we can design the policies that work specifically for our rural communities, and use our new-found freedoms to create a rural economy more robust and dynamic than ever before.

5 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Like every part of Scotland, my constituency voted to remain in the European Union. More than 60% of the people in my constituency said that they wished the United Kingdom to retain its membership of the European Union and allow our high-quality, locally produced seafood, whisky and other goods access to the world’s biggest and most valuable market. In return, we would continue to welcome, with open arms, the EU citizens who wished to come to live and work in Argyll and Bute and call it their home. As the economic development service of Argyll and Bute Council has done with some notable success, we would continue to promote Argyll and Bute as an excellent place for foreign multinationals to invest as they sought secure entry into the European single market for their products. That is why we voted to remain and that is why the Brexit being pursued by this Government will have a profound and damaging impact on so many areas of my constituency’s economy.

As we have heard many times, Scotland is a world leader in food and drink, and my constituency boasts 14 of the best whisky distilleries in the world.

Philip Boswell: Does my hon. Friend agree that the rural economy in Scotland is able to support our fantastic food and drink industry only because of the health of our environment, which has thrived under the environmental protection legislation made in partnership with Europe?

Brendan O’Hara: I absolutely agree, and I think that provenance and purity are essential, and a great part of what Scotland’s produce can offer.

Last year, Scotch whisky, much of it produced in my constituency, contributed £5 billion to the UK economy; whisky is absolutely massive, and removing us from the EU damages that. I am surprised that the Secretary of State seems unaware that a huge percentage of the Scotch exported beyond the EU still benefits from deals brokered by the EU, and that is what we stand to lose.

There is so much I would like to say about this issue, but let me conclude by saying that I believe membership of the European Union has been good for Argyll and Bute and for Scotland, and that our continued membership is vital to the future economic regeneration of our area. We need people in Argyll and Bute, and the plan for future economic growth put forward by its council is predicated on attracting inward migration from EU citizens who want to come to work in our food and drink sector, in our forestry, in our farming sector and on our seas. We need people to come to work in our rural communities. We need EU nationals to come to Argyll and Bute, and we welcome EU nationals to Argyll and Bute. Almost 2,000 EU nationals are living in my constituency, and it is a disgrace that this Government will not guarantee their right to remain in the United Kingdom post-Brexit. I want to put on the record the fact that every EU national living in Argyll and Bute is very welcome. They have my full support and I wish to thank them all for the positive contribution they have made and will continue to make to our communities between now and Brexit. I will do everything I can to support their staying post-Brexit.

Brexit will be bad for the UK and for Scotland, and it will be particularly harmful for rural communities such as my own. As I said, being a member of the European Union has been beneficial for my constituency, which is why when we were asked the question last June, the people of Argyll and Bute overwhelmingly voted to remain.

5.4 pm

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): There is an active and interesting debate going on about farming and agriculture in our rural communities. I was reminded of just how active on Friday, when I had the privilege of visiting the Plant House farm in Prestbury to find out more about dairy industry issues. We had a wide-ranging debate that completely captivated us for an hour and a half. I barely had time to see the new milking parlour, which had been the underlying reason for the visit, and the wonderful cakes on the kitchen table went untouched. Such are the sacrifices we make—unbelievable.

I recognise that this is a time of uncertainty for farming, but it is also a time to define new opportunities. The Prime Minister was clear today that although we are leaving the EU, we are not leaving Europe, so we need to define ongoing trading relationships with the EU. There are in her ambitious strategy new opportunities in broader markets, which will have positive implications for all industrial sectors and benefits for UK farmers as well.
Some may want the relative certainty of the common agricultural policy, but few would argue that it is a perfect system—far from it. It is quite the opposite. For too long, it has had all the hallmarks of a system created in the 1950s. It is over-bureaucratic and designed for the needs of 28 states, not the primacy of the UK national agricultural interests that we need to have in mind. Brexit will bring us a huge opportunity, so the passing of the CAP will not be mourned. We will create a better approach. The Prime Minister has already said that there are going to be protections for pillars 1 and 2 of the CAP until 2020.

Like the wider UK economy, the fundamentals of the UK agriculture sector are in good shape. We can compete with the best in the world, so we must now look forward to realise the opportunities before us. Like the wider economy again, though, it is not all about Brexit. Brexit should be a spur to action to tackle long-standing challenges and realise opportunities that have been with us for some time. I mentioned rural diversification in my intervention on the Secretary of State; we must realise those opportunities. That is particularly true for tourism and the visitor economy, which will be pivotal.

Outdoor recreation also has a part to play in that particular debate. We need to help young people to build careers in farming and develop their livelihoods in agriculture. I am impressed by the work I have seen done by young farmers clubs in and around Macclesfield, and by the enthusiasm that they bring to agriculture. As the Secretary of State develops her Green Paper and thinks about her 25-year DEFRA strategy, will she please not forget the enthusiasm that they bring to agriculture. I am impressed by the work I have seen done by young farmers, who are pivotal for future success?

5.7 pm

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): As the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, I am well aware of the likely impact on the rural economy of the UK Government’s policy on leaving the European Union. Indeed, after the Prime Minister’s speech today outside Parliament, it is clear that that impact will be catastrophic.

We must all be clear that, short of continuing European Union membership, full membership of both the single market and the customs union is the best outcome, not just for the people of Scotland, but in the national interests of each country of the UK. In Scotland, the key economic sectors of the rural economy in terms of employment are agriculture, forestry, fishing, manufacturing, and the wholesale and retail sectors. In remote rural areas, like much of my constituency, tourism, accommodation and food and drink—including whisky and gin—also play a vital role.

Our infrastructure has benefited immeasurably from the European funding of new bridges and roads that have shortened journey times and enabled remote communities to sustain themselves. Building them has created employment, and using them has created a tourist industry that has begun to thrive.

We have benefited economically from enhanced protection for workers, financial support for our farmers and crofters, access to the single market for our goods and products, and new skills and employees found through the free movement of labour.

The hard Brexit announced today will be utterly devastating for Scotland’s rural economies, with high tariffs and the loss of financial support. Our exporters face the prospect of losing the Scottish protected food names that we value, the common regulatory frameworks that help to maintain our food safety, animal and plant health standards, and the competitiveness that we rely on through non-tariff barriers to trade.

We do not have to choose between the single market and the UK market. Scotland is already the top destination for exports from the rest of the UK, but the single market of the EU is Scotland’s real growth market, and eight times bigger than the UK market. As a member of the single market, not only does Scotland have access to a market of 500 million people in Europe, but through the European Union, it trades with the rest of the world.

Today, we reiterate our request to seek common ground with the UK Government and to find a solution that will preserve Scotland’s membership of the European single market, and for the UK Government seriously to consider Scotland’s place in Europe.

5.10 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to make a contribution to this debate. As somebody who grew up in a horticultural environment in Wiltshire, I see agriculture and horticulture as absolutely key to the rural economy. This is a time of uncertainty. If a business was told that 50% to 60% of its current income was to end in three or four years’ time, it would feel a degree of uncertainty. Against that, in all the conversations that I have had with farmers over the past seven years in and around Salisbury, there was extraordinary frustration with the way that the CAP operated. Every time I met farmers, I heard about a difficulty that had not been overcome. Ministers in Whitehall were unable to effect the changes that they wanted to see.

We must now grasp the opportunities that exist—and considerable opportunities do exist. We must remember that 60% of all food eaten in the EU comes from this country. Some 70% of the UK landmass is managed by those working in the rural economy, and the rural economy contributes £100 billion to the British economy each year, which is a significant sum. We need to be ambitious about the sorts of reforms that we bring to the new funding mechanisms. We have given assurances for the next three years, but we also need to have a bold vision for the future of agriculture and the rural economy that not just delivers more, but demands more. We need to say to those who are frustrated with underfunding and the under-delivery of rural services that we can do more in return for a more productive sector.

I wish to mention the matter of access to the right skills. The problem was clear to me when I visited a fish-gutting plant outside Downton last year. The signs on the wall were not in English, but Polish. Everyone who worked there was bussed up from Southampton. We need to be clear that we nail this issue well. Despite excellent agricultural colleges in Hampshire and Wiltshire, we are not providing the supply of skills to the industry from local home-grown youths. We need to be clear that we answer the question that many farmers are asking, which is how we ensure access to the skills that are needed in this vital sector. This should be a time of optimism for the industry, as we are releasing the burden of all those issues that have been so difficult for farming for so long.
5.13 pm

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Coming from the mainly rural constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone in Northern Ireland, I know what it is like to live among farmers. Indeed I am a farmer myself. The European Union has provided significant finance and wider support to the rural community. Although many farmers, fishermen and rural businesses recognise that, they also add the question: at what cost? With all the paperwork involved in European regulations and directives, many farmers and rural businesses are saying, “Is it worth it?” Most of them are answering no, it is not, simply because it adds to their burden. Farmers want to farm and businesses want to get on with their business, and they do not want to be burdened with that additional red tape and bureaucracy. I listened to the hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) proactively highlight that—he is not in his place at the moment, but I thought that he showed an interesting aspect of this. When we exit the European Union, we need—in fact, we demand this—the United Kingdom and the devolved institutions not to follow through with red tape and bureaucracy, particularly that related to the common agricultural policy.

The most effective report on this that I have read comes from the Scottish Government and was published in August 2014. It says:

“...We believe that the EU Commission rely on a fear culture to achieve compliance with a complex set of regulations. The fear culture transcends through to Paying Agencies (fear of disallowance), inspectors (fear of audit failure) and beneficiaries (fear of unintended compliance failures and financial penalties)...”

I commend the Scottish Government for being so open, honest and truthful about the regulations and how they affect their farmers and rural communities. They are hugely critical of the penalty system imposed through the common agricultural policy, mainly due to the fear culture imposed by the Commission.

Whatever happens with the exit under Brexit, my one plea is that we will not follow through with those regulations and directives. Many other countries in the European Union do not impose them, but we in the United Kingdom have to impose them to the top end.

5.16 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this important debate. It is clear from my perspective that our rural communities and rural economy have not fared well during our time as a member of the European Union. There is one thing that was even worse for the rural economy than being part of the EU, and that was 13 years of Labour Government. It is quite laughable that the Labour Front-Bench spokesman suggested that rural Britain has something to fear from a Tory Government, because I can tell the House from Cornwall that 13 years of Labour did no favours to our rural economy. We need to understand that leaving the EU presents some great opportunities for rural Britain.

As has been mentioned, much of our rural economy is dominated by agriculture and fishing and neither have been able to thrive in the way that I believe they can while we have been part of the EU. The one-size-fits-all common agricultural policy and common fisheries policy in which we have to take into consideration all 28 member states simply does not work for Britain. The British countryside is unique; there is nowhere like it in the European Union and leaving the EU presents us with an opportunity to develop policies for agriculture and fisheries and to manage and invest in our countryside in a way that will be fit for the British countryside and British rural communities. I believe that that great opportunity is facing us now that we have decided to leave, and we can make the most of it.

I am often asked what will replace the European funding—the hundreds of millions of pounds that we have had from the EU, or should I say through the EU, for Cornwall. Let us remember that that money is British taxpayers’ money that is recycled through the European Union and comes with strings attached under heavy bureaucracy, so we are unable to invest it in the things that we really need to invest it in. Leaving the EU will give us an opportunity to have a regional development fund fit for the UK and fit for Cornwall. We will be able to spend it on the things that we want to spend it on and the things that Cornwall needs us to spend it on without the bureaucracy, box ticking and form filling that so many businesses find is needed just to qualify for the grant. I am confident that Cornwall and rural communities across Britain will have the opportunity to thrive and trade with the world once again.

We seem to think that once we leave the EU it will suddenly stop wanting to buy our world-class produce. Of course the EU will still want Cornish clotted cream and Cornish seafood, but this will give us the opportunity to trade with the emerging markets around the world, such as China, where there is a growing demand. I am confident—

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Steve Double: I will happily give way—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. It is the end of the hon. Gentleman’s three minutes.

5.19 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Now we know that it is to be the hardest of hard Brexits, in what will perhaps be remembered as the biggest single act of economic self-flagellation ever inflicted on a nation. It will practically crucify our rural economy. If we were indulging in this hard Brexit for some lofty ideal, such as tackling global injustice or trying to improve the conditions of some of the world’s poorest, I could just about stomach it, but we are indulging in this sadistic piece of national self-harm because the UK does not like immigrants. That is the predominant issue, and it takes precedence over all others when it comes to exiting the European Union.

We live in a global, interconnected world where the movement of people has never been so profound, but the new global Britain is about to raise the drawbridge and ensure that nobody comes here. It is the Faragistas on the hard right of the Tory party who have won the terms of Brexit. It is their vision that will now inform how this country prospers. I give you so much confidence that any nation voted overwhelmingly to remain within the European Union, and I will do absolutely everything I can to ensure that its decision is respected.
I am proud of the people of Perth and North Perthshire, who also voted overwhelmingly to remain within the European Union. My constituency is almost totally rural. We have some fine hill farming in highland Perthshire, and some of Scotland's finest arable lands in east Perthshire, and the city of Perth was once the centre of agricultural administration in Scotland. All those activities are reliant upon international trade and support from the European Union. Farmers in my constituency are very concerned about what will happen to them. The news that one in five Scottish farmers and crofters intend to quit farming because of their concerns over Brexit should alarm this House.

I have the world-renowned Perthshire berry sector in my constituency—no better strawberries or raspberries are produced anywhere in the world. The harvesting of that crop relies entirely on European labour. This Government could put my berry farmers at ease today by announcing that they intend to renew the seasonal agricultural workers scheme. Just a few weeks ago I went around the hotels in Pitlochry, all of which depend upon European Union workers, and all of which are now under severe threat and greatly concerned about what will happen to them.

If England wants to indulge in this economic self-harm, that is up to England, but our country must now be listened to. We have decided something else and our view must be respected. We have alternatives, and I encourage the people of Scotland to have a very close look at them now.

5.23 pm

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Looking at the statistics of the referendum, it is evident that a vast number of rural areas voted to leave the EU. We in this place must respect that decision, but we should also ask why that was—I fear that debate is for another day. As we are now on the cusp of triggering article 50, I welcome this debate, which was initiated by SNP Members. Indeed, I even agree with them in several areas. We agree that we must do all we can to support our vitally important rural areas and we agree that the rural economy is vital to the British economy at large. Food security is key, along with the rural way of life. But sadly that is where our paths diverge. The title of the debate on the Order Paper is “Effect of the UK leaving the EU on the rural economy”, and I take umbrage at literally the first word of that title. What does it say about an Opposition party that it uses the word “effect” when talking about Brexit and the rural economy, rather than the opportunities it presents? It seems to want to do down our farmers as nothing more than a subsidy, and there are those who believe that our farmers have the capacity to be the most innovative in the world. There are those who want to do down our rural areas as wholly reliant on the EU, and there are those who want to do up our rural areas so that they may flourish. There are those who seek nothing but their own self-created negativity towards Brexit, and there are those who see nothing but the opportunity that it will provide.

After the Brexit vote last year, we are now in possession of the ambition that our American cousins have held for more than 300 years, for we can truly state that Great Britain is the land of opportunity. Now is the time to capitalise on that. All that matters is that we go into our negotiations with the right attitude and protect our rural economy for the long term.

5.25 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr lawn. The Government amendment mentions continuity and certainty to 2020. That is three years away. People fear uncertainty, and the rural communities I represent are afraid that the certainties that underpin their way of life are to be swept away.

Farming is a difficult profession, requiring a commitment to a lifestyle that is almost unmatched. Yet, the economic impact of farming in communities in my constituency is far wider than is possibly appreciated. In Wales, upland farm profits fell last year to £21,900, meaning that about 60% of farms either made a loss or would have done so without farm support. However, despite their economic hardship last year, the 10,000 or so farm businesses in Wales paid employees and other businesses about three times as much as they made. Many Welsh communities are dependent on the rural economy for their year-round existence. The Welsh language, culture and traditions of Wales are rooted in these communities and their future is at risk.

That brings me to my next point, which is the much maligned—today, before and probably afterwards—EU common agricultural policy. Undoubtedly, this financial support mechanism is not perfect and its administration could clearly be improved, but what we have heard so far from the Government does not offer us much hope of an improved CAP-style model. Of course, farmers do not want to have to rely on direct payments, but a legacy of 60 years of policy making aimed at cultivating a plentiful, cheap and secure food supply means that the returns from the market are simply too low to sustain most livestock businesses. If we slash and burn the support mechanisms that we have heard so far from the Government does not offer us much hope of an improved CAP-style model. Of course, farmers do not want to have to rely on direct payments, but a legacy of 60 years of policy making aimed at cultivating a plentiful, cheap and secure food supply means that the returns from the market are simply too low to sustain most livestock businesses. If we slash and burn the support mechanisms that we afford our already struggling farms, we risk not only our food supply, but the future of our rural communities and the industries they support.

Wales has about 5% of the UK population, but receives about 12% of the EU funds that flow to the UK. That is a result not only of its considerably more rural society, but of the least profitable livestock hill farms of Wales receiving a far greater share of CAP payments compared with the crop farms of southern England. Those farms, which are vital to our rural and national economy, must receive guarantees now that they will not suffer any loss of support. I call on the Government to do something radical—to slow down and think.
Policies must be evidence-based, rather than the product of idealistic aspirations and clever-sounding buzzwords. A “clean Brexit” chimes with a clean break, but no rhetorical flourish will ring true for those who end up broken. I therefore call on the Government to maintain direct payments and budgets, to ring-fence the moneys until we have found a realistic way to replace farm incomes, and to guarantee that there will be no power grab from the nation of Wales. As I was told recently, “if they want to do to rural communities what was done to the miners, let them...do so with their eyes open.”

5.28 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I have said many times in this House that my constituency voted more than any other to leave the European Union, but what has not been said in this debate is that it was the rural parts of England and Wales that particularly voted to take back control. Those are the parts of the country for whom democracy today is working. What the rural UK voted for, it is getting. For those who remain remainers—behind the times though that may be—it is appropriate first to ask what rural Britain voted for. I would say that there are three things.

First, even though we know that agriculture has long been powered to a greater or lesser extent by migrant workers from elsewhere in the UK or from eastern Europe, a desire for a migration policy that has the consent of the British people was a key factor. By some estimates, a third of central Boston’s population is now from eastern Europe. These are hard-working men and women in the main, paying taxes and working in all weathers, but that is not a change the then Labour Government planned for or the constituency ever voted for.

A key impact of voting to leave the EU should not be to make any individual feel unwelcome, as I have said in this House many times; it should be the restoration, partly in the rural economy, of simple self-determination over environmental regulation and the workforce. No party went to the country on a manifesto that said that it was the rural parts of England and Wales that particularly voted to take back control. Those are the parts of the country for whom democracy today is working. What the rural UK voted for, it is getting. For those who remain remainers—behind the times though that may be—it is appropriate first to ask what rural Britain voted for. I would say that there are three things.

Secondly, we should point out that there has already been an impact on the supply of labour in constituencies such as mine. In my area, there is already not the abundance of minimum-wage labour there once was. I submit that that will combine with the more than laudable impact of the national living wage to create a third condition, which, I suspect, will be a renewed push for further mechanisation and automation.

As the labour supply changes, and as technology gets more powerful, the Brussels sprouts and the brassicas in my constituency will, if hon. Members will forgive me, become guinea pigs for new research into how we make growing and picking them even more affordable for businesses that often work on ferociously tight margins, thanks in part to our supermarkets. We will see a rise of the rural robots. In that increasingly complex environment, we must guard against the challenges of modern slavery, but we must also bear it in mind that we have a huge potential to seize that industrial revolution and to take back the control my constituents voted for.

5.31 pm

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr) for affording us this opportunity, albeit a rather short and curtailed one. The one guarantee I think we can assume we will have at the end of this debate is that we will return to these issues again and again—not least those of us who represent rural constituencies.

I do not think anybody would doubt the passion and concerns in this debate, not least about the impact of the hard Brexit we have heard about today. In my county of Ceredigion, small family farming is critical to the local economy and to the sustainability of our rural communities. The point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and those on the SNP Benches about the multiplier effect—the effect on single family farms and the potential loss of business in the wider community—should not be lost.

Farming is crucial to Wales’s economy. It is described by some as Wales’s last great industry, employing 58,000 people directly, with many more jobs created indirectly, and outputting £1.5 billion of produce each year. Some 13% of the people in my constituency are employed on the land, and farming has a hugely significant effect on the broader economy.

The UK’s food and drink sector as a whole is the fourth largest exporting sector in our country and is worth over £12 billion a year to our economy, with 72% of its exports going to the EU. The Welsh figures are somewhat higher.

The Government say they will keep their negotiating cards close to their chest, but that should not mean a lack of the long-term assurance—the certainties many have mentioned this afternoon—that is needed by those industries that need to plan years ahead at a time. Concern and anxiety are very much the order of the day among the small hill farmers I represent, who are operating on the margins and on a support regime—it is not something they want to exist in perpetuity, but they are concerned that, without transitional arrangements, with the rug pulled from beneath their feet, they could be on the edge of a cliff, which could have huge impacts.

Glyn Roberts, the president of the Farmers Union of Wales, said:

“Careful and precise statements are needed now more than ever.”

The reality is that we still await detailed, careful, precise statements. Yes, let us have guarantees about funding up until 2020, but a three-year window in which to plan a business is inadequate; it needs to be greater—we need far greater certainties. Glyn Roberts also said:

“The livestock producers which make up the vast majority of Welsh farmers are particularly reliant on exports to the continent, and we have made it clear since the referendum that full and unfettered access is essential to Wales.”
He went on to say that he was concerned that a deal was being floated with New Zealand for reasons of political expediency, and that gaining a market of 4.5 million customers on the other side of the planet—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order.

5.35 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): As we have heard, British food and farming are central to our national identity and a key part of the UK’s economy, generating £110 billion a year and employing one in eight people across the country, some of whom are employed on the small but none the less very important number of farms in my constituency, along with Hayhead farm shop and other food-related businesses.

In debating farming and fisheries in the context of this Opposition day motion, it is important that we recognise the role that all farmers play in managing the countryside, wherever they are in the UK, and the work that they do. I come from a farming background. My dad worked in farming for 40-odd years; he has probably never had a mention in this place before. I know that for many, farming is not a nine-to-five, Monday-to-Friday job—it is a 365-days-a-year job in what can be a very challenging sector. That is why, in this post-23 June era, I am pleased that at this stage, as the Government prepare to leave the EU, we are guaranteeing that current levels of agricultural support will be maintained until 2020.

Victoria Atkins: Is my hon. Friend, like me, very pleased to hear the Secretary of State for Brexit’s announcement that agriculture will be at the centre of future trade negotiations with the EU and the rest of the world?

Wendy Morton: My answer to that is short and simple: absolutely yes.

Agricultural support is being maintained until 2020 to provide stability while a new agricultural policy is being developed, and we are guaranteeing for their lifetimes any agri-environment schemes that are already in place or are agreed in future, even if they run beyond our departure from the EU. Anything we can do help to build a sense of stability will be good for the industry.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Wendy Morton: I am going to continue because we are short of time.

One of the issues that local farmers have raised with me is the workforce and the need to attract the next generation—which is why this stability matters—but also the need to ensure that the agricultural sector has the workforce it needs for today. That is why it is so important to recognise that the PM has said she wants to protect the status of EU nationals already living here.

Turning more directly to the motion, it is disappointing that its primary focus is on farming and fisheries. Vital though those industries are, as are the comments we have heard today, let us not forget that in a rural economy there is also tourism. There are also the very many small and medium-sized enterprises in other sectors that come together to form the backbone of our rural economy. In fact, the rural economy is part of our country’s economy as a whole—the economy that Government Members continue to build and strengthen further. I acknowledge that there will be challenges in the Brexit era, but let us understand that there will also be opportunities, and go out there and find them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. After the next speaker, there will be a limit of two minutes. I ask Members to bear it in mind that if anybody makes an intervention, the last few remaining speakers may not get in.

5.38 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We all know and understand clearly my EU stance: I have been firmly out, out, out, as were my constituents. I watched entire families who had fished for generations walking away from the harbour and walking towards uncertainty, and all that was within me revolted against the EU. I have been told about massive schools of fish and yet told by the scientists that there were no fish. I have heard of modernisations for boats being scrapped as they did not meet EU standards, in order to have more money spent on useless changes that did not help the crew to do their job. I have had furious British fishermen prevented from working only to see European fleets fishing at will in our waters. I have heard the death knell rung over British fishing, not because there was a problem in the sea, but because there was a problem in Europe. I have watched that decline during my time as an elected representative at council level, in the Assembly and finally in this place.

I commend our negotiators. I have every faith in the ability of the Secretary of State and the Minister of State to do the job that we want them to do. We look forward to their doing it, and we support them entirely.

When the Brexit vote took place, I met many of the agri-food industries in my area, and I arranged for the Secretary of State to come to Northern Ireland to discuss their needs in a post-Brexit market. Their view is clear, and the Minister knows it. I know it, and I want to put it on the record. Lakeland Dairies—the Secretary of State saw it during her visit to Northern Ireland—is expanding its exports further, beyond these shores and across the world, with much success. Willowbrook Foods has signed new contracts, which indicates how much it is looking forward to the future. Mash Direct, Rich Sauces and Glastry Farm ice cream are all firms from my area that may have had some concerns, but now see the opportunities for them in the future.

In our negotiations about coming out of Europe, the impact on the rural economy will come down to our trading power. The fact that we import so much from the EU surely gives us the strength to ensure a fair return on our trade. Let us therefore look at the good things that we will have when we leave the EU when it comes to fishing and certainly when it comes to farming. These are the issues that will affect our rural economy and the factors that we must consider and that, more importantly, the Brexit team must consider.

I know that the team is under no illusion about the difficulties of finding the right plan for the majority of fishermen, farmers and producers. However, as a
businessman said to me, this is an opportunity—leaving the EU will be an opportunity—that cannot be wasted, and we must not look back on it and wish we had done it differently. Let us do it the right way now. This is a democratic process: the people across the whole United Kingdom have spoken collectively to leave the EU, and we must now work on their behalf to bring to our rural communities the benefits from the decision that has been taken. This is our challenge. Are we up to it? I believe we are.

5.41 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Mine is a truly bucolic rural constituency, with quaint market towns, the beautifully old-fashioned seaside town of Filey and the stunning north Yorkshire moors. I believe it is the most beautiful constituency in the land—I would say so—but those magnificent landscapes conceal a vibrant economy. There is farming, of course, but also fantastic foods, which are on display every year at the sun-drenched Malton and Filey food festivals. Groovy Moo makes superb gelato ice cream, and Ian Mosey and Karro Food are pig and pork producers. There are other businesses that Members might not expect, such as precision engineering firms run by octogenarian Christopher Shaw of Sylatech and Eddie Neesom of Hunprenco. These people get up early and travel the world. They are not lazy; they are hard-working people who are confident of taking their products to the world.

One thing these people want across the world, as new trade deals are agreed, is a level playing field. They are excited by the future, but we need to be realistic. In this country, we quite rightly keep quite strong regulation on our businesses in terms of the workplace, the environment and animal welfare. If we do trade deals elsewhere, we must feel that we are on a level playing field with businesses in other nations to make sure that our businesses are not at a competitive disadvantage. We also need a level playing field in the United Kingdom. In our rural areas in north Yorkshire, we do not get the level of investment in infrastructure that we see in other parts of the country; it is about half in transport projects and broadband. All I would say on behalf of my constituents is that they see the world as an opportunity, but they want a level playing field.

5.43 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I was born and brought up on a farm where we had Ayrshire cows. They were fine—the greatest export Scotland has ever made. However, that is where any agreement with my Scottish colleagues ends in this debate.

I am very proud to represent the largely rural constituency of Taunton Deane, where farmers, growers, rural businesses and small businesses are the backbone of the economy. The south-west farming business brings in £2.7 billion and 220,000 people work in the food and drink trade, while there is also the all-important tourist trade. Leaving the EU represents an enormous opportunity for all these businesses, provided we have the right framework and backing from this Government. The Prime Minister’s statement about certainty and the new global Britain has set us on the right track. Which region wins on exporting the most and on having the most contracts? The south-west region, and we are perfectly placed to take advantage of the opportunities presented by leaving Europe.

Everyone agrees that the common agricultural policy must be reformed and the Government are on track to do that. I applaud the Secretary of State for mentioning that we must leave the environment in a better state than we found it. We must build a framework at home that enables all our businesses to be strong in the world. If we can do that, we will build on the global market. I applaud the Government for pouring money into infrastructure for Taunton Deane: the A358, the rail transformation project and the improvement to digital services. All those things will help us to build an environment that works for everyone, a farm economy that works for everyone and a rural industry that, contrary to what we hear from the Opposition Benches, will thrive.

5.45 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I have sat through the whole debate and heard all the contributions, and it is very odd that nobody on the Scottish National party Benches thinks that leaving the EU would be a good thing. One of the curiosities of first past the post is that 38% of Scotland voted to leave the EU, but the SNP is entirely negative about the prospect of leaving it. It shows an iron discipline that Zanu-PF in Zimbabwe would be very proud of, but it is not representing the full range of Scottish opinion.

I want to make a very obvious point. For every £1 we receive from the EU, we put £2 in. That is what being a net contributor means. We can therefore more than compensate for the loss of any EU subsidies from our own budget, which—this is the point—we can decide for ourselves in the United Kingdom Parliament.

One would think that Britain never had a thriving, successful industry and agriculture before we joined the European Economic Community in 1972. Britain had industry, business and farming for 1,000 years before that. If the Opposition parties knew their history—I am surprised that Labour Members have not mentioned this—they would know that the Labour party introduced the Agriculture Act 1947, which very successfully underpinned British agriculture before we joined the EEC. No one remembers that; we just have doom and gloom from the Opposition parties.

5.48 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I have the luck to represent a very beautiful constituency, but it is incumbent on all of us to remember that although the countryside is beautiful, it is not a living museum or a frozen Constable painting. There are real jobs and real livelihoods in the countryside, and they are extremely important.

In the very brief time available, I would like to make one point. The Minister will no doubt remember the pioneering flood alleviation work at Honeydale farm in my constituency, which she visited with me. I recently visited Littlestock brook in Milton-under-Wychwood, which is engaged in a similar scheme. A partnership of local landowners, the community and the Environment Agency are working together on upstream flood storage in the Evenlode valley. The measures include tree planting and the re-routing of streams to follow their natural watercourses. I make this point for one very good and
clear purpose: there is an economic as well as an environmental benefit to the scheme. Fruit trees create fruit and food that can be harvested by the local community. This scheme enables local sustainable businesses to create jobs and money.

Littlestock brook is essentially an open-air laboratory. I mention it because of the way the common agricultural policy is funded, which makes it very difficult for such small community endeavours to gain the funding they need. The CAP tends to favour very big schemes and very big landowners. Leaving the CAP gives us a golden opportunity to rework the policy, so that it works for all, and so that landowners in our communities can easily access the funding they need, without environmental schemes being tacked on as an afterthought. As the Secretary of State said, these environmental schemes can be part of the policy from the very beginning.

5.50 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I declare an interest as an active crofter.

I congratulate all my hon. Friends who have spoken so passionately about the threat to our rural economy from a hard Brexit and the concern about what the future holds for many of us. For us, Europe and the single market are about opportunities for growth, investment and jobs; the best opportunities to create sustainable economic growth; and playing to our strengths in order to benefit from the single market. Our opportunity to create a vibrant, prosperous economy hinges on access to the single market. It is a foundation stone of our rural economy, we say, “Not in our name.”

Food exports to the EU in 2015 represented 69% of Scotland’s overall food exports. There is clearly a threat of tariffs being put on those exports. That is not a price worth paying. Why would we willingly seek to disadvantage Scottish seafood producers, farmers and crofters? The Scottish Government have put forward a compromise plan to keep Scotland in the single market even if the rest of the UK leaves. Will the UK Government honour the commitments made to examining options brought forward by the devolved Administrations, acknowledge that Scotland delivered a clear message against leaving the EU, and recognise that we are demonstrating the importance of free movement and the single market to Scotland’s economy?

Our Government in Edinburgh are outward looking, internationalist and secure in seeing Scotland’s destiny as part of the family of nations in Europe. We are open and seek people to come to Scotland to study, work, invest and, critically, enrich our society with the contribution that they can make as new Scots. Scotland is looking outward while the UK wants to pull up the drawbridge. It is a UK where the welcome mat is no longer put out, a UK closed to Europe and European migration. It reminds me of the newspaper headline from the past: “Fog in the channel, continent cut off.” The reality of a hard Brexit is that the UK will be cut off—from the single market and from European trade.

Let me be clear: Europe has been good for the highlands and islands. Europe recognised the importance of investing in the highlands. Take the convergence fund, which was put in place in recognition of a lower level of support for Scottish crofters and farmers than was in place for most of Europe. Some £223 million of extra funding over four years was granted to the UK on the clear understanding that this would primarily help Scottish crofters and farmers. Sadly, the UK Minister with responsibility for farming took a different view in 2013: Scotland would get only a pro rata share of its normal CAP pillar funding—16% of the total. Put simply, Scottish farmers and crofters were done out of fairness from Europe. We were done out of fairness from Europe. Europe wanted to help Scottish crofters and farmers; Westminster once again short-changed us.

The then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), promised that a review of how the funds were to be allocated would take place in 2016, and the Minister of State, Department
The rural economy is vibrant and diverse, but it is not without its challenges. For example, productivity in predominantly rural areas is lower than it is in urban areas. While DEFRA’s responsibilities mainly lie with England, rural businesses and communities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland face similar challenges. Those challenges would be there regardless of our membership of the EU, and that is why we are already addressing them. That is why we launched the rural productivity plan, and why we are taking steps to improve life opportunities for those living in rural areas.

We have already done much to support and boost the rural economy. Nine enterprise zones in rural areas in England were set up last year, and a further six will start in April. Businesses that locate to an enterprise zone will receive business rate relief or enhanced capital allowances, and local enterprise partnerships can use the resulting increases in business rates to fund economic development in their areas. In the autumn statement, we doubled rural rate relief to 100%. That will give a much-needed boost to businesses, saving them up to £2,900 a year.

We are improving digital connectivity: 91% of premises can now access superfast broadband, and that is estimated to reach 97% by 2020 on our current delivery plans. Our universal service obligation of every premises receiving 10 megabits will be particularly important for remote rural communities. Reform of the electronic communications code, as a key part of the Digital Economy Bill, will help to increase rural coverage of mobile phones, and also the provision of fibre. Planning reforms that came into effect last year will enable industry to enhance existing masts and to upgrade and share equipment, which, again, will benefit mobile coverage in rural areas.

We are making it easier for people to live and work in rural areas. There are pilot programmes in parts of Northumberland and Staffordshire, providing 30 hours of free childcare for three and four-year-olds, and the national roll out is set for September this year. Under our plans for full implementation, every local authority in England will receive a minimum funding rate of at least £4.30 per hour, which will benefit many rural areas.

As was pointed out by my hon. Friends the Members for Macclesfield (David Rutley) and for Salisbury (John Glen), we need to work on skills and future careers so that farming is an attractive industry and we provide the skills that are necessary to employers. I can assure them of our commitment to trebling the number of apprenticeships to encourage people into the food and farming industries.

Extensive reference was made to the need for access to the single market. My right hon. Friend Prime Minister made clear today that we would pursue a bold and ambitious free trade agreement with the European Union. She said that we were not seeking membership of the single market, but the greatest possible access to it through a new, comprehensive, bold agreement. It is important to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England for us to ensure that we take full advantage of the economic opportunities that we enjoy today.

There has also been considerable discussion about devolution. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister reiterated, it is important that a Joint Ministerial Committee on EU negotiations has been established so that Ministers from each of the UK’s devolved Administrations can
contribute to the process of planning our departure from the EU. As has already been mentioned, we have received a paper from the Scottish Government, and we look forward to receiving another from the Welsh Government. Both papers will be considered, but I think it important to stress that our guiding principle must be to ensure that as we leave the EU, no new barriers to living and doing business within our own Union are created. That means maintaining the necessary common standards and frameworks for our own domestic market, and empowering the UK as an open, trading nation to strike the best trade deals around the world and protect the common resources of our islands. The Prime Minister has made absolutely plain that as we do that, no decisions currently taken by the devolved Administrations will be removed from them. It is very clear that there will be no power grab.

The subject of migrant workers was also raised today. As we draw up our plans to leave the EU, we are harnessing industry’s knowledge and experience, and ensuring that its voice is heard. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said at the Oxford farming conference, access to labour is an important part of our discussions, and we are committed to working with the industry to ensure that it has the right people with the right skills.

On EU nationals, a topic raised by SNP Members, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister reiterated today the desire to see this issue resolved.

On future support, we have provided early guarantees on CAP payments, specifically on pillar one, so that farmers have certainty. We have said to farmers that they will receive the same level of financial support until 2020. I welcome the support of many Members on the opportunities to shape a bespoke agricultural policy for the needs of our nation. A Green Paper will be published in due course, giving everyone the opportunity formally to offer thoughts on its future design. I particularly like the thoughts of my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), whom I would expect to get good thoughts from as he is my predecessor. I am sure his three-pronged approach of thinking of the agricultural, environmental and social objectives with a focus on small farmers will get much support.

On CAP pillar two, the rural development programme and the fisheries fund, the Government will also guarantee funding for structural and investment funds projects which are signed before we leave and which continue after we have left the EU. This includes rural development programmes and the European maritime and fisheries programme. Funding for projects will be honoured where they provide good value for money and are in line with domestic strategic priorities.

These conditions will be applied in such a way that the current pipeline of committed projects is not disrupted, including agri-environment schemes beginning this month. Where the devolved Administrations sign up to structural and investment funds under their current EU budget allocation, the Government will ensure that they are funded to meet these commitments.

We are committed to acting on the decision taken by the British people to withdraw from the common fisheries policy and to putting in place a new fisheries regime. We want to use this opportunity to ensure our fisheries industries are competitive, productive and profitable, and that our environment is improved for future generations—cleaner, healthier and more productive.

The Government will continue to deliver their commitments on sustainable fisheries and ending discards, and will work closely with industry in designing the future fisheries management rules.

Following EU exit, the UK will continue to be subject to international law on fisheries management. This includes the United Nations convention on the law of the sea and the UN fish stocks agreement.

On leaving the EU, we will want to take our own decisions about how to deliver the policy objectives previously targeted by EU funding. As has been mentioned by several Members, EU funding is actually UK taxpayers’ funding, and we will be able to decide how that is spent in due course. Over the coming months, we will consult closely with stakeholders to review all EU funding schemes in the round to ensure that any ongoing funding commitments best serve the UK’s national interest, while ensuring appropriate investor certainty.

City deals and devolution have helped to improve local economies and we are gradually seeing more rural economies being boosted. In Scotland, the Government have given considerable support—£2.3 billion-worth—to the oil and gas industry in the last years alone. We should remember how much of the Scottish Government’s case for independence was made on the basis of a high oil price to support their economy. It is a good job that the Union has pulled together and supported the industry in these challenging times.

This has been an important debate highlighting the importance of the rural economy. What we heard from the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) was, “We’re all doomed,” but far from it: as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has stated, Brexit means Brexit and we are going to make a success of it. We are determined to get the best deal for the British people on leaving the EU. We want a world-leading food and farming industry and the cleanest, healthiest environment for generations. We are clear that when we bring EU law into UK law that is non-negotiable and we will make sure that the environment is protected, if not enhanced, for future generations. That is why today I urge the House to reject the motion but to support the amendment in the name of my right hon. Friends.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 212, Noes 287.

Division No. 123] [6.8 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bardell, Hannah
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul

Boswell, Philip
Brabin, Tracy
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, rh
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Leaving the EU: the Rural Economy

...and to champion sustainable fishing; supports the continued investment in superfast broadband and the introduction of a...
DWP Policies and Low-income Households

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. I also take this opportunity to remind the House that this debate can run only until 8 o'clock. There are 17 colleagues wishing to speak from the Back Benches, and I know that those speaking from the Front Bench will jealously guard the rights and interests of those who wish to speak from the Back. Therefore, the Front Benchers should absolutely not exceed 10 minutes each in their speeches, and if they can speak for less time than that, they will be addressing a grateful nation.

6.24 pm
Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House is concerned at the impact of policies pursued by the Department for Work and Pensions upon low-income households; notes the negative impact on those with low-incomes disclosed in the roll-out of Universal Credit; expresses concerns about cuts to Work Allowances under Universal Credit; believes that the closure of JobCentre offices in Glasgow and other areas will create difficulties for many people in accessing services; and calls on that Department to suspend the roll-out of Universal Credit and the JobCentre closure programme.

According to the UK Government, universal credit was supposed to bring fairness and simplicity, and I ask hon. Members to hold that thought when I share the experiences of some of my constituents, of people trying to help them and even of Department for Work and Pensions staff trying to navigate them through universal credit. Inverness was a pilot area for the roll-out, meaning that we were suffering the bitter effects and chaos of the full service earlier than other areas.

Universal credit is hurting the people who need help the most. I know that if Government Members could see at first hand the grief that it causes, they would understand why I am so passionate about it.

Before I share some of my constituents’ experiences, I shall tell Members of my recent meetings with citizens advice bureau officers Leslie Newton and Elaine Donnelly. They have, respectively, 40 and 17 years’ experience of advice bureau officers. Leslie Newton and Elaine Donnelly. They have, respectively, 40 and 17 years’ experience of dealing with some of the most challenging situations we could imagine—folk at the end of their tethers, and sometimes even at the end of their lives. They have seen it all and had to deal with it. When I met them last week, they were moved to tears telling me about their universal credit case load. They told me about the suffering they were witnessing. They told me that the roll-out is a shambles, and that nobody in the system understands the process simply does not work. They see neither fairness nor simplicity.

The transitional protection is limited and will not protect new claimants. It will be lost if the household undergoes changes in circumstances, and it does not protect people against the anguish and suffering that lengthy delays are causing them. Again, the disabled are some of the hardest hit by the move to universal credit.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: I am going to make some progress because other Members wish to take part.

The loss of the severe disability premium has taken nearly £62 a week out of the pockets of the most critically disabled. Cuts to the disabled child addition mean that 100,000 disabled children stand to lose up to £29 a week. Cuts to the severe disability premium mean that disabled lone parents with young carers stand to lose £58 a week. Those in the work-related activity group who receive employment and support allowance will lose around £30 a week.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the lack of information and data that the Department for Work and Pensions has on its own activities, particularly when it comes to the most vulnerable claimants? On 10 January, I asked the Department to provide me with the number of people who had had their benefits withdrawn or suspended in the process of transferring from disability living allowance to personal independence payment. It wrote back on 13 January to say that it did not know; is that not shocking?

Drew Hendry: It is shocking.

Disabled people who have been found unfit for work by the work capability assessment are still expected to take steps towards finding work. That group includes those who have suffered serious injuries, those in the early stages of progressive conditions such as multiple sclerosis, and those with learning disabilities. Disability unemployment is a long-standing, unique issue, and the universal credit process is creating more barriers for the disabled people in the workplace.

The Prime Minister has been talking about JAM—the so-called “just about managing”—but thanks to universal credit, many families’ income is about to be toast. I suggest the Prime Minister comes to Inverness and talks to my constituents about her shared society—to those families with children who will be up to £2,630 per year worse off, according to the Children’s Society; to the lone parents and people with limited capability for work under the age of 25 who will lose £15 a week; and to the young people and their families who will be pushed further into poverty because of reductions in standard allowances. The four-year freeze on support for children will see the value of key children’s benefits cut by 12% by the end of the decade. Universal credit will not only fail to lift children out of poverty; it will push them further into poverty.

Citizens Advice has said:

“Universal Credit is failing to live up to its promise...from the outset people have experienced problems...delays to claims and errors in their payments.”

The Public Accounts Committee found that the systems were “underdeveloped”, and said there was increasing pressure on DWP staff. My team and I see it every day, day in, day out. Only yesterday, a constituent, Laura Shepherd, got in touch. She was at the end of her tether. Her 20-year-old son, Douglas, has severe autism, and has been on the waiting list for a work capability assessment since the end of September. During this time, they have had no disability support, just the minimum level of universal credit of just over £200 a month. Quite understandably, the family are trying to get this sorted out—they want their claim backdated to cover a period when they were incorrectly given child tax credits instead of universal credit. The universal credit team cannot even give Laura any dates for a
disability work assessment for her son, because assessments of that nature are done by an external contractor. The team actually told her in writing to contact me, as her MP, because they were at a loss as to what to do.

The wife of an officer serving in our Army has now been waiting five months for assistance with childcare costs. She could have no payments for five months—and has suffered a catalogue of errors and very sporadic communication. She could not get her problem sorted out because even DWP staff working on universal credit are not allowed to talk to the service centre or claims manager. Everything has to be duplicated by email, leading to confusion and lost information.

Then there is this so-called helpline. Who on earth thought that it was a great idea to make it a premium call line? It is shameful that people with no money are being made to spend their last pennies on premium lines. What do they do if they have no credit on their mobile phones—that is if the phone has not had to be pawned to make up for the money that they are not getting through waiting for their payments? Many constituents have come to my office to call the helpline because they have no money. When they do call, they are left on hold while DWP staff try to sort out errors for more than 20 minutes. We asked CAB to monitor calls, and it found that none was under the Government’s stated waiting time of three minutes 27 seconds. In fact, all 36 that it logged were for longer than that. The longest was a staggering 54 minutes and 17 seconds. Sometimes, people are offered a call back. If it happens and they get to their phone in time, they are lucky. They only get one shot at that. It is like a universal credit version of Catch 22. The transfer of universal credit to full digital has already been halted, and the halfway house that has emerged is ripe for confusion.

People are required to make some online claims, yet need to take the original copy of letters to the jobcentre at their own cost. A report detailing the impact of the controversial new scheme in Glasgow shows not only that claimants are struggling, but that services and jobs are being put at risk. There is a lack of understanding and explanation of the general requirements of a claim, and those who have special needs are often left to struggle and to face the sanctions that follow. Where is the fairness or the simplicity?

The system is manufacturing debt and despondency. In Highland, the council has a framework agreement for the temporary homeless accommodation services. It is £25 a night or £175 a week. One of my constituents, Gavin, has been living in homeless accommodation. Under the old system, he would have been awarded £168 housing benefit, leaving him a small difference of £7 a week to pay out of his other entitlements. Under universal credit, he has the same housing costs, but gets only £60 a week, which means that he has to pay £115 a week out of his other allowances—but he does not get £115 a week. Even if he gave up food, heat, light and everything else and spent every single penny he would still be short. Gavin and others will always be in arrears. The system is flawed by design.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that the latest rise in UK inflation will hit poorest families hardest? Surely the Government should be doing much to counteract its effect given that it is a direct result of the fall in sterling following the Brexit strategy.

Drew Hendry: I absolutely agree, and there is more to come.

It is not just the homeless who are affected, but families in private rented accommodation who have been waiting for three months for universal credit claims. There is no fairness there. The only simplicity is that it is simply nuts. Highland Council is left carrying the debt of the money that Gavin and others simply do not have. It has already accrued an additional debt of more than £180,000 as a direct result of universal credit. According to a report by Glasgow Council, a total of 73 homeless people in Glasgow are now on the benefit, and have racked up £144,000 in arrears between them.

The National Federation of ALMOs—arm’s length management organisations—and the Association of Retained Council Housing, which together represent more than 1 million council homes in England, found that the percentage of council home tenants in receipt of universal credit who are in rent arrears has increased by seven percentage points—it was up to 86% in March last year. That compares with 39% of tenants in arrears who do not receive universal credit. The average arrears total has also increased, from £321 to £616.

The SNP Scottish Government have consistently done everything they can to mitigate the worst impacts of Tory welfare cuts, and new devolved powers over social security and employment support will include disability benefits, carer’s allowance and the winter fuel allowance. With these limited new powers, we will seek to build a Scottish social security system with dignity and respect at its heart—

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: I am going to finish up.

It is wrong that the Scottish Government and the council should foot the bill for UK Government cuts. It is also true that the proposal to cut 50% of jobcentres in Glasgow—a subject I know my colleagues will speak on shortly—is a bad idea. Let us not forget that these proposals come on the back of last year’s announcement of the closure of 137 HMRC offices across the UK, with potentially thousands of job losses in Scotland.

There is a damning litany of failure, confusion, heartache and indignity and a crushing drive towards increased poverty in the universal credit system. Long delays to payments, short payments, lost sick notes, misplaced documents, failure to respond, confusion between departments, crushed morale for the poor Jobcentre Plus staff and an inability to respond to common sense are rife in universal credit. It is time to halt this tragic experiment—the bad IDS idea—and think about how we provide for those who need our help, rather than those few who stand to profit from austerity.

6.36 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” to the end of the Question and add:

“welcomes last week’s Official Statistics showing that the poorest households saw the biggest income growth of £700 in the last year; further welcomes the impact of this Government’s welfare reforms in supporting low-income households to find work, with over 2.7 billion more people in work and 865,000 fewer workless households than in 2010; recognises the role of Universal Credit...”
in supporting people into work and increasing their earnings in work by ensuring it always pays to work; welcomes the recent announcement of a reduction in the taper rate to 63 per cent; believes that the Government’s reforms have given taxpayers confidence in an affordable and sustainable welfare system that ensures value for money and responds to the needs of claimants, with 86.6 per cent of Universal Credit claims currently being made online; and notes that the Scottish Government has asked for an extended timetable for the full transfer of the extensive welfare powers devolved under the Scotland Act 2016.”

As the Prime Minister has made clear, this Government are committed to building a country that works for everyone, not just the privileged few. The support that the Department for Work and Pensions offers through universal credit and Jobcentre Plus has a key role to play in delivering this.

Since 2010, we have made great progress in delivering a modern and effective welfare system. Our work coaches are providing professional and tailored support, exploiting the opportunities offered by digital channels, and for those hundreds of thousands of people already in receipt of universal credit we have ensured that work and progressing in work will always pay. Although we have had to make difficult decisions on welfare spending, we have never lost sight of the fact that the most sustainable routes out of poverty and just managing are to get into work and progress in work, and universal credit lies at the heart of that, transforming the welfare system to ensure that work always pays—that it pays to participate, that it pays to progress. This is in contrast to the pre-2010 system; in-work poverty increased by 20% between 1998 and 2010, despite welfare spending on those in work increasing by some £28 billion.

We are building a fairer system that will mirror the world of work and we are eradicating the complexities and disincentives of the old system. There are no hours rules or cliff edges in universal credit, as there are in tax credits and other legacy benefits and which have historically, on occasion, provided the disincentive to work or to earn more. Universal credit also removes the need to switch between benefits as claimants move into and on in work, simplifying the system and ensuring continuity for claimants.

Our approach is working. The claimant count has dropped from almost 1.5 million in 2010 to about 800,000 now. Unemployment is down 894,000 since 2010, with near record levels of employment around the country. Once it is fully rolled out, we estimate that universal credit will generate about £7 billion in economic benefit every year and boost employment by up to 300,000, but we are not done yet. We believe that making work pay and opening up opportunities for people to realise their potential are central to building an economy that works for all. By reducing the universal credit taper rate to 63% we will further improve the incentive, helping up to 3 million households.

It is clear that for many disabled people the barriers to entering work are still too high. We need to continue to review and reform our support based on what we know works. We will build on the success of universal credit and provide more personalised employment support by consulting on further reform of the work capability assessment. Our Green Paper on health and work makes proposals that go further, marking a new era in joint working between the welfare and health systems.

Our change to the work-related activity component is designed to encourage and support claimants to return to work. We have allocated a total of £330 million for new employment support for people with limited capability for work over four years, starting from April 2017, and an extra £15 million for a top-up to the flexible support fund in both 2017-18 and 2018-19. It is also important to note that it will apply only to new claims and there will be no cash losers among those already in receipt of ESA.

However, looking at our benefit reforms in isolation fails to appreciate the Government’s wider work in providing support for those on low incomes. The single most important thing has been our stewardship of the economy and the strong growth that it has facilitated. People are sharing in the proceeds. Average household incomes are at an all-time high, income inequality has fallen and pay for the bottom 5% in society is up by 6.2% year on year, the highest rise since the series began in 1997.

I do not have time to list all the other advances we have made—the hour is late, time is short and many colleagues wish to speak—but it is important to acknowledge some of the most transformational. We have introduced the national living wage. We have increased the personal tax allowance to £11,000, so the typical taxpayer now pays £905 less tax per annum than they did in 2010. We have introduced the triple lock so that pensioners with a full basic state pension receive over £1,100 a year more than they did at the start of the last Parliament. We are extending free childcare—it will be interesting to hear what SNP Members feel about this—for three and four-year-olds from 15 hours to 30 hours, as well as introducing 15 hours of free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds and free school meals for all infants.

Tackling child poverty and disadvantage, delivering real social reform, is the key priority for this Government. Only by tackling the root causes of poverty, not just the symptoms, will we make a meaningful difference to the lives of society’s most disadvantaged children and families. It is for that reason that we introduced two new statutory measures, to drive real action on parental worklessness and children’s educational attainment, the two areas that we know can make the biggest difference to disadvantages children. The forthcoming social justice Green Paper will build on those measures and set out how we identify and tackle the root causes of poverty.

Alongside our policies targeted at helping people to progress in work and fulfil their potential, we are also committed to continuing to modernise and professionalise the services and support that our jobcentres offer. If we are to deliver a service fit for the 21st century, we must make the most of the opportunities offered by new technology and recent shifts in demand. I am pleased that the motion refers to our plans for the jobcentre estate, as they are one of the best examples of how we are in fact doing that. After 20 years, Labour’s private finance initiative contract, which covers many DWP offices, is nearing an end—it expires at the end of March 2018. That gives us an opportunity to review how the Department delivers modern services and ensure that it gets the best deal. As I have already mentioned, reforms such as universal credit are revolutionising the relationship between claimants and work coaches, ensuring that the support we offer is more personalised and better suited to the needs of claimants.
Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Will the Minister comment on the disability employment gap? Surely closing jobcentres will make attending employment and care centres for people with a disability and increase the hurdles they face in doing so.

Damian Hinds: As the House knows, narrowing the disability employment gap is an absolutely priority for this Government, and I am pleased to say that we are now making progress on that, but there is a great deal more to be done—nobody denies that. We must ensure that there are more opportunities available to people with disabilities, including through our jobcentre network, but part of that is making sure that the right services are available and that we have the resources in place to be able to afford the people, facilities and courses that can help support those people.

The claimant count has dropped from almost 1.5 million in 2010 to around 800,000 now. In some cases we are using only 25% of the floor space in sites we are renting. That is 25% of the value for 100% of the rent. Every penny that we spend on space under Labour’s PFI is money that could be going back into the public purse, helping to protect vital services.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) rose—

Damian Hinds: I am going to have to ask the hon. Gentleman for his forgiveness.

Those services and support include our own, because we are expanding what we do. In fact, we expect to have over 2,000 more work coaches in 2018 than we have today. In deciding what changes it is reasonable to make to the estate, we have carefully considered the impact on claimants, including travel times. We think that it is reasonable to ask somebody to attend a new jobcentre that is either less than three miles away from their existing jobcentre, or 20 minutes away by public transport. Of course, many claimants, including constituents of many Members on the Opposition Benches, travel considerably further than that, as of course do many people in work.

The UK Government have devolved powers for existing benefits worth some £2.7 billion to the Scottish Government. Scotland can also top up benefits and create new benefits. With that, of course, comes the corresponding responsibility and accountability. I was interested to note that the Scottish Government are returning to fortnightly payments and direct payments to landlords. We firmly believe that we should minimise the difference between the out-of-work welfare support system and the world of work to facilitate people’s transition into work. Few employers pay fortnightly and even fewer have a direct relationship with their employees’ landlords. We believe that our system, which still allows for alternative payment arrangements when required for vulnerable customers, is the right approach, but we appreciate that the Scottish Government have a different view. It will be interesting to see how the two approaches deliver. We shall see.

This Government’s record speaks for itself. Poverty is down, child poverty is down and the deficit is down. We had the fastest-growing G7 economy in 2016 and 2.8 million more people are now in work. We are all about a strong economy and a supportive, effective welfare system with work for those who can, help for those who could and care for those who cannot. Taken together, universal credit and our continued reform of Jobcentre Plus will provide the modern, effective and compassionate welfare system we need to continue to deliver on this promise: an economy and a society that work for all.

Mr Speaker: Just before I call the Labour spokesperson, I inform the House formally, as colleagues who are due to speak have been notified privately, that there will be a time limit of three minutes on Back-Bench speeches in my attempt to ensure—[Interruption.] Order. If the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) listens, he will learn. The time limit is my attempt to ensure that everybody who sought to speak has the opportunity to do so. Fairness and equality, Mr McDonald.

6.47 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The Minister paints such a rosy picture, yet the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), gave examples of cases that he has experienced. I could also give examples, and I am sure that Government Members have examples of cases they have dealt with regarding the work capability assessment or other cuts. It is absolutely right that we debate this very important matter.

The Minister started by expressing the Prime Minister’s commitment about having “a country that works for everyone.”

We need to scrutinise those words and, more to the point, work out whether they are actually true, particularly in relation to social security policies and their impact on low-income households.

To understand why the Government’s attacks on the poor are so damaging not just to the people who experience those attacks, but to the whole country, we need to understand the situation in the context of inequalities. I worked on this for more than 20 years before I entered this House six years ago, and I focused on the effects of inequalities in income and wealth on our health. Overwhelming evidence over the past 30 years shows that the risk of poorer health and lower life expectancy increases from high-income to low-income groups. My dear friend, the former Health Secretary, Frank Dobson, said:

“There is no more serious inequality than knowing that you’ll die sooner because you’re badly off.”

This pattern of illness and disease is systemic, socially produced and universal. It is not about the individual or biological factors. It is about inherent, systemic, socially reproduced inequalities. They are not inevitable. They can be changed, so we should all have hope.

The pioneering work of Professors Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett published in “The Spirit Level” a few years ago showed that socioeconomic inequalities do not affect just life expectancy, but educational attainment, social mobility, crime levels, mental health, happiness, and even trust within and between communities. The simple truth is that the smaller the gap between rich and poor, the better we all do.

When the Prime Minister claims she wants to tackle these burning injustices, I have to ask her where she has been. These injustices were burning while she was a
senior member of the Government. Now that she is Prime Minister, what is she doing to address them? Again, I am going to go on to show that it is not a lot.

This week, as the World Economic Forum gets under way in Davos, we hear the same warning we heard from the IMF in 2015—that widening inequality is the most defining challenge of our time. Last week, we heard yet again about obscene pay ratios, with top executives now earning 130 times more than the average employee.

Yesterday, Oxfam published the breathtaking figure that eight individuals have the same combined wealth as the net result of tax and social security changes. We have just heard from the Minister that work is the route out of poverty, but why is it that, contrary to the Government’s divisive narrative, more people in work—7.4 million people—are in poverty than ever before? Three million children of the 4 million living in poverty are living in families where someone is working. How can that be a success story of the Government? When will they start to look at the structural issues in the labour market and at the productivity crisis rather than victimising the poorest? Four out of five people on low incomes now will still be on low incomes in 10 years. What have the Government done about that?

The motion raises some of the important questions hanging over the Government’s flagship programme, universal credit. We supported the original principles of universal credit—to make sure that work always pays, by allowing people to work more hours without the fear of being made worse off. Universal credit has the potential to address inequality, by targeting employment support to those on low pay, reducing the cliff edge associated with other support, such as tax credits, as the Minister said.

However, we are a world away from the project initially lauded by the Government. We have been through seven delays in implementation, a reset by the Major Projects Authority, criticism from the National Audit Office and costs spiralling out of control. The many practical issues with the programme have yet to be sorted out, and a full working delivery is still a distant prospect. Fundamentally, there are key flaws in the design of UC.

Take, for example, the issue of four-weekly payments, with people being paid twice during one universal credit assessment period and expected to re-apply for support the following month. As hon. Members can imagine, many people do not know they have to reapply, so it comes as a rather unpleasant surprise when the Department refuses them support. Will the Minister please update us on progress in dealing with four-weekly payments?

Or perhaps we should look at the impact of universal credit’s so-called long hello. Last year, a report by The Guardian showed that the shocking 42-day wait to receive the first payment had sent claimants’ food bank use and rent arrears spiralling. One survey of landlords responsible for 3,000 households on universal credit found that eight out of 10 tenants were in arrears. Will the Minister commit to immediately reducing that waiting time and to providing immediate access to hardship funds so that people do not have the current two-week delay?

On sanctions, I am pleased that the Government are finally seeing the evidence of how damaging the system is and its impact on getting people off flow. We cannot underestimate the impact of sanctions when it comes to the rosy picture of falling claimant counts. Under the UC regulations of 2014, the Government are able to sanction people who are in work on low pay. We are now starting to see more people who are already working—doing the right thing—being sanctioned because they are not working hard enough. One million people on zero-hours contracts are potentially under threat from this Government.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: I am sorry but I will not; otherwise, people are going to miss out. [Interruption.] I am happy to take it outside, gentlemen.

Most important for low-income families has been this Government’s slashing of the programme’s budgets, significantly undermining the principle that work will always pay under the scheme. Cuts to the work allowances of universal credit will mean that, on average, claimants receive £2,100 a year less than if they were on UC. The autumn statement had no impact on this.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey mentioned the impact of this Government’s horrendous cuts on disabled people. With nearly £30 billion of cuts to 3.7 million people, we are definitely going to see more than 5 million disabled people pushed into poverty. We also heard about the jobcentre closures. It seems that the universal credit programme will no longer make work pay. It was built by a Government who believe that the best way to help people into work is by shutting jobcentres. We believe that, like our NHS, the social security system should be based on principles of dignity, inclusion and support, and Labour will do this.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. A three-minute limit is now to apply.

6.56 pm

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): As I have only three minutes, I will not take any interventions. I stood on a platform of getting Britain working again and reforming a welfare system that was failing some of the most vulnerable people in my country and my constituency. For too long, people went on welfare and remained there. It is worth noting that long-term unemployment doubled between 2008 and 2010. Major changes that so directly affect people in their day-to-day lives are never easy and are not necessarily popular, but our welfare system needed changing, and I am delighted that our
Government are taking that so seriously. We are determined to make sure that those who want work, and those who cannot work, are supported when they need it. That help is at hand from this Government.

So far, we have seen monumental change, and it is not easy. As a former member of the Work and Pensions Committee, I have always welcomed the Department’s attitude to universal credit—rolling it out; considering the changes and seeing the impact; and then changing and adapting, and rolling it out again. I welcome the pace of delivery of universal credit. We are listening, looking at the evidence, and reforming as we go. That is the correct way to do it.

The single best thing that any Government can do for low-income families is to ensure that we have a strong economy. I am delighted that since the 2010 election this Government have put that at the heart of what we are doing. Unemployment is at its joint lowest rate—4.8%—for 10 years; there have been 2.7 million more people in work over the past six years; and there are more women, older workers and ethnic minorities in work than ever before. The annual average income of the poorest fifth of households has risen by £700 in real terms since 2007-08. This House has heard on many occasions about the benefits of work: an improved outlook and social networks, better connections with the community, increased happiness and better health.

I am proud of the Government’s achievement in getting more people into work. This stands in stark contrast with the rhetoric of the Opposition. Under universal credit, the biggest change in welfare in this country for a generation, claimants are much more likely to move into work than under jobseeker’s allowance. Analysis has shown that working-age adults in non-working families is 7.3% more likely to move into work than under jobseeker’s allowance. That is the correct way to do it.

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Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we proceed to the next speaker, we come to the 7 o’clock motion.

7 pm

Debate interrupted (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order Nos. 15 and 41A(3))

That at this day’s sitting—

(a) the Motion in the name of Angus Robertson may be proceeded with, though opposed, until 8.00pm, and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and

(b) the Second Reading of the Intellectual Property (Unjustified Threats) Bill [ Lords] may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—(Guy Opperman.)

Question agreed to.

Debate resumed.

Question again proposed.

7 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): That sounds way above my pay grade, Mr Speaker, but thank you none the less.

I take my hat off to the Minister and his colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions, because he has managed to do something I never thought possible: unite Scottish Labour politicians and Scottish National party politicians against his jobcentres closure plan. That will be the focus of my remarks, and if he will listen, I will educate him.

The Minister’s plan has gone down like a bucket of cold sick among not just my constituents, but trade unions, the Catholic Church, the Church of Scotland and Glasgow City Council, Glasgow, the city I represent, has the highest unemployment rate in Scotland, and that shames me—I am not proud of that badge—and I would want to work with the Minister to improve on that, but I do not see how we can do so by reducing the number of jobcentres from 16 to eight. That is a 50% cut against what is supposed to be a 20% reduction elsewhere.

Glasgow is being targeted by the Tories yet again. [Interruption.] I will take no muttering from Back-Bench Tories. I invite each and every one of them who votes for the Government amendment tonight to come to Castlemilk to meet my constituents who are expected to do an 8-mile round trip, using up to three buses. Ministers would not know about any of that, because they relied on Google Maps in putting the proposal together. Government by Google is not the new Britannic isolation I had expected.

Where is the Scottish Secretary on these plans? Why have we not heard anything from our Secretary of State about fighting for Glasgow and standing up for Scotland against these proposals? [Interruption.] Let me say to the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who is muttering from a sedentary position, that I asked Ministers how many people in Langside and Castlemilk jobcentres in my constituency claim disability living allowance. The answer was that they do not know. On jobseeker’s allowance, they do not know. They were asked how many people who are disabled use Glasgow jobcentres across the city; they do not know. What about the public sector equality duty? How confident is the Minister that he will not breach his obligations under the Equality Act 2010, because we still have not had an equality impact assessment? The plans are so ridiculous and so ill thought out that it is almost a schoolboy howler. I invite Members to look through the written answers from the Minister to questions asked by me and Glasgow colleagues; if they do not make hon. Members laugh, they will certainly make them cry.

7.3 pm

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): I speak as a former member of the Work and Pensions Committee, which, during the previous Parliament, investigated the roll-out of universal credit. There was a lot of negativity on the Opposition Front Bench then, as there is in this Parliament. Perhaps the English Jobcentre Pluses that have introduced and rolled out universal credit could help their Scottish counterparts to enable SNP Members’ constituents to get into work.

The Scottish Government—the SNP has a majority in the Scottish Parliament—have the power to provide discretionary payments in any area of welfare, including to top up reserved benefits, as well as to create new benefits in reserved areas. If SNP Members really want to change welfare in Scotland, they would be better off speaking to their colleagues in the Scottish Government.
Conservative Members know that the way out of poverty is work, not welfare. Since 2010, 2.7 million more people are in employment, with more than 1,000 jobs created every day under the Conservative Government. We have introduced a new national living wage, giving people on low wages a pay rise, and lifted 4 million people—and rising—out of income tax altogether.

Every one of our welfare reforms was designed with the aim of supporting people into employment, and universal credit is a revolutionary part of that. Jobcentre staff in my constituency tell me that 71% of universal credit claimants moved into work in the first nine months of their claim, compared with 63% of comparable JSA claimants.

The SNP motion completely fails to acknowledge the reduction in the universal credit taper to 63p in the pound, announced in the autumn statement last year. This will target support on those on lower incomes, allowing people to keep more of what they earn. Under universal credit, 86% of people were actively looking to increase their hours, compared to just 38% on JSA. We now have a welfare system that rewards hard work and enterprise.

Official statistics show that the poorest households saw the biggest income growth, of £700, in the last year, and there are 500,000 fewer people living in absolute poverty since 2010. The benefit system has to be fair for those who are in receipt of welfare, but equally it has to be fair to the hard-working taxpayers who pay for it.

7.6 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): As of November 2016, there were about 1,130 universal credit claimants in my constituency, of whom 450 were in employment and 680 were not in employment. At my local surgeries, my team and I have spoken directly to and assisted those in my community who have been adversely affected. They have been scathing in their views of this policy.

The views of my constituents add to the overwhelming evidence from Opposition Members and organisations such as the Institute for Government and the Resolution Foundation. It is clear that universal credit has failed and that urgent action is needed from the United Kingdom Government, which is why I fully support my colleagues in their call for the roll-out to be suspended. It is obvious from the lessons not learned from the pilot scheme that the roll-out policy has stumbled from disaster to crisis at every step. The Resolution Foundation is scathing in its view of the policy, with the think-tank arguing that universal credit has serious design flaws and has veered off track.

This attitude is laid bare when looking at the implementation of the policy. When universal credit came into effect, the first £111 of a person’s wage was disregarded where the claimant was working and universal credit was topping up a low income. However, the UK Government, through the Department for Work and Pensions, scrapped that in April 2016 with no notification to claimants. Will the Minister deny that?

There are also serious problems with staffing. It is clear that staff are being overworked. Before Christmas, it was reported that a whistleblower in the DWP from Northgate benefit centre in Glasgow had revealed that staff were overwhelmed by the number of decisions they were being asked to process, and that managers had ordered them to prioritise sanctions over appeals in order to meet their targets—a wholly unacceptable situation. I hope the Minister can deny that.

Added to the problem is a huge backlog of what is known in the Department as “tasks”, many of which are computer-generated and unnecessary. This leads to double-handling, where more than one account developer is dealing with one claim. Staff in Bolton, Glasgow or Dundee could all be clearing tasks from the same claim on the same day. Will the Minister deny it? Staff have been instructed to check their buckets every day for tasks. In practice, this means claimants are in the lobster pot when claiming universal credit: once they are in universal credit, there is no chance of them getting out or reverting to another benefit. Will the Minister deny it?

The UK Government have failed to ensure that DWP staff are prepared for the roll-out. This has only led to the delays and errors that are resulting in a crisis, not just for those in the benefit system, but for those seeking to deliver it on behalf of the British Government.

7.9 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I thought the title of the motion was supposed to centre on the impact of Government policies on helping low-income households, but all Scottish National party and Labour Members have focused on is benefit provision. Not one of them has mentioned getting people into work and increasing the wages they earn once they are in work. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) said, the “Child poverty transitions” report showed that 74% of workless families that went into work exited poverty. This has to be the focus of the Government’s agenda.

The Government have done more than any other Government in living memory to help low-paid workers, through measures such as those my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans) mentioned: the national living wage; giving a pay rise to more than 6 million people; and enabling people to keep more of the money they earn by lifting 4 million out of tax altogether. I disagree with the shadow Minister that the jobs created are on short-term contracts; some 70% of all new jobs are full time, so people can earn more and be in work for longer.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that ours is the fastest-growing economy in the G7, which means that businesses up and down the country have been able to give workers a pay rise of 2.6% in the last year. It is this Government who are helping low-paid workers. The way out of poverty is through work, not benefits. As has been mentioned, research shows that if someone is on benefits, their life chances are increasingly suppressed, that they will live 15 years fewer than someone in work and earning a good wage, and that they will have more health problems, as will their children after them.

The route out of poverty is through work. The Government are helping people not only to get into work, but to earn more while they are in work and to keep more of the money they earn by reducing the amount of tax they pay. They are helping people into
work by creating full-time jobs and transferring them to universal credit, which has seen an 8% increase in the number of people finding work. The Scotland Act 2016 gave the Scottish Parliament powers to ensure that welfare provision could be tailored to local needs. The SNP should get on and use the powers it has, instead of blaming the UK Government for Scotland’s benefit problems.

7.11 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), because the Government’s current policies have little to do with getting people into employment and everything to do with aggressively targeting the people who most need support. I want to mention three groups currently affected. Last year, I visited Emmaus, a charity working with homeless people across Glasgow, building their confidence through local employment projects. Everybody living in Emmaus accommodation signs off primary benefits except housing benefit and works full time within the community. If they are forced to move to universal credit, they will potentially have to take part in jobseeking schemes for which many of these vulnerable people are simply not ready.

I also want to mention recently graduated students and the barriers they face when trying to claim universal credit. The eligibility criteria state that a claimant must “have lived in the UK for the last two years and not have been abroad for more than four weeks continuously during that time”. This means that anyone who has worked or travelled abroad, as many students do—for language students, it is a compulsory part of their course—is ineligible for universal credit.

Finally, I want to talk about a new source of anxiety for many of my constituents: the news of the closure of half of Glasgow’s jobcentres. I spoke to several constituents outside Anniesland jobcentre on Friday, including a lady in her mid-50s who had worked all her life, until she suffered a stroke two years ago that left her paralysed down one side. She has been declared fit for work because she does not have the mobility, and if it moves her over an hour each way. Public transport is impossible for her because she is on the floor, while a taxi costs £15. The lady in her mid-50s who had worked all her life, is now trapped on benefits and to the taxpayers who paid for it.

Let me finally address the closure of jobcentres in Glasgow. I read with interest the Westminster Hall debate led by the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on this specific issue. I fear that SNP Members might be politicising. When I read the summing up by the Minister for Employment, I found that he made very clear both his personal and his Department’s commitment to getting people into work. He said that at some of the smaller jobcentres, only 25% of the floor space was actually being used, while also making it clear that he is committed to getting people into work. There is too much clinging on to bricks and mortar when the real questions should be what works and what will get more people into work.

7.14 pm

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): This Government have never hidden their aims to have a high-wage, low-unemployment economy, in which people have the satisfaction of bringing home a wage for their family. We only have to look across the channel to see the really long-term unemployment, particularly among young people, can bring. The changes that the coalition Government and this Government have brought about have been successful. As other hon. Members have said, we now have 2.7 million more people in employment than in 2010. The claimant count is at its lowest since 1975.

Universal credit was an ambitious aim, and it has at its heart the objective that low-income families will not find themselves better off on benefits than if they went out to work. That was the perverse situation that persisted under the labyrinthine system that preceded it. This system was unfair, as my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans) said, to those who were trapped on benefits and to the taxpayers who paid for it. In South Ribble, my constituents support a system that is fair on everybody.

I would like to pay tribute to DWP employees who worked really hard on the roll-out of universal credit. There have been some hiccups, but I think they are being looked at. When the Minister sums up, will she explain what systems are in place for monitoring the ongoing roll-out of universal credit?

There is a feeling of unfairness for some families that are in work and doing the right thing, but still find it difficult to make ends meet. To that end, I am pleased about the introduction of the national living wage and the extended hours of free childcare. I particularly welcome the “child poverty transitions” report, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) mentioned. I shall not repeat what he said, because I know many hon. Members still wish to speak.

Let me finally address the closure of jobcentres in Glasgow. I read with interest the Westminster Hall debate led by the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on this specific issue. I fear that SNP Members might be politicising. When I read the summing up by the Minister for Employment, I found that he made very clear both his personal and his Department’s commitment to getting people into work. He said that at some of the smaller jobcentres, only 25% of the floor space was actually being used, while also making it clear that he is committed to getting people into work. There is too much clinging on to bricks and mortar when the real questions should be what works and what will get more people into work.
counts; it is the distance between where somebody lives and how they actually get to Shettleston. Lots of people will find that incredibly difficult. If they are in Bridgeton, it means two buses, but if they are in other parts, the journey will be even further and the buses will be even more infrequent. This will impact on people’s ability to get to the job centre and it will impact on sanctions. Can the Minister tell me whether the time that people have to travel will be taken into account in the claimant commitment, or will it not count as time when they are seeking jobs?

I have campaigned on another issue since it was announced in the summer Budget of 2015. The Government do not know how the two-child policy, which will come into force for universal credit claimants in April, will work. They expect vulnerable women to confess to DWP employees that their third child has been the result of rape, but they do not know how it will work. The consultation on this matter closed on 27 November, but from the DWP there has been not a peep since. We do not know how it will work. Parliamentary questions that I have lodged indicate that they have not even spoken to the trade unions about this issue and how their members will be asked to implement a very sensitive, difficult, personal and traumatic policy that will impact on the dignity of women’s lives. The Government do not know how that will work.

The Government do not know the impact of their policies, because they refuse to admit the truth. They refuse to admit that benefit delays are causing people to go hungry, and causing people to go to food banks. On Friday, I visited the fuel bank at the Glasgow SE—South East—foodbank. People do not even have fuel. They do not have electricity in their houses, because they have no money as a result of those benefit delays, but the Government will not admit that that is the truth of the situation. They are also in denial if they think that the national living wage is for everyone: it is not for those aged under 25. Under-25s have the same outgoings as everyone else, but they are not entitled to the same wage. It is disgraceful.

This is not a Government who work for everyone, and they should listen to the people who are actually affected.

7.20 pm

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). I have to say, however, that although she said that she was not getting answers from the Government, I know—having read the reports of Westminster Hall debates—that not only are she and her constituents getting answers, but, more important, her constituents are getting jobs as a result of the Government’s policies, as are constituents of Members on both sides of the House.

Welfare reform was a central plank of the election manifesto on which Conservative Members were elected, but building a system that works for all and a country that works for all, and reforming welfare, are part of a bigger package of measures, including increased childcare, the lifting of those on the lowest wages out of income tax, and the introduction of a national living wage. Most important of all, a record number of people are in work as a result of the policies of this Government. As we have heard from Conservative Members, getting people into work is central to improving their life chances and those of their families, and essential to achieving greater social justice. I am a considerable fan of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for whom I have a great deal of respect, but I was disappointed that she did not focus on that simple, single most important factor: the increased number of jobs that the Government have delivered, which, as I have said, are central to the improvement of life chances.

Welfare reform, of which universal credit forms a key part, is also central to the delivery of our vision of a country that works for all. It is reform that will help to ensure that work always pays more than benefits. It is reform that will help to ensure that our welfare system is financially sustainable and delivers a fair outcome, not just for those who use the system but for those who pay into it. It is reform that helps to simplify what was, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), a byzantine and opaque welfare system. There is more to be done, but this reform takes us a long way down the route, and it is reform that still places care and support for those most in need of it at the heart of this country’s welfare system.

Key to the delivery of reform will, of course, be implementation. Having read reports of debates and listened to Ministers on previous occasions, I have every confidence that the design of this system, and the graduated roll-out, are exactly what we need to ensure that we get it right, and do not repeat the tax credit debacle that we saw under the last Government. This policy has my wholehearted support—and we will get it right.

7.23 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): As always, it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), but he made the same mistake as many of his colleagues who have spoken today. They have merged the Orwellian with the Dickensian. Let me say to the Thatcherites among them that St Francis of Assisi has not had a look in. Marie Antoinette was a philanthropist in comparison with this Government.

I want to raise two issues, because I do not want them to be swept under the Axminster before the debate ends. I refer to the telephone tax, which my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) mentioned. Those who need to phone the Department for Work and Pensions must pay 45p a minute, and, as my hon. Friend said—this is also the experience of my constituents—it costs them between £9 and £16 to make calls just to gain access to the money to which they are entitled because they have not been paid on time. It really is time that that tax ended.

Why did the Government ignore the clear advice of their own Social Security Advisory Committee, which told them that it would be best to make those numbers 0800 numbers so that the calls would be free? I was told that that would cost £7 million and that the telephony system was being upgraded to include the option of advice on potential widespread problems. We should picture the scene: someone who is spending 45p a minute on a phone call being told, “You will be answered in 45 minutes.”
I was amazed to hear that, according to Government Members, closing Glasgow's jobcentres is a good thing. They said that we have not talked about people getting into work. How are people going to get back into work if 50% of the jobcentres in Glasgow are closed? Why has there only been an announcement of jobcentre closures in Glasgow? Glasgow should not be the guinea pig for the Government's experiment. Why has there not been an equality impact assessment? Why are we not measuring the impact this will have on the disabled or on women with childcare responsibilities, for instance?

No consideration at all is being given to the cost impact on people living off the minimum that the Government provide for day-to-day survival.

I urge all Members to support the motion.

7.26 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), and I also always welcome being in the Chamber debating policies around low-income households and families; whatever our political bent, it is useful to have that attention on them. I came here hoping we might have a debate about different ideas, proposals and alternatives, however, and while we have heard a lot of anger from the shadow Front Bench and the SNP, we certainly did not hear any policies, examples or detailed plans of what they wish to do.

That is particularly the case in Scotland. Greater powers have been given to ensure welfare provision in Scotland is tailored to the needs of Scotland, yet no proposals have been made, and the Scottish Government have in fact asked for a delay in the transfer of Executive powers until April 2020. I did not realise the SNP was quite such a fan of the Union.

We heard in the previous debate how the SNP wanted to see more of Labour, but in this debate we have seen a lot less. It is extraordinary that not a single Labour Back Bencher has joined us to make a contribution to the debate.

On the substantive issue before us, universal credit is coming in and nobody would argue with the theory behind it: we should remove the complexity of a benefits system was split between the Department for Work and Pensions and local authorities with people having to prove the same information several times. However, as this complicated system dealt with millions of people, it is also right to phase this change in, and it was inevitable that during that period issues with the new system would come to light.

We need to look at this in its wider context, however. We are seeing more people getting back into work. It is a truism that a Labour Government always leave unemployment higher than when they came to office, and that was very true in 2010. However, we know that by the end of the last Parliament, and certainly by the end of this Parliament, it will be a lot lower than when we came to office in 2010.

It is remarkable that the impact of the national living wage, which results in millions of low earners getting a pay rise, has been ignored. That makes a huge difference and for many people gives a real value to work, particularly in areas like Torbay where we have many tourism and social care jobs. [ Interruption. ] Many people are now getting a wage that better reflects the work they do.

7.29 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) asks what we are doing to protect jobs in Scotland. We are opposing the withdrawal from the single market, which the Fraser of Allander Institute reckons will cost 80,000 jobs in Scotland. He asks about the delays in the Scottish Government introducing their welfare reforms. That is happening because they want to put dignity, respect and the voice of the user at the heart of the system. That is why they are taking their time to ensure that they get things right.

As the international development spokesperson for the Scottish National party, I will not pretend to understand all the depths and complexities of the social security system in this country, but it is the lived reality for many of my constituents. Those constituents, especially those from low-income families, have as much right as any of the people I refer to when I talk about developing countries to live their lives free from poverty. This Government are committed to the sustainable development goals, which state that we must eradicate poverty in all its forms everywhere, yet, as we have heard, there are people in this rich, modern, 21st-century country who are going to bed at night hungry because of this Government’s policies, particularly the hated sanctions regime. That regime was condemned by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in June 2016 as being effectively a breach of the UK Government's international human rights obligations.

If the case studies that Members on both sides of the House see on a day-to-day basis in their constituency surgeries are not enough to convince them, I encourage them to read the study entitled “Welfare Conditionality: sanctions, support and behaviour change”, a major initiative by six English and Scottish universities to inform policy and practice by listening to people’s day-to-day lived experiences. The study has found that “the impacts of benefit sanctions are universally reported by welfare service users as profoundly negative. Routinely, sanctions have had severely detrimental financial, material, emotional and health impacts on those subject to them. There was evidence of certain individuals disengaging from services or being pushed toward ‘survival crime’...There is limited evidence to date of welfare conditionality bringing about positive behaviour change.”

The perniciousness of the UK Government’s welfare policy is there for all to see, and it is encapsulated in the jobcentre closures that we have been discussing. We will find out on Thursday, when the Scottish Parliament debates this issue on a cross-party and cross-civil society basis, whether Glasgow’s Tory MSPs have the guts to stand up and oppose the closures. We have heard time and again from service users about the reality that this is going to happen, and we have heard case studies from other Members today, but despite the spirit of the Smith agreement, no UK Government Minister has met their Scottish Government counterpart to discuss the impact of those jobcentre closures. That will have to happen sooner rather than later.
Why have no other jobcentre closures been announced? I think it is because the UK Government are beginning to realise that they have bitten off more than they can chew. They might find it easy to ignore those of us from north of the border where they do not have any constituencies, but just wait until these policies start to bite in places where their own Back Benchers have a vested interest.

7.32 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, you would not know from the speeches made by Scottish National party Members this evening that welfare spending in the United Kingdom was £264 billion in 2015-16. That made up 35% of public spending and 14% of GDP. All those figures are higher than they were in 2010. We rose from being 20th in the world in terms of welfare spending in 2000 to 13th in the world by 2013, yet there are some who think that we should be spending still more. I say to the Members from Glasgow who have spoken today, and to the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), that if their constituents are struggling to afford telephone calls to their Jobcentre Plus, why does their party in that if their constituents are struggling to afford telephone calls to their Jobcentre Plus, why does their party in Scotland not pay for the calls instead of spending £6 million a year on baby boxes for every child born in Scotland? The Scotsman has said that “for the vast majority of the four in five Scottish children who are not living in poverty, it seems to be an indulgent use of state cash.”

In contrast, our Government have focused on opportunity, education, skills and jobs, doubling free childcare, providing far more outstanding schools and 2.5 million apprenticeships and creating more jobs than in the whole of the rest of the EU put together. The result is that unemployment is down from 7.9% to 4.8% while free allowances for the lowest paid have almost doubled and salaries under the new national living wage have gone up by more than 6% in the past year alone.

There are parties that believe in the hand up, and there are those that focus entirely on the handout. Every party must decide where it stands. When Beveridge wrote his great report in 1942, he said: “The State in organising security should not stifle incentive, opportunity, responsibility...it should leave room and encouragement for voluntary action by each individual to provide more than the minimum.”

That was the right balance then, and it is the right balance today. Let me finish with these wise words: “If you let yourself be put in the ‘soft’ box on welfare, then it’s almost impossible to do anything to tackle disadvantage and unfairness—because it will always be more grist to the mill of those who want to caricature you as weak and interested only in spending more taxpayers’ money and undermining the work ethic upon which so much depends.”

Those wise words were written by an enlightened Labour Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, John Hutton. It is a message and a warning that the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, and all his colleagues, should heed as they gallop along the road of irresponsible spending.

7.35 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): My breath has been quite taken away by the insensitive, ruthless and, frankly, ill-informed approach of Government Members. They have demonstrated this evening that they are detached from the lives of ordinary people—an expression that one of them has used—which is perhaps why the Tory vote in Scotland is lower now than it was in the 1980s under Thatcher.

Like so many of my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran, I am deeply concerned about universal credit, of which much has been said this evening. The stated aim of the UK Government in introducing universal credit is to improve work incentives, simplify the benefits system and reduce fraud and error. Of course, anybody would welcome a system that is simpler and provides better incentives to low-income families to move into sustainable employment, but universal credit does not do that and has been plagued by errors, delays and computer crashes.

As for the vision of a fairer society outlined by the Prime Minister, how hollow do hon. Members think those words will ring to the average working family in receipt of universal credit? That family will be more than £1,000 a year worse off by 2020, with some families being up to £2,500 a year worse off. Transitional protection, which is limited, simply will not suffice.

What about those who are just about managing, about whom the Government like to talk? Do the Government not realise that many of those who are just about managing will rely on universal credit to make ends meet? What about child poverty? Child poverty is set to rise dramatically over the next three years, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. There is simply no evidence for the UK Government’s assertion that reducing benefit support incentivises work. The impact assessment of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 contained no evidence for that.

It is time to ditch universal credit, which is a failed experiment. It is time to abandon it. It fails those on low pay, it fails the sick, it fails the disabled and it fails to incentivise work. It fails to address inequality, and to continue it shows a failure to understand the lives of those who must suffer its indignities.

7.37 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), with whom I had many dealings in my former role as a Minister, although I am somewhat surprised that she seems to advocate bringing back Margaret Thatcher for Scotland—we would probably cheer for that.

The Government are committed to making a difference to help people fulfil their potential. We have delivered record employment in all regions, with 2.7 million more people benefiting from work—8,100 in Swindon alone. There are 850,000 fewer households in which no one has worked and 500,000 fewer children in workless households.

We are seeing wages rise, on average, by 2.6%, which is well ahead of inflation, and by 6% for the lowest paid. That is in part thanks to the introduction—the right introduction—of the national living wage, which is helping 6 million people, and our lifting of the 4 million lowest earners out of paying any income tax through our personal tax allowance changes. That, in addition to the triple-lock pension and the extension of free childcare, is why income inequality has fallen, with 500,000 fewer people in absolute poverty, a record low.
It is crucial that we help people into work and, by backing business, we have delivered a growing economy that is creating opportunities. To fulfil those opportunities, we are investing in the future, with 1.4 million more children going to good or outstanding schools. And we are expanding the National Citizen Service so that those children can develop real life skills. There is a commitment to 3 million apprenticeships by the end of this Parliament. There is real, direct link with getting people into work.

For those seeking work today, the roll-out of universal credit is vital: it builds on the emphasis that work should always pay; it removes the 16-hour cliff edge, which is an absolute nightmare for people looking to move on from part-time work; and crucially, for the first time, claimants will have a named work coach who can help them to navigate childcare, training, support and the complicated benefits system that confuses so many. Having that person to help allows claimants 50% more time to find work. As we have seen, for every 100 people finding work through JSA 113 are finding work through the universal credit system. For the first time ever—this is the single most important reason why we need universal credit—those who go into work continue to get support. Often they are entering the lowest-paid jobs, but they will continue to be reviewed, supported and given that confidence to ask for additional hours and for promotion, to increase their wages and benefit from a growing economy.

This Government are on the side of hard-working people—on the side of the people trying to do the right thing. We believe in opportunity. Hard-working people want that opportunity to fulfil their potential and we are there for them.

7.40 pm

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to bring up the rear this evening, Madam Deputy Speaker. From listening to today’s debate, it is not entirely clear whether this Government’s—or their Back-Benchers’—arrogance or ignorance on the crucial area of social security is more astounding. MPs, MSPs, devolved Governments, experts, civil society and even the United Nations have collectively warned the Government of the real and negative impact that their policies are having on low-income families, but this Government think they know better than those who live this experience or who help those suffering from it every day. The continued roll-out of a flawed universal credit system, the imposition of morally repugnant cuts to the ESA work-related activity group, the brutal benefit sanctions regime and the ideologically driven closure of half of Glasgow’s jobcentres are testament to that.

Universal credit is riddled with IT problems and will push many of our constituents into hardship. People who have gone through the process have described it as a “nightmare”, and it is reported that 86% of council tenants on universal credit are now in arrears. Since this Government announced devastating cuts of 30% to ESA for people with disabilities, MPs across the House, from both sides, have cited many shocking personal testimonies from our constituents, illustrating why further cuts are disastrous, as they force people with disabilities on low incomes into debt, isolation and even destitution. This is morally repugnant in the 21st century in one of the richest countries in the world.

This House has repeatedly heard of the devastating impact of the sanctions regime on low-income homes. It is clear that sanctions are underpinned by zeal, not evidence: driving people to hardship and desperation, and through the doors of food banks. Just last month, we learned of this Government’s punitive plans earmarking eight job centres in Glasgow—half of all of them—for closure, including those in Easterhouse and Parkhead in my constituency. A third, at Shettleston, is to absorb the services of three jobcentres, trebling its claimant size to become one of the largest jobcentres in the UK, in an area with twice the average unemployment rate, pockets of the lowest life expectancies in the UK and unique challenges relating to territorialism. It is an area that includes almost half of the top 10 most impoverished areas in Scotland. All this has been arrogantly proposed without so much as an equality impact assessment. These ideologically driven plans to rip jobcentres from the people who need them most—from some of the most deprived areas of the country—are so sorely bereft of logic, evidence and compassion it beggars belief. In constituencies such as mine, where deprivation and unemployment are high, the Government should be doing more, not less, to help people find work.

This Tory Government have choices where they say they have none. The choices they make tell us all we need to know about this Government and whom their priorities benefit—it is not Glasgow East, it is not Glasgow and it is not people who are on low incomes or just about managing, whom they profess to represent.

7.43 pm

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): To some extent, the Scottish National party, in its motion and debate tonight, is painting a picture of a very uncaring Government who may be trying to keep people in poverty. From what some sections of the press and Opposition have said, one would think that we have high unemployment, record low wages and benefit claimants at an all-time high, whereas in fact the opposite is the case. I am very proud to support this Government as we continue to turn around our welfare state. Slowly, we are decreasing dependency on the welfare state, getting Britain back to work and giving a pay rise to the lowest paid.

I find it astonishing that there are 2.7 million more people in employment now than when we first assumed office in 2010. No one could have predicted that, and it is an astonishing achievement. My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) mentioned one of the statistics of which I am most proud: we now have the lowest number of children in workless households since records began. We should make no apologies for that.

I pay tribute to the staff at the DWP, and particularly the staff of my local jobcentre on Canvey Island, who show incredible dedication and commitment to getting people back into work. They are using all the levers and measures we have provided to do so.

There are plenty of incredibly innovative and thoughtful schemes that I would like to mention, but I shall raise just one. A young gentleman called Dale was not in work. His adviser discovered that the thing he loved most in life was dog’s so rang up the local dog hydrotherapy company and asked the staff there whether they would consider giving him an apprenticeship. They had never considered giving anyone an apprenticeship, but the
does not have an impact on DWP budgets. Even the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) is calling for the cuts to universal credit work allowances to be reversed. They are the only incentive to work in the universal credit system, and they are being slashed. The Government must look at that again.

The Government must also look again at the cut to employment and support allowance for the work-related activity group. Some £30 a week is being cut for sick and disabled people assessed as unfit for work—a drop in income of a third for sick and disabled people. Then there is the closing of jobcentres, which has been raised repeatedly, passionately and eloquently by my colleagues from Glasgow this evening. It is an aspect of our motion that the Government seek to delete entirely in their amendment—a mark of the level of respect that they show for the people of Glasgow.

Let me turn now to the switch from the disability living allowance to personal independence payment. I wish that I had more time to reflect on some the problems, but I will focus on only a couple of areas. I hope that, in closing, the Minister will expand on the commitments that were given about the scheme on 30 November in Westminster Hall. The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), acknowledged that there is an issue of people returning their Motability cars while delayed appeals are considered. She also said that “we are exploring options to allow those who are not in receipt of the higher Motability component to have access to the Motability scheme.”—[Official Report, 30 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 610WH.]

We have not heard or received anything further since. I hope that we can get clarification on both those issues regarding PIP this evening.

I have also written to the Secretary of State on behalf of my constituent, Mr Tom Keatings from Salsburgh, who visited my surgery on Friday. He had been in receipt of PIP for some time, but after having three spinal discs prolapse last year he reapplied to receive the higher Motability rate. He made the application in August, and received a negative response in October. He immediately requested a mandatory reconsideration in October, and has heard nothing, despite being promised that it would take nine weeks to get a reply. He phoned the DWP last week only to be told that not only was the reconsideration not complete, but that it had not even been looked at yet. It is nearly three months since the appeal was sent. I cannot see how Ministers can say that that is in any way acceptable. I hope to hear how the Government are addressing such delays.

Finally, we have heard erroneous claims from Government Members this evening about delays to the Scottish Government’s implementation of the new social security powers. Those claims are not true. There have been announcements just this week. The Scottish Government made a commitment to introduce the new Scottish social security system in the lifetime of the new Scottish Parliament and that is what the Scottish Government will do—it was in our manifesto.

We have also heard that, somehow, the Scottish Government should divert more and more money to mitigate the Tory mess that has been inflicted on social security. It is time Government Members got their own house in order before deciding how the Scottish Government should be spending their money.
July 52 pm
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): I wish to reiterate the thanks of the Minister for Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), to those Members who secured today's important and interesting debate. I also wish to thank all Members who have contributed. I am very conscious that I am somewhat short of time, so if I do not have the opportunity to respond to every point that Members have made in this debate, I will certainly seek to do so in writing.

For Scottish Members present, I am aware that there is another debate tomorrow in Westminster Hall in which we are discussing the DWP estate. I am sure that that will be an opportunity for us to discuss in more detail the proposals in Glasgow.

This Government are committed to building a country that works for everyone, which means taking action to help the most disadvantaged. We know—many Members have mentioned this today—that our approaches need to be joined up across Government to enable us effectively to support and transform the lives of the most vulnerable. That is why we have committed to bringing forward a social justice Green Paper this year, which will identify and address the root causes of poverty and help build on the two new statutory indicators brought in through the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. That will drive real action on workless households and educational attainment—the two areas that can make the biggest difference to disadvantaged children and their families.

The Green Paper on social justice will demonstrate our commitment to the Prime Minister’s ambition of tackling poverty and disadvantage and delivering real social reform. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said on the steps of Downing Street, she will fight against the injustices that we see in our society. In doing that, we will do everything we can to give people more control over their lives. That is why we have committed to bringing forward a social justice Green Paper this year, which will identify and address the root causes of poverty and help build on the two new statutory indicators brought in through the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. That will drive real action on workless households and educational attainment—the two areas that can make the biggest difference to disadvantaged children and their families.

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The evidence is clear and we as a Government have been clear that work is the best route out of poverty. Working age adults in non-working families are almost four times more likely to be living on a low income than those who work, which is why the Government's approach has been about recognising the value and importance of work, making work pay and supporting people into work while protecting the most vulnerable in society. Our reforms are working and transforming lives. The most recent labour market statistics show that we have a near record number of people in work: more than 2.7 million more than in 2010. In the past year we have seen nearly 250,000 more disabled people in work, more than 200,000 more women and more than 150,000 more BME people. That is a record of which we are rightly proud, but we know that there is more to do to realise our ambition of an economy that works for everyone.

I reiterate the comments of my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment: it is vital that universal credit roll-out is delivered safely and securely so that claimants receive the support they need. As he mentioned, reforms such as universal credit are revolutionising relationships between claimants and work coaches, ensuring that the support we offer is more personalised and better suited to the needs of claimants.

There is no doubt that universal credit has been a large and complex programme, which is why we have rolled it out slowly, starting small to begin with and enabling our own DWP staff to be involved in the roll-out through a test-and-learn programme so that we could ensure that as the programme expanded mistakes were ironed out. Our DWP staff are also absolutely crucial to the role of universal credit in encouraging people not just into work but into more work once they have found employment. That is an entirely different relationship.

I have spent the past six months as a Minister visiting Jobcentre Plus centres around the country and speaking with work coaches. Whether in Newcastle, which saw the initial roll-out of full service UC, or in coastal towns such as Eastbourne, I have seen at first hand the value of this approach in transforming lives and I am immensely proud of the commitment I have witnessed from work coaches up and down the country. Indeed, in Oldham I saw some of the most enthusiastic and inspired job coaches that I have seen anywhere in the country, who were absolutely enthusiastic about meeting the claimants and helping them through the journey into more work.

The SNP’s call to suspend universal credit, which demonstrates a complete misunderstanding of its transformative benefits, arguably shows a lack of concern for the millions of working households that will benefit from a system that helps people into work, empowering them to transform their own lives rather than leaving them trapped in benefit dependency. As some Members might know, my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment is travelling to Scotland this week to meet MSPs and Ministers in the Scottish Government to discuss with them the issues of the jobcentres in Glasgow.

We have had a lot of discussion about the impact on disability employment, and I am very clear that when a jobcentre closes, that can provide opportunities to enable DWP staff to respond to the personal circumstance of claimants. Work coaches can personalise and tailor the support they provide and can visit claimants in their own home. Claimants do not have to travel to specific jobcentres but can nominate the ones they wish to use. We want a flexible and dynamic welfare state that embraces the new opportunities of technology and the expertise and joined-up services that our local partnership organisations have.

This Government are clear that the best way to help people to pay the rent and live independent lives is to help them into work. With my noble Friend Lord Freud, the former Minister for Welfare Reform, I met arm’s length management organisations to talk about...
UC and the issues that they raised with us about rent arrears. Our research shows that the majority of UC claimants are comfortable managing their budgets and after four months the proportion of UC claimants we surveyed who were in arrears at the start of their claim had fallen by a third.

To conclude, let me reiterate that the Government’s commitment to an economy and society that works for all is beyond doubt. I want to reassure hon. Members that the Government are committed to fighting against the injustices of society and ensuring that everyone has the right opportunities to fulfil their potential. Households in the lowest income bracket are now much more likely to be in employment than they were at the start of the previous Parliament. In the bottom half of the income distribution, the percentage of families who were in work increased from 60.3% in 2010-11 to 65.7% in 2014-15—

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Question put accordingly (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 172, Noes 276.

Division No. 124

[8.00 pm]

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bardell, Hannah
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Byrne, rh Liam
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette

Hendry, Drew
Heron, Lady
Hollem, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Mr Kevan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McGaa, Callum
McCarty, Kerry
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, rh John
McGarry, Natalie
McGinn, Conor
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Mullin, Roger
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Har, Brendan
Oliney, Sarah
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Pugh, John
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Jonathan
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Gavin
Rotheram, Steve
Salmond, rh Alex
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shannon, Jim
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Simpson, David
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stephens, Chris
Streeting, Wes
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomson, Michelle
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Conri
Wilson, Phil
Wilson, Sammy
Winnick, Mr David
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes: Owen Thompson and Marion Fellows

NOES

Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Sir Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brookshireshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Question accordingly negatived.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the proposed words be there added.

The House divided: Ayes 268, Noes 81.

Division No. 125 [8.12 pm]

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel
Afrjief, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Carol
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, James
Billingham, Andrew
Bingham, Andrew
Berry, James
Benyon, Richard
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, James
Billingham, Andrew
Garnier, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Sir Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Mr Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Cairns, rh Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caudfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishi, Reham
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Cleese, James
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byrond
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djankoly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Dudbridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Just
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heath, James, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holborne, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kris
Howard, rh Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Hudson nickel
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jennings, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Milton, rh Anne
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Opperman, Guy
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philip, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, rh Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Roberts, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Rhys
Somas, rh Sir Nicholas
Soloway, Amanda
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swain, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Tohur, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Witlingdale, rh Mr John
Wrigg, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Bob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Steve Brine and
Andrew Griffiths

NOES
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Bardell, Hannah
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Boswell, Philip
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Cooper, Rosie

Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Cunningham, Alex
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Durkan, Mark
Edwards, Jonathan
Ferrier, Margaret
Flynn, Paul
Gibson, Patricia
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Toilet Facilities: People with Disabilities

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

8.23 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the House for granting me today’s debate on community toilet facilities for people with disabilities. May I take this opportunity to thank the Minister for his attendance? This is not an issue with a party political dimension, but one on which I hope we can achieve cross-party consensus to make a real difference to the quality of life of millions of citizens living with disabilities and chronic conditions throughout the UK.

I raise this issue on behalf of my very brave and dignified constituent Mr Brian Dean of Stalybridge, who chose to go public with his own story last year. Brian is living with Parkinson’s disease. Among many challenges, one commonly occurring symptom of Parkinson’s is a problem relating to the bladder and bowel. Many people living with Parkinson’s have an overactive bladder and need to pass urine more frequently and urgently. Having Parkinson’s can also mean that the messages from the brain to the bladder may not get through properly, leaving patients with less time to access a toilet. In some cases, Parkinson’s causes slowness of movement and muscle rigidity which can also affect the muscles in the bowels. Easy access to appropriate toilet facilities is therefore essential for those managing Parkinson’s disease.

To my great sadness and frustration, Brian experienced both a lack of provision and a lack of community spirit when he found himself away from home and needing to access a toilet in January last year. Returning from a trip to Blackpool with his wife and carer Joan, Brian noticed the need to urinate towards the end of their journey home. Stopping in Levenshulme in Manchester, they pulled over outside a row of shops. They first thought they would have more luck at Subway, but were also rejected there. They approached a corner shop to see if they had a toilet to use, but were waved away. They then tried a Chicken takeaway, but were also rejected there. Joan continued a couple of doors down to the Krispy Chicken takeaway, but were also rejected there. They were now confident media professionals, having shared their story not just with local news outlets but with national newspapers and broadcasters. Their call is for as many businesses as possible to provide an accessible toilet.

Business without Debate

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY (UNJUSTIFIED THREATS) BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Orders Nos. 59(3) and 90(5)), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).
I know that that sounds like an ambitious plan and I know that high streets and small businesses are already under considerable financial strain, but I also remember acutely that when the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 required all businesses to become wheelchair accessible, people said it could not be done. People said that the adjustments would be too great, too costly and too impracticable. Yet today, two decades after the Act came into effect, we take it for granted that the vast majority of shops, cafés, banks and so on have some form of accessible entrance, and that it is simply unacceptable to turn those with mobility issues away at the door.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for so eloquently setting the scene. Does he share my concern that many young disabled people in the Muscular Dystrophy UK Trailblazers Network, whom I know he is aware of, are having to restrict their fluid intake, causing urinary tract infections? Some are now turning to surgical intervention because of the lack of Changing Places toilets across the UK. Will the hon. Gentleman ask for a meeting with the Minister and UK Trailblazers, and perhaps with me and other Members in the Chamber, to see what can be done to improve toilet access facilities for disabled people across the whole United Kingdom?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am certainly happy to do that and I thank hon. Members who have stayed for this debate, perhaps to raise issues that have affected their constituents, too.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I am a patron of Wolverhampton Mencap. Does my hon. Friend share my surprise that Mencap nationally has steadfastly refused to bring a test case before a tribunal on the lack of Changing Places public toilets being built in buildings constructed since the Disability Discrimination Act came into force in 1996, and does he share my hopes that Mencap will review that position so it can run a test case?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Gentleman for so eloquently setting the scene. Does he feel, as I do, that perhaps businesses are missing a trick, because the more accessible they make their business, store, public transport, sports ground, or whatever it is, the more that people with a disability can use those facilities and lend their economic investment to them?

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Does he feel, as I do, that perhaps businesses are missing a trick, because they make their business, store, public transport, sports ground, or whatever it is, the more that people with a disability can use those facilities and lend their economic investment to them?

Jonathan Reynolds: I absolutely agree, and I will say something specific about that too. This is absolutely not just a duty but an opportunity for businesses. I would love this debate to get that message across to people.

On public services, I understand that in many cases local authority-provided public toilets were among the first amenities to be lost following substantial cuts to local government settlements. In my own town of Stalybridge, there was a long-established and well-used public toilet block, right in the centre of town, next to the shops, but it was closed in 2012 because—and I appreciate this—the council simply could not justify the cost of running it in such a challenging financial climate. I will not condemn any council for making tough decisions in tough times, but if the public sector, businesses and community groups worked together strategically on accessible toilet provision, I am sure that we could make great progress.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising such an important issue about promoting dignity for vulnerable people and, as already indicated, greater prosperity for our high streets. Cheltenham is getting two new Changing Places toilets. Will he join me in congratulating all those who campaigned for this, including the fantastic St Vincent’s and St George’s Association in my constituency, and made it happen?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. It is wonderful news. I am afraid that I cannot share equally good news about my own area, although I hope one day to be able to do so.

In Manchester city centre, there are now only nine public toilets—down from 18 just a few years ago—although the council has had some success in introducing the City Loos scheme, whereby businesses can sign up voluntarily to open their toilets to non-customers and to advertise in their windows that people are welcome to use the facilities inside. I call today for a rapid expansion of such schemes and perhaps even a national scheme.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): We have set up several such schemes in my constituency. I am contacted regularly—on a weekly basis, in fact—about the availability and accessibility of toilets. One problem with the schemes, however, is around publication and awareness that these businesses are open for anybody to use. It is really important to get the message out.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s comments and to the many colleagues who have stayed for this debate. It is extremely pleasing to hear that such schemes are already in existence in some parts of the country.
Just as many shops and cafes now have “Breastfeeding welcome” signs in their windows, I would like to see as many businesses as possible displaying signs saying: “Accessible toilet here, all welcome”. I understand that some boroughs, such as Lambeth, have already gone further than a voluntarily scheme and managed their community toilet scheme in such a way as to commit that no one has to walk more than 500 metres to find a toilet. The locations of the nearest community toilet provided by local businesses are then well signposted. I know that for some disabled users the maximum distance of 500 metres would still be too far to go, but this sort of public commitment and planning feels like a good start.

A lot more could be done with technology. Apps are already springing up to enable smartphone and tablet users quickly to find their nearest accessible toilet. I had a look at one such app, however, and looking at an area I knew well, I could point to toilet locations not listed. I would therefore echo the comments of the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan): as well as extending community toilet schemes, we must extend the amount of information in the public domain, especially online, so that people can find help at the touch of a button when they need it.

The way that Brian Dean was repeatedly turned away from businesses highlighted not only a lack of compassion but an absence of sound business sense, as the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) said. It strikes me that there is a clear business case for more traders opening their doors to those who need to use their toilets. In my constituency, as elsewhere, town centre economies have struggled as footfall from our town centres and seek to revive those economies. We must address accessible toilet closures. Will he assess how many community toilet closures are currently operating in the UK, and how we can work with local authorities to prevent further toilet closures? Will he lend his support to the Changing Places scheme, and ensure that greater numbers of larger, better-equipped toilets exist for those who need them? Lastly, will he today encourage as many businesses as possible to extend their displays of “Breastfeeding welcome”, and to have this as part of the building regulations, so that developments over a certain size would have to have a facility such as a Changing Places toilet?

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. One of my constituents, Lorna Fillingham, has long campaigned for Changing Places toilets in all hospitals and health centres. Does my hon. Friend believe this campaign should be given more legs?

Jonathan Reynolds: I absolutely agree.

People with profound and multiple learning disabilities, as well people with other physical disabilities such as spinal injuries, muscular dystrophy and multiple sclerosis, often need extra equipment and space to allow them to use toilets safely and comfortably. These needs are met by Changing Places toilets.
[Jonathan Reynolds]

many businesses as possible to open their doors to those who need to use their facilities and show greater understanding of the needs of those with disabilities?

In conclusion, I would once again like to pay tribute to my constituents Brian and Joan Dean for the way in which they have turned their poor experience into a positive campaign to help others. Colleagues will recognise that not everyone can be a Brian or a Joan. There will be many people with disabilities, and many worn-out carers, who suffer or have suffered similar experiences and have simply decided that they can no longer face the hassle of going out, and who perhaps do not play a full part in their communities and, frankly, do not live their lives to the full. We must not allow that to happen. For Brian, for Joan and for everyone who has been deterred by the consequences of poor access, we simply must work harder to provide community toilet facilities for everyone with disabilities.

8.39 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell):

Let me begin by thanking the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) for raising this important issue, and for speaking so powerfully on behalf of his constituent Brian Dean. It was very decent of him to thank me for my attendance. I should put it on record that I had no choice but to be here, but on this occasion it is a real privilege, because I think the issue is very important. I should say at the outset that I have some personal experience of it, having cared for my late father, who suffered from Alzheimer’s at the end of his life. For people who are struggling with a degenerative condition, the humiliation that can result from not being able to find a toilet when they need one is very difficult to understand if one has not witnessed it.

The hon. Gentleman deserves great credit for raising the issue in the House, and the fact that so many Members have stayed for the debate shows that a large number of our colleagues take an active interest in issues related to inclusion and accessibility. I know that the hon. Gentleman has a particular interest in such issues, given his role as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on autism.

In some ways, the fact that we need to debate the issue of accessible toilets is an indictment of our society. Confidence that one’s toilet needs can be met is something that most of us take for granted in life, and disabled people should be equally confident that that will be the case for them when they leave the house. I was therefore very sorry to hear about the events affecting the hon. Gentleman’s constituent. It is sad that it is necessary to debate the issue this evening, but it is entirely right for us to discuss how provision of and access to toilet facilities might be improved to ensure that Mr Dean and many others like him are not subjected to similar experiences in the future.

A number of legislative measures have already been introduced to ensure adequate provision of accessible toilets, and the hon. Gentleman referred to one of them. Part M of the building regulations sets out minimum standards for accessible toilets in buildings when they are built or undergo major refurbishment. That includes standards for unisex accessible toilets even in small buildings where toilets are open to the public, and additional toilet provision in larger buildings.

Those requirements have helped to ensure that a wide range of needs are properly met in many circumstances, but people’s needs and expectations change over time, and the Government recognise that the approach to meeting those changing needs will have to change in response. That is why we have commissioned researchers to check that the current requirements in Part M remain fit for purpose, and, in particular, to look at the design and provision of accessible toilets. The researchers will report later in the year, and the report will help to inform decisions that my fellow Ministers and I make on whether the building regulations need to be changed. I should emphasise that the regulations help only with new buildings, or buildings in which a major refurbishment is taking place.

Once a building is in use, duties in the Equality Act 2010 apply to building owners and service providers, requiring them to take steps which include making what are known as reasonable adjustments. Reasonable adjustments are required wherever a disabled employee or disabled customer, or potential customer, would otherwise be at a substantial disadvantage compared with a non-disabled person. A substantial disadvantage is more than a minor or trivial disadvantage. The reasonable adjustment duty applying to service providers is an anticipatory duty, which means that employers and service providers are expected to foresee the requirements of disabled people and the reasonable adjustments that would have to be made for them, such as the provision of disabled toilets, wheelchair access and auxiliary aids or services for those who may require them. That includes, crucially, reviewing management provisions—for instance, how and when people can have access to toilet facilities, which was clearly an issue in relation to the businesses which Mr Dean approached—as well as making adjustments to the physical features of buildings.

The combination of the building regulations and the Equality Act have proved to be very important in improving provision. However, the hon. Gentleman issued a number of challenges in his closing remarks, asking—rightly—what more could be done to ensure that toilets were publicly accessible so that disabled people could be confident that their needs could be met wherever they went. I agree with him that that requires the public sector, businesses and communities to work together to find new ways to make it easier to find and use accessible toilets.

Rob Marris: I am grateful to the Minister for his support. Would he consider commissioning, through his Department, the development of a mobile phone app with access to a master list of all sorts of accessible toilets in the United Kingdom, whether they are Changing Places toilets or toilets that meet other requirements that people have, so that they can find them easily?

Gavin Barwell: The hon. Gentleman will find that if he is patient, his patience will be rewarded.

Local authorities have an important role to play in identifying how accessible toilet provision can be supported. They have powers to run and maintain public conveniences—although they are not duty bound to do so—meaning that, where appropriate, they can provide accessible toilets.
directly. Section 20 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 gives local authorities the power to require toilets to be provided and maintained for public use in any place providing entertainment, exhibitions or sporting events, and places serving food and drink for consumption on the premises.

Local authority environmental health officers have an important role to play in reviewing plans and premises licence applications, and advising on whether sufficient sanitary facilities are provided in terms of number, design and layout. Through the planning system, councils can also impose requirements, or negotiate with developers, to ensure that enhanced accessible toilets such as Changing Places are brought forward in new large-scale developments, or in buildings with strategic importance.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I have a question about the design and layout of accessible toilets and the expertise that is available in my constituency. At Shooting Star Chase there are lots of children with terminal illnesses and complex wheelchairs, and I am horrified to know that when the children are taken to some entertainment areas and the staff find a disabled-accessible toilet, it might not have the correct dimensions for the children. Where is the information coming from for the Department?

Gavin Barwell: That is a good illustration of needs evolving over time and the fact that the building regulations must keep pace with them. It also shows that whatever we do with the building regulations only affects brand-new buildings and those that are refurbished where a retrofitting job needs to be done.

I am also pleased to say that we are introducing measures in the Local Government Finance Bill to give councils flexibility to use their existing discretionary relief powers to support publicly owned public toilets from 1 April 2018. They already have powers to provide such relief to privately run toilets. As we announced at the Budget, this measure is a means of levelling the playing field so that both private and public toilets can benefit from relief. Where authorities use their discretionary powers, central Government automatically meet half the costs.

Alongside councils, it is also important that businesses play their part. I was delighted to be joined at the start of this debate by my colleague the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, who is leading on a number of initiatives to improve accessibility. Just before Christmas, she called for business people to step forward to act as sector champions, to become a catalyst for change by championing the accessibility of products and services. These champions will help to unlock a virtuous circle of greater financial independence and choice for individuals, while helping to tap into the spending power of the “purple pound.” Given that disabled people have a collective spending power of £249 billion, the economic opportunities for business are readily apparent.

Jim Shannon: I asked in an intervention on the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) whether the Minister would agree to meeting Muscular Dystrophy UK trailblazers to get their opinion, as it is a body with knowledge and experience of how to improve toilet accessibility. Will he agree to that? If so, I and others would be glad to avail him of that opportunity.

Gavin Barwell: I will be delighted to do that, and my suggestion to hon. Members who want to meet is that it is probably best to wait until we have the research, and then to have a meeting when we are at the point of reviewing the regulations.

I was talking about the spending power of disabled people. The need to unlock this potential is clear. In March 2015 the Extra Costs Commission found that three quarters of disabled people and their families had felt so badly treated because of their disability that they had left the shop or business. That is shocking and this is simply not good enough.

To help to address this, the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work is assembling some of the nation’s best tech experts at the Google campus on 26 January to identify how technology platforms can help people share knowledge about where access is not good enough. She will be inviting Members of the House to attend a showcase on 6 February in the Attlee Room to share the ideas generated at that event, and I encourage Members of both Houses to attend and think about how we can all champion improved accessible provision in our own communities. That community leadership is important, and there is a clear precedent for community, business and public sector leadership delivering improvements in accessible toilet provision through the success of the Changing Places campaign.

I first became aware of Changing Places toilets in my role as the Minister with responsibility for building regulations. It is clear from the correspondence that I see that the number of people with multiple and profound disabilities, and others who need more specialised toilet provision, has increased significantly in recent years. This includes members of the armed forces who have been injured when serving their country; younger adults seeking to live a full, active life; and an increasing number of elderly people. For those people, and for their families and carers, the availability of adequate toilet facilities becomes central to planning any activity outside the home.

Changing Places toilets provide an adult changing bench, a hoist, washing facilities and the space for carers and users to use the facilities safely. It is heartening to see that local and national campaigners, backed by the Government and working in partnership with business and local councils, have increased the number of Changing Places toilets from 140 in 2007 to 914 today. That is a great success story, and it proves what can be achieved where there is strong leadership and collaboration across sectors, but improving the provision of accessible toilets is only part of what is needed. One of the key points, as the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) pointed out, is that it is important to signpost where accessible toilet provision can be found, and Changing Places has provided a sign of how that might be achieved.

In 2015 my Department, along with the devolved Administrations, funded Mencap and the British Toilet Association to develop a website detailing the location, opening hours and facilities of every Changing Places toilet in the UK. This enables disabled people and their carers to locate the nearest toilet at the touch of a button. The website even includes a journey planner that shows every Changing Places toilet along a given route. This simple technology has had a positive impact, and I would encourage further exploration as to how
this might also work for the wider network of standard accessible and public toilet provision, to ensure that people like Mr Dean are able to find a toilet facility when they need to do so.

In summary, we have already started the process of looking at accessible toilet provision as part of our programme of research on the building regulations. That will help to inform decisions on whether changes need to be made. We will continue to stress the importance of meeting duties under the Equality Act, including the duty to make reasonable adjustments to buildings and to management practice to help to meet the needs of disabled people. We will also continue to look at ways in which technology and leadership can make a difference.

It is important that local authorities, public bodies and business continue to consider how they might look beyond legislation to improve the provision of accessible toilets, including identifying opportunities to introduce enhanced provision such as Changing Places. I would like to end by thanking the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde for raising these most important issues, and by thanking all the other Members who have been here for the debate. I would be happy to continue to discuss how we can work together to deliver further change in this important area.

Question put and agreed to.

8.52 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Welfare Powers

1. Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What progress has been made on transferring further welfare powers to the Scottish Government.

[908165]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): As this is the Scottish questions immediately preceding Burns night on Wednesday 25 January, may I wish all those organising Burns suppers or other events in Scotland, across the UK, including here in this House of Commons, and around the world the very best? Robert Burns’ legacy is as relevant today as ever.

The UK Government are committed to a safe and secure transfer of the remaining welfare powers. The majority of welfare powers commenced in 2016, and the transfer of the remaining powers will be overseen by the joint ministerial working group on welfare and give his assessment of progress.

David Mundell: That group has played an important part in establishing the links between the DWP and the Scottish Government. I have been in regular recent contact with Angela Constance, the relevant Minister in the Scottish Government, about their latest proposals on universal credit. Inevitably, the complexity of this area means that as the transfer takes place new issues arise that need to be dealt with. The joint ministerial working group is the ideal place to do that.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will join me in sending our condolences to the family of Canon Kenyon Wright, who, sadly, passed away last week. He was a principled man whose legacy should serve as a reminder to all of us that when we work together it is possible to deliver the impossible.

This Tory Government are currently moving disabled people from the disability living allowance to personal independence payments, and it is estimated that the people of Scotland will lose out on £190 million a year as a result. If that was not bad enough, the Government did this a year ago but they withdrew the timetable and have not issued a new one. So can the Secretary of State please inform the House, and indeed the people of Scotland, when they can expect to lose out on this £190 million a year?

David Mundell: First, may I welcome the hon. Gentleman back? He was missed at our last Scottish questions, although the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) entertained the House—I think I can say that, I knew Canon Kenyon Wright and he was indeed a very principled man, with strong personal conviction. He played a very important part in the constitutional convention that led to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. As we have seen in the media, he is widely mourned.

The hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) will know that disability benefits are to be fully devolved to the Scottish Parliament, and the funding of those benefits was dealt with in the negotiations for the fiscal framework. It is now for the Scottish Government to come forward with their proposals for disability benefits in Scotland.
11. [908175] Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to hear less from the Scottish Government about the powers they want and more about how they are going to use the powers we have given them?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend makes a very relevant point. The hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) referred to personal independence payments, to which, I know, the Scottish Government are opposed, but I have no idea what they intend to replace them with, or on what timetable.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): May I begin by joining colleagues in paying tribute to Canon Kenyon Wright? He not only played a significant role in helping to deliver devolution to Scotland but, of course, in 2014 supported a yes vote for Scottish independence.

The UK Government are planning to close half the jobcentres in Glasgow without even knowing the number of people who will be affected by such a radical change. Was the Secretary of State consulted in advance of the closures, and when did he show enough interest to find out which specific locations would face closure?

David Mundell: I have taken a very close interest in this issue and worked closely on it with my colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions and the Scottish Government. The Government and I have never suggested that the procedures followed during the process have been perfect, but we have put forward a public consultation for people who are affected and will have to travel more than 3 miles or for more than 20 minutes. I encourage everyone involved to take part in the consultation.

Angus Robertson: The devolution of powers hangs very much together with the hard Brexit plans of the current Government. The Secretary of State has said that his role is “to ensure Scotland gets the best possible deal and that deal involves clearly being part of the single market.” Does he still believe that, or has he changed his mind after being told what he should say by his Tory bosses in London?

David Mundell: I do not recognise the Prime Minister’s speech yesterday as a hard Brexit plan. I do not think that the 500,000 Scottish National party voters who voted for Brexit will take kindly to being referred to as right-wing Tory Brexiteers. They were independently minded people in Scotland who voted for what they thought was the right thing for Scotland. It is absolutely clear, as the Prime Minister said yesterday, that we want to have access to the single market, and that is what the quote from me that the right hon. Gentleman just read out made clear. On the other hand, membership of the single market is a quite different thing, as Mike Russell and, privately, the Scottish Government accept.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I say gently to colleagues that progress is far too slow; we need to hasten the pace. Some reduction in the decibel level—not least from the Chair of the International Trade Committee—would be heartily welcomed across the House.

Agriculture

2. Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for the Scottish agriculture sector.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I regularly meet Cabinet colleagues to discuss a wide range of matters. I recently met the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to discuss a number of issues relating to the Scottish agriculture sector, and will continue to do so.

Calum Kerr: Last year, the farming Minister told us that there would be an £18 billion Brexit dividend. He said that farmers would continue to get “as much support—or perhaps even more” after Brexit. Does the Secretary of State agree that it would be unacceptable if funding to Scottish agriculture was cut after 2020?

David Mundell: There is no suggestion that funding to Scottish agriculture will be cut, but there is the opportunity to move forward from the constraints of the common agricultural policy, which farmers throughout Scotland have often complained about. We need to seize this opportunity to reshape the support for farming to make it more effective, but to continue to sustain those areas of Scottish farming that need sustaining.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): My right hon. Friend is aware that my family are extensive farmers in the Scottish borders. Does he not agree that Brexit presents the United Kingdom with a magnificent opportunity to fashion an agriculture policy that is required not by French farmers, but by British farmers, and will he assure the House that hill farmers in Scotland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom will be given proper consideration?

David Mundell: I can absolutely give that undertaking. I hope that, in conjunction with the Scottish Government, we can move forward to shape a new basis of support for Scottish agriculture, especially for those who farm in less-favoured areas. There have been multiple complaints about the operation of the common agricultural policy and its need to take into account farming practices across the continent. We now have the opportunity to have our own support mechanism and we need to work to shape it.

14. [908178] Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State confirm what he said to The Sunday Times in November that the Scottish Parliament will retain full responsibility over agriculture and fisheries following Brexit and that “no powers will be re-reserved to Westminster.” Will he tell us: yes or no?

David Mundell: Yes.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): Almost two thirds of the UK’s agriculture exports are to the EU. After what we heard from the Prime Minister yesterday, there is an increasing possibility that we could revert to World Trade Organisation trade rules on exit from the
EU. Does the Secretary of State agree with the NFU Scotland, which says that the potential for 20% tariffs as a result of WTO trade rules will be increasingly damaging for the profitability of Scottish agriculture?

David Mundell: The Prime Minister made it clear yesterday that her objective is to achieve the best possible access to the single market, with the minimum of barriers and tariffs. That will be to the benefit of Scottish agriculture. Scottish farmers see the opportunity that leaving the EU provides them, and I am sure that they will seize it and that we will be able to provide the environment in which they will succeed.

Taxation

Simon Kirby: What I will say is that the SNP should focus on making a success of its new powers for the benefit of the Scottish people. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Docherty-Hughes, you are a very curious denizen of the House. I had you down as a cerebral and academic type, but you are becoming increasingly hysterical—very curious behaviour.

Mark Menzies: Does my hon. Friend agree that the SNP wants to levy the highest level of income tax anywhere in the United Kingdom. It already receives more per capita funding than England, yet Scotland’s schools are conspicuously worse than those in the rest of the United Kingdom. Does the Minister put that down to the incompetence of the Scottish Government or their prioritisation of nationalist posturing over proper administration?

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): In a week when the chairman of the British Medical Association in Scotland has warned that the NHS in Scotland is “at breaking point”, is the Minister as surprised as I am that the so-called progressive SNP Government in Holyrood consistently refuse to use the powers afforded them to protect the NHS in Scotland?

Simon Kirby: Scotland’s new devolution settlement delivers one of the most powerful and accountable devolved Parliaments in the world, giving the Scottish Government unprecedented power to shape the future economy of Scotland.

Immigration

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What assessment has made of the effect of immigration on Scotland’s economic performance.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Migrants from outside and within the UK make a significant contribution to Scotland—to its economy, of course, but also to its society and wellbeing. The Government will always welcome the brightest and the best who have come here to work.

Stuart C. McDonald: We know that about 180,000 EU nationals make a hugely valuable contribution to the Scottish economy and that Governments such as Canada’s and Australia’s successfully apply different immigration rules to different parts of their countries. Going beyond warm words, will the Secretary of State listen carefully to proposals for a different arrangement for Scotland, allowing EU citizens freedom to continue to come and live and work there, benefiting us all?

David Mundell: I will always look at evidence-based proposals; that is our commitment, for example, in relation to the Scottish Government’s paper produced
just before Christmas. However, it was clear within the settlement agreed under the Smith commission that immigration would remain a reserved power.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the problems that Scotland will face under the SNP Government is the flight of individuals from high taxes, who will have to be replaced with further immigrants, as well as the fact that businesses will fly down to London rather than be in Scotland?

David Mundell: I find it surprising that the Scottish Government always seem to fail to acknowledge that they have very significant powers to attract people to Scotland. At the moment, about 4% of migrants who come to the United Kingdom go to Scotland. Clearly, more needs to be done to encourage people to come to Scotland, and the Scottish Government need to address that. Making Scotland the highest-taxed part of the UK is not, in my view, the way to do it.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I associate myself and my party with the expressions of condolence about the late Canon Kenyon Wright—a truly lovely man, for whom it was once my privilege to act as election agent, albeit unsuccessfully.

Will the Secretary of State explain to the Home Secretary the importance of non-EU nationals in making up the crews of many fishing boats, especially in the white fish sector, that operate out of Scottish ports?

David Mundell: I certainly will take that issue forward for the right hon. Gentleman. I am aware of the concerns that have been raised and I would be more than happy to meet directly with him to discuss the matter further.

City Deals

6. Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of city deals on cities in Scotland.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The UK Government have spearheaded these deals, which will be transformative for the cities of Scotland. The city regions are engines of economic growth, so they will drive forward Scotland’s economy, which means more jobs and a secure future. That is why I am so pleased that the Government have now committed to a city deal for every one of Scotland’s seven city regions.

Iain Stewart: In the autumn statement, the Chancellor gave welcome support to city deals. Will the Secretary of State assure me that he will support the borderlands initiative as part of the programme?

David Mundell: The borderlands initiative is an innovative proposal that seeks to bring together Dumfries and Galloway Council, Scottish Borders Council, Carlisle City Council and other councils in the north of England to recognise the significant economic area that crosses the border. I am delighted to give my support to that proposal.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): As well as city deals, the Secretary of State will be aware that the Ayrshire growth deal has been submitted to the Scottish Government. In yesterday’s Treasury questions, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury wrongly said that it is for the Scottish Government to advance that deal. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with Treasury colleagues about supporting the Ayrshire growth deal?

David Mundell: May I first welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman’s colleague, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), has secured an Adjournment debate tomorrow that will focus specifically on the Ayrshire regional growth deal? I have met the councils and I want that deal to receive support from the UK Government in the way that is most appropriate to make it happen.

Mr Speaker: At this Scotland Office questions, I am pleased to inform the House that I have just been notified that Andy Murray has won his second round match in Melbourne.

Exiting the EU

7. David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on the Scottish economy of the UK leaving the EU.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Mr Speaker, I noted that in congratulating Andy Murray, you did not display the usual exuberance that you have demonstrated in support of him and the rest of the British team at Davis cup matches.

The UK Government have taken a number of measures to support Scotland’s economy, including by committing to city deals for each of Scotland’s cities, as I just said, and providing an additional £800 million for the Scottish Government’s capital budget through to 2021. Leaving the EU opens up real opportunities for Scotland and we must always remember that the UK market is worth more than four times as much to Scotland as the EU single market.

David T. C. Davies: Adam Smith gave us the theory of modern capitalist economics and William Gladstone put it into practice. Would not those two fine Scotsmen be delighted by the opportunity that Brexit offers to ditch the socialist protectionism of the Scottish Government, and to implement the free trade and free markets that made the country such a powerhouse in the 19th century?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend, as ever, makes a robust case for the benefits of leaving the European Union. Perhaps to his list of posthumous figures from Scottish history I could add David Hume, whose essay ‘Of the Balance of Trade’ predates “The Wealth of Nations” and provides an effective rebuttal to the so-called jealous fear of free trade among merchants at the time.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): A hard Brexit outside the single market threatens to cost Scotland 80,000 jobs over a decade and to cost people an average of £2,000 in wages. What action will the Secretary of State personally take to keep Scotland in the single market, even if the rest of the UK leaves?
David Mundell: It is absolutely clear that Scotland cannot be a member of the single market if it is not a member of the EU, and the United Kingdom will not be a member of the EU. The Scottish Government accept that proposition. What is important is access to the single market and, as the Prime Minister set out yesterday, we aim to achieve the best possible access to that market.

15. [908179] Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend considered the effect on the Scottish economy if a further independence referendum is held?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend may be aware that today, in relation to labour market statistics, unemployment is up in Scotland, employment is down, and economic activity is also down. I am in no doubt that the uncertainty caused by the constant reference to an independence referendum is having an impact on the Scottish economy.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): An important part of the Scottish economy is the rural economy, particularly crofting. Yesterday I asked the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what exactly, after her careful thinking and planning, would happen to crofting after 2020. The Secretary of State for Scotland set out earlier that he thought that there would be no cuts to funding. Is it the case that we will see no cuts at all to agricultural support in Scotland post-2020? Will he confirm what he alluded to earlier?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman has already heard me answer that question. I have set out that leaving the common agricultural policy is an opportunity. The common agricultural policy has not suited Scotland, particularly those farming in less favoured areas. We now have an opportunity to do something different—we should seize it.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [908225] Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 18 January.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House I will have further such meetings later today.

Kelvin Hopkins: Thousands of babies who are born each year are damaged for life by alcohol consumed in pregnancy. Patients affected by alcohol put immense pressure on the national health service, and alcohol is a primary factor in domestic violence and attacks on women. Does the Prime Minister recognise the seriousness of the country’s alcohol problems—the damage to lives and the billions in costs to the public purse—and will she instruct her Government now to address these problems effectively and as a matter of urgency?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly say to the hon. Gentleman that I recognise the problems that alcohol causes. He particularly referenced not just problems for pregnant women, but the part that alcohol often plays in domestic violence and abuse. That was why, when I was Home Secretary, we produced an alcohol strategy and worked on the issue of alcohol. The Government continue to recognise the importance of this issue and to work on it.

Q5. [908229] Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to the NHS staff who provide us with such magnificent treatment day in, day out? Does she agree that people who miss NHS appointments without cancelling them cost the NHS a great deal of money and also take up slots that would otherwise be used by other patients? Will she consider how she might let those people know about the inconvenience that they are causing to the NHS?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes two important points. First, I am very pleased to join him in paying tribute to the dedication and hard work of all those who work in our national health service. Secondly, he is right to point out that if somebody misses an appointment, that is a cost to the NHS. There are a number of ways in which this is being dealt with. Some hospitals send out text messages that not only remind people of their appointment, but tell them how much it costs if they miss it.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Yesterday the Prime Minister snubbed Parliament and snubbed the Brexit Committee’s recommendation to bring forward a White Paper, while at the same time describing the referendum as “a vote to restore...our parliamentary democracy”.

This is about our jobs, living standards and future prosperity; why will it not be scrutinised by this House?

The Prime Minister: What I did yesterday was to set out a plan for a global Britain. I set out a plan that will put the divisions of last year behind us, and that shows a vision for a stronger, fairer, more united, more outward-looking, prosperous, tolerant, independent and truly global Britain. It was a vision that will shape a stronger future and build a better Britain.

Jeremy Corbyn: Restoring parliamentary democracy while sidelining Parliament—it is not so much the Iron Lady as the Irony Lady.

Yesterday the Prime Minister finally provided some detail. May I urge her to stop her threats of a bargain basement Brexit—a low-pay tax haven on the shores of Europe? It would not necessarily damage the EU, but it would certainly damage this country, businesses, jobs and public services. She demeans herself, her office and our country’s standing by making such threats.

The Prime Minister: What I set out yesterday was a plan for a global Britain, bringing prosperity to this country and jobs to people, and spreading economic growth across the country. Yesterday we learned a little more of the right hon. Gentleman’s thinking on this issue. He said:
Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister was the one who made the threat about slashing corporation tax. If we reduce corporation tax to the lowest common denominator, this country loses £120 billion in revenue. How, then, do we fund public services?

Last year the Prime Minister said that leaving the single market could make trade deals “considerably harder” and that “while we could certainly negotiate our own trade agreements, there would be no guarantee that they would be on terms as good as those we enjoy now”, but yesterday she offered us only vague guarantees. Does she now disagree with herself?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman might also have noticed that when I spoke in the remain campaign, I said that if we voted to leave the European Union, the sky would not fall in. Look at what has happened to our economic situation since we voted to leave the European Union.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the future of the economy. I want us to be an outward-looking nation trading around the world, and bringing prosperity and jobs into the United Kingdom. The one thing that would be bad for the economy is the answers that the right hon. Gentleman has. He wants a cap on wages, no control on immigration and to borrow an extra £500 billion. That would not lead to prosperity; it would lead to no jobs, no wages and no skills.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Chancellor said after the referendum that to lose single market access would be “catastrophic”. A few days later, the Health Secretary said:

“The first part of the plan must be clarity that we will remain in the single market”.

The Prime Minister said something about “frictionless” access to the single market and a bespoke customs union deal. Could she give us a little bit of certainty and clarity about this? Has she ruled out paying any kind of fee to achieve access to what she describes as a “frictionless” market?

The Prime Minister: Access to the single market was exactly what I was talking about yesterday in my speech. One of the key objectives is that we negotiate a free trade agreement with the European Union that gives us the widest possible access for trading with, and operating within, the European Union.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about frictionless access. Actually, this was a separate point about frictionless borders in relation to the customs issue—a very important issue for us regarding the relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The Taoiseach and I, and all parties, are absolutely on a single page about this. We want to ensure that we have the best possible arrangement that does not lead to the borders of the past for Northern Ireland.

Jeremy Corbyn: The question was: will we have to pay for access to the market or not? The Prime Minister has not given an answer to that.

Yesterday the Prime Minister set out a wish list on immigration, referring to skills shortages and high-skill migration. Does she now disagree with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who told an employers’ conference, “Don’t worry. You can still have cheap EU labour after we leave the European Union”?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about access. Yes, the whole point is that we will negotiate a free trade agreement with the European Union that is about the best possible access for British business to operate in European Union member states and for European businesses to operate here in the United Kingdom. It is about sitting down and negotiating the best possible deal for the United Kingdom. That is what I am committed to, and it is what the Government are going to deliver.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was about how much we are going to have to pay to have access to the market—still no answer.

Yesterday the Prime Minister talked about the pressure put on public services by migration. May I just remind her—the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) referred to this earlier—that at the moment there are 55,000 EU citizens working in our national health service, helping to treat all the people of this country? There are 80,000 care workers helping our—mainly elderly—people and there are 5,000 teachers educating our children. The real pressure on public services comes from a Government who slashed billions from the social care budget, who are cutting the schools budget, and who are closing A&E departments, walk-in centres and Sure Start centres. Instead of threatening to turn Britain into an offshore tax haven, let us welcome those who contribute to our public services and fund those public services properly so that we have the fully functioning NHS that we all need and deserve.

The Prime Minister: I made it clear yesterday that we value those who have come to the United Kingdom and contribute to our economy and society. There will still be people coming to the United Kingdom from the European Union when we leave the EU. The crucial issue is that it is this Government who will be making decisions about our immigration system for people from the European Union. Yet again, I say to the right hon. Gentleman that there is indeed a difference between us—it is very simple. When I look at the issue of Brexit—or, indeed, at any other issue, such as the national health service or social care—I consider the issue, I set out my plan and I stick to it. It is called leadership; he should try it sometime.

Q11. [908236] Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): Yesterday was a day for being bold and ambitious, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend noted during her busy day that Lincoln City football club followed her lead last night, progressing to the fourth round of the FA cup.

While I warmly welcome the PM’s speech yesterday, I also note her recent comments about white working-class boys and university. In the past 10 years, half a million fewer males than females have gone to university, males’
exam results have been lower at all levels, and fewer males than females have started apprenticeships. Despite my raising this issue in a Westminster Hall debate with Education Ministers four months ago, nothing has happened. When can we expect to see practical action on closing the gender education gap?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Lincoln City on their victory last night. I think it was a fitting tribute to Graham Taylor that they won that match.

My hon. Friend raises an important point. I have indeed highlighted the issue of particularly white working-class boys, who are the group in society least likely to go to university. We are committed to making sure that every child gets the opportunity to fulfil their potential. That is about ensuring that apprenticeships are as accessible as possible. I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that the proportion of apprenticeships started by males has increased this year to almost 50%, and also that universities expect to spend more than £800 million this year on improving access and success for disadvantaged students. We want everybody to achieve their potential, whatever their background and whatever their gender.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Shortly after the Prime Minister confirmed that she wants to take the UK out of the single European market, the Scottish Parliament voted by a large cross-party majority to remain in the single European market, just as a large majority of people in Scotland voted to remain in the European Union. The Prime Minister said that Scotland is an equal partner in the United Kingdom. Does she still believe this is true or is she just stringing the people of Scotland along?

The Prime Minister: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to my speech yesterday, in which I reiterated my commitment to work with the devolved Administrations to ensure their voice is heard and their interests are taken into account as we proceed along the path of negotiating our exit from the European Union. I specifically referenced the Scotland plan. I understand that the Welsh Government will be producing a plan for Wales for us to look at, too. The Scotland plan will, I believe, be considered tomorrow by the Joint Ministerial Committee on European negotiations. We will be looking at it seriously and working with the Scottish Government on the proposals they bring forward.

Angus Robertson: Scotland’s leading economic forecaster says that real wages will fall—[Interruption.] We have Tories jeering and cheering when the forecast for people’s income is that it is likely to drop by £2,000 and that 80,000 people may lose their jobs in Scotland as a result of the Prime Minister’s hard Tory Brexit plan. Does the Prime Minister believe that this is a price worth paying for her “Little Britain” Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I repeat what I said earlier: we will work to ensure we get the best possible deal in terms of access to the single market, and continue to co-operate in partnership with the remaining 27 member states of the European Union. The right hon. Gentleman once again talks about the possibility of a negative impact on Scotland if Scotland were not part of the single market. His party is dedicated to taking Scotland out of the single market by taking it out of the United Kingdom.

Q14. [908229] Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): This week, directors of our larger companies have been told by investors to rein in senior executive pay, which is too often distorted by long-term incentive plans that are too complex to manage and too excessive in their rewards. Will my right hon. Friend look at such schemes as part of her corporate governance review?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. I am pleased to say that the Government have already taken some action on executive pay: giving shareholders the power to veto pay policies, forcing companies to disclose the pay of their board directors and introducing tough transparency measures for banks. I want to build on that, which is why we published a Green Paper on how to strengthen shareholders’ influence over executive pay and introduced greater transparency. I look forward to receiving representations from my hon. Friend on this issue.

Q2. [908226] Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister provide a commitment today that no part of the great repeal Bill will be subject to English votes for English laws?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady knows full well that no part of the great repeal Bill will be subject to English votes for English laws.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members of the Scottish National party, led by the right hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) on the Front Bench, who is supposed to be a statesmanlike figure, should demonstrate some calm and reserve while they are being answered by the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady knows full well that if any part of proposed legislation brought before this House applies only to England, it will be subject to English votes for English laws.

Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on her delivery yesterday of an historic, definitive, pragmatic, outward-looking speech that saw the pound rise to its highest level in two years and the FTSE up today? Does she agree that the strong and prosperous UK she has planned would be a nightmare for the Leader of the Opposition and the EU ruling class?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. A strong and prosperous Britain is exactly what we want to build as we leave the EU. It is only a pity that the Labour party seems uninterested in doing that, but wants to do the exact opposite and bring this economy down.
**Rhondda**

Q3. [908227] Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If she will visit the Rhondda.

The Prime Minister: I always enjoy my visits to Wales, and I hope to visit Wales in the future.

Chris Bryant: That is not quite an answer to whether she will visit the Rhondda. I hope she will; I am happy to accommodate her—I can do bacon and eggs. More importantly, I could take her to see the best brass band in the world, the Cory band, or, for that matter, I could take her to the local food bank, based in the closed-down Conservative club. Since 2010, the Government have closed the local courts, tax office, Department for Work and Pensions office and driving centre, and now they intend to close all the tax offices in Wales and centralise them in Cardiff. We in the valleys feel ignored by the Government. May I beg her to change direction and start putting Government offices in the small towns, villages and valleys of this country?

The Prime Minister: The last time I looked, Cardiff was actually in Wales—the hon. Gentleman says we are taking offices out of Wales and putting them in Cardiff. The whole point of what Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is doing is to move from outdated offices to large, modern regional centres, which will make it possible to modernise its ways of working, make tax collection more efficient and actually improve its customer service.

**Engagements**

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s speech setting out a plan for global Britain. It clearly shows that those on the Government Benches are listening to the British people. Will she commend this approach to the council leaders now considering the Greater Manchester spatial framework consultation responses, as they need to listen to the people, give us better infrastructure and protect our green spaces?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and for raising this issue. I understand that the consultation on the spatial framework closed earlier this week and that there has been huge interest among local people. I echo his comment that it is absolutely right that local leaders should take into account all the representations made.

Q4. [908228] Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): In the UK, we have 14 regional markets for electricity distribution, and highlanders and islanders are facing higher prices because of where we live. Electricity distribution charges for the north of Scotland are an eye-watering 84% higher than those for London. The Prime Minister talks about fairness. Will she introduce a universal market for electricity pricing and stop penalising highlanders and islanders? Those of us who live in the coldest, windiest places are discriminated against by her Government, and it must end.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman draws attention to the fact that geography of course has an impact on these matters. He talks about living in the coldest and windiest places, and obviously one interesting issue in Scotland is the opportunity for renewables there. I can tell him, however, that we are looking at making sure that energy markets in the UK are indeed working properly.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am pleased that the Prime Minister has said that she will take the necessary action on air quality to deal with the 40,000 premature deaths it causes across our country every year. I know she believes in her Government leading by example, so will she make sure that all diesel cars are removed from the Government Car Service as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that improving air quality is a priority for the Government. We are determined to cut harmful emissions and have committed money since 2011 to supporting the take-up of low-emission vehicles. The Government Car Service is working to remove diesel vehicles from its fleet. It has so far replaced a quarter of its vehicles with petrol hybrid cars, and of course its work continues to remove those diesel vehicles.

Q6. [908230] Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Prime Minister aware that I totally agree with what she said yesterday—[Interruption.] Wait for it. I agree that we in this House have a real responsibility to ensure that our children and grandchildren have a bright future, but is she aware that dark clouds are looming on the horizon—intolerance, racism across Europe and the foundering and flux of many of our great institutions that have kept peace and prosperity since the last world war? I speak here of the United Nations, NATO and, indeed, the European Union. Are we fit for purpose in keeping this country safe and secure in that world?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely recognise the important issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. It is precisely as we move out of the European Union that the United Kingdom will be more outward looking. We will look globally. We want to ensure that we continue to play our part in the United Nations and that the UN is able to do the job that everybody wants it to do. NATO has obviously been the most important bulwark when it comes to maintaining safety and security across the European continent. That is why we are continuing to support NATO. British troops are in Estonia, and British forces are in Poland and Romania, which shows our continuing commitment to NATO. The thrust of my speech yesterday was that we want a strong strategic partnership with the European Union. We want access to the single market through a free trade agreement, but we also want to continue to work with the EU on justice and security matters. Now is not a time to co-operate less; it is a time to co-operate more.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I am delighted at the third-round FA cup replay, in which Sutton United won 3-1 against Wimbledon. However, the pressing issue—what would make us really happy—is being able to get to work on a day-to-day basis. Does the Prime Minister share my cautious optimism that a return to talks by ASLEF and Southern can provide a long-lasting solution for hard-pressed commuters?
The Prime Minister: As a former Wimbledon councillor, I am not sure that I quite share the enthusiasm of my hon. Friend for the defeat of AFC Wimbledon. On the point about the train strikes, yes, I do; and I hope that those sitting around the table are going to ensure that an agreement will be reached to enable passengers to be able to get on with their lives and their jobs, and not suffer the misery that was brought about by the strike in the first place.

Q7. [908231] Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I agree with the Prime Minister and disagree with the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) about last night’s AFC Wimbledon result.

If the Prime Minister really believes that GP surgeries should be open seven days a week, 12 hours a day, will she be my guest at a residents’ meeting against a Department of Health diktat that will close the 6,000-strong Mitcham Wilson surgery? Even better, will she just tell her Government to stop cuts to GP services, which force thousands to attend hard-pressed A&E’s such as those at St George’s and St Helier, or is she just happy to oversee the possible collapse of the NHS on her watch?

The Prime Minister: I might remind the hon. Lady that she and I sat on a council together where we tried to keep Wimbledon actually playing in Wimbledon, or at least in the borough of Merton rather than moving elsewhere.

On the point about GP services, GPs are part of the solution for the NHS in the future. That is why we have seen more GPs coming into the NHS and 5,000 more are being trained and will be in place by 2020. We want to ensure that GPs are open and providing services at times when the patients want to access them.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It was quite clear from the Prime Minister’s speech yesterday that she seeks to build a Brexit consensus and to bring our country back together. I thank her for that. To that end, and indeed to strengthen the Prime Minister’s negotiating hand, before article 50 is triggered, will she please at least consider publishing all those 12 objectives in a White Paper so that we can debate them here in this place on behalf of all our constituents?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely understand my right hon. Friend’s point about Parliament’s desire to be able to debate the objectives that I set out very clearly in my plan yesterday. One of the objectives and principles I set was about certainty and clarity. It continues to be the Government’s intention that we will provide clarity whenever it is possible, and we will ensure that, at appropriate times, both the public and Parliament are kept informed and are able properly to consider and scrutinise these issues.

Q8. [908234] Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): While dedicated and talented staff at Royal Liverpool University hospital’s accident and emergency department struggle to find beds for sick people, about 135 patients cannot be discharged solely because of Government cuts in social care budgets. When will the Government recognise their responsibilities, and not try to blame GPs for a problem of their Government’s own making?

The Prime Minister: There is pressure on social care. I have accepted and recognised that in the House. The Government have recognised it, and have provided additional funding through the Better Care Fund and the social care precept. This year Liverpool raised £2.8 million from the precept, and it will receive more than £48 million on top of that from the improved Better Care Fund by 2019-20. However, this is not just a question of money; it is a question of ensuring that we have a sustainable social care system for the future, and that is what the Government are working on.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for what she said yesterday, and not least for her constructive tone and constructive approach to the European Union and its future? That was in marked contrast to what we have heard from others over the years, from many different quarters in the United Kingdom. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that constructive tone will remain, as the best base for securing an agreement between us and the EU that is in our mutual interest? Will she also confirm that the default position of “no deal” will remain a default position, and that the Government will not be persuaded to make it their preferred option?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely. We want to get that good deal and we expect to be able to get that good deal, and, as my right hon. Friend says, it is through good will and a positive approach on both sides of the negotiations that we will achieve it.

I am very clear about the fact that the United Kingdom wants to see a continuing, strong European Union of 27 member states. We want a strong strategic partnership with that European Union, and, of course, we want to continue to work bilaterally with individual member states. I made that point to a number of European leaders yesterday when I spoke to them after my speech. I said that we wanted to approach this in a positive and optimistic fashion, because I believe that a deal that is good for the UK will be a deal that is good for the European Union.

Q9. [908234] Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): This week the national auditor revealed the abject failures in the Concentrix fiasco which had resulted in thousands of people being wrongly denied their tax credit. That was not one rogue contractor, but a system designed by the Government to pursue and chase down claimants for profit. Does the Prime Minister agree with the chief executive of HMRC that payment by results has no place in our welfare system? Will she review this model, or will she wait for the next scandal to hit vulnerable people?

The Prime Minister: I recognise that many people received a poor service from Concentrix. This is not the first time that that has been highlighted in the Chamber. It was not acceptable, and I apologise for the worry and distress that was caused to people. We have been very clear about the service operated by Concentrix. HMRC will learn the lessons from that contract, and it remains committed to providing a high-quality service. It will not use a private sector supplier to undertake tax credit error and fraud checks again.
Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) mentioned the speech that the Prime Minister made yesterday. In that speech, she confirmed her commitment to parliamentary democracy, and I assume that she therefore accepts the long-standing convention that the Executive—the Government—are continuously accountable to the House for the policies that they are pursuing. Will she clarify whether she intends to make any further statements of policy intentions to the House, and whether she expects the House to have an opportunity to vote its approval for those policies earlier than two years from now, when the whole negotiation has been completed?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend has raised a matter that has also been raised not only by our right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), but by others as well. Yesterday my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union spent two hours answering questions in the House, and there will be a further debate on matters relating to exiting the European Union later today. There have been a number of such debates already, dealing with issues that are part of the objectives that we have set.

We shall have to consider the result of the decision of the Supreme Court, which may, if it goes against the Government, require legislation. There will be an opportunity in the great repeal Bill to consider a number of issues relating to exiting the EU, but as for voting on the actual deal that we have, we cannot do so until we know what it is. That is why I said yesterday that Parliament would have a vote when we knew what the deal was.

Q10. [908235] Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The Prime Minister’s passing reference to the interests of Spanish fishermen in her speech yesterday rather let the cat out of the bag that our fishing opportunities are already on the table as a bargaining chip before the Brexit negotiations have even started, so what exactly does the Prime Minister want to offer the Spanish fishermen?

The Prime Minister: I made the very simple point yesterday that this negotiation is not just about the United Kingdom; there will be others in the European Union who will be looking to ensure that the deal we get is good for the UK and good for the EU. But I have to say to the hon. Lady that if she in any sense thinks that continued membership of the common fisheries policy is what she should be looking for, that is certainly not the case, and it is certainly one of the things people voted against.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The people of Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent are again being confronted with the possible loss of emergency services in Stafford or Burton, when our acute hospitals are constantly under intense pressure. Does the Prime Minister agree with me, our hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) and other local MPs that closing A&Es is no way to deal with increased real—not imagined—need?

The Prime Minister: The important issue is the level of service that is available to people in any particular local area. That is why the sustainability and transformation plans that are being considered and have been published are being taken into account and being considered at a local level, so that local clinicians and local people will be able to agree what is best in their particular area.

Q12. [908237] Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): Last Friday I went to Blackpool Victoria hospital where the number of people waiting 12 hours or more in A&E doubled last year, with 100 of them aged 90 or over. Trust managers told me that the biggest factor in delays is discharging patients who cannot get community care, and my local paper said that Government cuts have eroded support for them. Will the Prime Minister stop waffling about her shared society, listen to her own budget watchdog saying that we will need £30 billion for older people in the next 10 years, and put that money not into corporation tax cuts but into local adult care and the NHS?

The Prime Minister: Just looking at the figures on what has happened in health in the hon. Gentleman’s area, I see that there are more doctors in his NHS foundation trust and significantly more nurses, but the—[Interruption.] I know what the hon. Gentleman is talking about and I am about to comment on it, but the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who is shouting from a sedentary position, might have recognised that he started off talking about the NHS, which is what I am also commenting on. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not going to allow an exchange across the Dispatch Box or across the House at this point. The Prime Minister was asked a question [Interruption.] Order. I require no help from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), which is of zilch value. The Prime Minister will answer, and she will be heard with courtesy, including by the hon. Gentleman.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) asked me about pressures on the national health service. We are seeing more doctors and nurses in his Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, and health funding in the hon. Gentleman’s area will be £3 billion this year, and that will be rising with a further £450 million by 2020-21.

As I have said in this House before, we are putting extra money into social care. We are giving local authorities the opportunity to raise more money and spend it on social care. But this is not just about more money; it is about ensuring best practice is spread throughout the country and it is about a long-term solution to sustainable social care for the future, an issue that has been ducked by Governments, including a Labour Government for 13 years.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): On Friday the east coast of England faced the threat of a tidal surge that endangered tens of thousands of homes and thousands of lives. A simple change in the weather meant that flooding was averted, but will the Prime Minister join me in praising the response of the emergency services in planning ahead, involving the Army, the Coastguard, the fire and ambulance services and the police, to make sure that the best possible plans were
made? Will she further join me in making sure that the public know that in future these warnings should always be taken seriously?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and I am happy to join him in commending the action of all those in the emergency services, in our armed forces and in local authorities who worked so hard to ensure that this problem was dealt with. As he said, a change in the weather took place, but it is crucial that when these warnings are given, people recognise that they are given for the very good reason that there is concern about the danger that could take place. The efforts that were put in protected tens of thousands of properties, and I am pleased to see that we have learned from the work done on previous flooding incidents. The work between the emergency services, local services and the armed forces was much better co-ordinated than has perhaps been the case in the past, so we have been able to learn from the flooding in the past.

Q13. [908238]Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): In response to the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), the Prime Minister talked about her desire to give clarity around our exit from the EU. Many of my constituents are European citizens who are paying tax and bringing up their families here. What assurance can she give them about their future, particularly if they change employer or are freelancers?

The Prime Minister: One of the objectives I set out in my speech yesterday was something I have said before about the guaranteeing of rights for EU citizens living here in the UK, but I also want to see the rights of UK citizens living in the 27 member states being guaranteed. I remain open, and I encourage others across Europe to agree with me that this is an issue we should look at as early as possible in order to give people the confidence and reassurance that the hon. Lady is looking for.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): In supporting my right hon. Friend’s endeavours in facing the difficult challenges in social care and the national health service, may I invite her to endorse the concept and continuance of community hospitals in our market towns across the country? Those hospitals, including the Westminster Memorial hospital in Shaftesbury in my constituency, provide a vital piece of the jigsaw in our national health service.

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the Westminster Memorial hospital in Shaftesbury is providing good services for local people. The structure of local services is of course a matter for discussion at local level, and it is crucial that local clinicians and others agree that we have a safe and secure service for people and that they are provided with the NHS services that they need at the most appropriate level. I fully accept my hon. Friend’s point that we often think only about the major district general hospitals and acute hospitals when actually the NHS is made up of many different parts. We need to ensure that patients are being treated at the most appropriate level for their needs.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): How can abandoning membership of a customs union that takes 68% of Wales’s exports—including, crucially, 90% of our food and drink exports—and that supports 200,000 jobs cause anything other than “calamitous...self-harm”?

The Prime Minister: What we will be doing is negotiating a free trade agreement with the European Union to get the best possible access for trade with the EU, but we also want to be able to negotiate trade agreements with other countries around the world. A number of countries have already expressed interest in doing that with us. We want to do that to open up new export markets being delivered for businesses here in the United Kingdom, including the sort of trade in Wales that the hon. Gentleman is talking about. On the question of customs with the European Union, we want an arrangement that will involve the most frictionless borders possible.
Human Rights: Burma

12.44 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make statement on human rights in Burma.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): Mr Speaker, I know that you care deeply about the situation in Burma and have done much to foster democratic values in that country and to promote relations between the UK and Burma. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for raising this matter. He knows Burma well and has close family connections there.

We have of course been deeply worried by the flare-up of violence in Rakhine state since an attack on police posts on 9 October by unknown assailants—presumed to be Rohingya militants. While we condemn the attack and recognise the right of security forces to carry out security operations to root out the perpetrators, we remain deeply concerned by the conduct of the army in its response. Although restrictions on media, diplomatic and humanitarian access make the facts difficult to ascertain, we have been worried by numerous reports alleging widespread human rights violations in the security response.

British Ministers have directly lobbied Burmese Ministers in response to the escalating violence. The Commonwealth Affairs Minister, my noble Friend Baroness Anelay of St Johns, raised the issue with the Burmese Defence Minister when she visited Burma in November last year. Specifically, she called for the full and immediate resumption of aid and for an investigation into allegations of human rights abuses. I repeated those calls to the Construction Minister when he visited the UK, also in November. The Burmese Government have now committed to investigating the 9 October attacks, restoring human rights access and investigating allegations of human rights abuses. In practice, however, much aid is still blocked by local authorities reporting to the military, particularly in the areas where security operations are ongoing. We will continue to monitor the situation closely.

We are also worried by the recent escalation of conflict in Kachin and Shan states, which has also led to allegations of civilian casualties, the widespread displacement of civilians and human rights abuses. We have raised our concerns about the violence in north-east Burma directly with Burmese Ministers. As I said, we continue to monitor the situation closely. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will visit Burma soon and will reiterate our concerns about such issues.

Paul Scully: I thank the Minister for that response. The first question I asked in this House was about the situation faced by the Rohingya community in Rakhine state. It is incredibly frustrating to return to the subject nearly two years later, following several worrying reports from Rakhine, northern Shan and Kachin, the last two of which have reportedly involved airstrikes and heavy artillery.

Since that first question, Aung San Suu Kyi has won a remarkable election victory. Although she has a difficult task in keeping the Government together while the military still has such a huge influence, does the Minister agree that friends such as the UK should continue to raise humanitarian issues while so many suffer due to their faith?

Tomorrow, Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation, an inter-governmental body of 58 member states, will meet in Kuala Lumpur to discuss the situation of the Rohingya in Rakhine state. Will the Minister join me and more than 40 Myanmar-based civil society organisations in calling today for a truly independent international investigation into that situation, whereby state-sponsored attacks on Rohingya Muslim civilians have escalated in recent months? It is difficult to get accurate information about what is really happening in Rakhine, so in order to get to the truth and beyond the false reports, will the Minister call for full access for independent observers and journalists to villages and displacement camps in Rakhine state?

I have also been informed that Yanghee Lee, the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, who has been on a 12-day monitoring mission to the country, has been denied access by the Government to conflict-affected areas of Shan state. Does the Minister agree that Ms Lee should be allowed to do her job and bring such issues into the open? Finally, when the Foreign Secretary visits Burma this weekend, will he raise the situation in Rakhine, Kachin and northern Shan, and will he also raise the matter with Burmese MPs and the Speaker of the House of Representatives when the Burmese delegation visits the UK next week?

Alok Sharma: I agree with my hon. Friend, and of course, we are deeply concerned about what is happening in Rakhine state. Yes, it is difficult to get access to verify the facts but, like him, we are extremely concerned about the human rights violations that have been reported and, of course, about the security response.

My hon. Friend raised a number of questions. He asked about UK support for an international commission—I assume a UN-type commission. A UN-led commission of inquiry can be established in one of three ways: by the Secretary-General, by the Security Council or by the Human Rights Council. Establishing an inquiry in that way would require broad international support, which we assess does not exist in the current international environment.

My hon. Friend also asked about the visit of Yanghee Lee, the UN special rapporteur, which I very much welcome. I am aware that she is currently in Burma, and for many years we have supported the annual resolution of the Human Rights Council that mandates her role. We hope that the authorities in Burma will give her full and unimpeded access so that she can conduct a thorough assessment, including of Rakhine. Like my hon. Friend, I look forward to reading her report.

My hon. Friend talked about the overall peace process and particularly about the aid that we are providing. I can confirm that we are providing aid not just in Rakhine...
but to the refugees in Bangladesh. In our meetings I have urged the Bangladeshi Government not to return refugees to a situation in which they would face harm.

Finally, my hon. Friend made a plea in relation to the Foreign Secretary’s visit. I assure him that the Foreign Secretary will strongly put the case on humanitarian issues from a UK perspective. As far as I am aware, he intends to meet Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as the chief of the military.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) on securing it.

For all of us who have campaigned for years for democracy and an end to repression in Myanmar, including many in this House, it is all the more troubling to see evidence that, for all the progress that has been made, the suppression of the majority in Myanmar has been replaced, in far too many cases, with the persecution of minorities. In particular, as the hon. Gentleman said, it was shocking to hear of the recent disappearance of two Kachin Christian leaders, who have apparently been kidnapped in northern Shan state. It is incumbent on the Government, and indeed on the international community as a whole, to press the Myanmar authorities urgently to provide information on their whereabouts and to secure their immediate freedom.

We are also deeply concerned about the continuing humanitarian crisis in Rakhine state, and particularly the recent reports from the United Nations, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch that a raft of human rights violations have taken place in recent months, including cases of torture, rape and sexual assault, summary executions and the destruction of mosques and homes.

Upholding human rights should be the driving force of our foreign policy, and we therefore call on the Government to use Britain’s influence to stand up for the rights and freedoms to which all human beings are entitled and to raise concerns with the authorities in Myanmar as a matter of urgency, including on the persecution and poverty that many people are suffering and on the need for full humanitarian access to all affected areas.

I hope the Minister can tell us today about the representations he has made to his counterparts in Myanmar, particularly on access for the UN-appointed rapporteur, Yanghee Lee, and on how he is planning to ensure that the rights of Myanmar’s people are protected.

**Alok Sharma**:

Having previously discussed the situation with the hon. Lady, I know that she cares very deeply about the humanitarian issues in Burma. There is consensus on these issues on both sides of the House.

The hon. Lady raises the issue of the Kachin pastors. Many Christians live in areas where there is active conflict, notably in Kachin, and we are of course deeply concerned about the disappearance of the two pastors, Dumdaw Nawng Lat and Langjaw Gam Seng. There is deep concern about their welfare. As she notes, they disappeared on Christmas eve, allegedly after taking journalists to see a recently bombed church. Like her, we urge the Government of Burma to investigate their case immediately and release them.

The hon. Lady asks about the UK Government’s lobbying. I note that the Foreign Secretary will be in Burma soon. He will, of course, make strong representations on behalf of the UK Government. Apart from the representations that I and other Foreign Office Ministers have made, our ambassador has visited north Rakhine in recent months and has lobbied five separate Burmese Ministers on the issue and urged restraint in the security response.

Finally, the hon. Lady talked about humanitarian aid. As she will know, the UK Government are doing an enormous amount to provide aid to this troubled area. We have certainly been the biggest bilateral humanitarian donor in Rakhine, and since 2012 we have provided more than £23 million in humanitarian assistance, including supporting work on sanitation and nutrition for more than 126,000 people.

**Sir Hugo Swire** (East Devon) (Con): When the Foreign Secretary travels to Burma, he will no doubt wish to discuss with Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders the role of the Tatmadaw, whether it is worth our while to continue running courses for them, the efficacy of those courses and whether the Tatmadaw is continuing to block aid from going into some areas. I urge the Minister to in turn urge the Foreign Secretary to travel to Sittwe in Rakhine to see the situation on the ground for himself, talk to the Rohingya and come back to this House to update us on whether there is now real evidence that outside forces are stirring up the Rohingya in that part of Burma.

**Alok Sharma**: My right hon. Friend is an expert, having been a Minister with responsibility for this part of the world when he was at the Foreign Office. I have already set out the key individuals whom the Foreign Secretary plans to meet, and we all look forward to his response when he returns to the House.

My right hon. Friend talks about the training we may be doing with the military in Burma, and I make it clear that any training we undertake has nothing to do with combat training; it is to do with humanitarian work and English language training. Our assessment is that building those links is a worthwhile thing to be doing.

On the Tatmadaw, my right hon. Friend knows full well that Aung San Suu Kyi has a position in the Government but that the army has a role to play. Clearly it is the army that is acting in the areas where there are humanitarian issues.

**Alex Salmond** (Gordon) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) on securing this important urgent question. The Minister has expressed concern about the disappearance of the two ethnic Kachin Baptist leaders who were apparently forcibly disappeared over Christmas, and he has also called for unfettered access for the United Nations special rapporteur. Can he confirm that both those matters have already been specifically raised with the Burmese ambassador in London, and that the Foreign Secretary will raise both specific matters in his talks in Burma next week?

The Minister rather sidestepped the question on action through the UN by saying that the Government’s opinion is that there is not sufficient consensus at the present
time to take forward such action. Can he go further? When the special rapporteur returns and reports to the UN, will he undertake on behalf of the Government to use every possible effort to build consensus on an urgent and independent United Nations commission as a result of the special rapporteur’s visit? Will the Government commit to trying to build that consensus, as opposed to merely remarking that it does not exist?

Alok Sharma: The right hon. Gentleman talks about the UK Government’s representations to the Burmese Government. As I noted, we have made representations at both ministerial and ambassadorial level. He talks about the representations that the Foreign Secretary will make. I will ensure that the Foreign Secretary is aware of what is said in this House, as I am sure he already is. He cares very deeply about Burma, and the fact that he is going out there very soon should give the right hon. Gentleman a great deal of comfort.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the UN, and I stated the position on that: we support the UN special rapporteur. He will know that we have also been supportive of the Human Rights Council, but this is about building multilateral support for actions, and that is where we seek to work together with other partners.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Years ago, during the time of the Labour Government, I organised a debate in Westminster Hall about the persecution of the Karen people, which has been a long-standing serious situation. Those people gave us unstinting loyalty during the second world war, and they have been repaid with persecution ever since. What further steps can the Government take on that persecution, to ensure that the human rights of the Karen are protected?

Alok Sharma: Collectively in this House, we all care deeply about human rights, wherever they may be being affected. If my hon. Friend would like to write to me, I would be happy to take up that specific issue, but I make the general point that human rights absolutely matter to this House, to the Government and to the British people, and will continue to be at the forefront of everything the Foreign Office does.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Undoubtedly there is reason for concern at the military crackdown on the Rohingya Muslim minority. I understand that Aung San Suu Kyi has made it clear that she welcomes the international community’s support and efforts in seeking peace and stability, and in building better relations with communities. I hope the Foreign Secretary will focus on that during his visit. The UN special rapporteur, Yanghee Lee, is on her fifth information-gathering visit, so does the Foreign Secretary intend to speak to her?

Alok Sharma: On whether the Foreign Secretary will be speaking to the special rapporteur, I will make sure he is aware of the right hon. Lady’s request. On our ongoing dialogue, she will know that the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, which is led by Kofi Annan, was put in place last year and is due to produce a report in August. I have had a number of conversations with Kofi Annan about the work that is ongoing, so I hope she will appreciate that that is a clear example of what the British Government are doing to engage with the international community and others in Burma.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Given the scale of abuse by the Tatmadaw and a particularly uncharacteristically militant form of Buddhism, does the Minister accept that the unwelcome radicalisation of the Rohingya is only a question of time, that that time is short and that this needs to be treated with the appropriate sense of urgency?

Alok Sharma: We of course bring a sense of urgency to all the work that we try to do, particularly on human rights, but this process has, sadly, been ongoing for some time. It is about continuing to work together with international partners, non-governmental organisations and others in Burma, and continuing to make those representations. As I said, the Foreign Secretary hopes to meet the chief of the army when he is in Burma, and I hope we will have an opportunity to make our points clearly to the Tatmadaw then.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I welcome the Minister’s indication about the Foreign Secretary’s visit. Will the Foreign Secretary make it clear when he is in Burma that the interest of this House extends to seeing not only a continued transition in rule, but a real transformation in rights? The best way for that to begin is through a credible investigation at an international level, with reliable adherence to any robust recommendations that that investigation brings.

Alok Sharma: On the investigations, I have said that the commission established and led by Kofi Annan will, we hope, set out clearly its thoughts. It is an independent commission and we support it.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): May I impress upon the Government the need to give attention to the unfolding tragedy in Kachin, with reports last week of 4,000 internally displaced people fleeing for their lives, particularly women and children, who have been moved on before and who need to get unfettered access to humanitarian aid? May I also draw attention again to the situation of the two Baptist pastors? Ministers surely must do all they can, with the UN special rapporteur there, to get the information that the family members need and not to accept the apparent approved response, with the absence being described as “enforced disappearance”, which is contrary to all international human rights.

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is a great champion of human rights, particularly those of minorities around the world. He puts his point about the pastors eloquently, and we will continue to make representations. On specific aid, I mentioned that the UK has provided £18 million in essential humanitarian and healthcare assistance, which of course has been in Kachin and the north Shan state, over the past four years.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm what discussions he and his Department have had with other Governments about getting medical assistance into the area? Will he update us on that?
Alok Sharma: On discussions with other Governments, our ambassador of course has discussions locally in Burma with counterparts. On the support we are giving, I talked about some of the numbers on the amount of money we are spending and what it is being spent on. We seek to work with NGOs and others on the ground to make sure that funds are getting through to where they are needed in these troubled areas.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure the Minister will agree that the progress in seeing improved human rights has been painfully slow in Burma since the elections, which we had hoped would bring far more, given the flawed constitutional position that still exists. I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s visit. Will the Minister update the House on what engagement we are having with regional partners to try to build the type of international consensus we need for further action through the UN?

Alok Sharma: As I have said on a number of occasions, we discuss these matters with a range of actors, including international partners. Right now, Kofi Annan’s independent commission is leading work in this area. We will continue to have a dialogue with Mr Annan and we look forward to his report.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I join the Minister in paying tribute to your interest in and work on behalf of the Burmese people over many years, Mr Speaker. We all welcome Burma moving out from the long dark years of military dictatorship, but we also hoped it would put behind it communal and religious conflict, too. Will the Minister therefore make it very clear to the Burmese authorities that their welcome re-entry into the international community will not be helped if they fail to protect minorities, particularly the Rohingya community?

Alok Sharma: The right hon. Gentleman of course makes a number of important points. On the work that is going on and what has happened since the election, he will be aware that the new Burmese Government released 300 political prisoners, began the abolition of draconian laws, initiated the peace process that I talked about and established the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, led by Kofi Annan. We have to give a huge amount of credit to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi for the work she has done in leading Burma to this stage. I agree with him that we need to keep pressing on humanitarian issues and to make sure that the rights of minorities are respected. However, as he will know, the military remain heavily involved in Burmese politics and they wrote the 2008 constitution, which grants them 25% of seats in Parliament, unelected.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): On having an independent UN investigation into this matter, the Minister said initially that there needs to be a consensus. Then he said he would work together with others for a consensus. Can he go a step further than the answer he gave to the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) and say that rather than working with others, the UK will lead the way in building that consensus, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council?

Alok Sharma: May I give a specific example of the UN work we are doing and supporting? Several UN mechanisms are already in place, including, as I said earlier, the Human Rights Council resolution, which we support. It mandates the role of the UN special rapporteur on Burma, who is currently visiting the country, and we look forward to her report. As I have said already, we call for full and unimpeded access for her so that she can carry out her work.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Given the range of access issues that UN staff and missions have had in recent times, what discussions has the Foreign and Commonwealth Office had with its counterparts in the Security Council to ensure that UN staff are given full and proper access to areas of concern, wherever in the world they may be?

Alok Sharma: We discuss issues of access to humanitarian rights with counterparts in the UN, as well as on a more bilateral basis. I assure the hon. Lady that we keep these issues at the forefront of our work, and will continue to make representations of the type she is pressing for.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): Parliament was rightly moved by the house arrest of a single exceptional lady, but as it has not been mentioned during this urgent question, may I mention the situation of the Rohingya people? Hundreds are being attacked and many are being murdered. Their villages are being systematically burned or destroyed. Many are being sold into slavery with the complicity of Burmese authorities—the very authorities that treat the Rohingya as a non-people. My hon. Friend the Minister has avoided the challenges of the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), who said that it is not sufficient for the Government to co-operate; they need to lead UN support if the reports are true. So, for the third time, will the Minister say whether, if the reports are true and the Foreign Secretary comes back from Burma validating all that has been said, the Government will take up leadership at the UN to ensure that there is broad support and a resolution to follow?

Alok Sharma: I pray forgiveness if I have given the impression that I am dodging the questions, because that has not been my intention at all. The point I have been making is that we have to work together with partners to achieve an outcome. That is what we seek to do in this particular case, and I assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to do that.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) and I have been approached by constituents who want to provide help directly to Rohingya communities that need it, in both Burma and Bangladesh. The Minister has talked about access for NGOs; what routes are currently open for the delivery of help where it is needed, and what advice can he give to those who want to help people who are currently suffering such extreme problems?

Alok Sharma: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. The area we are discussing is very troubled, and the humanitarian help that is getting through has been quite limited in some parts. If he would like to meet outside of the House to discuss the specifics and who his constituents are, I would be very happy to see whether we can take the matter forward.
John Pugh (Southport) (LD): In response to a written question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), the Foreign Office revealed that it had spent £300,000 and more on training the Burmese army. Would that money not be better spent on exposing and verifying human rights violations?

Alok Sharma: This question has come up before, but I can again confirm to the hon. Gentleman that the Ministry of Defence does not provide combat training. The UK is providing educational training to the Burmese military in the form of programmes delivered by the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom on the role of the military in a democracy, with leadership and England language training. We really do continue to believe that that is a useful thing to do to engage the next generation of the Burmese army.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Like other Members, I have been contacted by constituents who are deeply concerned about the treatment of the Rohingya community, which is often described as the world’s most persecuted religious minority. They struggle to understand why, after years of persecution, the brutality continues. The Minister talked about the importance of building consensus in the United Nations; will he elaborate on the barriers to consensus and what our diplomatic efforts with partners around the world can do to break them down?

Alok Sharma: Successive UK Governments have raised many long-standing humanitarian and other issues around the world, and we will of course continue to raise this one. I return to the point I made earlier: at the end of the day, this is also about engagement in Burma, particularly with the armed forces and armed services, and the Foreign Secretary hopes to meet the army chief. We can provide humanitarian support and support to the elected Government, and we can continue to have conversations, both in Burma and through our multilateral partners, to ensure that we keep this matter at the forefront, not only internationally but in Burma.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend you, Mr Speaker, for your interest in this subject and for bringing it to the forefront of our minds each and every day inside and outside the House.

The Minister will be aware that in the past few months the Burmese Government have introduced four new laws on race and religion. Those laws were made to protect but, unfortunately, instead of protecting they have built insurmountable hurdles for conversions and mixed marriages. Does the Minister agree that the disappearance of the two pastors is just the latest indication of the daily horrors faced in Burma? What representations have been made on behalf of Christians who fear uttering the very name of Jesus himself?

Alok Sharma: A few weeks ago in the House, I responded to a debate on human rights in which the hon. Gentleman made some powerful interventions. I know that he cares very deeply about minorities, and particularly the Christian community. As I have said, we continue to make the case, not only to the Burmese Government but internationally, that these matters are vital and that we must ensure there is no persecution of Christians or any other type of minority in that country.

We will keep doing that. It is important that we have debates such as this in the House, because it shows the international community that the whole House cares very deeply about this matter.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The Burmese Government’s commission to investigate the violation of Rohingya human rights found insufficient evidence of such violations, which I find shocking given the fact that they continue to be one of the most persecuted communities. What direct conversations has the Minister had with the Burmese Government to challenge the accuracy of that ridiculous report?

Alok Sharma: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The Government have also noted the interim report that has been produced by the investigation commission, which, as he intimated, indicates that no human rights abuses have taken place. That of course goes against the weight of testimony from a range of human rights sources; frankly, it is not credible. We call on the commission to demonstrate over the coming weeks the commitment made by the Burmese Government to an impartial investigation. We will of course wait to see what the final report says, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it needs to be credible for anyone to take it seriously.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): First, I will not be in the Chamber tomorrow, Mr Speaker—I know you will miss me—but I know it will be your birthday, so may I take the opportunity to wish you an early happy birthday?

Mr Speaker, may I, too, wish you a happy birthday for tomorrow? [Laughter.]

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): May you live forever!

Alok Sharma: I mean that most sincerely.

In response to the hon. Lady, I hope I have made it clear today that the UK is pursuing a huge number of avenues to get humanitarian aid in and make the case for minorities. We are making it clear that we care deeply about these matters, and we will keep doing that.

Going back to the approach from a UN perspective, the UN is already engaged in several areas, and we will continue that work and to make the case, because we want to ensure that there is resolution in this very troubled area.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister say what discussions he has had, or will have, with the Government of Bangladesh about the
refugee status of the Rohingya people who, in many cases, have fled the most obscene violence in Rakhine state?

**Alok Sharma:** I raised the issue of the Rohingya in Bangladesh with representatives of the Bangladesh Government before Christmas. The important point that I made was that they should not be looking to return people who are seeking refuge back into danger. On the aid that we are providing, the UK is the largest provider of food aid to the 34,000 Rohingya refugees already living in official camps in Bangladesh. Since 2014, the UK has provided nearly £8 million to address the humanitarian suffering of Rohingya refugees and the vulnerable Bangladeshi communities that host them.

**Danny Kinahan** (South Antrim) (UUP): I apologise for not being in the Chamber at the beginning of the urgent question. I was meant to be in Burma this week with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. When we were briefed the other day, we were told that the visit had been delayed till May. The foundation indicated that, in addition to the two main parties, there are 92 other parties. Will the Minister consider how someone like me who has experienced the difficulties in Northern Ireland can help some of those parties to work together and to learn to respect the military so that we find a way forward? Such advice would be a great help for the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

**Alok Sharma:** I am very happy to speak to the hon. Gentleman after this debate about the work that he is doing with the Westminster Foundation. On the discussions that we are having, it is Aung San Suu Kyi who is effectively leading the Government, and we have contact with her. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will meet her very soon on his visit to Burma. We continue to engage with all the actors, particularly through our ambassador. As I have said during this debate, the key thing is engagement with the military. At the end of the day, it is the military that is leading some of the issues over which we have some concerns, and it is vital that we continue to engage with it.

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### Promotion of Israeli-Palestinian Peace (United Kingdom Participation)

**Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)**

1.22 pm

**Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to promote the establishment of an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace to support coexistence projects and civil society programmes; and for connected purposes.

As the House knows, recent weeks have seen a flurry of activity on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: a UN Security Council resolution; a major speech by the US Secretary of State John Kerry; and a further peace conference in Paris last weekend.

The barriers to a two-state solution are well known. As a strong friend of Israel, I admit freely, but with great regret, that these include the expansion of settlements on the west bank. Settlement building is wrong. It threatens the viability of a future Palestinian state—the case for which is unarguable. It does immense damage to Israel’s standing in the world, and, over time, it will put at risk that which is most precious about Israel’s character: its Jewish and democratic character.

However, as Secretary of State Kerry stated clearly, this is not to say “that the settlements are the whole or even the primary cause of this conflict.”

There is also the incitement tolerated, and, in many cases, perpetrated by the Palestinian Authority. I am talking about the payment of “salaries” to those convicted of terrorist offences, and the naming of schools, streets and sports tournaments after so-called martyrs, thereby glorifying their violence. Then there is the greatest barrier of all: the rejectionist, anti-Semitic ideology of Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran, which denies Israel’s very right to exist, and the terrorism that inevitably flows from it.

My Bill today is not intended to downplay the importance of those barriers, although it will help to address some of the pernicious consequences arising from them. Instead, my Bill recognises that, as the example of Northern Ireland taught us, any peace process needs a political dimension, an economic dimension and a civil society dimension. Coexistence projects that bring together Israelis and Palestinians to advance the cause of mutual understanding, reconciliation and trust represent that civil society dimension. The world has paid it too little attention, investing only around £37 million a year in people-to-people projects for Israel and Palestine—that is less than £4 for each Israeli and Palestinian person each year.

Britain exemplifies this problem. From spending a pitiful £150,000 on coexistence projects in 2015-16, the Government, despite repeated warm words to the contrary, appear to have cut this funding altogether in the current financial year. I am pleased that the Secretary of State for International Development seems keen to right that wrong.

The absence of strong constituencies for peace in Israel and Palestine is one of the results. Polling by the Israeli Democracy Institute and the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research last summer underlined
the scale of the problem. Although 59% of Israelis and 51% of Palestinians still support a two-state solution, these already slim majorities are fragile, threatened by fear and distrust between the two peoples. Thus 89% of Palestinians believe Israeli Jews are untrustworthy; a feeling that is reciprocated by 68% of the latter. At the same time, 65% of Israeli Jews fear Palestinians and 45% of Palestinians fear Israeli Jews.

We should not place our hopes in the optimism of the young. After all, this is the generation that has no memory of the optimism engendered by the Oslo accords, but whose formative years have instead been marked by suicide bombings, the second intifada and perpetual conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. Even if the peace process were in better health, these would hardly be the most solid foundations on which to build a lasting peace. However, we should recall that the seeds for the Good Friday agreement were sown at a similarly auspicious moment during the height of the troubles, when the International Fund for Ireland was created. Over the past 30 years, it has invested £714 million in grassroots coexistence work in Northern Ireland. In all, more than 5,800 projects have been supported since it was established to promote economic and social advance and to encourage contact, dialogue and reconciliation between nationalists and Unionists throughout Ireland. That investment has helped to provide the popular support that has helped to sustain the Good Friday agreement over nearly two decades.

With that example in mind, my Bill requires the Government to promote the establishment of the proposed international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace. This has been designed by the Alliance for Middle East Peace, a coalition of more than 90 organisations building people-to-people co-operation and coexistence. The fund aims to leverage and increase public and private contributions worldwide, funding civil society projects and joint economic development that promote coexistence, peace and reconciliation. It is envisaged that the $200 million-per-year fund—four times the current level of international support for people-to-people work in Israel and Palestine—would receive contributions of approximately $21 million from the US, Europe, the rest of the international community including the Arab world, and the private sector. The fund is not, I should emphasise, intended to receive support that otherwise would be provided directly to either the Palestinian Authority or to Israel.

We know that the coexistence projects in Israel and Palestine work. After two decades, there is now a significant body of evidence, based on academic and governmental evaluations, indicating the impact that coexistence projects can have. That impact, moreover, has been achieved in the face of considerable challenges. According to the United States Agency for International Development, those participating in people-to-people programmes report higher levels of trust, higher levels of co-operation, more “conflict resolution values”, and less aggression and loneliness. Evaluation of individual programmes underlines that impact.

Middle East Entrepreneurs of Tomorrow—MEET—is a truly inspiring project that brings together young Israelis and Palestinians to learn about technology and entrepreneurship. It found a 60% increase in the number of students who value working with someone from the “other side” after just one year on the programme. The Parents Circle Families Forum, an organisation of more than 600 Palestinian and Israeli families who have lost a family member in the conflict, found that 70% of all participants had increased trust and empathy and that 84% were motivated to participate in peacebuilding activities in their communities.

I would ask, too, whether the Department for International Development can point to anything in its current funding that has moved the conflict closer to resolution. If coexistence work is to be held to a standard that demands that it demonstrate how it helps solve the conflict, surely other strategies that have not by themselves moved the ball forward should be held to the same standard.

Support for a renewed effort to promote coexistence work is strong and growing. It crosses international boundaries and political parties. The Quartet’s most recent report recommended a focus on civil society work for the first time since its founding. The Vatican, Jewish organisations and politicians on both left and right in Israel have all raised their voices in support. On Capitol Hill, two US Congressmen—Jeff Fortenberry and Joe Crowley—have worked across party lines, introducing a Bill in support of the international fund in the best traditions of US global leadership.

In this House, 56 of my Labour colleagues signed an open letter to the Secretary of State for International Development last month endorsing the fund, and I am delighted today to have the support of Members from the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. I am particularly pleased that the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles), chairman of Conservative Friends of Israel, is listed as one of the supporters of the Bill.

The late Shimon Peres, one of Israel’s founding fathers and most indefatigable peacemakers, once said: “The way to make peace is not through governments. It is through people.” He knew that, even in the most challenging of times, we must never give up on the search for peace. By supporting my Bill, the House can underline its support for that search.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Joan Ryan, Ian Austin, Mrs Louise Ellman, Stephen Kinnock, Catherine McKinnell, Stephen Twigg, Chris Davies, Sir Eric Pickles, Will Quince, Paul Scully, Craig Tracey and Mr Alistair Carmichael present the Bill.

Joan Ryan accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on 24 March and to be printed (Bill 126).
Leaving the EU: Security, Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice

[Relevant documents: Third Report from the European Scrutiny Committee, Chapter 29—Establishing a roadmap for a Security Union, HC 71-ii; Eighth Report from the European Scrutiny Committee, Chapter 19—Cross-border law enforcement cooperation—UK participation in Prüm, HC 71-vi; Eighth Report from the European Scrutiny Committee, Chapter 20—Preventing radicalisation and violent extremism, HC 71-vi; Twenty-fifth Report from the European Scrutiny Committee, Chapter 11—Enhancing security in a world on mobility, HC 71-xxiii; Eighteenth Report from the European Scrutiny Committee, Chapter 14—Establishing a Security Union: first progress report, HC 71-xvi; Twenty-first Report from the European Scrutiny Committee, Europol; opt-in Debate, HC 71-xix; Third Report from the European Scrutiny Committee, Chapter 27—Information systems to enhance EU border management and security, HC 71-ii; Seventh Report from the House of Lords European Union Committee, Brexit: future UK-EU security and police cooperation, HL Paper 77; oral evidence taken before the Home Affairs Committee on 6 December 2016 on EU policing and security issues, HC 806; oral evidence taken before the Justice Committee on 10 January on the implications of Brexit for the justice system, HC 750.]

1.33 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): I beg to move,

That this House has considered exiting the EU and security, law enforcement and criminal justice.

I am pleased to introduce today’s debate on security, law enforcement and criminal justice—one of a number of debates that we will be having about our exit from the European Union. It is important that Members have the opportunity to discuss and debate leaving the EU. The Prime Minister underlined the importance of Parliament’s involvement in exit negotiations in her speech yesterday. This afternoon, Members have a chance to debate an area of our relationship with the EU that is crucial, not only to our negotiations but to the continued safety of both Europe and ourselves—citizens across Europe and the United Kingdom.

This debate will focus on how we work with the EU on security, law enforcement and criminal justice now and how we will work with our EU partners in the future. Co-operation in the fight against crime and terrorism was one of the Government’s core negotiating objectives. The UK is leaving the EU, but as we have been clear, we are not leaving Europe. We are committed to strong co-operation on security, law enforcement and criminal justice now and when we leave. We will work with our European partners to find solutions that promote security across Europe and beyond.

The decision of the British people to leave the European Union does not alter the duty that we and all member states share collectively to keep our citizens safe and to protect our democratic way of life and the rule of law. In the face of the common threats that we face from terrorism, cyber-attacks and hostile foreign actors, maintaining strong EU-UK security co-operation is vital to our collective success in keeping citizens safe. It is difficult to see how it would be in anyone’s interests for exit negotiations to result in a reduction in the effectiveness of security, law enforcement and criminal justice co-operation.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I disagree with nothing that the Minister has said so far. We are leaders in Europe as far as co-operation on security and justice is concerned. Does the Minister agree that one of the most important aspects of the issue is information sharing? Access to ECRIS, the European criminal records information system, should be one of the key elements of our negotiations. We need to be able to reach the criminal records of those who have committed offences in the rest of Europe and to share information about those who commit offences in our country.

Brandon Lewis: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman’s agreement with my position so far. He makes an important point. I will come specifically to the issue of data sharing. As we all understand, we live in a world of global work; people are working across borders, particularly when it comes to criminality. We need to be well equipped to deal with that.

Criminality and terrorism are increasingly transnational. International organised crime groups exploit vulnerabilities such as inadequate law enforcement and criminal justice structures. Threats that we now face, such as cybercrime, which is moving ever more quickly, or online child sexual exploitation, are by definition international in a technologically interconnected world. The UK National Crime Agency’s most recent public estimate suggests that more than 6,000 organised crime groups are seeking to operate in the United Kingdom.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Minister give me some reassurance on the issue of the European arrest warrant? Before the last election, during a debate in this House, the current Prime Minister, then Home Secretary, fought hard to get the warrant through the House in the face of some opposition from some Members. Will the Minister say whether we will secure the powers of the warrant post Brexit?

Brandon Lewis: As the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, we are at the start of negotiations. I cannot predict where we will end up. However, I will come specifically to the European arrest warrant and its implications for us in a few moments.

Criminal networks are driving migrant smuggling; Europol estimates that more than 90% of migrants travelling to the EU used facilitators—provided, in most cases, by criminal groups with an estimated turnover of €3 billion to €6 billion in 2015 alone. We are at the beginning of a complex process to agree a new relationship with the EU. This is new territory for both sides, and it is way too early to say exactly what that relationship will look like. I am sure there will be many and varied views expressed from around the Chamber today and in the months ahead, but I am also confident that nobody will argue against the importance of fighting cross-border crime and of defending security across Europe.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): To reinforce that point, will the Minister concede that what we are talking about is a system of European criminal justice co-operation? Much of this is about practical
co-operation and information sharing and does not largely touch on the substantive criminal law of the states. Sometimes it extends beyond member states of the European Union. Does not that reinforce the importance of the point about practicality?

Brandon Lewis: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a really important point, and he is absolutely right. Some members of and countries involved with organisations such as Europol are not part of the European Union, highlighting that they see the importance of ensuring that we share information efficiently and proactively to fight crime. It is absolutely right that we work to protect that ability. Whatever shape our future relationship with the EU takes, I hope that we can all agree that it should not compromise the safety of people in the UK or, indeed, the rest of Europe.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): The Minister will be aware that one consequence of leaving the European Union, as the Prime Minister has indicated, is that we withdraw from, as she puts it, “the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice”. But many of these justice co-operation functions ultimately come under the jurisdiction of the European Court. I find it difficult to understand what arrangement the Government envisage to address that issue—perhaps they wish to have a separate tribunal system set up to apply the rules—because, even for states outside the EU, the ECJ’s rulings on these key areas of security co-operation are very important.

Brandon Lewis: I appreciate my right hon. and learned Friend’s point. One piece of work we will do during the negotiations is to ensure that we get something bespoke for the United Kingdom. One temptation is to look at those examples, but we actually need to develop a bespoke solution for the United Kingdom.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Brandon Lewis: I just want to make a bit more progress.

The Prime Minister set out in her speech yesterday the Government’s negotiation objectives for Brexit, explaining that this Government plan to make Britain “stronger” and “fairer”, restoring “national self-determination” while becoming “more global and internationalist in action and in spirit.”

We have a long record of playing a leading role, within Europe and globally, to support and drive co-operation to help to protect citizens and defend democratic values, and we have been leading proponents of the development of a number of the law enforcement and criminal justice measures that are now in place across the European Union. The Prime Minister reiterated yesterday that although June’s referendum was a vote to leave the EU, it was not a vote to leave Europe. We want to continue to be reliable partners, willing allies and close friends with the European countries.

On a practical level, there has been no immediate change to how we work with the EU following the referendum, as the recent statement by the Crown Prosecution Service demonstrates. The UK will remain a member of the EU with all the rights and obligations that membership entails until we leave. The way in which we work with the EU, of course, will have to change once we leave and we must now plan for what our new relationship will look like. The views that hon. Members express here today will be helpful in that regard, including, no doubt, that of the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne).

Liam Byrne: I just want to follow up on the incredibly important question posed by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). We are the proud authors of human rights in Europe. It is a tradition that dates back to Magna Carta. Will the Minister confirm that when the Government bring forward their proposals on a British Bill of Rights, nothing in the draft for discussion will propose that we leave the European convention on human rights or the European Court of Human Rights?

Brandon Lewis: The right hon. Gentleman tempts me to give a running commentary and to prejudge the outcome of the negotiations and work in the couple of years ahead, but I will resist. However, I will say that while we remain a member of the EU we recognise the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice over the measures that we have opted into. It is too early to speculate on exactly what our relationship with the European Court of Justice will be after we leave the EU. That work will be done as we go forward.

I have already spoken to several counterparts in Europe, as have the Home Secretary and many of my colleagues across Government. In my conversations with colleagues across Europe, I have been encouraged by their view that it is essential to find a way for our shared work on security to continue, but we do have questions about how that should happen in practice and we need to work through answering them. This will be complex and subject to negotiation. We are committed to finding a way forward that works for the UK and the European Union. The Home Office is working with Departments—such as that of the Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union, my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), who will be closing the debate—across Whitehall to analyse the full range of options for future co-operation.

We are liaising closely with our colleagues in the devolved Administrations as it is crucial to ensure that we find a way forward that works for all of the UK. We are drawing on the invaluable frontline experience of operational partners such as the National Crime Agency and the Crown Prosecution Service, and I am grateful for the ongoing contributions of all those organisations. The work is being drawn together with the support of our colleagues in the Department for Exiting the European Union and will form part of our wider exit negotiation strategy.

Mr Hanson rose—

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) rose—
Brandon Lewis: I will make a bit of progress before I give way again.

Our current model of EU co-operation centres on a number of legal agreements or tools. Broadly speaking, the tools provide the frameworks for practical co-operation arrangements and information-sharing mechanisms, as hon. and right hon. Members have mentioned, as well as establishing minimum operating standards to support cross-border judicial and law enforcement co-operation. They include measures such as the European arrest warrant, Europol, the European criminal record information system, prisoner transfer agreements and the Schengen information system. They are designed to protect the rights of defendants and the vulnerable across borders, facilitate mutual co-operation and support practical processes for fighting cross-border crime and delivering justice.

Over the years, we have been leading proponents of the development of a number of security measures within the EU, backed by proportionate safeguards. Leaving the EU does not mean that we are walking away from that close co-operation with our nearest neighbours.

Mr Hanson: I am looking at Europol’s website, which states:

“We do this by assisting the European Union’s Member States in their fight against serious organised crime”.

If we are not a European Union member state, what are the negotiating terms for us still to access Europol?

Brandon Lewis: If the right hon. Gentleman looks further into Europol’s website, he will see that there are already associate member states, such as the United States, which form a very large contingent in Europol. That is just one example, and I will mention Europol specifically in a few moments.

The EU law enforcement and criminal justice toolkit has evolved over many years in response to changes in the nature of the EU, international security threats and the increased movement of people across borders. The justice and home affairs opt-out decision in 2014 gave us the opportunity to consider the value of certain pre-2014 measures to the UK. Although that decision provides a useful reference point, it is important to be clear that the situation following the outcome of the EU referendum means that the context is now different. To state the obvious, we will no longer be a member of the EU so, unlike the 2014 decision, the question now is not whether we wish to seek to re-join certain measures as a member state. Instead, we have to consider how we should interact with the EU security, law enforcement and criminal justice toolkit from outside the EU.

We are considering the full range of possible options. We are looking at existing arrangements for third country co-operation with the EU, which can inform discussions, but it is important to be clear that we are not looking to replicate any other nation’s model. We are at a unique starting point with a strong history of working closely with the member states as partners and allies. As I mentioned, we will make a key contribution to security and justice in Europe and globally, and will seek an agreement with the EU that recognises the unique position we hold.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Further to the question of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), the Prime Minister said in her speech yesterday that we will not be hanging on to “bits” of the EU. Europol is an EU agency and the European arrest warrant is an EU crime and safety measure. Is not a reasonable—in fact, the only—interpretation of the Prime Minister’s speech about not hanging on to bits of the EU that we will no longer participate in either of those?

Brandon Lewis: It is worth the right hon. Gentleman looking at the Europol website that the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) mentioned. He will see that there are associate members of Europol that are not members of the European Union, such as the United States. I also point out that Europol existed as a non-EU institution before the EU was involved with it. Therefore, it is important to recognise that we will look to develop a unique and bespoke position for the country.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) rose—

Brandon Lewis: I will give way to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee in a moment.

I appreciate that some Members will question the benefit of our participation in some of the EU tools. However, as the Minister responsible for policing, I have had a chance to see the regular, real-life examples of what those tools do and why they matter, as I will outline once I have given way to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper).

Yvette Cooper: The Minister will know that although several countries have operational and strategic partnerships with Europol, they do not have a say in the overall direction of Europol and, in many cases, do not have access to all its databases—the most crucial aspect. Is he ruling out trying to remain a member of Europol, and is he aiming to have access to all Europol’s databases?

Brandon Lewis: I am not ruling anything in or out; I am looking to make sure that we get the bespoke deal that is right for this country. I am not going to prejudge the outcome of the negotiations over the next couple of years. It is clear, though, that Europol is an EU agency supporting law enforcement activity, based in The Hague, to which we are a huge contributor. In fact, the current chief executive, who is an excellent lead for that organisation, is a British national.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): While my right hon. Friend does not want to prejudice negotiations, does not his decision to opt into the recent Europol directive—the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) and I served on the European Committee in which he laid out his case for doing so—show that the UK is willing to be an active participant in Europol for many years to come?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point. As I clearly outlined in the Committee, the decision to opt in was made in the context of our being a member of the European Union, and at the moment, and over the next couple of years, we are still a full member of the European Union. It is important to make sure that
we take the opportunity to play a full and strong part in that. We want to continue to play a very strong role as a partner for our colleagues across Europe, and indeed globally, particularly in law enforcement.

The prime objective of Europol is to strengthen and facilitate co-operation in preventing and combating serious organised crime and terrorism, in which we have a clear interest in playing an important part. I have yet to meet a senior police officer across our country who does not value our membership of Europol. By providing a platform for members to share intelligence and information, and through a strong analysis function, it offers unparalleled opportunities to prevent serious crime and to protect EU citizens, including those here in the UK. Concretely, this means that 86,629 suspected criminals were identified on the Europol information system in 2015 alone—up by 40% on the year before. There were 1,800-plus decisions for referrals of terrorist and extremist online content between July and December 2016 alone, with 1,600-plus removals, and numerous ongoing large-scale organised crime and trafficking cases. Indeed, the UK staffs one of the largest national desks in the organisation and is one of the biggest contributors of information to Europol systems.

Another mechanism that we have at the moment is Europol, which supports the fight against transnational, serious organised crime by co-ordinating multinational investigations and prosecutions. It works through a co-located network of national liaison desks staffed with prosecutors and investigators from across the EU. Later this year, we will start operating the EU’s Prüm system for the exchange of DNA, fingerprints and vehicle registration data, following this House’s overwhelming vote in December 2015 to join it. In 2015, we conducted a pilot of Prüm, exchanging DNA profiles with four other member states. This gave us an impressive number of hits, many against suspects who would not have been identified otherwise, and enabled the police to arrest people for a number of serious offences, including burglary and attempted rape.

Since 2015, we have taken part in the second-generation Schengen information system, which circulates law enforcement alerts around the EU in real time. This ensures that vital intelligence is shared internationally to help prevent threats from across the world. Joining has seen us arrest and extradite wanted people including drug traffickers, murderers and paedophiles whom we would not otherwise even have known about.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): The National Crime Agency has said that joint investigation teams are incredibly important to the UK. Will my right hon. Friend join the National Police Chiefs Council and the Met police in agreeing that Europol is hugely valuable and that co-operation agreements must be guaranteed as soon as we leave the EU?

Brandon Lewis: When I talk to the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the National Police Chiefs Council, they are clearly uniform in their desire to make sure that we keep as many toolkits as we can actively working for the benefit of our residents. The work that we have to do in the years ahead must reflect the fact that we have been very clear that, as the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister have said, when people voted on 23 June last year they did not vote to be any less safe.

The European arrest warrant, which has already been mentioned, facilitates the extradition of individuals between participating countries to face prosecution for a crime they are accused of or to serve a prison sentence for an existing conviction. We have managed to extradite some 7,000 people as a result of that. The European criminal records information system provides a secure electronic system for the exchange of information on criminal convictions between authorities of participating countries. It ensures that UK authorities are made aware when our own nationals are convicted in any EU country. That means that we can secure criminal records information on EU nationals so that when UK courts are making sentencing decisions they can take into account previous offending behaviour abroad.

Anna Soubry (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Lab/Co-op): The European arrest warrant, as has been said, means that when EU nationals are convicted in another EU country, their records are available to us. That is an absolutely important safeguard for us. The Government are currently getting to the end of a negotiation with the EU about the European arrest warrant. It is clear from the Prime Minister that that is one of the things that is most important from the UK position. If the EU is not prepared to continue to do that, will my right hon. Friend assure the House that the UK will continue to be able to extradite EU nationals, access the Europol database and maintain the European arrest warrant?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes an important point in that the work we have done across Europe—we have been a leading country in working to get this information—we are also continuing to do with countries around the world to make sure that we are able to do everything we can, in every context, to keep our country and our citizens safe.

Brandon Lewis: When I talk to the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the National Police Chiefs Council, they are clearly uniform in their desire to make sure that we keep as many toolkits as we can actively working for the benefit of our residents. The work that we have to do in the years ahead must reflect the fact that we have been very clear that, as the
out, our EU co-operation is of course just part of a wider landscape of international counter-terrorism work, which includes co-operation through relationships such as those with Interpol and the “Five Eyes” countries, and bilateral work with individual countries and NATO.

Robert Neill: I am glad that my right hon. Friend makes that point. May I make a point in relation to the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash)? The evidence given to the Justice Committee was very clear that although there are other means of international co-operation with countries outside the EU, the current mechanisms are much more efficient, as they very often have to be conducted on a bilateral basis rather than as part of a joined-up system. It is therefore desirable, as my right hon. Friend says, that we do all we can to stay in them.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point in that there are different agreements in different parts of the world with different partners around the world. It is important that we work to improve all those arrangements and get the benefits that we have seen from some of the work we have done and agreements we have secured across Europe more widely. Key partners in Europe have already assured us, as a Government, that they value our close co-operation on counter-terrorism matters as well.

We are very clear that effective co-operation with EU member states on security and policing in order to combat terrorism will continue to be a top UK priority. Looking ahead, our EU-level relationships will, of course, have to change, but our shared goal of assuring and enhancing the security of our citizens will not. It is important that we can find a way forward that works for the UK and the EU jointly, for mutual benefit. We will approach the negotiations from the perspective of what is best for the safety of all our citizens, and what is worst for those who seek to cause serious harm to innocent people and democratic values.

During negotiations, we will look to maintain the excellent co-operation that currently exists with our European partners. We fully recognise that the nature of our future relationship can be decided only in negotiations with member states and EU institutions. We are confident, however, that all citizens will be safer if we continue to work together and co-operate. We recognise the challenges involved in negotiating a new relationship, but we are committed to finding innovative solutions that enable us to continue to work together for the collective security of Europe and all the citizens of the United Kingdom.

2 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): The official Opposition welcome this debate. In the run-up to the referendum in June last year and the months since, we have heard much about how our decision to leave the European Union will affect Britain’s economy. We have debated what it means for our businesses, our trading relationships, our nation’s finances and, most importantly, the personal finances of individuals and households throughout our country. That is all of deep concern to me and many other Members.

Of perhaps even greater significance is the threat to our national security that could come from our leaving the European Union and, in particular, the effect that doing so will have on the ability of our police to protect our citizens. Today, as we turn our focus to those issues, the Government need to provide stronger assurances that our nation’s security will not be compromised by our decision to leave the EU. I say gently to the Minister that while his long speech was strong on analysis and strong on detail about the institutions, we did not really hear anything about how we were going to do the things that he wants us to effect.

Some hon. Members lament the fact that in the 40-plus years since we decided to join the common market, it has become far more than simply a trading arrangement. Given the nature of the threats that we face, however, it is unsurprising that European countries have found it convenient to co-operate in other areas, including the field of justice and home affairs. Quite simply, it was in our national interest to do so, because the security threats that we face are not confined to our national borders. Whether we are fighting international terrorist networks, tracking down fugitives from justice, obtaining crucial information on the activities of suspects abroad or maintaining effective border controls, it simply makes more sense to act together. Those issues are paramount to our country and to the security of our citizens. Whatever our personal view on the EU referendum, we urgently need reassurance from the Minister that our national security and our ability to combat crime within our borders will not be compromised by the decision to leave. Many hon. Members have issues that they want to raise this afternoon.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Does the hon. Lady agree that for us in Northern Ireland, it is especially key that we keep our relationships with Ireland and the way in which we work together, and that we improve work on counter-terrorism? Only eight out of 110 extradition requests have been granted. There is still a great deal of work to be done, and we have to build on that.

Lyn Brown: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There are three main issues on which the Opposition seek answers this afternoon: our ability to participate in the common arrest warrant; our future relationship with Europol; and our access to Europe-wide crime prevention databases, including the Schengen information system.

I will come to each of those things in turn, but first there is a general point to be made. As many in the House remember, our optimal relationship with the European Union in the field of security and justice was comprehensively debated during the previous Parliament. We opted out of all provisions relating to police and criminal justice so that we could have a fresh debate about which initiatives we wanted to be part of, and then opt into them again. That initiative was negotiated with European member states by the previous Labour Government and continued by the subsequent coalition. The process consisted of two years of negotiation and debate in this House, in government and in Brussels, and it culminated in Britain deciding to opt back in to 35 specific measures that we considered to be in our national interest.

Those measures included the European arrest warrant, Europol and access to the Schengen information system—the three things that I am concerned about today.
I know that our Prime Minister is also concerned about them because it was she, as Home Secretary, who put it to the House on 7 April 2014 that we should opt back into the measures. It is so nice to have confidence that there will be unanimity in the Chamber this afternoon on this oft-contentious subject. However, the opt-in happened before the referendum, and now, in this post-referendum world, the Government need to tell us how they will ensure that we still have access to those measures, which we so recently decided that we needed to keep our citizens safe.

We do not have time today to rehearse the two years of debate that led to a decision to co-operate in each of the 35 areas that we decided to opt back into, so I will focus on our main concerns. There is no doubt that the European arrest warrant is a crucial tool in the fight against crime in the UK. Introduced in 2004, it provides a mechanism whereby crime suspects who have left the country—fugitives—can be surrendered back to the UK automatically by another European member state. It means that suspects who have fled can be returned in a matter of weeks or days. Crucially, it means that suspects can be returned to the UK even if the legal basis for the crime that they are suspected of committing is different from that under the law that applies in the country to which they have fled. That is because the European arrest warrant is underpinned by the principle that European Union countries agree to respect the decisions of each other’s criminal justice systems, even if they differ.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I think that the hon. Lady has just made the point that I wanted to raise, which is that that principle means that we have to accept that justice systems across the rest of the EU are as good as ours. Does she have confidence that that is the case?

Lyn Brown: I have confidence that the European arrest warrant is far more powerful than any other extradition process anywhere in the world, and we would be stupid if we let it go.

Since the European arrest warrant was introduced in 2004, the UK has used it to bring 2,500 individuals from outside the UK to face justice. Let us not forget that it was the mechanism that ensured that Hussain Osman was brought to justice after he fled to Italy after a failed suicide bombing in London in 2005. The problem that we face is that the European arrest warrant is available exclusively to EU members. We will have to overcome considerable hurdles if we are to maintain the current arrangements and we are not in the European Union. In fact, as a recent briefing from the Centre for European Reform think-tank states, if, having left the EU, the UK wanted to get a similar deal, “it would need to convince its partners to change their constitutions. In some cases, this would trigger a referendum.”

Do we really think that countries would hold such a referendum because we have decided to leave the EU?

Some countries outside the European Union have attempted to negotiate access to the common arrest warrant system. Norway and Iceland, for example, have concluded a surrender agreement with the EU that represents an attempt to get the same benefits, although it has not yet come into force. That agreement is weaker in two ways. First, it requires the alleged offences to be the same in both countries, thus losing the flexibility that comes from the agreement of member states to respect the decisions of each other’s criminal justice systems. Secondly, it allows countries to refuse to surrender their own nationals, which would make things tricky if a national of an EU country were to commit an offence on UK soil, for example.

On top of that—as if that were not bad enough—the agreement took 15 years to negotiate, and that was for countries in both Schengen and the European economic area, but as the Prime Minister made clear yesterday, there are no plans for us to be members of either. The alternative is that we fall back on previous extradition treaties that are far more cumbersome and will, in some cases, require EU countries to change their own laws in respect of the UK.

It is hard to see how any of those options are preferable to the current arrangements. I find it particularly hard to understand how this fits with the Prime Minister’s pledge yesterday to “work together more” in response to threats to our common security. While it is not difficult for an individual who has broken the law in Britain to hop on a cheap flight to another European country, I fear that it will be very hard indeed, without the European arrest warrant, for us to get them back again. For that reason, Labour calls on the Government to ensure that the current arrangements are maintained.

I turn to our second concern. This House approved regulations confirming our opt-in to Europol only a few weeks ago, and we did that because it is vital to our national security. Europol—the European Police Office, to give it its proper title—exists to combat serious international organised crime by means of co-operation between the relevant authorities of member states, including those tasked with customs, immigration services, borders and financial policing. As we know, Europol is not able to mandate national forces to undertake investigations, but it provides information and resources that enable national investigations to take place.

In the words of the British director of Europol, Rob Wainwright, whose previous career was in UK security institutions, our decision to opt into Europol is:

“Good for Britain’s security, great for police cooperation in Europe.”

Indeed, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service confirmed on 12 December during a debate in a European Committee that Europol provides

“a vital tool in helping UK law enforcement agencies to co-ordinate investigations involving cross-border serious and organised crime”.

He also said:

“About 40% of all Europol instances involves terrorism and serious organised crime. If the UK were to leave the EU it would lose access to Europol and the information and data it provides, including investigation reports.”—[Official Report, European Committee B, 12 December 2016; c. 5-7].

However, when pushed about whether we can maintain our membership of Europol, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, speaking in this House last year, was able to say only that the Government will seek to:

“preserve the relationship with the European Union on security matters as best we can.”—[Official Report, 5 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 45.]
When my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) asked him the same question about Europol yesterday, we got no more information about how that could be done.

Joanna Cherry: Is the hon. Lady aware that Rob Wainwright said last year that negotiating security pacts from outside the bloc of Europol, in the event of Britain leaving the EU, would be a “damage-limitation exercise”? Does she agree that what we need to hear from the Government is not a eulogy about how great Europol is—we all know that already—but an indication of how they are going to limit the damage caused by leaving the European Union and agencies such as Europol?

Lyn Brown: The hon. and learned Lady is absolutely right. I agree with her that this simply is not good enough.

Although Europol has arrangements for third-party access, they raise serious questions. The Government stated in a policy paper that was published last year:

“There are a number of important differences between what Europol provides to third country operational cooperation partners with which it has agreements, and EU members”.

In particular, they highlighted the inability directly to submit data and conduct searches within the Europol databases, the need to conclude a separate bilateral arrangement to connect to Europol’s secure information exchange network application, and the inability to sit on Europol’s management board, which sets the organisation’s strategy. That tells us that Mr Wainwright is highly unlikely to stay in his post. In summary, to borrow the words of David Armond, deputy director general of the National Crime Agency, any alternative arrangement to full membership would be “sub-optimal, not as good as what we’ve currently got”. Frankly, that does not feel comfortable to me.

Our third concern is about access to pan-European databases, which are important for the routine work of our police forces. Let me give some examples. Access to European criminal records data—the European criminal records information system—is limited exclusively to EU member states. The common European asylum system includes a fingerprint database known as Eurodac that prevents individuals from reapplying for asylum once a claim has been rejected. We currently have access to the Schengen information system, despite not being a member of Schengen, and that contains information on lost identity documents and, importantly, wanted persons.

The Minister’s permanent secretary stated in his foreword to the Home Office’s most recent annual report that strengthening data exchanges with our European allies was essential to combating terrorism. I would be grateful to the Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union, if he confirmed whether we will still have access to these databases outside the European Union and, if so, whether that access will come at a financial cost.

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is making an impressive and powerful speech on this issue. Some of us may not now need to speak, but I am sure that that will not stop us. At the moment, on ECRIS, if a German citizen is arrested in London, we are able to know within three minutes exactly what their previous convictions are. We will want an arrangement that is just as good if we are no longer to have our existing access.

Lyn Brown: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are simply not getting any guarantees from our Government that that is what they will be able to provide, or that they will even negotiate for it.

There is a more general problem about accessing the data we need to combat crime and keep us safe. Even if we, outside the EU, have access to European databases, we might not be able to use them. European data protection law is clear that no information can be handed to a third country—we will be such a country—that does not adhere to EU laws on privacy. Although our Government have said that they will apply EU data protection law at least until the point of Brexit, we do not yet know if they intend to do so afterwards. However, we certainly know what happens if our data laws do not adhere to European privacy rules: the European Court of Justice will simply invalidate any data sharing agreement, as it did on the so-called safe harbour agreement between the EU and the US. What guarantees will the Government give that the information that our police and security agencies need from European Union databases will not also be turned off when we leave?

In conclusion, we have deep concerns that it will be harder for us to protect our citizens when we leave the European Union. We need the Government to reassure us that they intend to reduce or eliminate this risk through their Brexit negotiations. It is one thing to have our prosperity under threat from the complexities of maintaining access to the single market—frankly, that is bad enough—but it is quite another if our security and the very lives of our citizens are under threat because the complexities of maintaining cross-border co-operation with our police and security services were not properly considered before leaving. To quote the Centre for European Reform again, justice and home affairs “is not like trade, which creates winners and losers: the only losers from increased co-operation in law enforcement are the criminals themselves.”

My question to the Minister is simple: what guarantees will he give that Britain’s security will not be compromised by our leaving the European Union?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I now have to announce the result of the Division deferred from a previous day. On the motion relating to local government, the Ayes were 299 and the Noes were 6. Of those Members representing constituencies in England, the Ayes were 280 and the Noes were 6, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division list is published at the end of today’s debates.]

2.20 pm

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): If I may say so to the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), whose speech I listened to very carefully, I am for my own part completely content that these matters should be left in the very safe hands of the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), who in my view knows exactly what needs to be done.
I am most grateful for this opportunity to say a few brief words following my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister’s excellent, bold and comprehensive speech yesterday, and to set out a few thoughts on wider security and co-operation after Brexit. In the Brexit negotiations, it will be necessary for us to set out the basis of our future relationship, as is described in article 50. I believe it is in our national interest to sustain, and to carry forward into the future, the highest possible degree of joint action on justice, home affairs, security and co-operation, scientific research and innovation, and many other areas of common and important interest.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on the clear and concise way in which she set out the Government’s position. I was a staunch remainder, but I absolutely accept the verdict of the referendum and the need for the Government to now get on with it. As Churchill once said, “If there is a bear in your bedroom it is not a matter for speculation”. So at the same time as these very difficult and complex negotiations on trade and all the other myriad issues take place, this is an important time for us to set out, as the Prime Minister did in her speech, a clear case for a very close partnership and a new relationship of co-operation between members of the European Union and the UK. In my view, it should be as close as any sovereign country can be in military affairs, free trade and security co-operation.

That type of work with our friends—Germany, France and other countries—is of the first importance. In my view, our initiatives would be widely welcomed in Europe, running in parallel with the rather more complex and tricky negotiations on the article 50 transaction. That is where Britain can bring something positive, useful and of proven worth to the table. Thus, in my judgment, we should aim to maintain our excellent co-operation on security and enhance it further, including during the discussion of the new settlement. On many issues, we will continue to have an important interest in shaping EU policies after we leave, but clearly the United Kingdom is an important influence on the European security agenda. Our influence will remain considerable given our position as NATO’s most capable and willing European partner. The recent deployments of Typhoon aircraft to Romania, army personnel to eastern Poland and, most importantly, a full armoured infantry battalion of 800 men to Estonia all serve to underline our profound commitment.

Inevitably, once the UK exits the EU it will become harder for us to translate that undoubted and important commitment into political influence. It is thus even more imperative that our partners and friends understand that we intend to continue the closest possible relationships in those areas, to our mutual interest. As the Prime Minister rightly said yesterday, she wants Britain to be the best friend and neighbour to our European partners, and a country that reaches out beyond the borders of Europe too. It is my fervent hope that our European friends will understand that it is our strongest wish that we play from the outside what role we can in making sure the EU succeeds.

Danny Kinahan: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we need to put all the pressure we can on President Trump to make sure that NATO stays in place and that we build on our security around that? There is a real fear that he may not want that, in which case the pressures will change.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I very strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman. That is very important. I have high hopes that the Prime Minister, when she visits President Trump, will make those points clearly. I hope President Trump will say something in his inauguration speech that will clarify what he meant by “obsolete” in relation to NATO. I am not offended by that. I was discussing it with the Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, my right hon. Friend, the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and I do not think that President Trump meant it as an insult. It is true that there is much about NATO that is highly unsatisfactory and obsolete, not least because many countries do not pay their fair whack. It is very slow to transform and is not equipped for the new asymmetric hybrid versions of warfare that we will have to contend with, or as advanced as Russia, as has been seen in its unbelievably bad behaviour in Crimea.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Before my right hon. Friend gets back to his main oration, I would like to draw attention to the context in which President Trump was reported. He said that NATO is extremely important to him. He seems to be using the word “obsolete” in the sense that NATO needs to be not abolished but modernised to face new threats. We should not read too much into the nuances of the individual words he speaks, because nuance does not seem to be his style.

Sir Nicholas Soames: My right hon. Friend is spot-on, and I am sure these matters will play out. If one looks at the wonderful success of the security architecture designed by those wise men and women after the last great war, one sees how well it has served the world in peace, and in good times and bad times. This does not seem to me a sensible time to do anything other than support it.

With the threats to our common security becoming even more serious and in many ways more insidious, our response surely cannot be to co-operate with one another less, but must be to work together more. As the Prime Minister said in her speech yesterday:

“I am proud of the role Britain has played and will continue to play in promoting Europe’s security. Britain has led Europe on the measures needed to keep our continent secure—whether it is implementing sanctions against Russia following its action in Crimea, working for peace and stability in the Balkans”—an extraordinarily important piece of work right now—

“or securing Europe’s external border. We will continue to work closely with our European allies in foreign and defence policy even as we leave the EU itself.”

I hope the Minister will agree that it is important that we demonstrate, even during the inevitable heat of the negotiations, our absolute determination to be good partners, allies and friends to Europe, and the fact that we are, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister so rightly said, leaving the European Union but most emphatically not leaving Europe.

2.28 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure and an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames). I am sure we could find much on which we disagree, but his experience
Act was going through the House. If the UK does not comply with EU law on data sharing and privacy protection, our former partners will not be able to share information with us under the laws by which they are bound.

This is not just about the protection of civil liberties; it is crucial to security and law enforcement. Much is made in the general debate about leaving the EU of the opportunities for the UK beyond Europe. It is sometimes suggested that we should focus more on our security arrangements with, perhaps, the “Five Eyes” countries, including the United States, and it is true that some countries, such as the USA, have set precedents for bilateral agreements on the transfer of data, but those do not offer the quick fix that some suggest. Those agreements have taken many years to negotiate and, in some cases, are not enforced. Why withdraw from a system we have so painstakingly contributed to for years, in order to seek something else that is far from guaranteed? As a matter of security, we cannot afford an operational break in our access to EU cross-border tools, because they are part of the day-to-day work of the police force. We have only to look at the figures and stats produced by the Home Office and the Scottish Government to see how important Europol and the European arrest warrant are.

It is sometimes also suggested that our partnerships with other countries, such as our “Five Eyes” partners, will somehow replace or supersede what we have in place with the EU, but that will not work either, because the “Five Eyes” partnership, important though it is, does not cover all aspects of our security. For example, it does not cover all aspects of day-to-day policing. In fact, the National Crime Agency has said that one concern for it and its “Five Eyes” partners is the impact that the absence of the UK from Europol will have on the other “Five Eyes” countries’ relationships, because they often use the UK as a proxy for getting work done at Europol when the UK is working with it. Such difficulties are the reality of the situation, and it is not just the SNP or the Labour party highlighting them; as we have heard, they have been highlighted by the NCA, Rob Wainwright and the House of Lords Select Committee that has looked into these matters in some detail.

The need to meet EU data protection standards so that we can exchange data for law enforcement purposes means that if the UK leaves the EU, the UK will need to subject itself to data protection laws that it will have no role in shaping. Is that what Government Members really want? I realise that they have concerns about how laws are made in the EU, and it is pretty obvious that they do not like the Court of Justice very much, but if we, as a Union of nations, want to continue to operate with our EU partners on security and data sharing, data sharing will be key. As I said, we will have to subject ourselves to data sharing rules made by the other 27 member states into which we will have no input. If we insist on going our separate way, as we have done with the Investigatory Powers Act, and going beyond what EU law sanctions, the other 27 member states will not want to share information with us, because, as I said earlier, it would breach their own laws on data sharing and data protection.

Those are very real concerns. As I said in my intervention on the hon. Member for West Ham, we heard a very good speech from the Minister earlier about the advantages to the UK of Europol and other EU institutions, but we
did not hear how he proposes to preserve those advantages in the event of the hard Brexit we heard about in some detail for the first time yesterday. We need to hear this afternoon not the UK Government’s wish list but the mechanics of how they intend to continue the level of security protection and law enforcement information sharing that we currently enjoy with the other 27 member states, if they are intent on the task the Prime Minister set out yesterday. We have heard nothing so far, except that they want a bespoke deal. We shall wait with bated breath to hear more about that when the Minister sums up.

2.38 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry). She is a distinguished, practical lawyer, and I agree with her on some of the practical issues that arise, to which I shall return in a moment.

I endorse the views of my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) in relation to our mutual situation—we both fought to remain in the EU, but, having lost, we both accept the verdict of the people. I also endorse his comments commending the Prime Minister for her realistic, practical and determined approach to this issue and on the importance of our NATO relationships. He is much more of an expert on those than I, but I endorse what he said, although I add one thing: we must not only strengthen our NATO relationships but maintain the best possible relationships with our colleagues who happen to be members of both the EU and NATO, not least our nearest neighbour, France, the other great military power of Europe. It is a nuclear power, a significant military power and a member of the UN Security Council. I am sure the Minister, being the diligent Minister he is, will gently remind his ministerial colleagues that we have a long history with France and were actually on the same side in the second world war.

That said, let me return to the specific issue of law enforcement and criminal justice co-operation. That has concerned me during my years at the criminal Bar and is also an issue on which the Justice Committee took evidence only in the last week or so—and we shall publish our report soon.

Unlike the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West, I do not expect the Minister to reveal the mechanism by which we achieve our objectives, because we are at the beginning of a process. The Prime Minister was right to set out the plan, and I expect there will be a lot more detail that we will have to think about. In my short contribution I want to flag up some of the issues with our colleagues who have put the unfortunate Mr Symeou in his position.

I endorse the views of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. She is right that we must do all that is necessary to remain within the European arrest warrant, which involves some compromises. As for the purity of any break, I personally would be prepared to make some compromises, as I would in relation to other matters, to achieve the practical objective of keeping our country safe. They are critical. As I said to the Minister of State, many of these issues are not about our domestically determined criminal law being overweened or supervised by some international system. These are matters of practical co-operation, tracking down suspects and arresting them, the exchange of information and the enforcement of court judgments to everybody’s mutual advantage.

All member states of the European Union have varying degrees of approach to their criminal justice systems. Ours is particularly different because of our common law system, of which we are immensely proud, but that does not mean—I hope people would never suspect that it does—that the systems of other European member states should automatically be regarded as inferior to ours. Some of us in this country are occasionally a bit too snippy about the quality of the justice systems of other European member states. I have no hesitation whatever in commending the integrity of the justice systems of France, Germany, Italy and many others, as I would in respect of Scotland, Ireland or Northern Ireland, for that matter.

David T. C. Davies: My hon. Friend is making some good points, but would he concur, given that we are fellow members of the Council of Europe, that some of the prison systems that he and I have probably both visited simply do not come up to British standards? I would mention Greece in particular.

Robert Neill: I thought that that issue might be raised, and I was going to say that that does not alter the importance of criminal justice co-operation and, secondly, that where this has been relevant as a criticism of the arrest warrant in the past—in the Symeou case, for example—that is essentially history. What is not often sufficiently recognised are the very important amendments made to the European arrest warrant in 2014. We heard evidence from both the criminal lawyers society and the Criminal Bar Association, who strongly concurred that the amendments of 2014 had removed the risks that had put the unfortunate Mr Symeou in his position.

Keith Vaz: It is a great pleasure to serve under the hon. Gentleman’s chairmanship of the Justice Committee. The point made in the intervention by the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), which is a cause of concern to me, is that sometimes countries in the EU issue their European arrest warrant for very minor offences. One example is an individual who had a warrant issued against him because he had stolen a bicycle. It is important that individual countries focus on the reasons why they take out their arrest warrants. I have always regarded it as very serious when a European arrest warrant is issued; it is not appropriate for the minor offences that some countries use it for.

Robert Neill: I accept that that is a significant issue, but the two amendments achieved two things. First, they removed any risk of extradition before commencement of proceedings; and, secondly, they introduced in the UK a proportionality filter. It would be better if all other countries that use the European arrest warrant had a proportionality filter, too. From the evidence we heard from Professor Wilson of the Northumbria...
University’s centre for evidence and criminal justice studies, it seems that even Poland, which has resisted a proportionality filter in the past, is now moving in that direction. The situation is improving there.

The fact that we have those two important safeguards is significant, and it is also important that the European arrest warrant system is a court-driven system, which is subject to judicial supervision rather than being an executive act of extradition. That is why it would be undesirable for us to lose the advantage of the European arrest warrant and have to fall back to the 1957 extradition convention, which was a purely administrative act, carried out through diplomatic channels, without the protection of court intervention or review. It was also much more cumbersome.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): It is indeed a privilege, as mentioned by others, to serve on the Justice Committee under the hon. Gentleman’s chairmanship; he is making a fine speech. Will he respond to some of the comments made by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry)? Notwithstanding her clear desire to stay within the European arrest warrant, there will be difficulties as a result of different data-sharing regimes in the European Union and the UK. How is it possible to reconcile the two, following the UK’s leaving the EU?

Robert Neill: It is certainly clear from the available evidence that the Government will need to take that necessity on board. We will have adhere to European standards of data protection for other member states to be able to share the information with us, according to their law. We may also want to share information with other third-party countries, so both we and they will have to be prepared to adhere to international standards. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) rightly said, that might involve some form of international adjudicative process to deal with disputes between member states. I am not going to tie anyone down on how best to solve that, but there are serious issues that we will have to bear in mind from day one of our negotiations.

Equally, when we talk about involvement with some of the other agencies—we referred to ECRIS, the European criminal records information system, to Prüm and to a number of other valuable tools—we need to recognise that there is a financial cost to the development of the databases. I would certainly encourage the Government not to be afraid to continue to make a financial contribution to the development and maintenance of them. That would be a small price to pay in view of the advantage of protection for the British public. I think there is a common ground on the objective of the European arrest warrant. I just wanted to raise some of the practical issues that we will have to grasp if we are to succeed in achieving our continued full access to it as a non-EU member state.

I want to refer to other matters of concern—co-operation between the courts, which involves our continued membership or association with Eurojust. There is a precedent for non-member states continuing to co-operate with Eurojust. Norway has a co-operation agreement and has liaison prosecutors based at Eurojust. If we leave the EU as it stands, we would have to move from being national college members, but we could have a Norwegian-style status. Perhaps we should be bold and try to argue that we should remain as national college members on some sort of basis if the constitution permits it. That would be preferable.

Joanna Cherry: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about Norway, but is he aware that the Prime Minister, in her former role as Home Secretary, was very disparaging about the abilities of Norway and Switzerland, outside the EU bloc, because they do not have access to all the tools and have to come under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, without having the same input into the law-making process?

Robert Neill: Prior to the referendum, neither the hon. and learned Lady, the Prime Minister nor I would have wished to be in the conundrum in which we now find ourselves. However, I accept the verdict of the British people, so we must find a practical means of achieving the objective that we want. It would be better to find something that is beyond Norway. That is why I have suggested starting as a negotiating point with the idea that we should be national college members rather than associates of Eurojust. If we are ambitious, we lose nothing from pressing for that from the beginning.

In April last year, the Prime Minister as Home Secretary referred to the whole of the European criminal record system—financial intelligence units, the prisoner transfer unit, Schengen Information System II, joint investigation teams and Prüm—in the context of seeing them as practical measures that promote effective co-operation between different European law enforcement organisations. If we are not part of them, Britain will be less safe. As Francis FitzGibbon, the chairman of the Criminal Bar Association, told the Select Committee, that would be a pretty good starting point for bringing this whole area to greater prominence, and a pretty good starting point, I would suggest to the Minister, for our negotiation objectives. Witnesses to the Justice Committee repeatedly said that this is part of a mutually reinforcing system of justice co-operation.

We may concentrate on the arrest warrant, but the information exchanges, the ability to enforce court judgments and the ability, for example, to seek a European information order to obtain evidence from abroad are all part of the same process. That is why it is critical for us to set our objectives at the highest possible level when it comes to seeking our continued engagement with these matters.

This is an important debate because it concerns an immensely important topic. Those of us who now want to move on constructively from what, according to any view, has been a bruising experience for this country, will want to do so on the basis of an ambition to protect the country, while also recognising that both our judicial system and our police force are immensely highly regarded, not just in Europe but internationally. We have something to bring to the table as well. I hope that the Minister will take those points on board in a bold and ambitious negotiation, and I wish him and his colleagues well.

2.50 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my fellow Select Committee Chair, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). I agreed with many of the points that he
made about the importance of continued European co-operation. Like him, I voted for article 50 to be triggered by the end of March, because although, like him, I wanted us to remain in the European Union, I believed that we should respect the referendum result, and that means getting on with the detailed and hard work of establishing how we can get the best possible deal for Britain outside the EU.

I also agree with the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) that we should be cautious about assuming that it will be easy for us to get the detail right, particularly in respect of the important law enforcement issues. If we do not have the right kind of legal basis for the co-operation that we want to see, we shall simply not be able to use the information or intelligence that we have to lock up those who have committed crimes and to keep people safe.

I hope that there is considerable consensus about the objectives that we should have—not just consensus across the House about our objectives in co-operating to keep Britain safe, but consensus across Europe, where co-operation between Britain and other European countries has saved people’s lives and protected us from terror threats and serious crime. The Prime Minister was right to say yesterday:

“With the threats to our common security becoming more serious, our response cannot be to cooperate with one another less, but to work together more.”

So far, however, we have heard very little from the Home Secretary, and, although I have the great respect for the Policing Minister, I am disappointed that she has not come to the House today.

Given the seriousness of these issues, and given that the Prime Minister highlighted the importance of parliamentary sovereignty, I think that we need to hear more from the Home Secretary in Parliament. We will be calling on her to come before the Home Affairs Committee to provide further detail. It is also disappointing that the Policing Minister has now departed, which means that no Home Office Minister is present for a debate on an issue that will have huge repercussions for our security operations for many decades to come. Obviously, the work on security will form part of the Government’s wider plan for securing the best possible Brexit deal and Brexit settlement.

Yesterday the Prime Minister talked particularly about trade. She pledged to secure tariff-free trade, and a better overall deal for British jobs that was outside the single market and the customs union. As the Government will know, there is considerable concern about whether ditching a long-established trade and customs deal will really deliver a better deal for jobs, employment protection and environmental standards here in Britain, and Ministers will need to provide a great deal more evidence to show that they can actually deliver a better deal for our manufacturing and services, as well as for the social and economic standards that matter so much.

Ministers will also need to say more about the Government’s approach to immigration. I am one of those who have believed for some time that we need to change the arrangements for free movement, and I think there are particular concerns about unrestricted low-skilled migration. We shall need to engage in a sensible debate about how to get the best deal for Britain on both jobs and immigration, so that we benefit from international talent and from economic trade as well.

There is some confusion and there are some questions as a result of mixed messages received from the Government. It would be helpful if the Minister clarified the position, as he represents the Department for Exiting the European Union. Some are suggesting that immigration will not form part of the discussions and negotiations about trade and that those issues will be kept separate in the negotiations, while others say that debate about future immigration rules will be dealt with alongside the trade negotiations. It is important for us to understand whether the negotiations about the customs union and the single market are stand-alone trade negotiations, or whether there will be a wider debate on options relating to both immigration and trade.

Keith Vaz: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on all the excellent work that she is doing as Chair of the Home Affairs Committee. Does she know whether we are to have a debate on leaving the EU and immigration and Home Office policy, especially with regard to the rights of EU citizens to stay here, or whether we are supposed to discuss all those matters during today’s debate about Home Office and justice matters?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my right hon. Friend for what he has said, and commend him for his many years of fantastic work on the Home Affairs Committee. I do not know what the plans are for further debates about immigration. Perhaps the Minister can enlighten us, because it will clearly be one of the central issues to be discussed. If it is included in the debate, that will affect the kind of deal or agreement that we secure, so it is important for us to have some clarity about what those plans are.

James Berry: The right hon. Lady will be well aware that there are a number of different options for immigration from EU member states. I am sure she will not miss this opportunity to advertise the Home Affairs Committee’s “big conversation”. The Committee is travelling around the country to discuss the issue. It is also encouraging Members to contribute, and to urge their constituents to do so as well.

Yvette Cooper: I am glad that a fellow member of the Home Affairs Committee has reminded me to say that people across the country need to become involved and have their say about what the right immigration options should be for Britain. We know that immigration is important for our future, but we also know that it needs to be controlled and managed in a way that is fair, and people have different views on how that should happen. My view is that there is rather more consensus than people may think, given the polarised debates on immigration that sometimes take place. We do indeed believe that all Members of Parliament should have their say as part of the process. We shall be holding regional hearings and evidence sessions around the country, and also urging Members to consult their constituents on what they want to happen as part of the future arrangements.

The Policing Minister set out a very broad-brush approach to security. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), the shadow Policing Minister, gave a forensic response, posing a thorough and detailed set of questions that were not really addressed in the
Policing Minister’s initial outline of the position. He rightly talked about the value of our relationships and the importance of joint working, but we need much more reassurance from the Government that they are taking three crucial issues—Europol, the European arrest warrant and the databases—incredibly seriously, because they will have huge implications for our security if we do not get this right.

There is no precedent for a non-EU member to be a member of Europol, but I should be grateful for confirmation from the Minister that there is also nothing in the treaties that would rule that out. If we are looking for a bespoke arrangement, perhaps he could confirm that there is nothing to prevent us from asking to continue our existing Europol membership, given the crucial role that Britain has played in shaping Europol in the first place, and in raising the standards of policing and cross-border policing in other countries across Europe to meet the standards that we have here in the United Kingdom.

As the Minister will know, the UK uses Europol more than almost any other country in the EU. We provide more intelligence, and play a leading role as well. Operation Golf, involving the Met and Europol, rescued 28 children who were being exploited by a Romanian-organised criminal gang network. Operation Rescue investigated the world’s largest online child abuse network and led to 12 arrests in the UK, safeguarding 230 children. That kind of work between British police forces and Europol is immensely important. I therefore urge the Government to pursue full membership of Europol, or at least something that looks, sounds and smells like it, so that it delivers exactly the kind of security arrangements we have at the moment.

We also need something that looks, feels, sounds and smells, and pretty much is the European arrest warrant, instead of reinventing something from scratch or having to renegotiate, as other countries including Norway and Iceland have done. It has taken them many years to do so, and the length of time involved in renegotiating those extradition agreements, whether with the rest of the EU or with individual countries, can cause huge delays and considerable legal uncertainty.

The Government are well aware of the importance of the European arrest warrant. Indeed, it was part of our discussion of justice and home affairs concerns over the past few years. I hope we will continue to make sure that we can respond to the up to 1,000 EAWs each year, which involve us being able to deport to other countries their suspected criminals, who would otherwise be able to find greater sanctuary here.

The most challenging area of all was raised by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West pointed out, there are some main things on which the Prime Minister will continually keep her attention. However, it must be taken immensely seriously, otherwise it will just slip between people’s ears, and could be dealt with as rapidly as possible to get people’s lives will be at risk.

Let me leave the Minister with a final thought about the way in which the negotiations take place. I have raised my concern about the Home Secretary and Home Office Ministers not being present, and because there is shared agreement on the objectives both in the House and across Europe, I am concerned that this matter will be treated as a lower priority in the negotiations. It is not as controversial an issue as some others, which we will all row about. It will not therefore be one of the main things on which the Prime Minister will continually keep her attention. However, it must be taken immensely seriously, otherwise it will just slip between people’s fingers and we will end up with the details not being ready in time and it therefore not being sorted out.

My other concern is that this issue must not be used as a bargaining chip in the wider negotiations. There will be all kinds of rows, debates and trade-offs across Europe around trade, immigration rules and so forth, but we should not have trade-offs around security. It would be better if issues around security co-operation could be treated as a separate part of the negotiations, and could be dealt with as rapidly as possible to get some early security and show that the Government are giving the matter sufficient attention. Our Select Committee will hold further evidence sessions, and I am sure other Select Committees and Members will also be scrutinising this subject in detail.

Britain voted to leave the EU, but nobody voted to make Britain less safe. I know the Government will take safety and security seriously, but they need to be taken sufficiently seriously to make sure that we do not inadvertently get a gap in our security arrangements which ends up putting lives at risk. In the end, we are
[Yvette Cooper]

talking here about terror, security and cross-border crime, so this is about any Government’s first duty: to keep their citizens safe.

3.6 pm

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, on which I sit, especially as I agreed with pretty much everything she said.

Security did not feature especially prominently during the referendum campaign. I understand why that was: a lot of what we have been talking about is very complex and does not fit easily into a brief soundbite, and much of our security co-operation is not done through our membership of the EU. Our security against military threats from other countries is protected by our membership of NATO, other alliances and bilateral relationships. Our security in terms of terrorist threats is largely dealt with on a bilateral basis, country to country between intelligence agencies, as well as through multilateral agreements such as the “Five Eyes” intelligence alliance comprising Australia, Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand and the USA.

Those relationships are entirely separate from our membership of the EU and are in no way compromised by this country’s decision to leave. To that extent, I never subscribed to the claims of some on my side of the referendum campaign—the remain side—that we would suddenly become a very dangerous place in the event of a vote to leave, or indeed to the ridiculous hyperbole that ISIS would be delighted by a leave vote. Indeed, Mark Rowley, the assistant commissioner for specialist operations at the Met police and the UK’s most senior counter-terrorism officer, reported that there has actually been an increase in co-operation between European member states’ police and intelligence agencies since the vote to leave the EU. This ad-hoc co-operation was no doubt due to, and necessitated by, intelligence shortcomings before some of the recent terrorist atrocities in Europe.

To focus on the military and high-level intelligence co-operation and counter-terrorism that takes place outside the EU architecture is to ignore the many policing and criminal justice measures inside the EU, which make the police’s practical work of keeping us safe easier and more efficient. I have spoken to a number of police officers—in my previous work as a barrister, I acted for and against the police regularly—and I know many police officers, both locally and outside my own area. Some voted to leave and some voted to remain, but all share a clear desire for our existing EU police and criminal justice co-operation to stay the same, or to be replicated as closely as possible.

Just last night I was speaking to the president of the Police Superintendents Association of England and Wales, Gavin Thomas, at an event at which a number of Members were present. He cited the example of how access to European Union DNA databases has allowed checks that previously took days or weeks to be performed within minutes. He is a full supporter, as are the leaders of many other police staff associations and senior police officers, of maintaining our current policing and criminal justice relationships with the EU.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Is he aware that similar evidence exists in relation to the Schengen information system? The National Crime Agency has stated:

“Loss of access to SIS II would seriously inhibit the UK’s ability to identify and arrest people who pose a threat to public safety and security”.

James Berry: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. In fact, I do not think that a single senior police officer or police organisation takes a view counter to the one he has just outlined.

Beyond the police—apart from some concerns about the European arrest warrant, which I do not share—I do not detect any desire among members of the public for any rowing back on our policing and criminal justice co-operation with the EU. I do not detect any such appetite within this place either. Certainly since I have been here, the only pushback—particularly on these Benches—has been on the requirement to submit to the oversight of the European Court of Justice. I will come back to that matter shortly, but to take it out of the equation for the moment, I doubt that there will be a voice of dissent in this place relating to the bonapathy of policing and justice co-operations we currently enjoy. Time does not permit me to go through each and every one of them, so I shall focus on just four.

Europol exists to assist law enforcement agencies in member states to tackle cross-border crime. It focuses on gathering, analysing and disseminating information, rather than on conducting actual investigations. The UK has 12 liaison officers at Europol’s headquarters in The Hague, which I was able to visit with colleagues on the Home Affairs Committee last year, including the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). It is a very impressive operation indeed. It is important to note that Europol also has representatives from non-EU countries such as Norway and the US. We had a long conversation with representatives from the US and the Department of Homeland Security, who have a significant presence there. It was not immediately clear from that conversation that they were significantly worse off for not being a member of the EU. However, they certainly do not have the automatic right of access of EU member states to the Europol information system. There is a specific provision for them to have access on a case-by-case, supervised basis.

We were also able to meet online counter-radicalisation officers from the European Cybercrime Centre, an initiative very much championed by our Prime Minister when she was Home Secretary. The Europol information system is a central database with information on suspected criminals and objects associated with crime, such as vehicles. If a vehicle is suspected of being connected to a crime in Kingston, for example, British police officers can search the EIS to find out whether there is any information on that vehicle, or people associated with it, anywhere in the EU. In 2015, the UK sent and received 37,000 alerts through Europol channels, half of which related to high-priority threats such as child sex exploitation and firearms. As crime and criminals respect state borders less and less, the role of Europol in supporting cross-border co-operation will only increase and become more vital. It must be retained, with British involvement.

I shall move on to the Prüm convention. Like the EIS, Prüm allows and facilitates member states to search
each other’s databases for fingerprints, DNA profiles and vehicle registration details. The UK has not yet fully implemented Prüm, although I believe that it will do so later this year; but we ran a pilot for DNA profile exchange in 2015. As I mentioned, I heard from a senior police officer yesterday that that has allowed checks that would previously have taken hours or days to be performed in 15 minutes.

Keith Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is the Chamber’s resident expert on Prüm. Does he agree that it is important that we continue to implement the terms of the agreement, irrespective of our decision to come out of the European Union, because it provides important data sharing on DNA and fingerprints? Does he agree that, having made the decision, we should continue with that process pending the negotiations?

James Berry: Pending the negotiations, we should continue down the path of integration in all these policing and criminal justice measures. We have already done that in respect of Europol in a decision that was approved by the House last month.

I shall move on to another important measure: the passenger name records directive. This was explained to members of the Committee at Copenhagen airport. It is a common system for collecting and processing data held by airlines, including names, travel dates, itineraries, seat numbers, baggage and means of payment. These data are vital in tracking criminal and terrorist movements to prevent and detect crime. It is important to note that the EU has bilateral data sharing arrangements for passenger name records with the US, Australia and Canada. It is also negotiating an arrangement with Mexico, so there is no good reason why a non-EU country cannot participate in what is clearly a system that has mutual benefits.

The European arrest warrant has had a transformative effect on the ability of the police and prosecuting authorities to get those who need to face justice in the UK—whether relating to a prosecution or a prison sentence—back to the UK to do so. It bypasses the fiendishly complicated extradition rules that apply with respect to some other countries, because countries that are part of the European arrest warrant arrangements cannot refuse to extradite their own citizens, and there are legally mandated time limits during which extraditions have to take place. In 2015-16, 2,102 individuals were arrested in the UK and deported on European arrest warrants. Those were people we plainly did not want in this country. We have been able to repatriate more than 2,500 individuals from EU countries since we have been a member of the European arrest warrant system, including some well-known terrorists, serious criminals and paedophiles. There is a list of high-profile cases, but I will not go into it now. I agree with the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) that this is the most effective extradition system in the world, and it would be madness if we were in a situation in which we had to leave it.

Dr Julian Lewis: I am not an expert on this subject, but there is concern that, under the European arrest warrant, UK citizens could find themselves extradited to other EU countries in which the justice system falls far short of what we would regard as adequate. Does my hon. Friend have any concerns about that?

James Berry: I am sure we will hear my right hon. Friend’s expertise in the defence field in a few moments. The starting point of the European arrest warrant system is that any country in it has a legal system that will give a British citizen a fair hearing, just as citizens of that country would have a fair hearing here. That is the starting assumption, and that was why the House approved our membership of the system. I accept that some people hold the view that my right hon. Friend describes—I mentioned that fact earlier—but, on balance, the majority of people in the House and in the country think that being a member of the European arrest warrant keeps us safer.

Robert Neill: Perhaps my hon. Friend would like to know that that was the view of the Criminal Solicitors Association, whose members largely represent defendants, and of the Criminal Bar Association. They agree that, on balance, membership of the European arrest warrant system is an advantage because it is a court-led system that involves judicial overview, unlike the classic extradition system, which is an Executive process.

James Berry: I thank my hon. Friend for his helpful intervention.

There are many other measures that I could mention: ECRIS; the Schengen II information system; the system for providing enforcement alerts, including for those wanted on European arrest warrants, which includes more than 70 million live alerts; and the European image archiving system, which is a database of genuine and counterfeit ID documents and travel stamps. In all those fields, I agree with the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford, that we should be aiming for full membership, or the closest possible approximation to it.

Turning to the UK’s position since the general election, the Government have put us in a good position to take forward policing and justice co-operation with the EU. First, in December 2015, we decided to opt into Prüm II. Secondly, in December 2016, we decided to opt into new regulations governing Europol, and I was pleased to sit on the European Committee that unanimously approved that decision. Thirdly, the Prime Minister set out yesterday how a global Britain will continue to co-operate with its European partners in the fight against the common threats of crime and terrorism. She made it clear that she wanted our future relationship with the EU to include practical arrangements on matters of law enforcement and the sharing of intelligence material with our EU allies. That came as no surprise because she personally led several such initiatives during her many years in the Home Office.

Clearly it is up to the European Union and others to decide whether to allow the UK to remain part of the policing and criminal justice architecture that we are debating today, but the case for the EU and EU member states to do so is clear. It is probably clearer in this area than in any other area of EU co-operation, not only because it affects the security of each citizen of every EU member state, but because the UK is at the forefront of each and every one of these criminal justice measures. For example, 40% of contributions to Europol’s shared intelligence come from the UK—we are behind only Germany—and the UK is the main contributor of intelligence in several of the most important areas.
It would not be in the interests of any EU member state, or the EU as a whole, to shut itself off from access to that vital intelligence in pursuit of some lofty EU principle or ideal—this is a matter of practicality. If the tables were turned and another country that contributed 40% of Europol’s intelligence—this intelligence helps British police officers to fight crime—were leaving the EU, I would be the first to call on our Government to do everything possible to maintain access to that intelligence and to preserve our co-operation with that country. Without wishing to labour the point, it would be an act of self-defeating nihilism for the EU to seek to shut the UK out of policing and criminal justice co-operation measures.

How could we co-operate outside the EU? We could either be allowed to remain a member of such measures, which would require EU legislation to be rewritten, or we could be given informal or bespoke access, which the US already has with Europol. Once any legal hurdles are overcome, the two main sticking points will be money and judicial oversight. As for money, I am clear that we should play to pay. If we are to benefit from Europol, for example, which has an office and staff in The Hague, there can be no question but that we should expect to pay. On judicial oversight, I understand that oversight of the European Court of Justice is a sticking point for many Members and for many members of the public who voted to leave, but that must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, looking at each measure on which there is co-operation. When we enter multilateral agreements with other countries on issues such as extradition, there is often an international court that arbitrates, such as the International Criminal Court.

I do not believe that we immediately become less safe because we decided to leave the EU. The measures we are discussing are hugely beneficial to law enforcement. The police and the public want us to continue with them, and I am pleased that the Prime Minister agrees. The litmus test for me on this and all other EU co-operation is simple: if we were not currently a member of the EU, is this something in which would we be looking to get involved because it would benefit British people? For all the measures we are debating today, the answer is a resounding yes.

There will undoubtedly be legal hurdles to overcome, but it is clear beyond peradventure that our side is willing. I hope that the EU will respond in kind and that the starting point for any negotiations will be not whether we should do it, but how we should do it. Some Members have demanded guarantees and more information, but given the consensus in this area, it falls on everyone in this House, particularly those with expertise and legal training, to contribute on the question of how we assist the Government to ensure that we maintain this vital co-operation in policing and criminal justice for the benefit of all our constituents in Britain, and of citizens in Europe as a whole.

3.24 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): This is a very important debate and, as it comes the day after the Prime Minister’s very important speech, I want to begin by reflecting briefly on what we learned yesterday about the Government’s objectives in the forthcoming negotiations. It is now clear that Ministers will seek transitional arrangements and that Parliament will have a vote at the end of the process, both of which the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union called for in our report. I should observe that it was published on Saturday and that the Prime Minister adopted these proposals three days later on Tuesday—somewhat faster than the normal Government response to Select Committee recommendations. With that standard having been set, the members of the Committee who are in the Chamber today hope that it will continue.

The most significant of the announcements was that we will be out of the single market and partly out of and partly in the customs union. In such decisions—this is the link to today’s debate—lies our future economic success and security. However, despite the Prime Minister’s speech yesterday, it is in trade and our relationship with the customs union that the greatest uncertainty still exists. Why do I say that? The Government have made it clear that, one way or another, they want to secure continued tariff and barrier-free access for UK businesses to European markets—they could not have been clearer about that. It is an objective that the Select Committee supports and one that was also supported by the vast majority of businesses that gave evidence to us.

However, there is no guarantee that this will be achieved. There is no guarantee that the EU will be prepared to give us what it may well regard as the best of both worlds: free trade with Europe and the right to set our own common external tariff and to negotiate new trade deals. The Government may therefore be confronted down the line with a rather uncomfortable choice between remaining in the customs union and once again seeing tariffs and bureaucratic obstacles rising between British businesses and their largest market. What would be the consequences? One way to answer that question would be to look at the Government’s workings. In oral evidence to the Exiting the EU Committee, the Secretary of State said that the Department was “in the midst of carrying out 57 sets of analyses, each of which has implications for individual parts of 85% of the economy.”

In our report, we acknowledged that the Government were looking at different options for market access and said:

“In the interests of transparency, these should be published alongside the Government’s plan in so far as it does not compromise the Government’s negotiating hand.”

Now that we have the plan—the Prime Minister’s speech from yesterday—will the Minister assure the House that those economic assessments will be published, so that the Select Committee, Parliament and the public can see for themselves the basis on which the Government reached their view both on leaving the single market and on changing our future relationship with the customs union?

I turn to the broader issues of security and foreign policy. We live in an age in which our very interdependence makes us more vulnerable to crime, terrorism and threats to peace and security. However, that same interdependence is the best means we have to deal with those threats. During the referendum campaign I did not come across a single person who said, “Well, I’m voting leave because I really object to the United Kingdom and its European neighbours co-operating on policing, justice, security, foreign policy and the fight against terrorism.” Continued co-operation in all those areas is therefore not about trying to hold on to bits of membership as we leave.
On the contrary, it is about ensuring that we continue working together in our shared national interests at a time of—let us face it—great instability and great uncertainty. We only have to look around the world. The Middle East is still reeling from the Arab spring and the consequences of people seeking more security, more of a say and better governance, and from the response of those who were or still are in control. That response was, in many cases, very violent and brutal—think of Syria, think of Libya and think of the resulting flow of refugees, including those who have come to the shores of Europe.

The conflict that has dominated global politics for 50 years, Israel-Palestine, remains unresolved. In passing, I welcome the Government’s support for UN Security Council resolution 2334, which rightly has some strong things to say about the threat from Israeli settlements to the prospects for a two-state solution. We all want a safe and secure Israel living alongside a Palestinian state. Given the number of countries, including European countries, that sent Ministers to the conference in Paris last Sunday to discuss a way forward, the Foreign Secretary should have been there instead of appearing to undermine the conference by not attending.

Across Europe, of course, we face a shared threat from Islamist terrorism, as the people of Germany and Turkey have tragically experienced in recent weeks, and as the families of those who were murdered in Sousse, Tunisia are now reliving as the inquest takes place. We know that North Korea is trying to develop long-range nuclear missiles, and we know that China is seeking to establish a presence on rocky outcrops in the South China sea in its disputes over territorial waters. We know that Russia, resurgent, is seeking respect in the world—“уважение” is the word in Russian—although seizing Crimea, invading Ukraine, bombing civilians and hospitals in Aleppo and engaging in cyber-attacks is a slightly strange way of going about getting it.

In the United States of America, we will witness on Friday the inauguration of a new President who, to say the least—notwithstanding what the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said in his intervention—appears to be sceptical about the international rules-based system and the institutions, such as the EU, NATO, the World Trade Organisation and the United Nations, that we created precisely to give the world greater security. I was astonished to hear him describe Angela Merkel’s decision to provide shelter to 1 million refugees as a “catastrophic mistake...taking all of these illegals”, as if he were completely unaware of America being a country built on providing a welcome to those seeking shelter. That is best expressed in these famous words:

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”—words forever associated with the Statue of Liberty.

Like the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), I do not regard NATO as an outdated institution, although of course there are things that could be reformed. Nor, incidentally, do Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, because they see NATO, as well as their membership of the European Union, as absolutely fundamental to their future security.

All the things that I have described affect Europe, and they all mean that co-operation in Europe—we are not leaving Europe—is in our shared interest. That is why it is essential that we find a way in the forthcoming negotiations to continue working closely with our neighbours on foreign policy, security and defence, which I know the Government support. But there are some practical questions. We will no longer be attending the Foreign Affairs Council, so how exactly will that continued co-operation work? Will the Government press for what I have called a common foreign policy area—a new structure to bring together EU and non-EU member states to discuss shared concerns about foreign policy?

We already have the special deal that allowed us to opt into certain arrangements on policing and security co-operation, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper)—the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee—and others have asked what exactly will happen after we leave. That point was put forcefully by my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown).

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union told the House that one of the Government’s main aims during exit negotiations will be “to keep our justice and security arrangements at least as strong as they are.”—[Official Report, 10 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 55.] That was a very specific pledge to the House, and the question is, how are we going to achieve it? As we have heard in this debate, replicating what we have at the moment represents a significant challenge. We have heard about the practical benefits of the Schengen information system, because it is really important to know who is wanted, who is a suspected foreign fighter and who is missing. How will we ensure that we continue to receive that information after we have left? We have heard about the Părău decisions, and being able quickly to search DNA, fingerprint and vehicle registration databases is really important in combating cross-border crime and terrorism. We have also heard how being part of Europol gives us access to its databases and expertise. I could give many other examples, and the challenge for the Government will be to replicate those things once we have left.

We have heard about the issue of data sharing. As I understand it, some of the current instruments make no provision at all for sharing information with third countries, with the European criminal records information system being one such example. Others expressly prohibit the transfer of data to third parties, with the Schengen information system being an example. Existing models of third country co-operation with Europol do not allow direct access to Europol’s extensive information systems. As I understand it, the Home Office has carried out a review of EU law enforcement and security co-operation measures, and it would be helpful if the Minister told us what conclusions it reached, particularly on the options available to the Government to secure the continued participation that every Member who has spoken in the debate thus far wishes to achieve.

Will the Minister also tell us whether the Government’s negotiating objectives specifically include retaining access to those data and that information? Will he confirm the extent to which the UK’s data protection laws will need broadly to replicate EU laws if information sharing is to be able to continue to the same or a similar extent once we leave? That point was raised by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry),
The former Attorney General, the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), asked how we will negotiate agreements without accepting a degree of oversight from some court, be it the ECJ or another court. Will the Minister confirm that in this area, as in others, the Government will seek transitional arrangements to make sure that there is no interruption to the flow of information?

The process on which our country is about to embark will inevitably involve uncertainty until such time as matters are resolved by agreement, but if the Government are to honour their pledge to keep our justice and security arrangements at least as strong as they are now—that is a very high test—the security and safety of our communities is one area in which we simply cannot afford there to be any uncertainty whatever. We also cannot afford an outcome in which there is no deal at all. The Prime Minister said yesterday that "no deal...is better than a bad deal". In the case of security, no deal is and would be a bad deal, and we simply cannot afford to allow that to happen.

3.38 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), and may I commend him on his work, the early start his Committee has made and its first report? I read that report with interest on Saturday, and it certainly showed that the Committee has hit the ground running. I hope it made some impact in relation to yesterday’s speech, too.

I am going to keep my remarks short, as I am not an expert on security issues—ask me about the NHS and I would be absolutely fine. However, this is a big issue of great importance to my constituency. There have been a number of instances where intelligence reports have been put out in the newspapers and this has caused a lot of concern to my constituents, so it is important that I speak in today’s debate.

I shall focus on two particular issues. I could, of course, discuss many others, some of which have already been mentioned—for example, Eurodac, Europol, the European arrest warrant, the Schengen information system and the European criminal records information system—but I shall just pick up on a couple that relate to cross-border security and the sharing of intelligence, subjects that have been covered by several hon. Friends and other Members so far.

As my right hon. Friend the Minister outlined earlier, the maintenance of the UK’s current strong security co-operation with the EU will obviously feature heavily in the forthcoming Brexit negotiations, as was outlined yesterday. Nevertheless, there should be absolutely no doubt that many of the tools and institutions that currently underpin security and police co-operation are vital for the safety of our nation. That is ever more true, given the current security concerns.

I welcomed the Prime Minister’s commitment in her speech yesterday that the Government will continue to co-operate with our European partners in important areas such as crime and terrorism. I particularly welcomed her saying: “With the threats to our common security becoming more serious, our response cannot be to co-operate with one another less, but to work together more.” I agree that there is a good opportunity for us not only to maintain the current co-operation but to extend it. We should not give up on the opportunities provided by this significant debate—one that we have not necessarily had for a long time.

We all face the challenges of cross-border crime and deadly terrorist threats, which certainly do not respect borders. As the Prime Minister outlined so clearly yesterday, with the threats to our common security becoming more serious, our response needs to be enhanced. The political arrangements on matters of law enforcement and the sharing of intelligence materials with our EU allies has never been more important, as my right hon. Friend the Minister said earlier.

Before Members ask why on earth I am mentioning the European convention on human rights and the protection it gives to individuals in our criminal justice system, I should say that I raise it because I still think that while we are having these debates a lot of people in the country either confuse the convention and the European Union and think one is interchangeable with the other, or worry that the debates we are having about the ECJ and our exit from the EU will at some point have an impact on the convention.

If Madam Deputy Speaker will indulge me for a second, I still think that our leaving the EU will make it much easier for us to bring ourselves out of the European convention on human rights. Although it is a topic for another day, I have no doubt that it will be debated for a serious amount of time, in both this place and the other place. I am concerned that our potential withdrawal will limit the rights on which those in the criminal justice system could rely, so such debates are crucial. When he responds to the debate, will the Minister assure me that the Government will put the protection of human rights at the forefront of their agenda, when governing both inside and outside the EU?

There is considerable consensus among UK law enforcement agencies on the tools and capabilities that we must retain if we are to keep the British people safe. One of those tools is the European arrest warrant, which was mentioned earlier. The EAW facilitates the extradition of individuals between EU member states to face prosecution for a crime of which they are accused or to serve a prison sentence for an existing conviction. Since 2004, through the EAW the UK has extradited more than 7,000 individuals accused or convicted of a criminal offence to other member states, and brought 675 suspected, convicted or wanted individuals to Britain to face justice—that is no small number. Ultimately, we need to think about that number and how many different individuals in society have been affected over the years.

The European arrest warrant has been used to get terror suspects out of the country and to bring terrorists back here to face justice. An important example is when in 2005 Hussain Osman, who tried to blow up the London underground on 21/7, was extradited from Italy in just 56 days. Before the warrant existed, it took 10 long years to extradite Rachid Ramda, another terrorist, from Britain to France. It is crucial that we replicate it or ensure that something similar continues in its place, because I do not want to see us return to the days when it took years to extradite citizens.
Sir William Cash: On the issue of the European arrest warrant, which was debated extensively in previous Parliaments, may I mention that there are a number of instances in which British citizens have been subjected to complete failures of justice under that system? I will leave it at that, but that is a point that my hon. Friend needs to take on board.

Ben Howlett: I thank my hon. Friend for intervening. The Prime Minister said yesterday in her speech that this is about not just maintaining our current system, but enhancing the system that we have. If that means having debates on the European arrest warrant to ensure that the system works to stop exactly what he mentions, then that is what we should do, and this is the prime opportunity to do so.

I turn now to cross-border intelligence sharing, which has been instrumental to the safety of our nation. In particular, I am talking about the mechanisms, data gathering and analysis executed by Europol—the agency that supports the law enforcement agencies of the EU member states by providing a forum within which member states can co-operate and share information. Will the Minister assure me that we will continue to have access to Europol after our departure from the European Union? There is no doubt that every hon. Member will agree that UK intelligence agencies, including individuals working in my constituency in Cheltenham, protect not just British lives, but European lives as well? As part of any future arrangement, we want to ensure that they continue to do the vital work both within our shores and beyond.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that UK intelligence agencies, including individuals working in my constituency in Cheltenham, protect not just British lives, but European lives as well? As part of any future arrangement, we want to ensure that they continue to do the vital work both within our shores and beyond.

Ben Howlett: My hon. Friend is a great champion of the security services, particularly those that are in his constituency, and of his constituents who work at places such as GCHQ. Those agencies protect people not just in the European Union, but in the wider world with associate members. That must be at the fore of the Government’s thinking. This is about not just British domestic interest, but international interest at the same time.

There is no doubt that the UK’s participation in criminal and policing capabilities and intelligence sharing, such as the European arrest warrant and Europol, have resulted in a safer United Kingdom. The UK has always taken a lead in European security matters, managing the relationship between the European Union and the United States and taking the lead in producing EU policies on counter-radicalisations. The EU action plan on terrorism was drafted during a UK presidency. May I press on the Minister the importance of this continued co-operation long after we exit the European Union?

Like other hon. Members, I must highlight the need for as much clarity as possible on this issue. My constituents and the British public put security and law enforcement very high up the agenda, so I am very pleased that the Government have enabled this debate to take place today. People are rightly concerned that we should be giving them more confidence that, whatever relationship we have with the European Union in the future, we maintain the highest level of security.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett). I rise to speak in this debate and to make my final contribution in this House before I leave to take up the post of director of the Victoria & Albert museum, the world’s greatest museum of art, design and performance. It has been a profound privilege to represent Stoke-on-Trent Central in this Chamber for six and a half years, and I wish to place on record my thanks to Mr Speaker, the Clerks of the House, the doorkeepers and, perhaps above all, the Library staff, who I fear will now face quite a drop in demand for their services.

It perhaps seems particularly perverse to leave the House now—let me apologise to the political parties and to the people of Stoke-on-Trent for inflicting a by-election on them—just as this place is about to enjoy the largest return of powers since the Act in Restraint of Appeals, not least in terms of security, law enforcement and criminal justice.

As power and sovereignty are returned to the UK Parliament, the question for us today and into the future is whether we will see a Britannia unchained that will forge a new Elizabethan era of free trade, cultural exchange and innovation. Or is it the case, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) has suggested, that we live in a world that is so interconnected in economy, security and political power that we have, in leaving the European Union, exposed ourselves to international headwinds that will batter rather than benefit us? At this stage, we have no answer to that.

The Prime Minister’s speech left no doubt about the strategic direction in which the Government are heading, but let me say that I welcome the tone of it: the need to end division and heal some of the anger surrounding our decision to exit the European Union is a vital task of political leadership. The saddest and bleakest moment of my time in this Parliament was hearing the news of the murder—the political assassination—of my friend Jo Cox: the brilliant, gifted and beautiful Member of Parliament for Batley and Spen. It remains a devastating loss for the Labour movement and humanitarian affairs. We should not forget that her killing took place amid some of the ugliest and most divisive rhetoric in the lead-up to the referendum. I pay tribute today to the enormous dignity and resilience of her widower Brendan Cox and her close family.

Amid the Brexit debate, I continue, before I am perhaps seduced by a Crown office, to represent a constituency that voted 70:30 to leave the European Union. Week in and week out, I campaigned with colleagues for us to remain in the EU. I remember some days not meeting anyone in the potteries who wished to stay inside the EU. Like many Members in the House, I accept the result, but the division of opinion between the official Labour party position and many of our heartland voters has served only to highlight some of the deep-seated challenges that centre-left parties are facing. From Greece to the Netherlands, Sweden and France, the combination of austerity, globalisation and EU policy has hammered social democratic politics.

The challenge that my right hon. Friend the leader of the Labour party faces is not unique to him. All parties are coalitions, but what Brexit has done is exacerbate
the divergence of priorities between, say, the Labour voters of Cambridge and those in Redcar, Grimsby or Stoke-on-Trent. Keeping a metropolitan and post-industrial coalition together is no easy task.

In Stoke-on-Trent, my voters wanted to leave the European Union for three reasons: sovereignty and a return of national powers to this Parliament; a reaction against globalisation and a political economy that they thought had shut down the mines and steel industry and eliminated 80% of jobs in the potteries; and immigration. The concern about immigration was not racism. It was about the effects of large-scale migration on public services and wage levels in an already low-wage city.

I often put the case that the EU was a bulwark against the ripcords of globalisation, and vital for policing and national security. I said that 50% of our pottery exports went to the EU, that EU investment had assisted regeneration in north Staffordshire and that our great universities of Staffordshire and Keele both benefited from EU funding. It made no difference. Now we need a Brexit that delivers for Stoke-on-Trent and other communities feeling left behind by globalisation and rapid socioeconomic change.

Again, the question is still out: will presaging judicial and immigration control be detrimental to economic growth? Is that the society we want: probably poorer, but more equal—Sparta, rather than Rome? I continue to have great concerns about leaving the single market and the effects on British business and prosperity, but as we leave the European Union, there is also a moment for progressive reform.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) has made the case for a Marshall plan for parts of the midlands and the north to equip them for contemporary challenges. The House could think creatively about industrial strategy, freed of state aid rules, revolutionising our skills and training with a new focus on vocational education and building a new internationalism. The tension on the Government Benches is, as I read it, between a national popular politics—a post-liberal vision of Government action and redistribution—and a vision of Britain as a low-tax more deregulated state in the Singapore-Hong Kong model. It will be interesting to see how those approaches play themselves out.

I will watch developments from my new post at the Victoria & Albert. The museum is European in heritage; Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg was instrumental in its foundation as he felt that Britain needed to follow the German model of design, education and technical skills. Where have we heard that before? The V&A’s heritage is also proudly global, with a collection drawn from across the empire and the wider world. Its current lead exhibition, which explores the life and legacy of John Lockwood Kipling, a sculptor and potter from Burslem in Stoke-on-Trent who went to Bombay but missed north Staffordshire so much that he named his son Rudyard after a local beauty spot just north of Stoke, speaks to exactly that mix of European and imperial influences.

The V&A, along with other national museums, now stands at the hub of our creative industries sector. If we are concerned, as we are in this debate, with security, we should reflect on the need for economic security. The UK’s creative industries are now worth some £85 billion a year to the UK economy. The creative industries sector is the fastest growing sector of the UK economy with capacity to deliver further jobs and growth, and it is a major component in soft power. Museums are sources of inspiration, innovation, creativity and synergy. The UK’s museums are global leaders in their fields and great drivers of British culture and identity right around the world. At the V&A, curators have introduced the brilliance of David Bowie’s designs and Alexander McQueen’s fashion right around the world.

When it comes to Brexit, the V&A and other museums will continue to build their connections in China, India, the Gulf and elsewhere, but their success is also a European success. The story of British art and design is also a story of European culture and our place within it. More than that, so many who work in our cultural sector are EU citizens. I welcome the Prime Minister’s recognition of the urgent need for a reciprocal arrangement with the EU on its nationals working in the UK and on British citizens currently employed in the EU. Similarly, trade negotiations with the EU will need to recognise the importance of the digital sector to the British economy.

There is a broader Brexit issue for our leading cultural institutions. It seems to me that when there is this growing sense of disparity between the winners and losers of globalisation, museums and other cultural institutions need to help to lessen the division. In an age when art, design, the humanities and culture are so important for our competitiveness and quality of life, we cannot have London detaching itself from the rest of the UK. This is a chance to think more creatively about education provision, as art and design are under real pressure in our schools. We need to build stronger connections between national and regional museums, and wider support for our creative industries. In short, Brexit demands a stronger connection between South Kensington and Stoke-on-Trent. I will try, as director of the V&A, to do just that.

The father of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central, Tony Benn, famously said that he was “leaving parliament in order to spend more time on politics”. I am not quite doing that, but I do think that museums have a responsibility, as places of learning, discourse and inquiry, to interrogate, in a non-partisan way, the big challenges of the day. I hope to do just that and I hope to see many hon. Members there.

Finally, let me place on record my thanks to my personal staff. Within this palace, there work thousands of people writing, researching, prepping and advising, and for five long years, Mr Alan Lockey and Ms Carrie Martin have helped me in my job enormously. I put on record my debt to the people of Stoke-on-Trent for sending me here—the greatest privilege of my life—and I thank the Speaker for his indulgence in my speech this afternoon.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): It is an enormous pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt). He is pretty well my next-door neighbour and we talk regularly. We were even on a Radio 4 programme that he organised only a week ago on Asa Briggs and all the matters to which he referred.
I regard him not only as an hon. Member, but as a good friend. The valedictory comments that he just made were rather reminiscent of a maiden speech. I simply wanted to put on record that he has performed a great service to this House and to his constituents before I get into the more substantial questions before us.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is my constituency neighbour, for giving way. Does he agree that my hon. Friend the soon to be departed Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) has, since 2010, been a truly class act in north Staffordshire and the potteries, not least in his efforts to save the Wedgwood collection for the nation?

Sir William Cash: Absolutely. We are indebted to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central for that. We have all taken an active part in trying to do what we can regarding the museum, and it is marvellous not only that that collection is still there, but that it is now in secure hands under the aegis of the director of the V&A himself. I do not know whether he has taken up his contract yet, but he is getting close to it. I thank him very much for everything he has done in that context, and for our area and region.

The hon. Gentleman questioned whether, under Brexit, there would be a “Britannia unchanged”. I can assure him that there will be a “Britannia unchained”. That, to me, is the most important question of all, to which I have devoted the best part of 30 years of my political life. I believe very strongly that we will benefit enormously from this. It has been a long journey, and a very interesting historical journey, as people will discover one day when they get the full measure of what has actually taken place. It will benefit not only my constituents, 65% of whom voted leave, but the 70% of leave voters in Stoke-on-Trent Central.

The hon. Gentleman referred to sovereignty as one of the main issues before his constituents. That is connected with the question of trust which, as I said yesterday on a programme on Sky after the Prime Minister’s speech, is at the heart of the issue not only in this country, but across the whole of the European continent, which happens to be, largely speaking, within the European Union. This vote is not against Europe but against the European Union—that is what the discontent is about. There is a lack of trust between the member states, and between the citizens and the institutions and elites within the member states who have implemented these arrangements, which simply have not worked. They have generated monumental degrees of unemployment—up to 60% in some countries, including Greece and Spain. The problems that come from an over-dominating Germany have had a detrimental effect on stability in terms of the progress and evolution of the European Union. The situation has recreated the very insecurity and instability that people wanted to deal with in the aftermath of the second world war, in which my own father was killed fighting against the Waffen-SS Panzer division in 1944, winning the Military Cross, of which I am very proud.

I voted yes in 1975. I wanted to see a situation that could work but, unfortunately, the manner in which this has developed has become dysfunctional. In the discussion on the statement yesterday, I noticed that a sense of realism was bearing down on many Members because we know that we have to make this work. This is not anti-European. It is not anti-European to be pro-democracy. I know that there are some good and honest remainers who are still worried about the outcome, but I say to them, “Have confidence. Have trust in the people”—as Lord Randolph Churchill said in the 19th century. This is not a 19th-century problem, however; it is a 21st-century problem. This is not Euroscepticism in a negative sense; it is about trying to ensure that we have proper democracy, and that when we get on to the great repeal Bill, we will be able to achieve the reaffirmation of Westminster’s jurisdiction.

What does that actually mean? It means that we will be implementing in this Chamber the decisions taken by the electors in general elections, for which the people of this country fought and died. That is a crucial issue for the future of Europe as well; it does not just apply to us, but we were the first to have the opportunity to do something about it, because we had the referendum, for which some of us fought for a very long time.

At a conference at the European Parliament the other day, we discussed matters of security, terrorism and all the rest. In front of about 300 chairmen of various parliamentary committees from all over the European Union, the chairman of the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, Elmar Brok—I have parried and fought with him for the best part of 20 years in various forums of the European Union—accused the United Kingdom of cowardice in holding a referendum. I replied that holding the referendum was an act of courage, not an act of cowardice, because we have seized the opportunity to defend the necessity of having a proper democratic system in the United Kingdom, and we will now be able to implement it.

With respect to this business of justice and home affairs, and all that goes with it, my European Scrutiny Committee held an inquiry in April or May last year—before the referendum—into the manner in which decisions are taken in the Council of Ministers. I am prepared to bet that there are people in this Chamber who do not know that virtually no votes are taken in the Council of Ministers. As a result of the European Communities Act 1972, decisions taken by the Council of Ministers—quite often stitched up behind closed doors—come straight down to this Chamber and we are under an obligation to implement them. Such decisions are often on matters such as those we are discussing, and they are of direct relevance to the whole question of security, terrorism and crime.

If people do not know that that is how the system functions, I strongly advise them to speak to me privately, when I can provide them with further information—I will not go into it in the Chamber today, but it is vital to democracy. Such decisions are not taken on a democratic basis, as people have imagined, and that is a reason in itself for our getting out of the European Union. I was absolutely delighted by what the Prime Minister said yesterday. As I said during our proceedings on the statement, her speech was “principled, reasonable and statesmanlike.”

Justice and home affairs was intended to be intergovernmental. It was never meant to be governed by majority voting and all the rest; it was meant to be a separate pillar. I say to the hon. Gentlemen and Ladies of Labour that they, under Tony Blair, collapsed the
pillar so that the matter became part of treaties subject to the European Court of Justice. That was never the original intention.

In this debate, we are engaging in an element of déjà vu, but we are also giving ourselves the opportunity to indicate the extent to which we will move forward after Brexit into a different environment in which decisions on all these incredibly important matters will be dealt with by this House on the basis of votes cast by the voters of the United Kingdom and nobody else.

I drafted the repeal Bill in May last year and submitted it to various people. As a result of a process that I do not need to go into in detail, it was accepted in principle by the Government. I have no doubt that the wording will be slightly changed—or somewhat changed—but that does not matter. I set out five principles, which I will not go into now, other than to say that they meant that we would withdraw from the European Union and transpose all legislation currently within the framework of the EU's jurisdiction into our own Westminster jurisdiction, and that thereafter we would deal with it as we went forward.

I apologise for not being in the Chamber earlier, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was here for the opening speeches, but with my colleague my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) and others, I have been cross-examining my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), who was the Minister for Europe and is now the Leader of the House. We had important questions to put to him, and we got some interesting answers.

The repeal Bill will require careful attention. As a result of the Bill, we will be able to reintroduce a proper democratic system into this House. We will have to accept some things as a matter of policy, and we heard some of them in my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's brilliant speech yesterday, but we cannot absorb the European Court of Justice. The issue of the Court is raised in debates on this subject matter probably as much as it is on any other subject matter within the framework of the European Union.

The Prime Minister’s speech yesterday made it clear that the UK will continue to co-operate with its European partners in important areas such as crime and terrorism once we leave the EU. She said that, faced with common security threats, “our response cannot be to co-operate with one another less, but to work together more”—subject, of course, to the question of the European Court of Justice—and to ensure that the UK’s future relationship with the EU includes “practical arrangements on matters of law enforcement and the sharing of intelligence material with our EU allies.”

She went on to make it clear that “we will take back control of our laws and bring an end to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice”.

As Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, I and my colleagues, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome—my wife is from his constituency, so I should be able to remember its name—continue to see a raft of EU initiatives in the sensitive area of law enforcement and security co-operation. The Government tell us that while the UK remains a member of the EU, all rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force, which is true, and that they will “continue to negotiate, implement and apply EU legislation.”

I say quite explicitly, however—I put this to the Leader of the House this afternoon—that during the period in which we are engaged in the negotiations, it is absolutely essential that we have proper explanatory memorandums on matters relating to security and terrorism and to justice and home affairs, because we must examine such matters properly and form a judgment about the extent to which we will actually implement them. When, on a matter requiring unanimity, we are in a position to vote against it, we must do so, and when a matter is subject to qualified majority voting, we must insist on a vote, rather than allow an agreement to be stitched up behind closed doors.

As my Committee recommended, we must at the same time give reasons for what we are doing, to increase transparency and accountability. Some of these matters to do with the question of terrorism and all that goes with it are so important to our security that if we do not believe that what the EU is proposing is in our national interest, we must take a stand. In my opinion, there is an absolute requirement on the Government to make sure that the reasons for that are put on the record.

Although the generalisation that we want to achieve a degree of co-operation is important, if we do not like things that are proposed—things that are not in the UK’s interest and that we would never contemplate accepting post-Brexit—we must not allow them to go through by consensus in un-smoke-filled rooms. Indeed, if we had had our wits about us, we would never have accepted such things in the first place. The European scrutiny process therefore needs to be considered, and my Committee is looking into it very closely.

As the House will recall, the coalition Government decided that it was in the UK’s national interest to rejoin 35 EU police and criminal justice measures that were adopted before the Lisbon treaty took effect and were subject to the UK’s 2014 block opt-out decision. They included Europol, Eurojust, the European arrest warrant, joint investigation teams, important data sharing instruments—EuroDac and so on—the Schengen information system, the European criminal records information system and the so-called Swedish initiative, which provides a simplified mechanism for the exchange of law enforcement information and intelligence. Since then—the Prime Minister was then the Home Secretary—the Government have rejoined the Prüm measures, which provide for the rapid automated exchange of information on DNA profiles, fingerprinting and vehicle registration data. The United Kingdom also participates in the European investigation order, which will take effect in May this year, and many other criminal justice measures.

On the new EU justice and home affairs proposals, there appears to be inadequate recognition in the explanatory memorandums that the context in which the UK will continue to negotiate, implement and apply EU legislation” has changed profoundly because of Brexit. To quote the Prime Minister, the UK is leaving the European Union. The Government cannot continue with business as usual within COREPER and UKRep. I trust that Sir Tim Barrow will, as the new UK representative, carry on in a
way that will be entirely consistent with what is required in relation to COREPER and UKRep. We cannot continue with business as usual in the handling of sensitive EU justice and home affairs proposals in COREPER, the Council and the trilogue negotiations with the European Parliament. Given that the UK is under no obligation to participate in most new EU justice and home affairs proposals, the Government must explain on the record in each case how a decision to opt in would be in the national interest and consistent with taking back control of our laws, as the Prime Minister said, and ending the jurisdiction of the European Court.

Since last June’s referendum, the European Scrutiny Committee has pressed the Government to clarify how the measures in question will be affected by the UK’s decision to leave the EU and how they envisage managing security and law enforcement co-operation post-Brexit. Under the repeal Bill and otherwise, there will need to be significant adjustments to how that is handled. What sort of relationship do the Government intend to establish with Europol and Eurojust? Will they seek an agreement to enable the UK to continue to apply a new arrangement regarding the European arrest warrant? We cannot have it both ways. We cannot be out of the jurisdiction of the European Court and yet have all the laws interpreted by the judges in the European Court in Luxembourg. That just cannot happen, and that has to be taken on board.

What assessment have the Government made of the operational value of EU data sharing instruments? Would access to those instruments require the UK to comply with EU data protection laws in practice, even if it was no longer under a legal obligation to do so? Answers to those questions are absolutely fundamental, because otherwise we will not be able to implement the commitment to “take back control of our laws and bring an end to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice”.

As I said in an intervention, we also have to take into account the fact that justice, home affairs, terrorism and security—all the problems that have accumulated in the 21st century—are not exclusive to the European Union. They apply across the whole world. The fact that the European Union exists and has developed a body and a framework of law does not give it any absolute value. This House and its predecessors have been legislating for 400 years or more. We do not need to be told how to do this. Yes, we want to co-operate with other countries, but for heaven’s sake let us take on board the fact that we can work out what is in the interests of our own citizens in accordance with the decisions they take in general elections. We will bring in our own immigration Bill, not have one imposed on us through deals done behind closed doors, and it will do exactly what the British people want, because they will have voted for it.

We are talking about important matters arising from the decision taken by the British people, and I pay tribute to them; I do not, however, pay tribute to the campaigns. I thought that the “Project Fear” campaign was a disgrace, and I said so in the House at the time. I do not think there was any treaty change, either, although the Prime Minister kept on telling us there was—I challenged him on that and even put the matter to Mr Speaker. That was around the middle of June, and the Prime Minister was gone by the end of the month.

The bottom line, however, is that neither side of the campaign covered itself in glory, and there were things I deeply regretted.

For that reason, I did my own campaign in my own area, and I am glad to say that in the area in which my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central are situated, we notched up votes of between 65% and 72% in favour of leaving. He was quite right: it was about sovereignty and the very matters I am talking about. It was about whether we could run our own country in our own fashion through our representation in this House. It was as fundamental as that. Everything else pales into insignificance compared with democracy, if it is properly conducted. It is absolutely sure that the current EU is undemocratic, and it is as well that we are getting out of it.

Our Committee has issued a press release regarding another matter that I doubt has been mentioned so far—whether UK nationals will need authorisation to travel to the Schengen area post-Brexit. The UK is not entitled to contribute to the proposal being drawn up, as it is not a Schengen country, but the Government will have to monitor the negotiations closely. In that regard, my Committee has some questions. What are the main differences between the model proposed by the Commission for visa-free entry to the Schengen area and the full Schengen visa regime? Do the Government intend to seek visa-free access to the Schengen area for UK nationals post-Brexit? Do they intend to press for an exemption from the new travel authorisation for UK nationals, or will they seek instead to minimise the cost and complexity of the application process? If they cannot secure an exemption, would they wish to introduce a reciprocal travel authorisation system for EU nationals travelling to the UK after Brexit? All those matters are in the press release that was presented to the media this afternoon, and I sincerely trust that they will give it the attention it deserves.

This is a vital debate on the best example of a policy area that impinges directly on citizens. Elsewhere in the EU massive resistance to EU proposals is building up among citizens, but we have had our referendum and the people have decided that we should get out. That is what we are doing. Let us get on with implementing that decision.

4.23 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): First, I would like to pay a personal tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt). He grew up in the best constituency in the world and went to school in the best constituency in the world, Hampstead and Kilburn. I also thank him for sending me a long handwritten letter after my maiden speech, which was much appreciated by a newbie.

I am in danger of breaking the rules again, so I will come to the debate at hand. The problem with being so low down the pecking order is that everything has already been said and articulated very well by others, but I thought I would speak about the worries of my constituents, 75% of whom voted to remain in the EU. As such, they voted in support of continued security co-operation with our European partners, as indeed they did on many of the other matters raised in today’s important debate. As Londoners, the strength of feeling over the upcoming renegotiations on security protection...
I have a few other questions that I want the Minister to answer. Will he ensure that the Home Office gives the Met the full amount it needs through the national and international capital cities grant? There is currently a more than £100 million shortfall, which threatens the police’s ability to protect Londoners. Will the Minister make it clear where our future lies in respect of our relationship with Europol? This will be vital for accessing criminal records information systems, yet we know the EU’s deputy chairman has already made it clear to Denmark that it “should not be under any illusions” about its ability to negotiate a parallel agreement to membership.

Finally, there is the question that everyone has asked over and over again. What will be our future relationship with the European arrest warrant? In November, the Director of Public Prosecutions said that up to 150 essential extraditions would not have been possible without the European arrest warrant system and our relationship with it, and the former director general of MI6 has warned that losing abilities such as that provided by the arrest warrant would make the UK “less safe”.

I hope that the Minister will make it clear how we can continue to protect our citizens and to protect London, where my constituency is. I urge him to address these practical security questions: that might even earn the Government some good will from those who will be sitting on the other side of the negotiating table. As I am sure the Minister will recognise, the No. 1 priority of any Government is to ensure the security of their civilians, but it is not entirely clear to me at present how this Government intend to do that.

4.30 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I think that, in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks, it was recognised that something had to be done to speed up extradition processes and reduce the amount of bureaucracy involved. That, in addition to the fact that some career criminals seemed to be using countries such as Spain—the so-called Costa del Crime—as a permanent home, meant that I was happy to give the then Government the benefit of the doubt. I have always supported the principle of a European arrest warrant, and we have heard many important speeches in support of it today. However, although I do not disagree with the principle of what has been said, it cannot be denied that there are cases that have given rise to concern.

The European extradition warrant makes the assumption that standards of justice are the same in all EU countries, that standards in prisons are the same, and that bail conditions will be the same as well. In short, it assumes that human rights are respected in exactly the same way throughout the European Union. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chairman of the Justice Committee, said that he had no doubt that standards of justice in Germany and France were exactly the same as they are in the UK, and I do not really have any doubt about that either, but I do have concerns about the overall standards of justice in other parts of the European Union.

Some of the cases that concern me have already been mentioned briefly. There was the case of Andrew Symeou, who spent nearly a year in prison, having been denied bail, because he was not a Greek resident. In other
words, he was extradited because he was a European, but was unable to get bail because he was not actually Greek. He served time in some pretty awful places. Both my hon. Friend and I have seen a Greek detention centre, and I have certainly seen a Greek detention centre, and, having served as a special constable, I would say that the conditions were illegal under any European rules and regulations.

We were shown a room that was probably not much more than a quarter of the size of the Chamber. It contained 30 or 40 people who were being held in those conditions for up to a year for various immigration infractions, and who, as far as I could tell, were given very little time out. That was totally unacceptable. It would have been unacceptable to hold anyone in conditions like that for 48 hours in a UK police station. It comes to something when people are actually begging to be sent to a Greek prison because their existing conditions are so bad.

There was the case of Gary Mann, who was tried for and convicted of an affray-type offence within 48 hours of being arrested. He had not, in fact, been involved. He was released, but there was subsequently a demand for him to return to Portugal to serve a two-year sentence. He was not given access to facilities that we take for granted, such as translation facilities, which are extremely important.

There have been other such cases. There was, for instance, the case of Edmond Arapi, about which I read on the Fair Trials International website and of which I had not been aware before. Apparently he was convicted of murder in his absence, despite the fact that at the time the murder in question took place he was working, or studying, in the United Kingdom. There were numerous witnesses to say that he had been in the UK on the day and nowhere near the country in which the murder was supposed to have taken place, yet he went through years of hell because of the strong possibility that he would be extradited to Italy to serve, I think, a 19-year sentence.

It could at least be said that, in those instances, the motivation was to reduce crime and to deal with straightforward criminality, even if we think that the standards applied were simply not good enough. Other cases are now beginning to emerge that have a more worrying motivation, and I want to pay particular attention to what the Romanian Government are doing at the moment. They have indicated that they may serve an arrest warrant against an award-winning Sky journalist, Stuart Ramsay, and his team, who put together a documentary about gun-running in Romania which the Romanian Government did not like. I do not know whether the claims made were accurate, but he is an award-winning Sky journalist and I have no reason to doubt them. If Governments do not like journalists’ stories about them, they have the right to rebut them, but it is simply unacceptable for Governments to start issuing arrest and judicial proceedings against journalists who have upset them. That would never be acceptable in this country.

There is another ongoing case that I find particularly worrying: the extradition warrant served against Alexander Adamescu, also by the Romanian Government. He is becoming a bit of a cause célèbre at present. His father runs a newspaper in Romania which has been highly critical of the Romanian Government. The Romanian Prime Minister at the time said he was corrupt and had him arrested, and he was found guilty in a short space of time. There are all sorts of reasons why one might question the court case but it is not really for me to do so here. The point is that when his son, who is a UK resident and an aspiring playwright, filed charges against the Romanian Government, he was served with an EAW and was arrested on the streets of London on his way to speak to the Frontline Club about the importance of journalistic freedoms. There was also an attempt to kidnap his wife by masked men, which still has not properly been dealt with, and nobody has been found.

These are very worrying cases as they give rise to the concern that, rather than trying to have people arrested to resolve criminality, some Governments—on the basis of those two cases the Romanian Government are one that worries me—seem to be using the EAW to send out a message that anyone who questions them or tries to hold them to account will run the risk of being taken off the streets of the country in which they are resident, arrested and sent back to Romania or elsewhere for trial.

Sir William Cash: There is another problem that the European Scrutiny Committee has looked at in the past, when we had the Fair Trials team in to give us evidence: some of the judges are politically appointed.

David T. C. Davies: My hon. Friend makes an important point.

I have listened with great interest to what has been said in this debate. I was of course a supporter of Brexit, but that in no way means I oppose the EAW or the principles behind it.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the EAW has benefited some of our constituents? Four days before Christmas a father in my constituency was reunited with his son who had been abducted and taken to Poland. He was recovered on the issuing of an EAW.

David T. C. Davies: I do not deny that for one moment; the EAW has led to some very important results for us, where we have had terrorists and other serious criminals either extradited out of or back to the UK. As my hon. Friend knows, I served as a special constable for eight or nine years, so there is no question but that I will always support any Government in wanting to bring about stricter measures against criminality. But the issue here is that there is a price to be paid, and we pay it in the human rights of citizens in our own country. If we are prepared to allow countries which apply a lower standard of justice, of fairness in court, or of access to bail to extradite our citizens or residents of this country in order to keep the bureaucracy running smoothly, everyone who is living in this country is paying a price in terms of their human rights in order to reduce bureaucracy and improve an extradition procedure. We need to think very carefully about that price.

Brexit offers us an opportunity. I have no problem with the countries my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst mentioned—Germany or France—or indeed many other European countries, but if it becomes the case that some countries are not giving people bail, are holding them in pre-trial detention for
an unacceptable length of time, or are using the EAW as a means to silence criticism of them through the press, it is absolutely right that we use Brexit as an opportunity to renegotiate the whole system, and to work with countries that apply our systems of justice but to state with the utmost respect that we are unwilling to sacrifice the human rights of people such as Alexander Adamescu in order to maintain membership of the EAW. I hope that a Justice Minister will meet me to discuss this case on a subsequent occasion.

4.40 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), even if I do not always agree with everything he has to say. I should also like to extend my best wishes to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) as he starts a new chapter in his career. I am pleased to take part in this important debate, in which there is an unusually wide degree of consensus, although not unanimity.

Participation in EU schemes brings value, and the Government should be doing all they can to keep the UK as closely involved as possible. If Brexit is to happen, we on these Benches believe that it is utterly essential that we do everything open to us in the negotiations to preserve our involvement to the maximum degree achievable. However, as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said, success in that ambition cannot be taken for granted. As the Minister said, it is in the interests of the other EU member states that the UK is involved, and it is undoubtedly true that the UK contribution to these institutions is significant and very much valued. Indeed, it is no doubt a matter of huge regret that a member state that has been hugely influential in shaping initiatives such as the European arrest warrant, Europol, passenger names records and so on has now put its ongoing participation in these schemes at risk. However, nobody should be complacent in thinking that securing meaningful ongoing participation will be straightforward, because all the evidence shows that there are significant political and legal hurdles to overcome. That point was well made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), in her opening speech.

Justice and home affairs are areas of shared competence, so agreements on participation may well need approval from the EU institutions and individual member states. In some of those states, that could involve parliamentary ratification or even a referendum. All of that will be made more complex still if the Government are going to set out clear red lines that could make those hurdles even more difficult to overcome. That includes the Prime Minister’s obsession with escaping any aspect of the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. The right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) was right to make that point at the start of the debate.

Let me turn to a couple of the schemes and institutions in which it is vital we seek to preserve a role for the UK. The introduction of the European arrest warrant has resulted in a step change in how quickly suspects and criminals can be repatriated to face justice. Other Members have already made this point, and I will not repeat all the benefits of the system that have already been highlighted. Last May, the then Home Secretary told the Home Affairs Committee that if we were not in the European Union, we would almost certainly not have access to the European arrest warrant. On the basis of evidence submitted to the Committee so far, that seems almost certain to be correct. This would create one of the biggest headaches for the Government. The then Home Secretary also noted the length of time it had taken for Norway and Iceland to negotiate access to something not even as comprehensive as the European arrest warrant system. Sixteen years on from the start of negotiations, an agreement is not yet in force. She also noted that such deals often contain massive loopholes that the European arrest warrant does not. For example, some states will simply not extradite their own nationals, and will insist on any trial taking place in their own courts.

Do the Government accept that it will not be possible to negotiate a single deal for one procedure with the European Union as a whole, or are they going to make an attempt to do so? Or are they resigned to negotiating 27 different agreements, as Lord Carlile, the former independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, has suggested will be required? In the likely event that work on either of those options cannot be completed within two years, will the Government be seeking a transitional arrangement? Otherwise, as the Chair of the Justice Committee suggested, we will revert to the 1957 Council of Europe Convention on Extradition. In those days, it took an average of 18 months to extradite someone; now, under the European arrest warrant, it takes 15 days in uncontested cases or 45 days if contested. Police officers everywhere will be interested to know what planning will be done so that law enforcement agencies can cope with a more expensive and complicated procedure.

The Home Affairs Committee visited Europol last year—we have already heard about some of the other benefits of that institution—and all its members were impressed by the work that has been done under the leadership of Rob Wainwright. On that visit, the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) highlighted, we noted the presence of US liaison officers. Indeed, 14 third countries have negotiated operational partnerships with Europol. Although some such arrangement could probably be agreed within two years, that status is just not as good as what the UK currently enjoys as a full member. Before the referendum, Mr Wainwright warned that the UK would become “a second-tier member of our club” if it left the EU and that, like Iceland and Norway, it would be denied direct access to Europol data and, of course, would not have direct influence on the overall direction of the agency, which has proved so beneficial in recent years. Those are not trivial matters and could mean that a request for information on missing or wanted persons takes days rather than hours, which could be crucial for those involved. That is why the NCAs David Armond has called on the Government to seek something more than the operational partnership enjoyed by other states.

There could be problems with our relationship with Europol, in particular the all-important access to data, if the Government move away from EU data protection standards, as other hon. Members have mentioned. We have heard that the ECJ has struck down the EU-US.
safe harbour agreement on similar grounds. Under the new Europol directive, we will also need to seek approval from the European Parliament, which has refused to back an EU-US terrorist financing tracking programme for similar reasons. While it is good that the Minister said that the Government are not settling for an operational partnership and are looking for some form of bespoke agreement, we need more detail about exactly what is envisaged. Will the Government ensure that data protection standards here do not jeopardise our relationship with Europol? What if that involves some influence from the ECJ?

While the UK enjoys only partial access to the Schengen information system, the evidence to the Select Committee so far has been that it has been a game changer for police. It facilitates real-time information sharing and alerts, and the police national computer is linked into the system. Access for non-EU and non-Schengen countries is limited, with countries such as Australia having to ask an institution such as Europol to search on its behalf. Norway and Iceland have agreements to access the database, but they are required to make payments without any say on policy development and, significantly, they must implement ECJ decisions or face losing access. The SNP would have no hesitation in saying that such commitments are absolutely worth it if we can secure similar access, but do the Government believe the same? Does the Prime Minister’s obsession with the ECJ take precedence?

Similar issues arise with Prüm, to which Schengen membership, financial contributions and ECJ jurisdiction have secured Iceland and Norway access. According to David Armond, the Interpol agreement that we would have to fall back on if and when we were excluded from Prüm would be time-consuming, bureaucratic and far less effective. Similar problems also arise with ECRIS, the European police college, the European Union Agency for Network and Information Security, Eurojust, and the passenger name record, and the Government’s efforts at securing access and membership must be scrutinised.

I welcome the Minister’s commitment to work with devolved criminal justice organisations and Governments. Although justice is devolved, the devolved Governments will sadly not be directly at the table when the negotiations happen.

In conclusion, if anything illustrates the idea that the European Union can be about empowering states, rather than ceding state powers, it is surely the field of policing and security. If we fight serious and organised crime and terrorism on our own, we are not so much taking back control for the police and other services involved in that fight as risking tying one arm behind our back. We all benefit and are more powerful by co-operating and sharing sovereignty at that level. It is essential that the Government prioritise security, not obsessions about back control for the police and other services involved in that fight as risking tying one arm behind our back. We all benefit and are more powerful by co-operating and sharing sovereignty at that level. It is essential that the Government prioritise security, not obsessions about back control for the police and other services involved in that fight as risking tying one arm behind our back.

I add my voice to the many better qualified than me who detailed the aspects of co-operation that best serve the citizens of the United Kingdom. I understand that there are 133 EU measures in place on co-operation, and we have a fair amount of work on our hands to co-ordinate and work in concord.

There are a few issues of particular relevance to Wales and the western seaboard. As we well know, the common travel area allows Irish and UK citizens to travel between the two countries without showing a passport. We welcome the announcement that that is to remain, but I will explain why, from the point of view of Wales and of the security of Wales, the border warrants consideration.

Key Welsh ports such as Holyhead, Fishguard and Pembroke Dock deal with thousands of passengers and huge amounts of freight coming from Ireland each and every day. Milford Haven is a major port for fuel arriving by sea, and Holyhead is second only to Dover in terms of passenger numbers, with 1.9 million passengers in 2015. In the present circumstances, will the security status of the port of Holyhead be revisited? Plaid Cymru’s police and crime commissioners, Arfon Jones and Dafydd Llywelyn, have warned that, were the border to become more tangible, it is likely that there would be a rise in criminality in Holyhead in the form of cross-border smuggling, and even the possibility of terrorist violence focused on physical manifestations of the border. That possibility must be avoided at all costs.

David Anderson QC, the outgoing independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, highlighted in his December 2016 report that ports on the western front could be the “soft underbelly” of this island’s security. With more than 1,680 miles of coast and relatively small police forces covering vast rural areas, the practical difficulties of policing Wales’s coastline are enormous. Ports and police services in Wales are already facing immense pressure, as public service cuts have seen their capacity slashed—this is, of course, a domestic issue as much as an international issue—and there are concerns that ports may be lost at Welsh ports if the cuts continue. As we are aware, the Border Force is already struggling to fill the gaps.

A senior police officer has warned me that “people will be coming in and we’ll be missing them.” There are real concerns that the still-unresolved police funding formula and the high priority accorded to urban adversity will disproportionately affect rural police forces such as Dyfed–Powys and North Wales. I urge the Policing Minister to consider the risks of over-simplifying the number of ‘smudging indicators if it is evident that they fail to take account of the variation in policing needs and policing environments across forces.

I specifically request a meeting with the Policing Minister to discuss concerns about the future funding of North Wales police in light of what we are discussing today. From stopping the smuggling of goods and people to stopping outright acts of terrorism, if the Government are serious about ensuring the continued security of this country in a time of great uncertainty,
they must recognise and address the unique issues faced by Welsh police services. Brexit must not mean more cuts and more uncertainty for the forces that work day in and day out to protect us.

4.53 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): As the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) observed, one of the disadvantages of taking part so late in a debate is that many of the things that I might have wanted to say have already been covered. The other disadvantage, of course, is that there are fewer people left to hear me.

I principally want to make the case for differential arrangements in Scotland in a post-Brexit world. The areas that we are discussing exemplify why that ought to be the case. Policing and law enforcement in Scotland have long been quite separate from that in England and Wales in their structure, administration, budget and legislative framework. The police’s mandate from the criminal justice system predates devolution. Devolution and the establishment of the Scottish Parliament transferred legislative responsibility to a Parliament elected in Scotland, but that process did not set up a separate arrangement for policing and did not establish a separate criminal justice system. No one has suggested that those matters should change post-Brexit, but I hope the Minister will acknowledge that position, and discuss how the arrangements will be different in Scotland and what processes need to happen to make that a reality.

I also want to talk about the general political context in which this debate takes place, as well as some of the criteria that inform public opinion and political dialogue in Scotland. Members of this House, including those who do not represent Scotland, will know only too well that the politics of Scotland is largely influenced by the legacy of the 2014 independence referendum. I do not want to go into that in any detail, but two aspects of that discussion, which ended in September 2014, are relevant to today’s debate.

The first of those relates to the relationship that people in Scotland were to have with the European Union. We were told during that debate not only that the prospectus for an independent Scotland was a bad one, because Scotland’s position within the EU could not be guaranteed, but that if people in Scotland wished to retain their European passports, the best way to do so was to vote to stay within the United Kingdom. Only that, we were told, would guarantee that people would be able to maintain their existing relationship with other European nations. The second thing that was said was about the concept of respect. We were told that if people voted to renew the Union between Scotland, and England, Wales and Northern Ireland, that would be a matter not of opinions and views being subsumed into a much larger neighbour, but of a partnership in which the views of the people of Scotland would be respected and treated equally, albeit in an asymmetric power relationship.

What has just happened with Brexit severely tests both those propositions and the assurances given in that debate. We have yet to see what type of United Kingdom emerges in a post-Brexit world, but clearly many fear a dystopian future in which this country turns its back on the rest of the world, and becomes insular, isolated and riven by sectarian and ethnic division. That may not come to pass—I very much hope that it does not—but clearly the United Kingdom of the future is going to be manifestly different from the one on the ballot paper on 18 September 2014.

The other thing to say is about respect, which is another notion that will be sorely tested. Public opinion, as expressed on 23 June 2016, on the matter of relationships with other European nations is manifestly and palpably different in Scotland from that in England and Wales. That presents all of us with something of a dilemma. Given the muted tones and more thoughtful nature of today’s debate compared with some of the exchanges in recent weeks’ Brexit debates, I hope that we might be able to confront these paradoxes and decide that together we should try to do something positive about them.

That was what the Scottish Government attempted to do in “Scotland’s Place in Europe”, the paper that they published before Christmas. I commend it to any Member who has not read it as it sets out a prospectus for a differential relationship that Scotland would have in a post-Brexit world. It suggests that Scotland should be given the authority and competence to be an associate member of the European economic area, because attitudes in Scotland are different from those in England and Wales, particularly on the freedom of movement of people across borders.

I want to make it absolutely clear—I encourage people to recognise this—that the Scottish Government’s document and the position that they are now campaigning for are not seeking to say that Scotland should be an independent country, or that any part of the UK should remain part of the EU. In that sense, they respect both the 2014 decision and the 2016 decision. They try to square the circle with regard to how opinion north of the border is manifestly different from that in the south. I therefore commend the document to Members; we should explore it.

Joanna Cherry: Will my hon. Friend confirm that polling released this afternoon shows widespread support in Scotland for the Scottish Government’s plan to stay in the single market? Indeed, in the early days after the EU referendum, both the Secretary of State for Scotland and Ruth Davidson, the leader of the Conservative and Unionist party in Scotland, were demanding that Scotland should remain part of the single market.

Tommy Sheppard: Indeed. Members will think that we prepared that exchange, but we did not. It is worth quoting the Secretary of State for Scotland, who said in June last year, just after the Brexit vote:

“My role is to ensure Scotland gets the best possible deal and that deal involves clearly being part of the single market.”

Those are not my words, but the words of the Conservative Secretary of State for Scotland. Of course, he might have changed his mind in the months since then.

The Scottish Government’s document suggests that there are three levels of legislation that should be looked at when considering how we manage Brexit within these islands. I hope that no one would suggest that a constitutional decision of such magnitude as to withdraw this country from its main international association can be done without having any effect on the constitutional arrangements within the county—it is obvious that that
will be the case. There will have to be, either as part of the great repeal Bill or in a Scottish Bill, some provision to give new powers to the Scottish Parliament.

The Scottish Government believe that those powers fall into three areas. First, there are some areas in which the Scottish Government already have competence that are going to be repatriated straight from Brussels. We should make sure that they go straight to Holyrood without stopping at Westminster on the way. Secondly, there are areas of additional legislative competence that should be given to the Scottish Government when they are devolved from Brussels, particularly in the field of employment legislation and, indeed, some immigration matters. Thirdly, if we can persuade the United Kingdom Government to consent to and support the idea of arrangements in Scotland being different, but still consistent with leaving the EU, we will need a legislative competence Bill that allows the Scottish Government to form future relationships.

The matters we are discussing in this debate very much fall into the first category I described, albeit perhaps with the exception of security. Criminal justice and law enforcement are areas in which the Scottish Government already have competence, so the repatriation of powers should see that competence expanded.

Will the Minister tell us what dialogue is taking place between Ministers of the Crown here at Westminster and their Scottish counterparts about how the arrangements I have referred to should be made? They will involve matters of great detail that require great expertise, so it would seem rather ridiculous simply to say that this is all a matter for the Department for Exiting the European Union. We need to explore in some detail criminal justice and law enforcement, and how the relationship for the special aspects of Police Scotland in terms of the security system will work following Brexit. That should not be left to the Brexit Department; it should properly be a matter for the Home Department. When he responds, I hope the Minister will set out not only that the Government intend to have that dialogue, but suggestions about how it might take place.

5.2 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Prime Minister made it clear in her speech yesterday that one of her objectives in exiting the European Union would be to release the United Kingdom from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. During yesterday’s proceedings on the statement made by the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, an issue arose of how cross-border trade disputes are to be settled if the UK refuses to be bound by the rulings of the ECJ. The Secretary of State did not give a comprehensive answer to how such disputes will be arbitrated once the UK is outside the EU, which raises the possibility that he does not yet know.

It gives me enormous concern that the Department for Exiting the European Union does not yet have a clear idea of how the role of the ECJ will be replaced once we leave the EU. Although it might be possible to cobble together a mutually acceptable compromise for trade deals, as the Secretary of State airily declared yesterday, the ECJ has a far greater role to play in our national life than just being the arbiter of trade deals.

As members of the EU, we benefit from a range of different schemes for sharing data and resources across borders, including the Schengen information system, the European arrest warrant, Europol and the European criminal records information system, among many others. We collaborate with our European neighbours on matters relating to family law, asylum and the freezing of assets.

The Prime Minister argued passionately in favour of those measures as Home Secretary, and when leading the Government’s case for opting into 35 justice and home affairs measures in 2014. In this very House, she argued that without such measures we would “risk harmful individuals walking free and escaping justice, and would seriously harm the capability of our law enforcement agencies to keep the public safe.”—[Official Report, 10 November 2014; Vol. 587, c. 1229.]

Our membership of the European Union gives us an automatic right to the co-operation of our EU neighbours in all those measures. Once we exit the European Union, we will lose that automatic right. As we have seen with the single market, the Prime Minister and her Cabinet are failing to support measures that they have spent their whole careers championing as fundamental to our security and public life.

It is entirely possible that we can negotiate a new agreement to maintain access to data and resources. The UK has been instrumental in setting up many of the cross-border police and crime systems that the EU has adopted, and our contribution will be missed when we leave. It is to be hoped that this will provide a powerful negotiating tool when we come to strike a new deal. However, so much of that cross-border co-operation and data sharing depends on all parties accepting the jurisdiction of the ECJ. There are several reasons for that. First, the EU can only act in compliance with the charter of fundamental rights. The ECJ is the ultimate arbiter of that, so it is impossible for the EU to sign an agreement with the UK that conflicts either with the charter or with ECJ case law.

Secondly, any agreement needs to be policed. If the UK acted in ways that breached the terms of this agreement, it would be open to an EU citizen to take a case to the ECJ and have the EU’s decision concluding the agreement annulled. Thirdly, the developing jurisprudence of the ECJ is binding on EU member states. If the UK failed to keep pace with legal developments on the continent, or diverged from EU law on any significant matter, a gap would open up. The international deals that the EU signs with third countries tend to include a mechanism for discussing legal divergence, including the ability to allow the agreement to be terminated if the differences cannot be reconciled. The UK would therefore have to stick closely to the rulings of the ECJ to avoid the agreement being annulled.

One of the most valuable contributions that membership of the European Union makes to the UK’s continuing security is the sharing of data between national police and intelligence agencies, but the sharing of personal data must be subject to stricter safeguards to prevent misuse. Within the EU, all countries have signed up to data protection legislation that governs the sharing of this data. Once the UK has left the jurisdiction of the ECJ, which oversees the data protection legislation that governs such data sharing, any bespoke agreement will have to continue to be governed by similar levels of protection.
Should UK law diverge from EU law on data protection, any agreement will become void if the ECJ deems that UK law is insufficient to protect European citizens’ data. That would result in the flow of data from the EU to the UK being immediately stopped, putting at risk the ability of British police and security forces to investigate and prosecute potential threats.

Given the Prime Minister’s determination, as expressed yesterday, to cut all ties with the European Court of Justice, I urge the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to form, with the utmost urgency, a proposal for the future of information sharing and co-operation on security matters between the UK and the European Union. He needs to set out detailed plans for how collaboration can be continued if the UK will not accept the jurisdiction of the ECJ. He also needs to state how the risks of any bespoke arrangement will be addressed, especially the risk that UK and ECJ case law diverge in the future, making negotiated arrangements untenable.

I hope that Members on both sides of this debate will acknowledge that the full implications of rejecting the ECJ were not put to voters in a referendum campaign and that, had they been, the Prime Minister might not now be so determined to remove the UK from its jurisdiction. I hope that the very real risks to our future security are being properly considered by the Secretary of State and look forward to hearing his proposals in greater detail in due course.

5.8 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). Her constituency is very close to my heart, because I fought my first parliamentary election as the Labour candidate in Richmond Park and lost by, I think, 26,000 votes. However, it was enough to ensure the election of a Conservative Member, Jeremy Hanley. At the count, the Liberal Democrats were very angry with me because Alan Watson, who is now in another place, lost by a very small margin. At least I have the comfort of knowing that the hon. Lady has now been elected as the Member for Richmond Park. I wish her well in her career, which I am sure will be long and distinguished. I have to say that I was fond of the former Member for Richmond Park, who was always extremely courteous and had great respect and affection for the House and for you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I am sorry that I missed the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt). I was sad to hear that he was to leave the House to take up an appointment outside. I feel that I was at his political birth—I sat on the panel that interviewed him for the seat of Stoke-on-Trent Central. We had interviewed 25 people before my hon. Friend came in; he was so outstanding in his interview and we were so impressed that we immediately put him on the shortlist—and, of course, party members in Stoke-on-Trent selected him by a very large majority.

I remember one of the panellists saying that one day my hon. Friend would become the leader of the Labour party and Prime Minister; instead, he has gone for a better-paid job, probably with much better influence and less stress, as the director of the V&A. His amazing career outside the House has been matched by his complete devotion and dedication to the people of Stoke-on-Trent Central. I know that because I have been up there twice in the past five years and seen the great affection that local people have for him. He is dedicated and hard-working and will be greatly missed. We all wish him well in his new career. He is going to keep the museums free, and we are all going to visit him at his first exhibition.

What has been good about this debate was the passion of both Front Benchers. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) gave an extraordinarily good speech, and we heard another good speech from the Minister for Policing. Both supported the immensely important role that we play in justice and security in the EU. In fact, I do not think there was any difference between what the Front Benchers said on this subject: they both realised the importance of our remaining at the forefront of this agenda in the European Union, even though we are leaving it.

The Minister spoke with all the passion of one who supported the remain campaign during the referendum. He reminded us of the importance of the institutions and how vital it is that we remain part of them in one way or another. It is significant that we lead the rest of Europe as far as justice and security are concerned. We need the European Union, but it also needs us in a whole variety of organisations and institutions and in different ways.

Europol has been mentioned a number of times. Like the Minister and shadow Minister, I am a great fan of Europol. I pay tribute to Rob Wainwright for the excellent work that he does. During all the years that we have been members of the EU, how rare it has been for a Brit to be head of an EU agency or organisation. What an incredibly good job Rob Wainwright has done as director of Europol.

The Prime Minister is keen that we should not just have bits of the EU, but this is a bit that we desperately need. We desperately need to be part of an organisation that has a proven record in dealing with organised and serious crime. In the terrible migration crisis that has gripped the EU over the past few years, the involvement and support of Europol from the Hague has been vital to the hotspots that have been created.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Many years ago, when I was a member of the Home Affairs Committee, we went to Holland to see a demonstration of Europol in action; it had traced millions of pounds’ worth of drugs to the other side of the world. It helps British police forces to do the very same thing, by getting information from Interpol. The issue is about connections.

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is right. He knew about it then, and I have reminded him.

I know the Minister is busy tweeting parts of my speech, but may I occupy his time for just one moment? It is possible for us to get an arrangement with Europol that will mean not that we are sitting on its management board, but that we are very near that position. We know, from watching what the United States has done, that it is possible to be there. It is not as good as running the organisation, but it is being near the centre of power, which is where we need to be with Europol.
As we have heard, every serving chief constable, the head of the NCA and the head of the Metropolitan police say how important it is for us to stay a part of it. The Policing Minister knows that, because I am sure that police officers have said as much to him. At the very least, we should be able to negotiate something equivalent to what the United States has negotiated, whereby we have a room, a desk and access to the kind of information that we so desperately need.

On criminal records, the Minister has responded to me on ECRIS but we do not have details. I spoke yesterday to the national police director of information, Ian Readhead, who runs our database system from Hampshire. He told me how vital it is for our country to have access to ECRIS because it means that we know exactly where people are, and if someone has committed an offence, we can contact their country, which will give us within minutes the results of a check on whether that person has a criminal conviction. Some 200,000 foreign national offenders were arrested in our country last year, half of whom—100,000—are EU nationals. That is why it is extremely important that we have access to the database.

ECRIS is not extended to any non-EU members. Those are the rules. The only exceptions are full members of Schengen, so Switzerland and Norway have access to the database. Of course, we have no prospect of joining Schengen or, indeed, of wanting to join Schengen, so we must be very careful in our negotiations to ensure that we have information sharing so that we can get data from the rest of the European Union.

We heard from the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry), who is the House’s resident expert on Prüm. After some delay, the Government decided to opt into Prüm, but we will not start sharing the information that is provided under it—the DNA and fingerprinting expertise, and the other information that we need—until later this year. I hope very much that the Minister will ensure in his negotiations that we continue to benefit from Prüm until we leave the EU, and indeed that we have an agreement to allow us access to the important information gained through Prüm after we have left the EU.

I do not think that anyone so far has mentioned the issue of foreign national offenders. The latest figures show that there are 4,217 EU national offenders in the United Kingdom, costing £169 million a year. At the top of the list is Poland, with 983 citizens in our prisons. There are 764 from Ireland and 635 from Romania. The Chair of the Select Committee on Justice, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), will remember that we questioned the prisons Minister on the issue of foreign national offenders. We could not understand why—since we have a prisoner transfer arrangement with Poland, and both Poland and the United Kingdom are in the European Union—we have not been able to transfer Polish prisoners back to Poland. The answer came back to us from a senior official at the Ministry of Justice that the Government probably could have transferred more prisoners back. It is important that we look at that, especially if we can do the prisoner swap before we leave the European Union. Otherwise, once we come out of the European Union, Poland will be in exactly the same situation as any other country with regard to prisoner transfer arrangements. We should try to make sure that the swap happens as quickly as possible.

A number of Members have mentioned the European arrest warrant. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham made an impressive contribution on that issue. I have concerns about it, because other EU countries are issuing warrants on the basis of their law and their constitutions, and in some cases for very minor offences. Our system is being clogged up with a number of warrants that have been issued against nationals of other EU countries. We should be much more careful before issuing a European arrest warrant: it should be for serious and important offences, not for someone who has stolen a bicycle in another part of the EU, as has been the case. As the Minister negotiates with the rest of EU on the European arrest warrant, this is an opportunity to look at the issue anew. While accepting the importance of the principle of the European arrest warrant, which we would like to keep, we can also look at the defects inherent in it. It is a great scheme but it has its flaws, and this is an opportunity to ensure that they are dealt with.

My final point relates to EU nationals living in this country. As I said to the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, I do not know—she did not know either—whether we will have another debate on leaving the EU and home affairs issues other than those that we are discussing today, but I would have thought it essential that we clarify the position of EU nationals living in this country. The Prime Minister gave a guarantee in her speech yesterday that they would be allowed to remain here in tandem with British citizens being allowed to remain in the EU. That is short of an absolute commitment from the Government, for which Members in all parts of the House have asked. Now we have even more uncertainty. Can the Minister tell us the cut-off date for EU citizens who are resident in this country? Will it be 23 June 2016, in that everyone in the country on that date will be allowed to remain here as residents, will it be the date when we trigger Brexit, or will it be the date when we leave the European Union? I realise the Government’s difficulty: they do not want to set a date in the future, because they fear that lots of people would suddenly arrive in order to claim residence.

However, there will be a huge problem in processing the 3.5 million EU residents, because people from some EU countries do not require a passport to enter the United Kingdom. Italians come here on the basis of an Italian identity card, which is not stamped—one cannot stamp an identity card. No matter what the Government say, we still do not have 100% exit checks, and if someone presents their EU passport or identity card, nobody knows when they have arrived. Therefore, how will it be possible to process 3.5 million people in the space of two years?

That is why the best course of action is to make this commitment now—to say that we will allow EU citizens to remain here and to set the date, so that there is no uncertainty or rush in the future. We can get this clarified at a very early stage rather than waiting until the end of the process. There are still EU nationals seeking employment in this country who are being told by employers that they will not be able to stay. There are people who may not be given jobs because they are EU citizens, and people who may not be able to rent accommodation under the new rules regarding landlords and tenants because they now have
to show their passport in order to rent property in the United Kingdom. It is essential that we have the situation clarified.

Whatever the detail—it is good to see the former Immigration Minister, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), here as I talk about these matters—the negotiations will be very complicated, and they will not be easy when it comes to enforcement and criminal justice. We need regular reports back to the House on how they are going, because they will affect the safety and security of our citizens. The primary task of any Government is to protect their citizens, which is why it is important that we get as much information as possible.

5.25 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): This has been an important debate, if a somewhat select affair, and there have been many excellent contributions from colleagues. The safety and security of citizens is the first responsibility of any Government.

Given the need for the UK and EU member states to collaborate, to co-ordinate intelligence and to share information, this debate matters. The fact that the Government have scheduled it is a good signal of their intention to maintain close relationships on security, law enforcement and criminal justice. But there are other important issues to debate urgently—freedom of movement, principles for negotiating new trade deals, change to single market membership and associate membership of a customs union, whatever that might turn out to be—and, welcome as our general debates so far have been, I cannot help wondering whether the Government are avoiding debating some of the most crucial issues.

The Minister has said that he wants to have a future relationship with EU states on security and law enforcement, and we welcome that. Maintaining our close relationship on security is vital. Our security must not be compromised by our departure from the EU. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) has said, it is good to hear both Front-Bench teams agreeing on that important point. It is in our national interest to continue to have the closest possible collaboration on these issues. We must maintain our ability to participate in the European arrest warrant, our Europol membership and our ability to participate in information sharing, particularly via the Schengen Information System. We need those measures in order to stay safe.

Justice and security were barely mentioned during the referendum campaign, and the Government have no mandate to water down such measures. The European arrest warrant is strong. The Government, and particularly the Prime Minister, have favoured participation in it, and the current arrangements must be maintained. The Minister must not just outline his commitment to the European arrest warrant, but signal how he intends to ensure that it is maintained to the UK’s benefit.

Similarly, full Europol membership is vital. Anything less has been described as “damage limitation”. After we have left, will we still have access to the same databases and sources of information as we do now? How will Ministers ensure that privacy laws do not encumber our access? The Government must ensure, and explain how it will ensure, that Britain’s security and safety are in no way diminished. This is not about trade, vital though that is. This is the most fundamental duty of any Government. Our security and safety are not to be weakened, and our partners need to know that we intend to work together with them more closely than ever. As threats emerge, we must work more, not less, closely with our allies as good partners.

The right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) spoke with great care and authority of the need to sustain our involvement with international bodies. Like many of us who campaigned to remain in the EU, he accepts that we are leaving, but, like the rest of us, he sees the danger of departing without resolving the serious and vital security issues. The UK recently opted in to the new adopted regulation on Europol. The Government passed that test of their resolve, but good intentions are not sufficient. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) spoke of the need for Ministers to explain how the UK can remain part of the existing structures, on equivalent terms. The detail counts, and the House will hold the Government to their stated objective of maintaining our current beneficial relationship.

The Chairman of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), urged the Government not to rule out making the financial contributions that may be required so that we can continue to benefit, in particular, from intelligence databases. This is a most reasonable request. Will Ministers confirm that they will not dogmatically decline to make such contributions for domestic political reasons, thereby putting our information-sharing processes at risk?

We have all agreed this afternoon how important security co-operation is to the safety of our citizens. This is the closest to consensus that we are ever likely to see in this Chamber when we discuss Brexit. However, as the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), rightly said, agreement in this House does not mean that achieving the right outcome will be easy—it will not—hence her call for an explanation of how the Government intend to proceed.

My right hon. Friend gave the example of Europol’s success in achieving arrests in child exploitation cases. Everyone in the House will want to ensure that our capacity to identify and detect the individuals responsible for such crimes is in no way diminished. That ought to be possible, but it will require consistent and unwavering resolve from the Government. These matters must not be up for negotiation: there must be no trading away on these issues.

The Prime Minister spoke yesterday about not wanting to retain “bits of membership”, but as the Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), said, collaboration on justice and security is not a bit; it is a vital tool in securing safety in this country. With that in mind, will the Minister commit to ensuring that a transitional agreement protects us from any interruption in access to data and intelligence?

My hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) made an excellent speech, in which she detailed the specific concerns of her London
constituents. She wants the reassurance, as do we all, that co-operation on security and law enforcement measures will outlast our EU membership.

Lastly, I want to turn to the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt). It was a privilege to sit by him as he made his maiden speech almost seven years ago, and I am pleased, although I did not know he would speak for the final time in this House today, to take this chance to wish him well in his new and exciting role. He has always conducted himself with the utmost courtesy, speaking on issues as important as social mobility and as niche as the management of British waterways. I will miss him, and I know others will, too. I know that he has found opposition frustrating—banging your head against a brick wall is not for everyone—but I feel confident that he will use his new role to make a difference on inclusion and broadening opportunity, and I wish him every success.

5.32 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): May I say what an excellent debate this has been? It has been a debate of very high calibre. Indeed, it has been attended by no fewer than five Chairs of Select Committees. The issue of security, law enforcement and criminal justice is of significant importance in the context of Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union. I am sure that all hon. Members would acknowledge the value of this debate, which is the fourth in a series promised by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. These debates have proven to be of real assistance to the Government, not least this one, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) pointed out, is on an issue that impinges directly on all of our citizens.

As the Prime Minister made clear yesterday, a global Britain will wish to continue to co-operate with its European allies on tackling crime and terrorism. That is in the interests of not only the United Kingdom, but the continuing European Union, given the significant strengths that we can bring to the table. One of the 12 objectives that the Prime Minister outlined yesterday for the negotiations ahead is to establish a new relationship that enables the United Kingdom and the European Union to continue practical co-operation to tackle cross-border crime and to keep all our people safe.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State reiterated that objective to the House yesterday and made clear, during his appearance before the Select Committee in December, that a future relationship on security, law enforcement and criminal justice co-operation will be one of the Government’s priorities when the negotiations commence.

The UK is leaving the EU, but self-evidently it is not leaving Europe. The reality of cross-border crime and threats to security will remain. In December, as referred to by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), the House of Lords EU Home Affairs Sub-Committee report on this subject concluded that there is a shared, strong mutual interest between the United Kingdom and the 27 continuing EU member states to make sure that co-operation on tackling these threats continues. To that end, the UK already has strong bilateral relationships with member states and other countries across the globe that help to address security threats and serious organised crime, as well as facilitate the delivery of effective justice. We intend to continue that close co-operation with our European and global allies on promoting security and justice across Europe after we leave.

Sir William Cash: In my speech, and when the Minister came before the European Scrutiny Committee, I referred to the question of the attitude to be adopted in relation to votes in the Council of Ministers. Will he give some indication as to the kind of trend towards being sure we make it clear where we stand on Brexit matters within the framework of the decision-making process in COREPER?

Mr Jones: As my hon. Friend pointed out, there is clearly now a change in the staffing of COREPER so far as the UK is concerned. As we move closer towards Brexit, and particularly after we trigger article 50, it is inevitable that that position will develop and change.

There were a number of points made by hon. Members during the debate and in the short time available to me I would like to comment on as many of them as possible. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) asked what guarantees can be given that security and law enforcement will not be compromised as a consequence of our departure from the EU. Of course, we have not even started the process of negotiation. We have not yet even triggered article 50. We are leaving the EU, but, as I previously indicated, co-operation on law enforcement and security with our European and global allies will remain a priority for the Government. The Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have both spoken with several EU partners who have been clear about their wish to maintain strong co-operation with the United Kingdom. That is a good basis for starting the negotiation, but clearly this is very early days.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) made an excellent speech. He referred approvingly to the Prime Minister’s speech and made it clear that it is important the United Kingdom continues to be a close friend of the continuing EU. That is certainly the spirit in which the Government intend to approach the negotiations.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West and a number of other Members raised the issue of data protection in the continuing EU, and the extent to which the continuing EU would wish to, or be able to, share data with the UK. I would point out that on the day of departure, the UK’s data protection arrangements will be in perfect alignment with those of the continuing EU.

Joanna Cherry rose—

Mr Jones: Forgive me, but I have very little time.

Again, that will be a good basis for continuing the negotiations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chairman of the Justice Committee, raised the European arrest warrant. He said that the United Kingdom should seek to remain within the arrangements of the warrant and that we should seek to be pragmatic in the negotiations. That is certainly the
case so far as the United Kingdom Government are concerned. We look for similar pragmatism from our continuing EU colleagues.

The hon. Member for West Ham, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett), the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the hon. Members for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) asked what access we would have to Europol. Again, we are clearly at a very early stage in the negotiations, and they will obviously take time to progress, but the Prime Minister has stated that law enforcement co-operation will continue once the UK has left the EU. We are exploring options for co-operation arrangements with Europol once the UK has left the EU. But I repeat that these are very early days.

Keith Vaz: I will be brief as I know that the Minister has limited time. Will he clarify one point? He said that negotiations were at an early stage. I understood that there were to be no negotiations until article 50 had been triggered. Is he telling the House that negotiations in this area have actually begun?

Mr Jones: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to upbraid me. The negotiations are at such an early stage that they have not yet commenced. To that extent, he is quite right. He has chastised me, and I am pleased to stand corrected.

The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford asked whether there was anything in EU treaties to prevent us from remaining a member of Europol. I understand that the EU treaties do not allow for non-EU members to join Europol as full members, but as indicated already, we are seeking bespoke arrangements with the EU in this regard, and certainly we would wish to pursue access to Europol on as enhanced a basis as possible.

Yvette Cooper: For clarification, the Exiting the European Union Committee has been given evidence suggesting that although the treaties do not provide for it, neither do they rule it out. I accept the Government’s interpretation, but it would be helpful to have that confirmed.

Mr Jones: The position, as I understand it, is as I have just stated, but now that the right hon. Lady has raised the question, I shall pursue and investigate it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bath asked whether the UK would be putting human rights at the forefront of our negotiating agenda. The UK has a long-standing tradition of protecting our rights, traditions and liberties, and we see no reason to depart from that.

Richard Arkless: The Ministry of Justice has responsibility for the Crown dependencies. I have just spent two days with the Justice Select Committee speaking to the Government of the Isle of Man, and they have a simple message — no demands or list of conditions: will a Minister come to the Dispatch Box and say that the Crown dependencies will not be forgotten throughout this process or in any agreement reached with the rest of the EU?

Mr Jones: I can certainly give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. In fact, there have already been many meetings with representatives of the Crown dependencies, and that will continue throughout the process of exiting the EU.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) rightly reminded us that many security arrangements are agreed largely on a bilateral basis and that the UK has significant strengths in this regard, and of course those arrangements will continue undisturbed by our departure from the EU.

The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who chairs the Exiting the European Union Committee, congratulated my Department on its speedy response to his most recent report, at least in two respects. I am glad to see that we are giving satisfaction. He asked whether the Department would be publishing the economic analysis underpinning the plan that the Prime Minister outlined yesterday, and if so when. I can assure him that the analysis continues and will continue for some time. However, he must understand — I am sure that he does understand—that going into too much detail about that analysis at this particular stage could compromise our negotiating position. I give the right hon. Gentleman the assurance he has had before: as time passes, we will consider and reconsider the issue of how much information should be passed to his Select Committee.

Hilary Benn: The Minister says that the analysis is continuing. Will he tell us whether it will continue for another two and a half years, which would avoid the need to publish anything before the negotiations are concluded? It seems to the Select Committee perfectly reasonable, without compromising the Government’s negotiating hand, to reveal to the House and the public the Government’s analysis of the different options, which will help to inform people’s view about the Government’s plan?

Mr Jones: I have no doubt that that analysis will continue for some considerable time, although I doubt whether it will continue for two and a half years. I have heard what the right hon. Gentleman has to say, and we will certainly continue to consider the position. At this particular stage, however, I believe that giving such detail would compromise the negotiation.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) gave his valedictory contribution, and on behalf of Conservative Members, I would like to wish him well in his future endeavours. He reminded us quite correctly that the United Kingdom is part of the greater European culture, and I am sure that under his direction the Victoria & Albert museum will continue to reflect that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stone expressed concern about the use of the European arrest warrant for crimes that he regarded as trivial. The European arrest warrant was radically reformed by the previous coalition Government to offer better protection for British citizens and others who are subject to extradition proceedings. British citizens can no longer be extradited where a case is not trial-ready, where the conduct is not a crime within the United Kingdom or where it is...
simply not proportionate to extradite. These protections are set out in UK legislation. Concerns about the European arrest warrant were also expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), who raised specifically the Adamescu case. The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), has listened and attended carefully to the points raised. Concerns about the use of European arrest warrant were also expressed by the right hon. Member for Leicester East.

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Mr Jones) raised the issue of the common travel area, which is a matter of concern. The common travel area long predates our membership or Ireland’s membership of the European Union. It goes back to 1923, and the Government have made it very clear that preserving those arrangements is at the forefront of our minds as we approach the negotiations.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) raised the issue of respect for Scotland in the United Kingdom. He referred to what he described as the spectre of a dystopian future, in which the UK turns in on itself. That is not the future that the Government see for the UK outside the EU. In fact, we see a more global Britain, a more outward-looking Britain—a Britain that is not confined by the limits of the EU. He also raised the issue of respect for Scotland and the paper that Scotland has recently issued. He will be aware that in order to address the issue of the impact of Brexit on the devolved Administrations, the Government established the Joint Ministerial Committee for exiting the European Union. That is the forum in which these issues are raised, discussed and debated, and there is a meeting this week. I do not believe any suggestion that there is a lack of respect for Scotland or indeed for any of the devolved Administrations.

Tommy Sheppard: Would it not enhance the discussions taking place at the JMC if there were discussions between Ministers in his Department and their counterparts in Scotland in order to prepare some of the detail of these very particular matters?

Mr Jones: Discussions will certainly continue, but I must say that I regard it as highly unfair of the hon. Gentleman to suggest that there is any lack of respect for Scotland. I believe that the Government could have done hardly any more to accommodate the concerns of the devolved Administrations.

The debate has been genuinely useful. Both my right hon. Friend the Policing Minister and I have made it clear today that this issue is of the utmost importance to the Government as we prepare to negotiate our exit from the European Union, and that has been reinforced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who has said that co-operation with the EU in the fight against crime and terrorism will be one of the Government’s principal priorities when negotiations begin. We are determined that the United Kingdom will continue to be a leading contributor in the fight against crime and the promotion of security and justice, not only in the United Kingdom and the European Union, but throughout the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered exiting the EU and security, law enforcement and criminal justice.

Flooding: Ribble Valley

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Chris Heaton-Harris.]

5.51 pm

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): It is a great delight for me to have this opportunity, more than one year on, to reflect on what happened in the Ribble valley during the floods, to reflect on what progress has been made in terms of resilience, protection and prevention, and, indeed, to thank some of the people who, beyond the call of duty, came to help those who were in distress.

I remember that on Boxing day in 2015, I was at my sister’s house in Pontarddulais. Very early in the morning, I received a text message from a friend of mine, Robert Hayward, who has since been elevated to the House of Lords. He asked, “What’s happening in your constituency?” I sent him a text saying, “What do you mean?” He replied, “Floods.” There had been a flood in the Ribble valley just over a week earlier, so I thought that perhaps some footage was being shown of what had happened then. I did not think too much of it, but I went and switched on the television.

Sky News was being broadcast live from Whalley, one of my villages. The reporter was several feet underwater. I watched live footage of one of my constituents, an elderly lady, being carried from a small cottage—manhandled out of her property—to be taken to a safe place further up the road that the floods had not quite reached. My eyes were wide open, and I was aghast to see the condition of the main street through Whalley, but I had not realised that the flooding was much more extensive than that.

I called to my sister, “I’m going.” It was Boxing day, and I was due to stay for about four days, so she said, “What do you mean, you’re going?” I said, “I’m going to the Ribble valley.” She asked why, and I said, “Well, have a look at the TV and I think you’ll understand why.” She asked, “What can you do?” That was a great question, to be honest, but it was about being there. That was the answer: I had to be there. There was no other place I could be on that day.

I got into the car and drove for four-and-a-bit hours towards the Ribble valley. Coming off the M6, I would normally turn right, immediately towards Whalley, but I could not do that because the main road to the right off the motorway junction was flooded. I had to turn around and then use my local knowledge which was quite extensive, to work out another route through Preston.

First I dropped into Longridge, where there was an emergency centre in one of the village halls. I spoke to four people there. Nobody had reported there, because it is several miles away from Whalley, and I think it was just too far away. People were making their own arrangements, with some going to the Clitheroe golf club. The local school had said that it was available to take anybody, and of course neighbours were coming to the assistance of those in distress.

When I drove into Ribchester, an area that gets flooded from time to time, I went to have a look at the River Ribble from not far from my local church, St Wilfrid’s. That is an extensive area. I have to say that my mouth dropped open, as I had never, ever seen that river so high. If it had risen just another few inches, it would...
have broken its banks into the main street in Ribchester. When I talked to one of the local residents, he said, “I was waiting for it to go one step further before I started moving my furniture and possessions from the bottom to the top floor.”

I then went on to the Ribchester Arms pub. As it was Boxing day, it was ready to take in all the bookings it had for that day, but of course it could not open at all because it was completely flooded. The landlord and landlady were on the top floor. The firemen were already there, pumping water away from one electrical substation to make sure that it was still operational, so there were still lights on at the top of the pub. That pub was closed for several weeks. One thinks of the on-costs to that pub of keeping on the labour and so forth, never mind the colossal cost of the waste of all the food, the equipment that was damaged and the loss of trade during that period.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman’s heartfelt and passionate speech reminds me of what happened in my constituency a year ago. On the subject of businesses being affected by floods, many businesses in Newton Stewart in my constituency now face excesses of more than £15,000 and cannot get cost-effective insurance. Will he join me in trying to persuade the Association of British Insurers to extend the Flood Re scheme to small businesses? At present that scheme covers only individuals, so it is of no solace to small businesses that stand on the edge of a precipice.

Mr Evans: I am more than happy to do that. In fact, I have made representations to Mark Hoban, who is in charge of the Flood Re scheme. I believe that we should extend that scheme to businesses. I have no doubt at all that the premiums for a lot of small and medium-sized enterprises that are prone to flooding or that have made claims will go through the roof. If we think it is a good idea to spread the risk for domestic premises, as we have done through the Flood Re scheme to small businesses, at present that scheme covers only individuals, so it is of no solace to small businesses that stand on the edge of a precipice.

I must praise the brilliant emergency services for all the work that they did. In the late hours of Christmas night and early hours of Boxing day, members of the Army were knocking on doors. They already knew what was going to happen, so they were alerting people so that they could either get out and secure their premises, or get their possessions upstairs if they could. They were working during the time when other people were celebrating with their families, so I have absolute praise for them for everything they did, as well as for the early flood warning system, which clearly was working.

I then went down into Whalley, which had been featured on the television for most of that day. A lot of the water had subsided by that time—it was several hours on—but my goodness me, the damage that had been done during those hours was absolutely phenomenal. It was not just the main road that was affected, but several streets back on both sides. I chatted to Norman Atty, the landlord of the Dog Inn, who was able to tell me all the things that had happened that day. I then went from Whalley through Grindleton towards another village way on the other side of the constituency, but I had to turn my car around when I got there because I could not distinguish the road from the river. The water was so high that I thought that if I went any further, I would have been adding to the problems, because my car would be stuck—it is not a 4x4. I therefore reversed back and went home.

I got up the next morning and went back into Whalley, where the salvage operation had begun. My goodness me! It was heart-warming beyond belief to see the volunteers who had given up their Christmas to help their neighbours. I also heard a story about a group of four men who were travelling up to Scotland for Hogmanay—they were going pretty early by the sound of it—and heard what had happened in Whalley. They drove off the M6 and turned up in the village. They picked a house at random and helped the people there to clear their possessions out on to the street and into skips. They then got back into their car and continued their holiday. What fantastic people!

Other people had had the good sense to get money and drive into the Ribble valley and hand it out to families. Some people would have been without money, and they would have lost all their food. Perhaps they lived alone, or perhaps they had spent all their money at Christmas and had no access to money. Those people giving out money provided a lifeline. They did not need to do it, but they did. People came from all over the area to help. For example, charities in Blackburn gave assistance. It was a colossal operation to help people to get all their food and possessions out of their kitchens and living rooms. I also pay tribute to the skip operators who managed to get skips in on a regular basis, and to the police, who managed to set up a one-way system through the village. I have been talking about all the great things that people did to help, but now and again we had “flood tourists”, who decided to come in just to have a look. They thought it was rather clever to drive through the water, which resulted in water splashing into businesses that had already suffered greatly. Those people were really thoughtless and careless.

I remember talking to one chap, Andrew Ronnan, who has done tremendous work as a volunteer. He told me, “I don’t know what I was expecting to do on the day after Boxing day, but it wasn’t manhandling a piano into a skip.” That was what he ended up doing. The volunteers were absolutely superb. They were led by Gillian Darbyshire, the president of the Whalley and District Lions club, and she was joined by some of her friends, including Kellie Hughes, who runs the hairdresser’s shop. Her shop was badly hit—it is still being repaired—but her resilience has been absolutely superb. Anyway, she did not cut hair for a few days. She went straight across to the village hall, which was requisitioned, where people turned up to give electrical goods, blankets and food. The hot coffee and food were served by some people who had volunteered.
Twist and Katie Blezard—I am afraid that I am going to forget some of the people—and even the Dog Inn was giving out coffee and sandwiches to the volunteers who were coming in to help.

Another electrician was going around people’s houses and helping. Of course, people from the electricity board also came in to switch people off and ensure that everything was safe before getting them switched back on. One of the volunteers had training in mental health issues, which was useful because some people were tipped over the edge by the flood. One can understand why when they were seeing their houses being destroyed on Boxing day. This person was able to talk a man out of his bedroom and get him downstairs so that he could finally get assistance. We need to pay some attention in that area when we think about what actions to take after future floods. I also pay tribute to Marshal Scott, the chief executive of Ribble Valley Borough Council, who was on the scene from Boxing day night onwards. The council moved many officers from the county offices in Clitheroe into Whalley and operated from the village hall. Marshal Scott was there every day, giving assistance to people who badly needed it.

Part of the problem was that some businesses and homes had been hit just a week before, when a culvert became blocked and water rushed down. Funny enough, Andrew Ronnan had already called some locals together to see what they could do, because they realised that there would be real problems if the river burst its banks. Well, we had real problems, but they brought the community together.

One area that was badly damaged included the houses off Calder Vale. The road there is unadopted, so it was already rough, but that road now has a proper surface thanks to Gillian Darbyshire and the Whalley and District Lions club, which helped to raise more than £100,000, which was matched with donations from the Freemasons and others. In fact, it is now one of the best roads in the Ribble valley—it is absolutely superb. I could not believe it when I went down there the other day. I thought, “Wow. Look at that. That’s what happens when a community works together,” so I pay tribute to Gillian for leading the volunteers.

One chap called Allan Elliott, whom I went to see just the other day, has his house at the back of Calder Vale. One third of his garden was washed away, his car was a complete write-off and, of course, the house was badly damaged. One would have hoped that the Environment Agency would have looked at the damage and given a bit more assistance than it did, but he has had to spend thousands of pounds of his own money to shore up the garden to ensure that it will be resilient against any further rises in river flow.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing a debate on a topic that is important in our area of Lancashire. Following the December floods, Lancashire County Council’s delay in applying for funding for future flood defences until at least April meant that it missed out on Budget funding in 2016. Does he agree that that was a little short-sighted?

Mr Evans: I hope that many lessons will be learned. Any funding that is made available ought to be claimed—I remember the big argument about claiming European flood money, but we all pay into that, so we are only getting our own money back—but it took ages before we did that, which was a huge mistake. We should have known about it from the very beginning. I was told about how complicated it was to sort it out, so that must be sorted out. When one is paying into an insurance fund, claiming our own money back should not involve so much officer time and the filling in of so many pages. Many lessons need to be learned by the council, and by government more generally, to avoid adding to a tragedy through action or inaction.

I also want to praise the refuse collectors. One would not expect to see them the day after Boxing day. There are few sadder pictures in my mind than seeing refuse people backing up into a street on the day after Boxing day and loading Christmas trees into the back of their vehicle because people were clearing their whole houses. It was a very sad picture, never mind that those people were already under stress. There was one lady whose husband was dying, and in addition to all her problems she was having to clear out her house. Some people are still not back in their home a year on. Big questions have to be asked about the resilience of some properties. The Minister has produced her own report on the flooding, and I hope a lot will be learned from it.

I also praise councillors Terry Hill, Joyce Holgate, Albert Atkinson, Ged Mirfin and others. Councillors came from all over the area. Even if their areas were not flooded, they came to give assistance. I also praise Sir James Bevan and the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), who turned up the day after Boxing day—I could not believe it, but there they were, walking through the village in wellington boots. I was able to show them some of the damage, and Sir James looked into the River Calder and could see the damage for himself. A lot of the damage is still there. One would have thought that one of the farmhouses over at the other end would not have been touched, but it was way underwater.

Some insurance companies were prompt, and others were not—their answerphones were switched on and saying, “We are on holiday. Please get in touch on 28 or 29 December.” When such colossal flooding is affecting so many thousands of people, one would have thought that all the insurance companies would be there to help.

Andrew Ronnan created the Whalley and Billington flood action group by drawing on the expertise that can be found in any large village and its surrounding areas, including civil engineers and people with knowledge of flood prevention. The group has regular meetings in order to liaise with the lead flood authority—Lancashire County Council—Ribble Valley Borough Council and the Environment Agency on the long-term plan. We have to do that, because these once-in-a-lifetime events are now happening quite regularly. Action must be taken against anything preventable that can lead to the misery I saw that day. Some of that action relates to the river, and other action relates to the housing that is being built, particularly in Whalley, on a rather large scale.

It might be useful if I talk about that housing. One section, Lawson Rise, is being developed in part by Redrow. There should be drainage ponds in the scheme to allow for water attenuation. Well, Redrow has been merrily building the houses, but the ponds simply have not happened. Redrow itself said that the ponds needed
to happen, and they have not happened. I understand that there may be problems with the design and with where the ponds should go, but the reality is that Redrow is now in breach of the conditions set by the local authority. The people at Redrow still think it is okay to build the houses, sell them and get people moving in. Well, it is not. They have a responsibility to the people who are going to live on that estate and to the people who may be affected by the building of those houses and other houses that will be built on the same plot. It is their responsibility to ensure that all of the area is properly drained and that the water that runs off is retained. How dare they not take the action that they should at this moment in time? How dare they think it is okay to carry on building those houses without putting in the proper attenuation?

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly important and powerful speech. He has mentioned a building company. I want him to know that all over the country, many colleagues on both side of the House have the same experience with building companies. They bang on until the cows come home about their corporate social responsibility, being good neighbours and all that, but with many of them—not all, by any means—it is complete and utter tosh. They need to honour their obligations and be seen to do so.

Mr Evans: I can only agree with my right hon. Friend. Indeed, one of Redrow’s reports talks about the company being a shining-light member of the considerate construction scheme. Steve Morgan, the chairman, talks about Redrow being in great shape and says that he is looking forward to “another year of significant progress”.

I have a good idea: some of that significant progress can go into the attenuation ponds and the other things that need to be happening.

Another plot of land, which one could see from the road, famously had a sign saying that it was a “development site with permission for 39 dwellings”. but that sign could be just seen above the water. The sign was famous and did the rounds on social media. The sign was there before a single house was built. It is not a good idea, and we really should not put any houses on an area susceptible to that sort of flooding, but what sort of attenuation would that site need to make sure that that water did not flood the houses and was not then pushed to flood other houses?

I say to Redrow, in respect of the particular site I mention, that notice has been served by Ribble Valley Borough Council that Redrow is in breach of the conditions that were agreed to. So when are the people at Redrow going to do it—when will they provide the attenuation that they said they would? Everybody is waiting. They have a social and moral responsibility to do it. I know, as my right hon. Friend will know, that these companies have some great experts working for them and they know some tricks. They know that there are certain things they can do to delay taking the action they need to take. They have very expensive lawyers, who are doubtless listening to every word I am saying, but I say: get on with it! We do not want to see any delay or deferment. They know what they need to do and they need to do it now. That applies not just to Redrow, but to every other developer who is building houses and has conditions put upon them. They should not see that as burdensome; they should see it as playing their part in a community, so that they are not making other people’s lives a misery one or two miles down the road. They have a responsibility, and they should do it.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful and moving speech, touching on a number of good points. In 2007, Witney had some serious flooding, which affected a great deal of the town. I spoke briefly in the House yesterday about some of the flood attenuation schemes in Milton-under-Wychwood, which I know the Minister came to visit. My hon. Friend refers to making people’s lives a misery, and does he agree that that is exactly what we are talking about here? This is not just a matter of damage to property, which in due course, when the insurance companies pay up, can be rectified. When I speak to my constituents who have been affected by flooding, I see that the fear and worry of that happening again lives on 10 years and more after the event. “Misery” is just the right word for it.

Mr Evans: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. I think these situations are akin to mental torture; once someone has gone through this sort of flooding misery, all of a sudden they have one eye on the computer to see whether there is a flood warning coming up—they have had a few of those since 26 December 2015; indeed, they have had water coming through King Street. We must recognise the impact on people’s lives once their properties have been soiled in that way; if it has happened once, it can happen again, unless something is done about it. That is basically where we are now. Once these things have happened—the flooding happened on a wide scale, as you know, Mr Deputy Speaker—we must see what action needs to be taken.

The Environment Agency is talking about spending £2.3 billion over the next six years on a lot of the major works that need to be done, but who knows whether that money will be sufficient? We are talking about spending £3.5 billion on this place, so I suppose that puts it into a bit of context. We need to ensure that the right sort of money is put in place to help to alleviate the problem.

Companies such as Network Rail are doing a great deal of work in Whalley. It is working on the aqueduct because of the water that flowed from it. It is spending a lot of money in an area that was badly flooded—I saw it for myself the other day—so I pay tribute to it for that work. Companies such as AXA Insurance are spending a lot of money on resilience measures, because they have worked out that it is in their interests. It means that when people sadly do get flooded, the costs will be much smaller.

People can take a lot of sensible measures if they have the wherewithal to do so. I remember going into one house in Ribchester that had been flooded a bit before. I walked on the lady’s sodden carpet, and she said, “Last time this happened, Nigel, I asked the insurance company whether we could have flagging instead of carpet, but they said, ‘Oh no, like for like, madam.’” The insurers would not move, but they moved this time. They have now got the message.
Hopefully it will never flood again, but if it does, the flagging means that at least something can be done about it more easily.

I know that other Members want to contribute, so I shall go quickly through the things that ought to be done for future resilience. The Environment Agency is looking at proposals for Whalley, and particularly at what action can be taken regarding the Calder. I am told that the study will take about six months, and that the agency will then put in a bid to the Government, perhaps towards autumn 2017. I hope it can bring forward that report as quickly as possible, because of the mental torture that my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) mentioned. As long as people cannot see anything substantial being done, they think it can happen again, and of course it can, so I hope that the Environment Agency will look into that and other matters to see what can be done. It will be working closely with the local flood action group—Andrew Ronnan and his friends—along with the lead flood authority and local authorities.

As well as the problems associated with the River Calder, there are problems with surface water after heavy rain. A week before 26 December 2015, Whalley had been damaged because of blocked culverts, and there has been water running through since. It should not be beyond the wit of the local authority to look at those culverts and make absolutely certain that they are not blocked. There are now sensors that can enable it to do that. Lancashire County Council should pull its finger out, have a look at the areas that are prone to flooding and get it sorted.

The drains are also a problem. Kellie from the hairdressers was out cleaning the drains herself, post-26 December. More floods were expected, and she saw that some of the drains were blocked. There are simple things that can be done, and I hope that they will be done.

As for planning, local authorities ought to be able to say quite simply that there should be no housing on a flood plain. That should be sufficient. When companies go to appeal, as they do, and use their expensive lawyers to dance rings around local authorities that are rather strapped for cash, it should be sufficient for the local authorities to say, “No, it is a flood plain”. Even with attenuation, if houses are built on a flood plain, huge amounts of water may still be retained by the fields, as in the example I referred to. Builders must take responsibility for complying with conditions that are imposed on them.

I pay tribute to the Woodland Trust, which is planting trees all over the place. We do not pay enough regard to the usefulness of trees, particularly in preventing soil erosion, which can easily happen. The trust has planted thousands of trees in our area, and we must do more of that.

Insurance resilience measures must come in as well. The early payment of insurance money is important to people so that they can get on with the job. We must also look at this matter of having to get three quotes. Some insurance companies insist on it, but they are lucky to get one quote. Our area was blighted by flooding on Boxing day; it is not hard to imagine how difficult it was to get even one quote. Some companies are just not interested in providing a quote, so different measures must be put in place to cover reasonable costs, so that people can just get on with the job.

One person came to see me last week, one year on from the flooding. He had put in a £110,000 claim—it was part business, part hereditament. He had used a broker, which had insured with one company. The company then part-insured with another company, which went bust. The man received £35,000 of his claim. He was going to get another £20,000 before the other company went bust. He does not know when he will get paid, even under the financial compensation rules, which, when they kick in, pay out 90%. I have to say: 90% of what? Things must be made easier. When a person goes to an insurance company, the responsibility must lie there. They should not have to chase around the houses, worried witless that they will not get the proper compensation that they need. They will already lose some of it, simply because of this offsetting of the bet, as I call it—or the offsetting of the risk. The person paying the premium, which in this case is just under £5,000 a year, should not have to suffer.

The emergency services learned a lot that day, as they had to institute a one-way system. Such best practice needs to be spread around the country, because what has happened in the Ribble valley will, sadly, happen in other areas in the future. Spreading best practice can be done. Whalley and Billington Flood Action Group has done its own resilience programme, telling people of the simple things that they can do, including providing phone numbers that they can use, when flooding happens. Those sorts of things are absolutely superb, and I do hope that local authorities can learn from one another about the actions that they need to take, including providing advice to people now. We are in the winter now, and, sadly, some villages may well get flooded between now and summer.

David Morris: I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. As I have explained, we had floods in our area. The local hospital ran on emergency generators, but, apparently, from what I can gather, a state of emergency can be declared only if the Environment Agency has two separate sources verifying the state of emergency. In this instance, the Army had to come in to help in the end. Does he think that it should be only one separate source that contacts the Environment Agency so that measures can be enacted and things do not get so bad that the Army has to be called in to rescue patients who need electricity for dialysis and other life-saving treatments?

Mr Evans: Of course common sense should kick in. Once common sense kicks in, people understand that there is an emergency or a crisis. Why add to the problems by imposing unnecessary bureaucracy and rules? I do hope that lessons can be learned from that as well.

Proper planning in flood areas is essential. For instance, there were a lot of sandbags under lock and key in local authority depots. People could not get access to them until, eventually, calls went through to the county council saying, “Open the depot”. Eventually the sandbags were released. It should not be beyond the wit of planning to ensure that when these sandbags are there—irrespective of the fact that they might have been set aside for somewhere else at another time—they are released immediately to the local community so that further damage can be prevented.
Whalley is what is known as a hotspot: I had to go into Benedict’s delicatessen to latch on to wi-fi and access certain emails. I had to use the pub phone at The Dog Inn because my phone simply would not work. A lot more attention needs to be put into telecommunications in areas of high susceptibility to flooding; it might cost a bit more, but that needs to be done so that people can use their mobile telephony in an emergency, particularly if flooding has wiped out some of the landlines. Let us be fair: a lot of people do not have landlines anymore.

Earlier, I mentioned the drainage on the main road that prevented me from getting to the area that I needed to get to. If an area floods certain roads from time to time, the floods authorities need to put in extra drainage so that people can get where they need to.

I will never forget 26 December 2015 for as long as I live. It taught me a lot of things—and most of them were good, thank goodness. On new year’s eve that year, I had expected to be in sunnier climes, but I was not. I stood in Whalley’s square with all the local residents as I had expected to be in sunnier climes, but I was not. I stood in Whalley’s square with all the local residents as we all linked hands and sang “Auld Lang Syne” together. The community spirit was alive and well and still is in that particular community. I could give a list of worthy people to get gongs when they are handed out, but from what I can remember none of them has got one. That is sad. Recognition ought to be given in communities up and down the country when people go the extra mile—they do not need to—in helping people in their own community because it is the right thing to do.

Twelve months on, and the Minister is listening carefully to what I have had to say. I hope she will give us good news today about the action that the Environment Agency will take to ensure that the misery and torture that so many news today about the action that the Environment Agency to what I have had to say. I hope she will give us good news today about the action that the Environment Agency needs to put in extra drainage so that people can get where they need to.

6.32 pm

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. I am doing so for two main reasons. First, I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans). He was my first ever MP; I remember his election back in the early ‘90s. Secondly, I was in Ribble Valley on Boxing day 2015 at my parents’ house, which is about four miles from Whalley. I grew up just outside Ribchester, which I have seen flood in the past. We woke up on Boxing day and we were all supposed to go off to a pantomime. I looked across the hill and asked, “What’s that?” A new river had grown up. I grew up in Lancashire and I know what wet weather is, but I had never seen anything like it.

My hon. Friend said he thought about what he could do. I pay tribute to him: what he did was really remarkable. My friends and family in Ribble Valley were really touched, particularly my auntie Pauline who was with my hon. Friend at The Dog Inn on new year’s eve in the square. My hon. Friend has been a fantastic constituent MP and parliamentarian for more than 10 years; we know because he looks very youthful. He has done great things, and I thank him for securing this debate.

The River Ribble, the historic border between north and south, flows from Yorkshire into God’s own county of Lancashire, and the floodplain is in my constituency of South Ribble. I share that great river with my hon. Friend. My constituency, like my hon. Friend’s and yours, Mr Deputy Speaker, had bad flooding on Boxing day 2015 when Storm Eva struck. The constituencies of my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) and the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) were also affected, although Storm Desmond may also have been involved in those places. Various other parts of the country were affected.

I pay tribute to the local groups. We had flooding in Leyland, but work was done by my constituent, Celia Whittaker, and the Leyland flood action group. In Eccleston, Gillian Jamieson and other members of the parish council did sterling work to rebuild the parish hall back in November. Hon. Members may remember the views of the Chinook flying over Croston, which has three rivers, to assist with the breach in the River Douglas. I believe that Chinook was actually flown by one of your constituents, Mr Deputy Speaker—a member of the Chorley air cadets, of which you are president.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Correct. He is now in the RAF, by the way.

Seema Kennedy: There are also flooding issues in the areas of west Lancashire in my constituency. I know that the Minister is aware of the situation with the flood pumps in Alt Crossens. The villages of Rufford, Croston, Banks and Hesketh Bank are all affected. Trying to stay on topic, there is concern in South Ribble about the progress of the Preston and South Ribble flood scheme. As the Ribble leaves urban areas, the last bridge, although we hope to have another, is at Penwortham in my constituency, with Preston on the other side. Flood defences were built up in the early 1980s but they are not ideal when there is a high tide and rain such as that which we saw on Boxing day 2015. I have walked the area many times, including in the summer with representatives from the Environment Agency. I know that there is funding, but we are hoping that it will be matched by the Department. I would be grateful if the Minister could say something about the progress there.

I pay tribute to Croston flood action group; to the parish council, whose members actually man their own pump; and to Kath Almond and Anne Peet, who came down to No. 10 when there was a reception for flood heroes in spring last year. Businesses in Croston have been very resilient. In fact, I went to Croston on Boxing day 2016. It was a beautiful, sunny day with blue skies and I wanted to see how people were. Jon Lilley, the publican of The Wheatsheaf, said that things were going well and the community spirit was alive and well. I think that Chinook was actually flown by one of your constituents, Mr Deputy Speaker—a member of the Chorley air cadets, of which you are president.

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P MPs who have faced such a situation in their constituency know, flooding does not just affect possessions. There is a sense of people watching out for every flood warning and thinking, “Is it really going to happen again?” Flooding is a complicated issue because rivers and waterways are complicated. We need to be creative in how we deal with water upstream, because what happens in Whalley and Walton-le-Dale affects what happens...
down in Penwortham. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley for the great work he has done on the matter and for being such a wonderful champion for Ribble Valley. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

6.39 pm

Dr Coffey: I do not know the details of that, but my hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the Environment Agency manager responsible for his area is in the Box today and will have taken careful note of what he has just said. My hon. Friend might be aware that a future scheme to protect Whalley from river flooding is in the development stage. It would cost approximately £1.4 million, and considerable work is being done with the Whalley and Billington flood action group and the local community to optimise the design of the scheme and to develop partnership options prior to a bid for funding. I think that is the project to which he referred.

A review is ongoing of flood risk right across the River Calder, which will provide additional information to refine options for addressing that flooding. We expect to undertake a review of flood risk in Ribblechester this year. A scheme to protect Clitheroe from flooding from Mearley brook will cost approximately £4.8 million, and work is taking place to develop partnership funding options prior to submitting a bid for funding. Lancashire County Council is developing a £2 million scheme to address surface water flooding in Whalley and Billington.

Overall, I am pleased that local partners are already working together to contribute to those schemes, alongside considerable Government investment, and work is continuing to bridge the current funding gap. I remind the House that under a Conservative-led Government, my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), changed the funding policy to give...
every scheme that had a positive benefit-cost ratio a chance to secure some grant funding, rather than the old system of all or nothing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley has referred to planning, and he should be aware that the national planning policy framework is specific about issues relating to planning in flood areas. The Environment Agency’s advice has been accepted in more than 98% of applications. I have looked carefully at the ones that were rejected by local councils, and that information is publicly available.

My hon. Friend referred to Redrow and his concern that the housing development in Whalley is failing to comply with planning conditions designed to reduce flood risk. As he has indicated, I expect the local authority to deal robustly with any developer that does not adhere to planning conditions. I know that my hon. Friend wrote to the Environment Agency about the matter. The Environment Agency does not have the necessary powers, but if there is more that my hon. Friends at the Department for Communities and Local Government can do, we will do it. I will just say on the record that this is the second time today that Redrow has been raised with me as a developer not particularly fulfilling its conditions—in the other case, it is fulfilling a condition that simply does not work—so I will certainly be following up on that matter with my hon. Friends responsible for planning.

In terms of drainage, the Environment Agency leads on flood risk associated with culverted sections of main rivers in England. Where there are culverts, the EA will inspect them regularly, and operations staff will clear structures upstream of such culverts prior to flood conditions. Lancashire County Council, as both the highways authority and the lead local flood authority in Lancashire, leads on flood risk associated with highway drains and culverted ordinary watercourses.

In the village of Whalley, Lancashire County Council has been investigating the condition of the culvert that carries an ordinary watercourse—Wiswell brook—underneath King Street, to which my hon. Friend referred, in the centre of the village. The culvert has surcharged in the past and led to flooding, most recently on 21 November. When any works are deemed to be necessary to the culvert and associated infrastructure, bids for Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs funding will be submitted by the council via the Environment Agency.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) spoke eloquently on behalf of her constituents. I thought it might be worth sharing where we are on the housing development in Whalley is failing to comply with planning conditions designed to reduce flood risk. As he has indicated, I expect the local authority to deal robustly with any developer that does not adhere to planning conditions. I know that my hon. Friend referred to planning, and he should be aware that the Environment Agency’s advice has been accepted in more than 98% of applications. I have looked carefully at the ones that were rejected by local councils, and that information is publicly available.

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substantial works, such as installing pumps, having solid floors or rewiring so that plug sockets are higher up the wall.

On insurance, my hon. Friend made a series of points about the presence of companies, quotes, the availability of assessors, the challenge of the risk being passed on and the problem of not being able to get to the end of the process. I will raise these issues with the ABI and share some of this with my hon. Friends in the DCLG, who are primarily responsible for the recovery from flooding.

On Flood Re, I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue of access to affordable flood assurance. For those at high risk, whether households or businesses and their surrounding communities, I recognise that the matter is very important. Flood Re is already under way, providing relief for the thousands of households at high flood risk so that they can now access affordable flood insurance. I recognise that that will bring very real practical and emotional comfort to many. Fifty insurance companies, which is over 90% of the market, now offer access to Flood Re, and 53,000 households have benefited during its first six months. It is important to stress that this project is time-limited—it will last for 25 years—and is, in effect, funded by all other households paying towards it. That principle of taxation ensures we can support our communities.

On businesses, just last month the British Insurance Brokers Association launched a product designed to help small and medium-sized enterprises at high flood risk to access affordable insurance. By using very granular postcode data and recognising the benefit of property level resilience measures, it should prove a welcome solution for many businesses. The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless), who is no longer in his place, also raised that issue.

I want to give this product a chance to work, but I would welcome evidence about whether it is working. As I have pointed out in relation to Flood Re, there is the significant principle of taxation that means we can help each other. If we moved to the stage of asking businesses to start adding to their insurance premiums to help businesses in other parts of the country, that would be an unprecedented form of mutual business support. It would take a lot of evidence for me to say that that is the next necessary step, but I am open to the evidence and I want to hear from people. Should it prove that there is a need for additional action, I remain open to exploring what could be done.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley referred to European Union funding. I draw his attention to a written statement from the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) made on Monday 16 January, which sets out in considerable detail what has happened in relation to EU funding. Ultimately, we were going to receive a payment of £15 million. We now have to pay back £14.5 million due to ineligible expenditure relating to an application made in 2007. It therefore looks like we will end up with about half a million pounds. I will leave it to my hon. Friend to read the written statement in detail to explain that situation further.

I would appreciate it if my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) were able to provide more detail on the issue he raised, so that I can look into it. He should be aware of the £9.7 million allocated to the Morecambe wave reflection wall, which is due to be completed by 2019 and will protect more than 8,000 properties. My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) referred to the building issues and I agree that we need to follow up on them. Again, I will involve my hon. Friends from the Department for Communities and Local Government in that matter.

This has been a very useful debate to consider the particular situation in this very special part of Lancashire. I was born in the county of Lancashire and it will always be in my heart. I hope I have been able to show my hon. Friends that plans are under way to try to address the flooding issues. We have already seen the benefit of additional investment, including the use of the mobile barriers. I hope the House will join me in thanking the Environment Agency, our emergency services, council officials and the many volunteers involved in responding to the east coast tidal surge this weekend just gone. I am sure we are all relieved that the worst-case scenario did not happen, and are grateful for the work put in by so many people to ensure the potential impact was minimised.

The Environment Agency will continue to work with my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley to reduce flood risk in the area, and to work collaboratively to help to deliver projects locally. I assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the House that I will listen to all the comments made today. The Government will continue to try to ensure that we are all as best protected from flooding as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

6.56 pm

House adjourned.
Deferred Division

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Combined Authorities (Mayoral Elections) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 28 November 2016, be approved.

The Speaker having certified the order as relating exclusively to England and being within devolved legislative competence (Standing Order No. 83P), the Division was subject to a double majority (Standing Order No. 83Q(2)).


Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England:

Division No. 126]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afridi, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Archer, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Barnes, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berridge, Tom
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Sir Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carmichael, Neil
Carsswell, Mr Douglas
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Caroline
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James

Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Courts, Robert
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Derries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, rh Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert

Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, rh Ben
Hafon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, rh Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, rh Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Hudson, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, rh Mr Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Miss
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Kirby, Simon
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Lucas, Caroline
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David

Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McMahon, Jim
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
McTernan, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, rh Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paton, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Pennrose, John
Perera, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, William
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stewart, lain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs
Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy

Question accordingly agreed to.
House of Commons

Thursday 19 January 2017

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Household Food Insecurity

1. Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to measure levels of household food insecurity. [908252]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We have a well-established living costs and food survey, which has been running for many years and which informs our “Family Food” publication. It includes questions on household spend on food, including that of the lowest 20% of income households. This figure has remained reasonably stable, at around 16%, for many years.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: May I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, because I believe it is your birthday? Happy birthday, Mr Speaker—I hope you have a good’un!

I thank the Minister for his response, but he knows as well as I do that that is simply not good enough. An estimated 8.4 million people in Britain live in food-insecure households. There have been repeated calls from me, the all-party group on hunger, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, the Food Foundation, Sustain and Oxfam for the Government to adopt a household food-insecurity measurement. Why will the Government not just admit that the fact is that their resistance to introducing such a measurement is because once they have admitted the scale of hunger, they will have to do something about it and admit that it is largely caused by their punitive welfare reform policies?

George Eustice: I, too, add the best wishes of Government Members to you on your birthday, Mr Speaker. I understand that it is also the birthday of the House of Commons Chaplain, Rose. I am sure we will all want to add our best wishes to her, too.

I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Lady. This Government have got more people back into work than ever before, and the best way to tackle poverty is to help people off benefits and get them into work. In the LCFS, which has been running for many years, we have an established measure of how much the lowest-income households are spending on food. It is a consistent measure and we are able to benchmark changes year on year. As I said, that has been very stable: it was 16% when the Labour party was in power and it is 16% now.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Food insecurity is a terrible thing, and it is exacerbated by low-income households spending too much on food that is not good for them. During the war, the wartime generation knew how to manage on a very tight budget, and nutrition actually improved for most households, including the very poorest. Could we learn some lessons from the wartime generation about how best to feed our people?

George Eustice: My colleagues in the Department of Health publish lots of very good guidance and run lots of very good campaigns to encourage healthy eating. In addition, we have the school food plan, which aims to improve the nutrition of food in schools so that children learn lifelong good habits. I agree with my hon. Friend that it is possible to eat good, nutritious food, the cost of which has been remarkably stable.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): When I visit my local food banks, I hear that the number of people relying on them is going up. Is it not the truth that the Government do not want to collect data on that because they would have to admit the failure of their policies, not least the fact that getting a job is no longer a route out of poverty because of the levels of in-work poverty they have created?

George Eustice: This Government have introduced the concept of a national living wage, which will raise incomes for the lowest paid in our society. I, too, visit my local food bank, and I send my case officers into the food bank to help people who may be having particular problems or crises in their lives. Many complex issues contribute to poverty. I advise all Members to work closely with their local food banks, as my office does.

Air Quality

2. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve air quality. [908253]

6. Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve air quality. [908257]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The United Kingdom complies with the EU legislation for nearly all air pollutants, but faces challenges in achieving nitrogen dioxide limits, along with 16 other EU member states. That is why we have committed more than £2 billion since 2011 to reduce transport emissions and the autumn statement provided a further £290 million to support greener transport. We should all recognise that air quality is actually improving, but we recognise that we need to go further and faster and will be consulting on a new national plan by 24 April.

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank the Minister for her answer, but I believe the Secretary of State is aware of the GB Freight Route rail scheme, which will take up to 5 million lorry journeys off Britain’s roads each year, save thousands of tonnes of emissions, and radically improve air quality. Will she and her Ministers use their good offices to press the case for GB Freight Route in Government?
Dr Coffey: With Felixstowe in my constituency, I am fully aware of the advantages of rail freight. I stress to the hon. Gentleman that the Departments for Transport and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs work closely together on these matters. Shifting freight onto rail is a key part of any future strategy.

Matthew Pennycook: Is the Minister aware of the controversial proposal for a cruise liner terminal at Enderby Wharf in east Greenwich? With the air quality impact of that proposal in mind, will she tell us when the Government expect the recently promised review into shore-to-ship power and the assumptions that underpin port development to conclude?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that his own council carried out an environmental impact assessment, which it considered when looking at that particular planning application. As he will also be aware, my right hon. Friend, the Minister of State, Department for Transport, is committed to looking further at what can be done, and I am sure that he is making progress with that.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Does the Minister agree that British businesses have made great strides in recent years in producing technologies that enable us to improve air quality, such as the taxis that now run in Birmingham on liquefied petroleum gas and the adaptation of buses that have significantly cleaned up the air in Oxford Street?

Dr Coffey: I agree with my right hon. Friend. Her vast experience in this area is added to by her local knowledge of the city of Birmingham and the support going on there. This Government made a substantial transport settlement with the previous Mayor of London, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), and I know that air pollution has improved on Oxford Street over the past year, which is thanks specifically to the grants that were provided.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Camelford in north Cornwall suffers from very high levels of pollution, because of the A39 running straight through its town centre. Will my hon. Friend congratulate Camelford Town Council on the work that it has done to address the air quality? Will she work with the council and me to tackle the problem in the town?

Dr Coffey: I have made it clear in this House before that national Government have their part to play in finding solutions to tackle local congestion issues, but so too does local government. Of course we will continue to work with my hon. Friend on that matter.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Royal College of Physicians has stated that air pollution contributes to approximately 40,000 deaths in the UK every year, and that diesel emissions have been poorly regulated. What progress are the Government making in that field?

Dr Coffey: Nitrous oxide levels have been falling, but I recognise that it is not happening quickly enough. The previous Labour Government signed us up to achieve deadlines by 2010, and failed spectacularly. We are continuing to invest in this area and will continue to do so and work with devolved Administrations on specific issues in other areas.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one way to make real progress on air quality is to forge ahead with ultra-low emission vehicles. Given that 25% of the cars on Norway’s roads are either electric or hybrid, does she agree that we need a real turbo-charged boost to get ahead in this area?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The low-emission vehicle industry is a competitive advantage for this country, which is why the Government are backing it through the Office for Low Emission Vehicles and the many millions of pounds that have been spent on improving the charging infrastructure up and down this country.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Many happy returns, Mr Speaker, to both you and Rev. Rose.

The Government have lost the confidence of this House on air quality. More than 50,000 people are dying prematurely each year because of air pollution, and many more are suffering associated health conditions. With no guarantee from either the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State that last December’s strict EU laws will be introduced post-Brexit, how can the country trust the Government to ensure cleaner air in future?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady refers to a lack of trust in this Government. I think that that is the pot calling the kettle black. It was the Labour Government who introduced fiscal incentives for people to switch to diesel cars, and it was the Labour Government who signed up to these guidelines. Air quality is better now than it was under a Labour Government. That is an uncontroversial fact.

Mr Speaker: Or even an uncontroversial fact.

Hill Farmers

3. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What assessment has made of the potential effect on hill farmers of the UK leaving the common agricultural policy.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

Hill farmers play a critical role not just in producing high-quality food, but in delivering environmental benefits for all the public in our beautiful landscapes. Leaving the EU gives us a great opportunity to look again at their contribution to delivering our very clear twin ambitions to have both a world-leading food and farming industry and, at the same time, a better environment for future generations.

Helen Goodman: I am grateful for that response from the Secretary of State. Of course, paying for environmental goods will only work as a strategy if the hill farms are financially viable. She knows that some of them are earning £14,000 a year, so income support mechanisms will still be necessary. Can she guarantee that in future trade negotiations she will not allow a flood of cheap New Zealand lamb that will put them out of business?
Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that we have undertaken, from our very first days in the job, to commit to the levels of current support for all pillar one payments until 2020 to give that continuity to farmers and businesses. We have committed to our consultation on the future of the food and farming sector in our 25-year plan, and that will look closely at the level of support that is needed. I absolutely agree that we will need to look at what we do for the future to ensure that hill farmers remain viable and sustainable.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): The Secretary of State is right that there is now a real opportunity to create a system of rural support that is bespoke to the United Kingdom and that is an environmental, economic and social policy. In that respect, giving Ministers the opportunity to move the money up the hill to protect those who are clinging on economically is an opportunity that I hope she will grasp.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is extremely knowledgeable in this area and his input will be extremely useful when it comes to our consultation. He is exactly right that this is a unique opportunity to create a policy that works for us, not for 28 EU member states. That is exactly what we will be consulting on and what we will be delivering.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Happy birthday from me, too, Mr Speaker.

I wonder whether the Secretary of State or, indeed, the chairman of the Rural Payments Agency would tolerate waiting 13 and a half months for their salary cheque to arrive, yet that is what 50 hill farmers have had to do as they wait for their December 2015 single farm payments. Hundreds more waited up to a year to get their payments. They have been told that in the 2016-17 year they will be at the back of the queue to receive their payments if they farm on the commons. Will she commit to ensuring that those 50 are paid immediately, and will she also commit that those commoners, those hill farmers, who were at the back of the queue last year will be at the front of the queue this year?

Andrea Leadsom: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is just not apprised of the facts, which are that there are very few—[Interruption]—No. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) shouts 2,000 from the Front Bench, but people have received a payment and there are some challenges to those payments that are awaiting settlement. I would like to say to the hon. Gentleman that the RPA, under Mark Grimshaw, has strived to settle all outstanding claims. There are people challenging them, understandably, but that is what it is. Everybody has received a payment, apart from a very small number where issues such as probate are concerned, or where there are legal or inspection challenges. This year, many commoners have been paid across the board and we are up at 92.8% of payments so far, which is a good achievement compared with last year.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): Happy birthday from these Benches, too, Mr Speaker.

Given that lamb as a product is facing large tariffs in its most important market, farm payments will become more important than ever. Long term is not just the three years to 2020. The farming Minister, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), has said that we will get at least the same amount, if not more. Yesterday I challenged the Secretary of State for Scotland and he said:

“There is no suggestion that funding to Scottish agriculture will be cut”—[Official Report, 18 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 922.] after 2020. Can the Secretary of State offer the same assurance that payments will not go down after 2020?

Andrea Leadsom: The assurance I can give the hon. Gentleman is that we will be looking at how to achieve our twin ambitions of a world-leading food and farming sector while ensuring that we leave the environment in a better state. We will be looking at the facts and then we will decide what level of funding is required to support those ambitions.

Farming Regulation

4. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the regulation of farming.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): One of the great opportunities for farmers as we leave the EU is that of scrapping some of the bureaucratic rules that have limited their ability to maximise productivity and profitability sustainably—for example, the rule that dictates how many crops of what type they must grow, or the excessive number of inspections and farm visits to which they are subject.

Bob Blackman: Long life, Mr Speaker.

I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. As we free ourselves from the straitjacket of the common agricultural policy, which has added so many bureaucratic burdens to our farmers, what assessment has she made of the financial burden that our farmers are facing as a result of the common agricultural policy? What extra freedom will that mean for our farmers in the future?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to this issue. It is something that we are determined to address as we develop new policies. Unnecessary rules cost farmers millions of pounds and up to 300,000 man hours each year, which says nothing of the lost opportunities. I will be paying very close attention to these issues in the coming months, as we look for better solutions that work for us rather than 28 EU member states.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I do not want to be nasty to anyone, especially on this day of all days—your birthday, Mr Speaker—but the fact is that these Government Front Benchers are sleepwalking into Brexit. We have heard so much from the Secretary of State before the Brexit vote; now we hear nothing. Our farmers and our people in the countryside know nothing about what is going to happen. They fear a new agricultural devastation in our countryside. What is she going to do about it?
Andrea Leadsom: If that is the hon. Gentleman’s definition of not being nasty to anyone, that does not really work very well. I am not sure that Labour has much support in the countryside because it has done nothing for country folk. It is the Government who have ensured that we continue with support until 2020 and with all agri-environment schemes that are signed up before we leave the EU for their lifetime, to ensure that continuity for business confidence. It is the Government who are committed to a world-leading food and farming industry, while at the same time to an environment that is better than we inherited. Those are great ambitions and we will achieve them.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con) rose—

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: What a delicious choice. Mr William Wiggin.

Bill Wiggin: Having heard what my right hon. Friend has said, and knowing what sort of Minister she is, I cannot really believe that her team were fully briefed properly when they saw the nitrate vulnerable zones regulation rolled out to new parts of England.

Andrea Leadsom: I would be happy to meet and discuss that issue separately with my hon. Friend, but I can absolutely assure him that we looked very carefully at this issue. As ever, there is a balance between successful sustainable farming, food productivity and what is right for our environment.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): May I also wish you a happy birthday, Mr Speaker?

Earlier this month, the Secretary of State told the Oxford farming conference how excited she was about “scrapping the rules that hold us back”, saying that we could all think of at least one EU rule that we would not miss. That may be true, but I am sure that each of us can also think of at least one rule that we would miss and would want to keep. Will the Secretary of State share her choice with us?

Andrea Leadsom: I have already shared a few choices—the three-crop rule, farm inspections, some of the rules around billboards and so on. I know that the hon. Lady cares a great deal about this matter, as I do. In the great repeal Bill, we will be bringing all environmental regulation rolled out to new parts of England.

Andrea Leadsom: If only it was that easy. Of course, that was an incredibly vague answer—not a specific EU regulation mentioned. Those of us who value EU regulations, which set high standards for food safety, the environment and animal welfare, will not find the Secretary of State’s answer reassuring today. Of course I assume that some kind of objective criteria have to be applied and that rules and regulations are not just going to be thrown on to the Brexit bonfire on the Secretary of State’s whim. If that is correct, can she tell us what those objective criteria are?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry if the hon. Lady perhaps did not hear my previous answer. I made it extremely clear that the day after we leave the EU the rules will be the same as the day before. After that, we will be seeking to meet our twin ambitions of a world-leading food and farming industry and an environment that is better than the one we inherited. To give her one example of a manifesto commitment that Labour did not have in its manifesto, we will push for high animal welfare standards to be incorporated into international trade agreements.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con) The events of the—

Mr Speaker: It is Question 5.

Flood Defence Schemes

5. Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): How many flood defence schemes are planned for construction as a result of Government investment up to 2021.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Government are investing £2.5 billion between 2015 and 2021, delivering at least 1,500 new flood defence schemes and better protecting 300,000 homes. In my hon. Friend’s constituency, Government investment of £121 million is being made, delivering 18 schemes, better protecting more than 30,000 homes.

Matt Warman: I am afraid that I was overwrought with the excitement of your birthday, Mr Speaker, and forgot parliamentary procedure.

The Minister will know from the events of last week that my constituency is under great threat of flooding. I am sure that she will join the Prime Minister and I in praising the response of the emergency services under the threatening tidal surge. Does she agree, therefore, not only that the Boston barrier cannot come soon enough, but that it offers a huge economic opportunity that will allow Boston to be protected from flooding and to seize a new tourism dawn that could be improved with a lock?

Dr Coffey: What a “fantastic” idea. A design for the Boston barrier has been considered by the Environment Agency and is currently subject to a public inquiry under the Transport and Works Act Order. Alongside the famous Boston stump, it could be a compelling reason to ensure that we visit this special part of rural England. I personally extend my thanks to the Environment Agency, councils, emergency services and volunteers who helped to ensure that people were safe last weekend.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Happy birthday to you, Mr Speaker. Many small businesses across the UK that operate in flood risk areas are facing enormous flood insurance excesses. Will the Ministers please commit to persuading the Treasury to extend the Flood Re scheme for affordable insurance to small businesses? If there are floods again not only will individual companies go out of business; many high streets in my constituency might actually disappear.
Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that flood defences are a matter for his Government. He raised the same point in the Adjournment debate yesterday and if he had waited for my reply, he would have heard my response.

**Tree Planting**

7. **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What support the Government are making available for tree planting. [908259]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): We all love trees. Woodland planting in England is supported through the countryside stewardship woodland creation grant. To further encourage tree planting we launched the second round of the woodland creation planning grant and the woodland carbon fund. We are committed to planting 1 million trees for schools during this Parliament in partnership with the Woodland Trust and other community trusts.

Sir David Amess: Happy birthday from the residents of Southend West, Mr Speaker.

Will the Minister join me in congratulating Southend-on-Sea Borough Council on its memorial tree planting scheme, of which I am about to take advantage? Does she agree that planting a tree in memory of a deceased person is a fitting tribute and makes an excellent contribution to the overall quality of the environment?

Dr Coffey: I commend Southend-on-Sea Borough Council for its tree planting scheme, and I personally acknowledge my hon. Friend’s recent bereavement with tribute because trees can provide a longstanding reminder of the departed and offer bereaved loved ones a special place to visit that is living and growing. I know that from personal experience of the trees planted in Wrexham cemetery.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Having planted some 3,500 trees on my farm back home, I am aware of the incentives given by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Will the Minister indicate what long-term incentives there are for farmers to plant trees, and for the participation of community groups and schools in that process?

Dr Coffey: As I have outlined, the countryside stewardship scheme acts as an incentive for tree planting. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is leading by example but, as he understands, the encouragement in Northern Ireland is led by his Government there.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, we can learn all about tree planting in Taunton Deane.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Perhaps planting a birthday tree would be a good idea, Mr Speaker.

Does the Minister agree that planting trees is an important part of keeping the whole environment in balance, and that the environment should be made a cornerstone of our post-Brexit agenda? There are enormous opportunities to sell our technologies worldwide and to show that we are world leaders. At home, we should weave the environment into everything to do with our economy and our social aims so that we increase productivity and security, benefit everyone and leave the environment in a better state than it was in when we inherited it.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right to point out the importance of the tree, which can have multiple benefits, as she pointed out. Late last year, I visited St Vincent de Paul Primary School in Liverpool to support its tree-planting exercises. I can assure my hon. Friend that the environment is at the heart of the Government today, not just post-Brexit.

Rural Economy

8. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the effect on the rural economy of the UK’s decision to leave the EU. [908260]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Leaving the EU represents a great opportunity for the rural economy because we will be free to design from first principles policies that really deliver for our own farmers and our own rural communities, without having to accept a centralised, one-size-fits-all policy set by the EU.

Patricia Gibson: Happy birthday to you from me, Mr Speaker. President-elect Trump spoke last week of the UK securing a very quick trade deal with the US once it has left the EU, which has led to fears that that could mean harsh compromises on issues such as the environment, animal welfare laws and food safety. Will the Secretary of State today reassure the House and people across the United Kingdom that any trade deal with the US will not involve such compromises, which would jeopardise our food safety and animal welfare laws? Will she reassure us that she understands that a very quick deal is not necessarily the same as a very good deal for the consumer or the producer?

George Eustice: The Secretary of State made it clear earlier that the Conservative party is the only party that made a commitment to reflect animal welfare standards in trade negotiations, and that remains a commitment of the Government. There are opportunities for our agricultural sector in the US, particularly in sectors such as dairy, and possibly in sectors such as lamb as well. My colleagues in the Department for International Trade will obviously lead on these matters once we leave the European Union, but there will be potential opportunities for UK industry as well.

Gavin Newlands: In his visit on Monday to Gryffe Wraes farm, which I visited last week, the farming Minister will have heard many Brexit concerns, one of which is about the potentially catastrophic impact on Scotland’s rural economy of ending free movement. At
the Oxford farming conference, the Secretary of State hinted at some relaxation of that for the agri-sector. Can the Minister elaborate on that and assure the sector that taking on seasonal workers will not be a costly bureaucratic nightmare?

George Eustice: I had a very constructive meeting with members of NFU Scotland on Monday. We had a meeting for almost two hours, where we discussed a range of issues that are of concern to the industry, but also some of the opportunities that we have. As we move forward, we will work closely with all the devolved Administrations and with industry throughout the UK. When it comes to labour, we have heard the representations. We will be looking at those issues. It is a Home Office lead, but we are contributing to that debate.

George Eustice: I can reassure my hon. Friend that, having grown up on a farm and worked in the farming industry for 10 years, I will be very much listening to farmers and their views, and wanting to learn from their experience. We will be listening to everybody as we develop future policy.

Stephen Crabb (Pembridge) (Con): We hear the reassurances that Ministers give about seasonal agricultural workers, but my hon. Friend will be aware that a great many farms and rural businesses rely on EU workers as part of their regular staffing requirement throughout the year. Will Ministers bear in mind the very real labour shortages that exist in much of the countryside as they discuss with ministerial colleagues how we tighten our immigration controls?

George Eustice: One of the things that I ran on my own farm was a very large soft fruit enterprise, where I had experience of employing over 200 people, so I am familiar with the challenges that certain sectors in agriculture bring to me. We are in discussion with a number of the leading players in this area to try to get an understanding of their needs, and it goes without saying that we are in discussion with colleagues in other Departments.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): Can we be reassured that, when he makes his assessment of the impact of farming of leaving the EU, he will actually listen to the farmers and not the so-called experts from bodies such as the National Trust, who seem to be intent on following their own agenda, with scant regard for the farmers who are trying to make a living on the hill farms in High Peak and across the country?

George Eustice: I can reassure my hon. Friend that, when he makes his assessment of the impact of farming of leaving the EU, he will actually listen to the farmers and not the so-called experts from bodies such as the National Trust, who seem to be intent on following their own agenda, with scant regard for the farmers who are trying to make a living on the hill farms in High Peak and across the country.

11. [908266] Andrew Bingham: Can the Minister elaborate on that and assure the sector that taking on seasonal workers will not be a costly bureaucratic nightmare?

Dr Coffey: I commend my hon. Friend for his continuing support of the hedgehog. The Government support efforts to make our gardens more hedgehog-friendly through the creation of havens, and the campaigns within local communities to work together to look out for the hedgehog, including that of BBC Suffolk. I encourage him to get BBC Devon to do the same. We do have a proud tradition, and we want to continue that with our next generation.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: On hedgehogs and related matters?

Mary Creagh: Indeed, Mr Speaker. Many happy returns.

Hedgehogs and other wild mammals, and precious bird species, are currently protected under European Union regulations. The Environmental Audit Committee’s report on the effects on the natural environment of leaving the EU recommended a new environmental protection Act. Has the Minister had a chance to read the report, and what is her assessment of our recommendation?

Dr Coffey: I read it from cover to cover on the day it came out, as is appropriate for a Minister in serving the needs of the House. I can honestly say that our intention is to bring environmental legislation into law on the day that we leave the European Union. As a consequence, we see no need for any future legislation at this stage.

Topical Questions

T1. [908270] Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): I would like to place on record my sincere thanks for the commitment and
hard work of the military, Environment Agency staff, local councils, volunteers and the emergency services during last weekend’s tidal surge. While a small number of properties were flooded, more than half a million homes and businesses were protected from flooding along the east coast as a result of their efforts. I am sure the whole House would like to join me in expressing our gratitude.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The consumer prices index is at the highest it has been for over two and half years, largely driven by rising food prices. Since the Government stubbornly refuse to measure and act on levels of food poverty, what will the Secretary of State do for the millions of people her Government have ignored for years now who cannot afford to eat?

Andrea Leadsom: Food prices are steady and have been reducing. There is a very recent small uptick, but generally food inflation has been low. As the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), explained to the hon. Lady earlier, we do monitor the levels of expenditure on food very closely.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): We as a Government continue to invest in flood defences right around our coasts—a feature that my hon. Friend and I share in our constituencies. I reiterate our thanks to our emergency services and the military who helped people at risk last year. We continue to invest so that fewer homes and businesses will be at risk in future.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): I was originally told that the study by the Small Area Health Statistics Unit investigating the potential link between emissions from municipal waste incinerators and health outcomes would be published in 2014, then 2015. In October last year, through a parliamentary question, I was told that it would be published this year. Is the Minister confident that it will at last be published this year?

Dr Coffey: That is a timely reminder from the hon. Gentleman. I will look into the matter straight away and write to him.

T2. [908271]Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): May I endorse what the Secretary of State has said about the superb work done by the emergency services and other voluntary groups along the east coast? What are she and her Department doing to support community interest companies, which can harness both the public and private sectors in finding additional funds for coastal and other defences?

T3. [908272]Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the Secretary of State agree to visit the “Slowing the Flow” project in Pickering? It is a natural flood alleviation scheme part-funded by DEFRA, which saves the taxpayer about £15 million compared with a similar, traditional scheme. Will she meet the local flood authority and the Yorkshire Dales partnership to see what has been done and what could be done with some of the £15 million that the Department has allocated to other, similar projects?

T4. [908273]Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Minister was doubtless reminded by the National Farmers Union Scotland on Monday that 90% of this country’s beef and lamb exports are to the EU. For the farmers concerned, the Prime Minister’s threat to walk away from the single market with no deal would not be bad; it could leave them facing tariffs of up to 20%, and that would be catastrophic. What assurances
can he give to the farmers and crofters in my constituency that he and the Government will not leave them exposed in that way?

George Eustice: The Prime Minister gave the assurance that we seek a good deal, and that no deal is better than a bad deal; I do not think that anybody can disagree with that. I will simply say that in food and drink alone, we have a trade deficit with the EU of some £10 billion, so the EU has a great interest in having tariff-free access to the UK market.

T7. [908279] Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Following the success of the charge for plastic bags in reducing the amount of plastic going into our seas, and the welcome announcement on limiting the use of microbeads, the next big issue we need to address is single-use plastic bottles. Can the Secretary of State update the House on what plans she has to cut the number of plastic bottles polluting our seas and beaches?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right to point out that the consultation on microbeads is out there. It contains a call for wider evidence on the need to tackle other plastics. We are developing a new litter strategy, which may well address this issue. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is personally interested in the matter and intends to set up an innovation fund that may explore new ideas to tackle it.

T6. [908275] Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): Under the common agricultural policy, an enormous amount of subsidy is used to encourage very intensive farming. Although subsidies to help farmers need to continue, could Ministers also look at some of the ideas for rewilding advocated by George Monbiot and others and see whether, after the common agricultural policy, our subsidies could encourage the restoration of the environment rather than its conservation?

George Eustice: We will be looking at representations from all people. If we want to improve the farmed environment, we have to look at the whole farmed environment and not restrict our ambitions to the uplands or, indeed, the moorland areas. We are looking in a range of areas at how we can improve soil management and water quality.

T8. [908277] Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Will the my hon. Friend update the House on the proportion of 2016 single farm payments that have been made and progress on that with our Cornish farmers?

George Eustice: As the Secretary of State said earlier, we have now paid 92.8% of basic payment scheme claims for the current year. As a fellow Cornishman, I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that 97% of claims in Cornwall have now been paid.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Hill farmers in my constituency and elsewhere in the country will be concerned that their interests should not be compromised in any free trade deal with New Zealand. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that she will fight for farmers in any free trade deal and ensure that they are not put out of the market because of cheap imports of New Zealand lamb? Will she fight for farmers in the post-Brexit world?

Andrea Leadsom: It will be for us, as a free and sovereign Parliament, to determine the terms of any free trade agreements. I have already read out our manifesto commitment on the highest levels of animal welfare. Our manifesto also commits to food safety and traceability. In our ambition to be a world-leading food and farming sector, we intend to promote those commitments around the world.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): There is a continuing problem of beam trawling, fly shooting and electronic pulse fishing in UK waters. Not only are those practices environmental vandalism, but they are having a devastating impact on local fishing communities. Will the Minister assure the House that he is doing everything he can to address the problem?

George Eustice: I am aware of the concerns, particularly about pulse trawling in the southern North sea. I have asked CEFAS, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, to look at the issue, do a review of current literature and give me a report on what we know about the science. In addition, there is a working group in the EU on the matter.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker. At the time of the negotiations on the now stalled TTIP deal, the US Agriculture Secretary said that the EU needed to rethink its current bans on chlorine-washed chicken and beef from cattle raised with growth hormones. British consumers do not want those products on their shelves, but given that we are now in a much weaker negotiating position, how can the Minister reassure us that the Government will not allow them into the UK?

George Eustice: The US represents US interests in negotiations; the UK Government will represent the UK in any future trade negotiations. As I made clear earlier, we will not compromise on issues such as animal welfare and food safety.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Occupied Palestinian Territories

1. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What support the Church of England is giving to Christians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories?

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman) (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Bishop of Southwark is currently visiting the west bank and Gaza and the Archbishop of Canterbury also intends to visit later this year. He is very keen that the House should know about the work of Embrace, whereby the Church of England is in partnership with 23 Palestinian Christian organisations to end poverty and bring justice to the Occupied Palestinian Territories—to Muslims, Christians and Jews alike.
Helen Goodman: Palestinian Christians are suffering the effects of the settlement. Two weeks ago, I stood on the hills behind Bethlehem and saw how the six-lane motorway and the wall carve through Palestinian farmland. Their houses are being demolished and I met a young man whose family had lost 18 trees, which are now being sold on the internet for £30,000. When the Archbishop and the Bishop go to the occupied territories, please could they make vocal their witness to the injustice that is happening?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Speaking out about injustice is precisely what Church leaders do, and they do it well. When the Archbishop visits, I am sure that he will look closely at the injustice that the hon. Lady described. It is scandalous that infant mortality is increasing in the occupied territories when, on the whole, it is in decline around the world. The Church supports the Anglican Al-Ahli hospital, where 1,000 children and more than 15,000 adults are treated, so we give practical support to the territories.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): There is an increasingly militant settler movement that treats Palestine like its own biblical theme park. To what does my right hon. Friend attribute the radical decline in the numbers of Palestinian Christians living in the west bank?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Both my right hon. Friend and the hon. Lady have the advantage over me in having actually been to the occupied territories. I have not been there. Sadly, there is a huge pressure on Christians in the middle east. About 8% of the population of the middle east is Christian, with 80% concentrated in Egypt. As we saw at the Open Doors launch in Parliament last week, religious persecution is one of the main drivers of out-migration.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Best wishes, Mr Speaker. Will the right hon. Lady consider visiting Christians and others in the Palestinian west bank very soon? Like my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), I too saw the land owned by 53 Christian families near Beit Jala, and the monastery and the convent. Despite protests and support from Christian leaders around the world, the wall proposal is going ahead through those lands. I hope the right hon. Lady will visit very soon.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I would love to have the opportunity to visit this very troubled part of our world and to see for myself the impressions gained by several hon. Members. The Church actively encourages its members to go and see the reality of life for Palestinian Christians. About 750,000 parishioners and to members of the public, so that we all have our eyes opened to what is going on around us.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I declare my interest, as I was on the same visit as the hon. Members for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury). It might surprise people to know that there are Christians in the Palestinian Cabinet. The Palestinian Authority are responsible for both Jesus’s birthplace and his family home. May I encourage my right hon. Friend to encourage the Church to develop as close relationships as possible between the Church in this country and Christian communities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories?

Dame Caroline Spelman: That is exactly the purpose of Embrace the Middle East. We are in partnership with 23 Palestinian Christian organisations. The value of the support we give through this scheme is equivalent to £1.25 million.

Human Trafficking/Vulnerable Women

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to (a) tackle human trafficking and (b) support vulnerable women.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England has launched a new project specifically to equip and resource Church of England dioceses to tackle modern slavery and human trafficking. The Lord Bishop of Derby has pioneered this practical support to tackling trafficking. Working together with local charities and the Mothers’ Union, the Church seeks to support vulnerable women alongside those who suffer domestic violence.

Chi Onwurah: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker. I pay tribute to the work of the Church and to the many generous Geordies who help to support vulnerable and trafficked women in Newcastle, which is proud to call itself a city of sanctuary. Unfortunately, it is not enough and not every woman has the support they need. What is the Church doing to work more effectively with local authorities and police forces, which are suffering extreme cuts, to ensure that every vulnerable woman has someone to turn to?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Lord Bishop of Derby’s initiative I referred to is known as the Clewer Initiative. The objective of the Church is to share best practice in Derby with different dioceses. For example, Portsmouth diocese has expressed an interest in what has been learned in Derby. Tackling trafficking and violence is about spotting the signs. Training will be given to parishioners and to members of the public, so that we all have our eyes opened to what is going on around us.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Adult victims of human trafficking are looked after by the most excellent Government scheme, which is administered on an umbrella basis by the Salvation Army. Many of the people who actually look after the victims are Christian groups. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is exactly how it should work?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am sure we all remember the work of Sir Anthony Steen in raising our awareness of the terrible blight of trafficking. It is often down to local voluntary groups to provide that arm of practical support to the victims of trafficking, who are all around us in our society.

Prisoners and Prison Chaplains

Chi Onwurah: How the Church of England plans to support prisoners and prison chaplains across the prison estate.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Prisoner chaplains across the prison estate.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): How the Church of England plans to support prisoners and prison chaplains across the prison estate.

3. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): How the Church of England plans to support prisoners and prison chaplains across the prison estate.

6. Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): How the Church of England plans to support prisoners and prison chaplains across the prison estate.
Dame Caroline Spelman: The work of prison chaplains is especially important given the current pressures in the prison system. The Bishop to Prisons, the Lord Bishop of Rochester, will shortly be bringing Church of England chaplains together for a training and support event.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. My private Member’s Bill combating homelessness is currently proceeding through the House. One aspect of the Bill is to help ex-offenders leaving prison to find a proper place in society. What further action can the Church take to prepare ex-offenders for a life outside prison so that they do not reoffend in the future?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I commend my hon. Friend for his private Member’s Bill. We are all keen to see it become law and for action to flow from it. The Bishop of Rochester is sponsoring a new national initiative called “Prison Hope” designed to increase the level of volunteering around prisons, and I have seen it working in practice in my own constituency. A charity called Yellow Ribbon provides prisons with mentors from the parish to help offenders prepare for life outside and for going straight, with a job, a place to live, clothes to wear and some money to live on.

Mr Nuttall: Will my right hon. Friend explain what measures are in place to monitor prisoners’ commitment to the Christian faith after their release from prison? It is sometimes suggested that prisoners only start attending church services in the belief and hope that it will help them gain parole. If prisoners at least know that their continued adherence to the Christian faith is being monitored, they might think twice before trying to take advantage of the genuine support offered by prison chaplains.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Prison chaplains are highly experienced and welcome all those who show an interest in matters of faith, but they have become reasonably expert at spotting those for whom it is perhaps a means to a short-term end. It is important to remember that the primary aim is not to check ex-offenders leaving prison to find a place in society today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Many prisoners are veterans who have served in the Army and other armed forces. What deliberations has the right hon. Lady had with veterans charities and Army charities to ensure that specific help is given to veterans in prisons to support their spiritual or physical health?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I have not had any specific conversations with the Army charities, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We have seen from the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), whose Bill is focused on homelessness, that there is a worrying nexus or correlation in relation to veterans leaving the Army and sometimes ending up homeless or getting caught up in a life of crime. All institutions, including the Church of England, need to work together to stop that happening.

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for those thefts, and will she also congratulate the congregation on their spirited efforts to put things right?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am sure that we all condemn thieves who steal lead from church buildings, not least because communities face very big bills for its replacement. My own parish church is in the same position. After such thefts, it becomes difficult to insure churches again. I commend the congregation at my hon. Friend’s local church. I point them to the ChurchCare website, which shows that there are now ways of fixing lead, and marking systems for signature materials to help to deter thieves.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Gainsborough, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, was asked—

National Audit Office Expenditure

7. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What progress the Commission has made in reducing the expenditure of the NAO. [908247]

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): My Committee approves the NAO’s future plans and resource requirements. The Commission is conscious of the need for the NAO to practise what it preaches in terms of value for money, and also to have the right capability to perform its duties.

Since 2010-11, the NAO has, under our direction, reduced the cost of its work by 26% in real terms, excluding new local government work. The NAO’s budget is set to ensure that it has the resources that it needs to discharge its statutory functions to Parliament, while also meeting the external quality standards that govern its audit work.

Henry Smith: Now that this country is leaving the European Union with the clear vision set out the other day by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, can my hon. Friend say what impact he believes that will have on the NAO and the auditing of its accounts?

Sir Edward Leigh: It is obviously too early to say what the full impact of Brexit will be, but I can say that the NAO’s scrutiny will focus initially on the capacity and capability of Departments to deliver an effective and efficient exit process. The NAO is now the auditor of the new Department for Exiting the European Union, and will work with that Department and with the Treasury to ensure that disclosures in annual reports and accounts provide a transparent and balanced view of the impact on individual Departments. In my view, the whole point of this process is, indeed, to increase transparency and parliamentary accountability as we take back control of our own money.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): More than 60% of the existing NAO reports and investigations cover matters that exclude Scotland. Does the Chairman agree that Barnett consequentials should arise from that expenditure?

Sir Edward Leigh: I serve on the Procedure Committee, and we do discuss such matters. This is more a matter for the Committee than for the commission, but I can say that it is undoubtedly true that there will be Barnett consequentials.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Low-carbon Economy

8. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In what way Church of England asset investments support a low-carbon economy. [908248]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): I am delighted to be able to announce that last month the Church of England received three awards at the Investment & Pensions Europe awards ceremony, including the award for climate-related risk management, which recognised, among other things, the Church of England’s comprehensive climate policy and commitment to ensuring the reduction carbon in its own portfolio.

Kerry McCarthy: I welcome the Church of England’s moves in this regard, but how does commitment to a low-carbon future sit with reports today that the Church has given the go-ahead for fracking on Church land?

Dame Caroline Spelman: It is not a question of a Church of England go-ahead. This is part of Government policy. On Tuesday, the Church released an updated briefing paper on shale gas and fracking. It does not endorse or reject the outright prospect of fracking, but fracking is acceptable to the Church only if it turns on three points: the place of the shale gas in the low-carbon economy, the adequacy and robustness of regulation, and the robustness of local planning. Of course the Church sympathises with the concerns of individuals and communities that are directly affected by it.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Northern Estate

9. Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What the timetable is for work on the northern estate to be completed. [908249]

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The target date for completion of work on the Northern Estate is November 2023, which is the date by which the buildings will have been reoccupied.
Mr Speaker: I call Chris Bryant.

Chris Bryant: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker—although I recall that you did not wish me a happy birthday, or even call me, on my birthday last week.

Mr Speaker: Inexplicably, I was not aware of that great matter at the time.

Chris Bryant: I am grateful for that answer from the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), but the key thing about the date is that that is when the decant from this building is meant to have started, and there is a series of decisions that knock on one from another. If the Government do not bring forward the motion so we can start debating what is going to happen to the Palace of Westminster, is there not a real danger we will put that project and the public finances at risk?

Tom Brake: I certainly agree that it is important that we have a debate on this matter very soon, and I hope that is going to happen, but although there are linkages between the Northern Estate and the restoration and renewal project, it is my understanding that any delay on R and R would have an insignificant impact on the Northern Estate programme itself.

Christian Matheson: Is the right hon. Lady aware of the excellent work of the clergy at Chester cathedral in increasing visitor numbers through tourist attractions, which of course has the added bonus of getting people into the cathedral for its original purpose of worship, and is there a lesson for other cathedrals to learn from this?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Yes, and I encourage all Members to visit Chester cathedral. Last year I invited the vice dean, Canon Peter Howell-Jones, to come and talk to us about how he had turned the fortunes of Chester cathedral around, making it a very attractive visitor attraction, and introducing a brewery and a falconry centre, opening the tower for tours and, intriguingly, removing the entry charge for all of that. He has now moved on to a new appointment and I wish him every success in that new cathedral.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker. Torbay as a tourist destination is blessed with places like Cockington parish church and the historic Paignton parish church. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital that those who go to a church find the Holy Spirit, particularly if they are in distress, and an easy way of finding a place for prayer, rather than a ticket desk?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Yes. I have just been talking about Chester cathedral, where visitor numbers significantly increased with the removal of the entry charge. A church has always got to be a place where we can all go to find our spiritual base and recharge our spiritual batteries and, as my hon. Friend says, meet with the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Tourism

10. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What steps the Church of England has taken to promote churches and cathedrals as tourist destinations. [908251]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church of England actively promotes its 42 cathedrals as visitor centres, and together they contribute £220 million to the national economy. There are 10 million visitors to them annually, and 7,000 people are employed by them, supported by 15,000 dedicated volunteers.
Mr Speaker: I should like to make a brief statement to the House.

The House of Commons Service has participated in Stonewall’s workplace equality index for the past five years. Stonewall is the largest charity in Europe in support of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights. This year, Stonewall has announced that we have achieved a place in its index of the top 100 LGBT-friendly employers, ranking 28th with a score of 155 out of 200 points. Colleagues, this is an impressive rise of 88 places on last year’s index ranking of 116th, and the first time that we have been named in the published top 100. In addition to this score, ParliOUT, the parliamentary workplace equality network for LGBT equality, has been named one of Stonewall’s “highly commended network groups”. Among its achievements in 2016, ParliOUT members raised money to buy the rainbow flag that flew over Parliament for the first time during London Pride weekend in June.

I should like to thank stakeholders from across Parliament for their support in this achievement, led by the redoubtable Anne Foster and her colleagues in the House of Commons Diversity and Inclusion team, and an achievement which I confess I have been passionately championing as Speaker. I hope that this news demonstrates our commitment to being an inclusive employer and institution.

We are pleased with the progress and we shall now redouble our efforts in the coming years to improve further upon it.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for his statement, but we still do not appear to have a date for the summer recess. I ask him to think carefully about that and perhaps come back with it next week, possibly with dates for Prorogation and the state opening as well.

Mr Speaker, may I wish you a very happy birthday? I am afraid that the House cannot sing to you. As a tennis fan, I do not know whether your presents included new balls, but we all know how well you handle a racquet—both outside and inside the Chamber. I also wish a happy birthday to Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin. She was an inspired choice as Speaker’s Chaplain and
Swayne) said last week that his pleasure

The right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond

and should have been 12 paragraphs in a White Paper.

The 12 points of principle are Government policy initiatives

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why the Prime Minister refused to come and tell the

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Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson),

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a ten-minute rule Bill on stalking, and, with the help of

hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) introduced

the Finance Bill, highlighting gender-based pricing. The

provides great pastoral support for MPs. Perhaps the

Leader of the House will join me in challenging you

both to a doubles match for charity.

Sadly, this House is losing MPs, including a former

Prime Minister, but I point out that many hon. Members

have made an incredible contribution and that things

can be done from the Back Benches. My hon. Friend

the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) amended

the Finance Bill, highlighting gender-based pricing. The

hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) introduced
	
ten-minute rule Bill on stalking, and, with the help of

the other place and the Government, has extended the

maximum sentence for stalking to 10 years. The hon.

Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson),

when speaking about the loss of her baby, reminded us

that we should allow coroners in England to investigate

stillbirths so that errors in care can be addressed.

Many other hon. Members from across the House do

great work, which is why many of us cannot understand

why the Prime Minister refused to come and tell the

House and its elected representatives about a major

policy announcement that affects the whole country.

The 12 points of principle are Government policy initiatives

and should have been 12 paragraphs in a White Paper.

The right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond

Swayne) said last week that his pleasure

“is magnified when I address the Chair and you, Sir, are occupying

it.”—[Official Report, 12 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 488.]

I wish he would say that to the Prime Minister. The

12 objectives should have been set out in a White Paper

last September, which would have ended the speculation

and uncertainty that have engulfed us for the past six

months. However, we still need clarity on several issues,

so I can see why the Prime Minister did not want to be

questioned about them.

I welcome objective 4, which is about maintaining the

common travel area with Ireland. The Prime Minister

said that the devolved Administrations will be consulted,

but, given the elections in Northern Ireland, will the

Leader of the House confirm who from Northern Ireland

will be sitting on the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU

Negotiations)? Gibraltar voted 96% to remain. What

consultation do the Government intend to have with

Gibraltar, and how, before Spain plants its flag? Spain

has already threatened to plant its flag in Gibraltar.

The Prime Minister talks of a global Britain, yet

principle 5 sets out the Government’s proposals to keep

the world out. She said:

“And because we will no longer be members of the Single

Market, we will not be required to contribute huge sums to the

EU budget.”

In principle 10 she wants the UK to continue to be the

best place for science and innovation, forgetting that in

2013 the UK received £9.8 billion, the fourth largest

share in the EU, for research and development, with the

private sector receiving £1.4 billion. And that is just one

sector. We give but we get something back.

As we await the Supreme Court judgment on a point

of law on 24 January—next Tuesday—let us remind

the people that the judges are on their side, upholding

the rule of law and holding the Executive to account. Can

the Leader of the House confirm that, whatever Bill

comes out after the judgment, it will not be a cynical,

one-line Bill, as suggested by Government counsel? The

Prime Minister wants to do this for our children and

grandchildren, but our children between the ages of 18

and 24 voted overwhelmingly, 75%, to remain in the

EU. They already feel let down.

As we remember Martin Luther King Day this week

and Holocaust Memorial Day next week, let us remember

the words of Martin Luther King and Elie Wiesel, a

holocaust survivor who sadly died last year. And let us

remember that the European Union was formed for

nations to come together in peace, not hatred. We must

remember that we are interdependent: we do not live in

isolation, whether as individuals, countries or nations.

Our constituents want justice—economic and social

justice—both here and in Europe. In the months and

years ahead, let those, too, be our guiding principles.

Mr Lidington: On the dates for the summer recess and

Prorogation, although I hope to oblige the House

as soon as I am able, the hon. Lady and others will

understand that there are uncertainties about how long

it will take to transact the business before the House

in the weeks to come, so I am not yet able to give firm

dates.

The hon. Lady made a number of criticisms and

asked a number of questions about the Government’s

handling of the forthcoming EU negotiations. My right

hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the

European Union gave an oral statement to the House

and answered Members’ questions for about two hours.

In the hon. Lady’s strictures on the Prime Minister, I

detect a sense of the frustration that I know is widely

shared on the Labour Benches at the inability of the

Leader of the Opposition to lay a glove on the Prime

Minister every Wednesday on this or other matters.

The Ministers who have not resigned from the Northern

Ireland Executive, in the way that Mr McGuinness

stepped down as Deputy First Minister, remain as

acting Ministers until the new Executive can be appointed

so the Government are able to talk to them. Of course,

officials from the Northern Ireland Executive continue
to attend meetings. I used to chair Joint Ministerial

Committees on Europe, and I remember that after the

previous Stormont elections it took a while for the

Executive to be formed. During that period, Northern

Ireland officials did attend the joint meetings to make

sure that Northern Ireland was represented.

In line with the Prime Minister’s undertaking following

the referendum, Ministers and officials are in regular

contact with the Government of Gibraltar, from the

Chief Minister down. More broadly, on the question of

the European Union and the hon. Lady’s concluding

words, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made it

clear during her speech that the last thing she and

the Government are seeking is a weakening or dismantling

of the European Union. The Prime Minister said in

terms that she wanted the European Union to succeed.

My right hon. Friend and the entire Government are

very aware of the fact that for much of Europe the

mid-20th century was an utterly scarring experience,

very aware of the fact that for much of Europe the

very clear during her speech that the last thing she and

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terms that she wanted the European Union to succeed.
British people last June, but in a way that seeks to achieve a future relationship with our closest neighbours that is based on mutual trust, friendship, and continued alliance and co-operation on a range of policy measures.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I join the hon. Lady in wishing all the best to you and to the Speaker’s Chaplain on your birthdays today. I would be happy to accept the hon. Lady’s challenge, but I have to say that, knowing your prowess on the tennis court, I would regard the outcome of the encounter as something of a forgone conclusion.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a bit rich of the shadow Leader of the House to complain about parliamentary scrutiny of the matters announced to the media. I lived through the Blair and Brown years, when they never even bothered to turn up to answer anything, whereas this Government have been absolutely splendid—better than the coalition Government. Although the Opposition claim they want to discuss and bang on about Europe, yesterday’s debate on Europe finished early, as they did not have enough speakers, so will the excellent Minister continue to schedule general debates? Could they be themed debates, with one on each of the 12 points the Prime Minister mentioned, so that the Opposition could have as much time as they like to discuss this?

Finally, with your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I would just like to put to rest a lie. The leader of the Liberal Democrats claimed that I might have written the Prime Minister’s speech, but I had nothing to do with it; it was her own words.

Mr Lidington: I do not know whether that last comment was a bid to join the ministerial speechwriting teams in the future. On the point about debates, there will be ample opportunities for the House to continue to debate all aspects of the forthcoming negotiation on the European Union.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I, too, wish you a happy birthday, Mr Speaker? Lang may yer lum reek, as we say in these parts. May I also thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week?

This week has quite simply been a bad week for Parliament, and the Leader of the House, as this House’s champion, should be thoroughly ashamed of himself. The Prime Minister made perhaps the most important statement about the future of this country—not in here, where the elected Members are, but in an assembly full of the press and diplomats. We know now that it is almost certain that a Bill will be required in order to trigger article 50, so will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that this Bill will be subject to the maximum scrutiny, thoroughly amendable and properly debated in this House?

May we have a debate on how to win friends and influence people? The Foreign Secretary’s is currently touring Europe like a dodgy character out of “Allo ‘Allo!”—doing his utmost to upset the very people that global Britain needs to negotiate with to get a good deal on exiting the EU. We now know that this Government’s predominant obsessions—everything that underpins this approach to leaving the EU—are immigration and freedom of movement, so perhaps they could start by confining the Foreign Secretary to barracks here.

Several hon. Members rose—

Pete Wishart: Steady on! Over-eagerness there from those on the Labour Benches.

Will the Leader of the House do what the Prime Minister failed to do yesterday and confirm that the English votes for English laws procedure will not be applied to the great repeal Bill? That Bill will cut across many devolved competences, it will be a very complicated Bill and there will be many jurisdictions involved in it, so will he do what the Prime Minister failed to do yesterday and rule out EVEL today?

Lastly, through no fault of our own, we lost about half our Opposition day on Tuesday. Obviously, it was very necessary that people had an opportunity to question Ministers on the two important statements, but will the Leader of the House pledge to give us that half day back in the future?

Mr Lidington: On the hon. Gentleman’s last point, I cannot promise to give the Scottish National party that additional day. I do, though, recognise that there was pressure on the party’s limited time because of what he himself acknowledged were, by anybody’s count, two important statements. I shall reflect on that request, but he will understand that there are other pressures on the parliamentary timetable.

The hon. Gentleman asked two questions about European Union legislation. On the first, it is clear that until the Supreme Court has ruled, we do not know whether any Bill is going to be required. Nevertheless, if it is to become law, any Bill has to go through the full parliamentary process in this Chamber and in the other place—that is the only route available to change primary law in this country. I hope that gives him some reassurance. The extent to which amendments are in order clearly depends on the rules of the House and, ultimately, on the interpretation of the Chair.

On his question about the EVEL arrangements, it might be helpful if I remind the House that for any matter to be subject to those arrangements it has to meet three tests. First, it must refer to a matter that is devolved to Scotland; secondly, the legislation must refer only to England, or only to England and Wales; and, thirdly, there must be a certification from Mr Speaker that the clause, Bill or statutory instrument meets those tests. We have not yet published or determined the final shape of the Bill that will give effect to our exit from the EU—the repeal Bill—but those tests continue to be the ones that would have to be met in any case. A measure that repeals the European Communities Act 1972 clearly has UK-wide implications and would not apply only to one part of the United Kingdom.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): May I, too, wish you a very happy birthday, Mr Speaker?

Yesterday, the all-party group on youth employment heard from several youth employment ambassadors. These young people were inspirational, but their achievements were not due to the careers advice they had received but because of their self-belief and determination. May we have a debate about how careers advice can be improved, because currently there are examples of where we are potentially letting young people down?
Mr Lidington: That sounds to me like an important issue that might well merit an airing in one of the Backbench Business Committee debates. It is an issue to which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education is giving close attention.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Many happy returns, Mr Speaker. Forty is a difficult age, so beware. [Laughter.]

I thank the Leader of the House for notifying us of the Backbench Business on 26 January, and for confirming that there will be Backbench Business on 2 February—we have provisionally tabled a six-hour debate on the armed forces covenant for that day.

On Monday, the House adjourned at 7.40 pm, which I think was rather predictable, given the business on the day. Will the Leader of the House please consider, yet again, working with the Backbench Business Committee to schedule Backbench Business debates on such days in future? Those debates would, of course, take second place should Government business run its full course.

Will the Leader of the House also resolve a little thorny problem? We have had an application for a debate on International Women’s Day, which I am sure Members will know is on 8 March, which is when the spring statement is scheduled. Will he work with us to get a debate on International Women’s Day as close as possible to 8 March—probably beforehand, if at all possible?

Mr Lidington: I will do my best to meet the hon. Gentleman’s request on his last point.

I take seriously the problem he identifies apropos last Monday, and will see whether we can do more to accommodate it. The difficulty for Government business managers is that they are never certain until the day whether there will be urgent questions, which will take up time, or how many Members from all parts of the House will want to participate in a debate and for how long they will wish to speak. I can remember previous occasions when Backbench Business came under enormous pressure, resulting in a debate having to be abandoned or drastically curtailed, which was, understandably, immensely frustrating for Back Benchers who had altered their arrangements so that they were in their places and able to participate in the debate. The challenge is to try to strike that right balance.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the national schools funding formula, because if the proposals go ahead every single school in Southend will be worse off and Southend will be the 84th worst affected constituency out of 533?

Mr Lidington: I can understand my hon. Friend’s concern. I know that he is always a formidable and active champion of his constituents’ interests. The consultation run by the Department for Education is live now—it does not end until 22 March—so I urge him to ensure that he, on behalf of his constituents, and his constituents individually make strong representations to the consultation.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): I am always willing to offer birthday congratulations to young people, Mr Speaker, be it to you or your chaplain.

Mr Lidington: I clearly do not know the details of the situation in Hull, but I am happy to ask the relevant Health Minister—I think it is my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat)—to write to the hon. Lady. The principle is that there are now 15% more pharmacies than there were just a decade ago, two fifths of pharmacies are within 10 minutes’ walk of two or more other pharmacies, the average pharmacy receives roughly £220,000 a year in NHS funding and, even after the recently announced changes, the community pharmacy budget will be 30% more than it was a decade ago, so I think that the Government have demonstrated that they remain committed to community pharmacies and their importance.
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): For disabled people, achieving a job can be a life-changing experience. Last Friday, I was privileged to promote a This-Ability event in Cleethorpes to encourage local employers to take on more disabled people. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Lorraine Alexander and her team from Grimsby jobcentre, who did a great deal of work to stage the event, as well as all the voluntary and charitable groups? Can we find time to debate the role of and opportunities for disabled people in the workplace?

Mr Lidington: I am very happy to congratulate my hon. Friend’s constituents on this successful event. It has been an important step forward that we now have a record number of people with disabilities in work. I am the first to acknowledge that more still needs to be done, but I am heartened by the fact that we are making progress and that local enthusiasm, such as that which my hon. Friend describes, is helping to highlight those opportunities for people with disabilities.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): In contrast to just about everyone one of his predecessors for the past 30 years, the Leader of the House shows no inclination to defend the wider interests of the House as opposed merely to progressing Government business; his disgraceful treatment of the Bill on parliamentary boundaries is a case in point. A parliamentary Committee—a Select Committee—has unanimously recommended a White Paper before the invocation of article 50, so what representations did he make to secure that in the wider interests of the House, as opposed to a prime ministerial statement that was not even made in this place, motionless debates or a one-clause Bill that will be rammed through like some sort of thief in the night? Will he indicate to the House that he sees his job as securing effective parliamentary scrutiny of a major constitutional decision, however long it might take?

Mr Lidington: I am absolutely committed to full parliamentary scrutiny of this matter. Indeed, I had the delight of appearing for the first time in my current role before the European Scrutiny Committee yesterday to give evidence on one aspect of that subject. The right hon. Gentleman makes some incorrect assumptions about the role of the Leader of the House apropos individual Select Committee reports. It is for Select Committees individually to come to their view and make recommendations to Government, and it is then primarily for the Department to which those recommendations are addressed to recommend to Government colleagues what the response should be. There is a collectively approved Government response to that Select Committee report and if the right hon. Gentleman believes that any Government of any political colour is likely to agree with absolutely every recommendation of every Select Committee, I do not think that he has read many Select Committee reports or Government responses to them over the years. It is a perfectly fair and transparent way of conducting business and of Governments responding to Select Committee recommendations.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): With the decision of the Backbench Business Committee not to schedule a debate on settlements and the destruction yesterday of Umm al-Hiran, is there a possibility of a Government statement on what appears to be a significant shift in Government policy over recent days as we cosy up to the incoming American Administration in granting complete impunity to Israel?

Mr Lidington: The Government’s policy on Israel and Palestine has not changed. We remain committed to a two-state solution, involving a sovereign, independent viable Palestinian state living alongside Israel, with mutually agreed land swaps where appropriate and with Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states. Our view on the settlements remains that they are illegal in international law, and that is at the heart of the United Kingdom’s policy.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) for putting me right earlier. I should have realised, on reflection, that he would never write such an extreme speech as that which came out of the Prime Minister’s mouth the other day.

On the matter of flood-hit communities, not least mine in Cumbria after the devastating floods in December 2015, will there be time for a debate on Government financial support for those communities, in particular in the light of the Government’s decision in recent days to spend the entire amount of the £15 million we have now got for the December floodings from the European solidarity fund not on giving support to the communities that it was for, but on paying off a historical fine incurred in 2007 by a previous Government? Whoever’s fault it was that that fine was incurred, for certain it was not the fault of communities such as mine in Cumbria. Will the Leader of the House commit to all that money coming to those communities or at the very least to hold a debate on the matter?

Mr Lidington: An Adjournment debate is probably the best way forward on that issue, as it affects the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency. In fairness, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers have worked with Department for Communities and Local Government Ministers to make sure that the Bellwin money has been made available more rapidly than has sometimes been the case in the past when communities have been badly hit by floods. I will look into his particular point about the European solidarity fund money, since I am not sighted on that, and I or one of the DEFRA Ministers will write to him about it.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Nene Park was once the home of Rushden and Diamonds football club and is still a fully usable football stadium, but the demolition notices have been issued. Will the Leader of the House join me in urging the owners to sit down with the local authority, AFC Rushden and Diamonds football club and the community to have one last look at whether a solution can be found that retains all or part of the stadium, because once it is gone, it is gone? May we have a statement next week on those matters?

Mr Lidington: That strikes me as a natural Adjournment debate opportunity, but I very much hope that the sporting and other organisations locally in Corby can come together and find a way in which to maintain a clearly much-loved community sports facility.
Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Notwithstanding that many of us were disappointed with the result of the referendum, we recognise that the people have spoken. Nevertheless, it is not just for the Government to decide the detail; it is very important that this House gets a proper say. In response to the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and other Members, the Leader of the House indicated that there will be ample opportunity for debate. Will he be more specific about how many days this House will get to debate and influence the Government’s thinking on how we progress the negotiations, so that businesses and our constituents who are very concerned have their views aired in this House, and we can reflect the views of the people about how this will go ahead?

Mr Lidington: As the hon. Lady knows, there have been a number of debates already on particular aspects of our leaving the European Union. I fully expect that there will be other such debates related to additional specific topics in the months to come. Whatever does or does not happen next week, we will have a Bill in the new parliamentary Session to repeal the European Communities Act 1972. That will provide plenty of opportunities as well. At my last count, more than 30 different Select Committee inquiries into different aspects of our leaving the EU were being conducted by Committees either of this place or of the House of Lords. Of course, mechanisms exist to bring those Select Committee reports to the Floor of the House for debate as well.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): In this week, of all weeks, it is absolutely right that we say in the House of Commons that we want to proceed with the building of a Holocaust memorial museum. As the Leader of the House is responsible, at least in part, for the environs of the Palace of Westminster, does he accept that there may be merit in a debate on the siting of the museum? There is a view among many people that the best place for the museum would be within or outside the Imperial War Museum, so that its many visitors can see the link between the Holocaust and war and hatred, rather than siting it in Victoria Tower Gardens, which is one of the last green spaces around this Palace and visited by many hundreds of thousands of people each year. As the museum will be two storeys underground, there might also be a flood risk. There is a need for a debate on the siting of the museum.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend may well want to seek a Westminster Hall debate on the subject. The previous Prime Minister gave a commitment to the Victoria Tower Gardens site, and that has been reiterated by the current Prime Minister. Ultimately, the planning matters to which my hon. Friend alluded will be the responsibility of Westminster City Council.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Warm congratulations, Mr Speaker, as you approach the prime of life and the halfway point of your Speakership. You may be surprised to know that for all but two of your 54 years, Severn bridge users have been ripped off by the bridges being used as a cash cow. They have suffered double taxation, paying for the national road system and the local tolls. Can that rip-off now be ended as the bridges come into public control? It would be an immense benefit for accessibility on both sides of the Severn.

Mr Lidington: I have sometimes heard Welsh people say, “You have to pay to come to Wales, because it is such a privilege to visit, whereas everybody wants to get back to England in a hurry.”

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House want to start again?

Mr Lidington: No, no—they say it in the nicest possible way—[Interruption.] The point that perhaps I did not make clearly enough is that my interlocutors say to me, “If you tried to charge people to get back into England, they would want to stay in Wales and never leave.”

The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) made a serious point, which I will take up with Transport Ministers. The tolls help to pay for the cost of the crossings and that is important, but I will get the relevant Transport Minister to write to the hon. Gentleman on the subject.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give careful consideration to the time allocated to questions to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for International Trade and the Department for Exiting the European Union? We have only 30 minutes for oral questions and 10 minutes for topical questions to those Departments. Given the current relevance of them and their Select Committees, more time needs to be allocated. Will the Leader of the House give that consideration?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to give consideration to that proposal and to discuss it through the usual channels, because such matters are agreed by consensus if possible. However, if we add time to questions to those Departments, one of two things has to happen. Either we take time off other Departments or we extend the cycle of departmental Question Times to six weeks, rather than five, which leaves a longer gap before hon. Members have the opportunity to question the Secretary of State from any one Department.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): This week saw the release of the damning National Audit Office report on the Concentrix scandal that demonstrated institutional incompetence and neglect at the heart of all the agencies involved. The vast majority of victims have not received compensation. I have written to the Prime Minister, asking her urgently to intervene of victims ha ve not received compensation. I ha ve written to the Prime Minister, asking her urgently to intervene
that the contract was scrapped. HMRC has apologised, and it knows that it has to learn some lessons from that contract and what happened there. When it became clear that Concentrix’s customer service issues could not be rectified by Concentrix, HMRC took back 181,000 incomplete cases, and rightly redeployed hundreds of its own staff to deal with this work. All those cases were finalised by 3 November. HMRC has then also had to deal with mandatory reconsideration requests, of which 36,000 have been received, and it has allocated additional staff to that work so that requests can be dealt with quickly and payments restored where claimants are entitled to them. There may be an opportunity for a Back-Bench or Westminster Hall debate on this issue, further to the airing it has already had in this Chamber, but I think HMRC was right to give priority to the incomplete cases and to deal with those first. It is now proceeding as rapidly as it can to sort out the remaining mandatory reconsideration requests.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Can we have a debate on dementia? I am sure the Leader of the House will join me in congratulating Incommunities—the social housing provider for Bradford, which is based in my constituency—on training its staff to support residents with dementia. In such a debate, we could encourage other organisations to do the same. We could also find out what more the Government could do to help people who suffer from dementia—an estimated 6,500 people in the Bradford district are affected by it—and what further support could be given to their families, who have the difficult job of caring for them.

**Mr Lidington**: I hope my hon. Friend will have that opportunity, perhaps in Westminster Hall. I add my salute to those groups and individuals in his constituency, and in many others, who have highlighted the challenges posed by dementia and worked not only to encourage more people to become dementia friends but to ensure that we treat people living with dementia with the respect and dignity to which they are entitled and that they get the solidarity and support from their fellow citizens that they are entitled to expect.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Can we have a debate on bravery? In March 1936, a young gay Conservative Member of Parliament, Captain Jack Macnamara, visited the Rhineland to celebrate its remilitarisation, because he was then a supporter of Hitler. But while he was there, he visited the first concentration camp, Dachau, and he saw such horrific violence to Jews and homosexuals that, when he came back here, he campaigned relentlessly against anti-Semitism and appeasement. He raised those matters in this Chamber, but he was spat at when he went to the Carlton Club that night. He was killed in action in the second world war, on 22 December 1944, and his shield is on the wall of this Chamber. Do we not owe a debt of gratitude to such people, and should we not be doing everything in our power to put an end to anti-Semitism and prejudice in our era? [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

**Mr Lidington**: I agree with every word the hon. Gentleman said. The tribute he has just paid was a most appropriate one as we come towards Holocaust Memorial Day.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I hesitate to spoil your good humour on such a day, Mr Speaker, but you will be aware that Tottenham Hotspur is rebuilding White Hart Lane, and, as a result, we have to find a new home. The current proposal is that Tottenham will use Wembley stadium for a season, which will increase the use of our national stadium by 60%. There is an important issue for my constituency, which becomes the car park for Wembley stadium on event days. Worse still, Chelsea football club intends to come to Wembley for three years thereafter. May we have a debate in Government time on the uses to which our national stadium can be put, so that we can put on record our concerns about the potential abuse of our national treasure?

**Mr Lidington**: My hon. Friend has put his constituents’ concerns on the record most effectively, but there may be an Adjournment debate opportunity if he wishes to pursue the matter further.

**Mr Speaker**: I gently make the point that the Emirates is a very, very, very special place in London.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It seems appropriate, Mr Speaker, that today we have not only an amazing exhibition of photographs in the Attlee Room on Syria and Aleppo by William Wintercross, a brilliant photographer—I hope people will be able to see it—but a debate on Holocaust Memorial Day. May we also, on this special day, think about having a debate on a report that came out, I believe, in July 2008—it was called the Bercow report—on children and young people? Owing to cuts to local government up and down this country, young people are in dreadful danger, because child protection is becoming very difficult to maintain. May we have a debate on the Bercow report so that we can see what progress has been made since those good recommendations?

**Mr Lidington**: I cannot promise a debate in Government time, but the hon. Gentleman can make a submission to the Backbench Committee.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): As it is a double birthday today, Mr Speaker, may we have a pair of statements—one on the long-term future of HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, two of the most versatile and essential ships in the Royal Navy, whose future is threatened by a shortfall in the defence budget; and another on offering at least the same level of legislative protection to our veterans who served in Northern Ireland as is currently offered to the terrorists who fought against the welfare of the community that the veterans fought to defend?

**Mr Lidington**: On my right hon. Friend’s second point, the Northern Ireland Secretary has already said that he feels considerable disquiet at some of the reports of proposed prosecutions, and he is working very actively to try to secure agreement within Northern Ireland to legislate on the legacy of the troubles in a way that settles that issue as well as a number of others. On his point about the two naval vessels, I will ask the relevant Defence Minister to contact him about the detail.

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Airdrie Savings Bank, the UK’s last independent savings bank, is to end all business activities after 182 years, with the loss of 70 jobs. Secured loans and mortgages
will be transferred to the TSB, and customers will be helped to find alternative banking providers. As Unite the union has said,

“Airdrie Savings Bank has become yet another innocent victim of casino bankers.”

May we have a debate in Government time to discuss the state of UK banking?

Mr Lidington: Although I completely understand the concerns of the hon. Lady and those of her constituents who have accounts at the bank about the loss of this historic institution, the most important thing is that their savings are protected and that a banking service that is accessible to them remains in being. We have seen over the years a number of mergers of different banks and building societies. We have also seen a shift towards many, many more customers making use of online banking. Those factors are going to drive change, but having the service available is the key thing that we need to make sure is preserved.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes—Mr Bernard Jenkin.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Happy birthday, Sir.

May I thank my right hon. Friend for providing time for the approval of the name of the candidate for the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, which was approved by the Health Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee yesterday?

As we have already heard, Tuesday 24 January is the day on which the Supreme Court is delivering its judgment. May I suggest to my right hon. Friend that it would be expedient for the Government to plan to make a statement immediately on the future implications for business, even if a substantive statement on the longer-term implications of such a judgment will need to be made at a later date?

Mr Lidington: Clearly, I and other Ministers will want to brief Parliament fully on the substance and implications of the judgment once we know what it is. We do not yet know either its content or its complexity, and we are unlikely to get any prior knowledge—at most, it would be very brief—of what that judgment contains. I cannot make a promise today about the specific timing, but the principle at the heart of my hon. Friend’s question is one that I completely endorse.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Can we have a debate on the future of the Crown post office network? Crown post offices break even, unlike the post office network as a whole, and yet the Government are forcing through a change programme that puts at risk the post office network as a whole, and yet the Government have, despite that difficult fiscal environment, been able to protect the core schools budget. The money that is going to be paid to schools, coupled with the rise in pupil numbers that we are expecting, should ensure that for most schools—depending on whether they are gaining or losing pupils—the overall core schools budget is protected in cash terms.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I declare an interest as a crofter on the Isle of Skye? On 23 November last year, the Minister with responsibility for farming stated during Question Time that we would have a review of the allocations of the convergence uplift funding before the end of the year. I tabled a written question, to which I had a reply yesterday indicating that an update will be provided shortly. This is unacceptable. Can the Leader of the House make sure that the Minister makes a statement on the urgent review of the convergence funding? This is an important matter for crofters and farmers throughout the highlands and islands. Some £223 million euros of funding was given to this Government on the understanding that it would go to those in most need of it, and that has not happened.
Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman raised exactly that point during the debate on the rural economy on Tuesday. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs replied to him that she recognised his point, that she continues to look closely at the issue and that,

“I will keep him up to date with progress on it.”—[Official Report, 17 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 835.]

He has had a clear undertaking from the Secretary of State and he has reinforced his point.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Twice this week, I have raised my constituents’ concerns about cuts to council services and Ministers have simply swatted them aside. Will the Leader of the House take the opportunity to address those concerns and demonstrate that the Government are taking seriously the impact of Tory cuts on local people?

Mr Lidington: I accept that we have confirmed a settlement for local councils that is flat in cash terms, but we have also delivered what local authorities were asking for in certainty over a four-year funding period. We are planning legislation, which will be before Parliament but we have also delivered what local authorities were set for local councils that is flat in cash terms, so that the Northern Ireland Public Accounts Committee. It is therefore in their remit to investigate it. The scheme in process?

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The terms of your earlier statement, Mr Speaker, mean that “happy birthday” is not a mere wish but an observation of fact. In passing, may I mention yesterday’s landmark 80th birthday of landmark statesman, John Hume, the pathfinder for our peace process?

Will the Leader of the House talk to Northern Ireland Office and Treasury Ministers to clarify that there is legitimate locus for the House, its Ministers and Committees in the renewable heat incentive debacle in Northern Ireland? There is no basis for pretending that the dimensions of abuse in the uptake of that scheme are confined to devolved expenditure and do not involve the annually managed expenditure from the Treasury. There is also a question about a period when the regulations for the scheme had run out, spending continued and it was not covered by the Northern Ireland budget. Did Treasury funding cover it in the period when there was no regulatory basis for that spending?

Mr Lidington: First, I join the hon. Gentleman in sending belated birthday wishes to John Hume. We all salute the heroic role that he played in helping to start our peace process.

Mark Durkan: Like many Members— and, I am sure, the Leader of the House—I have been appalled by the Foreign Secretary’s crass comments. It seems to me that the Prime Minister has three options: she can sack him, gag him or educate him. If she decides to educate him, can the whole House have a role in that process?

Mr Lidington: When I think of our relationship with France, I think about how we stood with the free French forces and the resistance fighters against Nazism; how we and France stood together against Soviet tyranny; and the very active work that we carry out with France today against international terrorism. We look for a relationship after we leave the European Union that enables us to build on those historical strengths and to continue to work as active, complementary partners on a whole range of issues.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Yesterday in Scottish questions, I counted 13 non-Scottish-based MPs asking questions of the Scottish Secretary and only 10 Scottish-based MPs. Was that not a rather humiliating exercise in circling the wagons to save the Scottish Secretary from being scalped? May we have a debate on how to make the Secretary of State for Scotland answer to Scotland?

Mr Lidington: The Secretary of State for Scotland, like every other Secretary of State, answers to the House of Commons. It has always been the case that it is open to Members from any part of the United Kingdom to participate in questions to any Secretary of State. The hon. Gentleman’s party frequently complains about arrangements for English votes for English laws. It strikes me as a wee bit odd for him now to complain if Members from other parts of the UK want to ask questions of the Scottish Secretary of State.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On 16 December, Elton post office in my constituency closed without warning. Elton is a rural village and it is not easy for its residents to travel elsewhere. I understand that the closure was unavoidable, but we have no clear timetable for the reopening of the post office. May we have a debate on what more can be done to speed up the reopening of post offices in such situations?

Mr Lidington: This may be an Adjournment debate opportunity for the hon. Gentleman. I know from my own experience that the reasons for delay are various. Sometimes it is not easy to get a new manager to take over a franchise and operate the sub-post office. I hope very much for his constituents’ sake that the sub-post office is able to reopen as swiftly as possible.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Samir Chamka, a Christian convert from Islam, was accused of insulting the Prophet by republishing pictures and comments on Facebook, and arrested by the cybercrime unit in Algeria. He was given the maximum punishment for blasphemy under the Algerian penal code of five years’ imprisonment and a fine of 100,000 dinars. On 8 January, a court of appeal upheld his conviction and sentenced him to one year’s imprisonment. May we have a statement on how we can encourage Algeria and other nations to repeal their blasphemy laws?
Mr Lidington: I do not know the details of this particular case, but my view and the Government’s view is that we should champion religious freedom everywhere in the world. We pride ourselves on being a plural society that respects people of different faiths and no faith. That view of the world and those values influence our foreign policy, and will continue to do so.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Every weekend, parkrun volunteers make it possible for thousands of people across the country to take part in 5 km runs. I myself completed the Cwmbran parkrun on Christmas eve. May we have a debate on the contribution parkrun makes to our communities, and to health and wellbeing all over the country?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to those who organise parkrun. I myself completed the Aylesbury run. Parkrun is remarkable as a demonstration of how a voluntary grassroots initiative can help not just to get people more active, but to change attitudes towards activity by making people, who have perhaps been very shy of getting involved in organised sports, feel that they are welcome to come along and participate.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Debating with this Government, who have forsaken all reason on Brexit, is proving to be a bit like administering medicine to the dead. None the less, may we have a debate in Government time on Scotland’s place in Europe?

Mr Lidington: I think Scotland’s place in Europe is going to be prosperous and secure through its continued membership of a United Kingdom which, while it leaves the European Union, will be forging a new partnership on trade, security and co-operation against crime that will work to the benefit of everybody in Scotland, as well as everybody else in the United Kingdom.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The Leader of the House has previously told me and the House that the reason the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass), which deals with constituency boundaries, could not proceed to Committee was that it did not have a money resolution attached. I have just finished serving on the Homelessness Reduction Bill Committee, and that Bill went to Committee without such a resolution—in fact, we did not get one until the last week of the Committee. Why is it one rule for one Bill and another rule for another, and when will the boundaries Bill go into Committee?

Mr Lidington: I am not in a position to announce anything further about that Bill.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Clydesdale bank’s latest tranche of bank closures includes the one in Giffnock, in my constituency, which has already been disproportionately affected by bank closures. As well as causing difficulties for our high streets, it is particularly problematic for people less able to get about, and the bank’s wilful disregard for any form of consultation is frankly shameful. Can we have a debate in Government time on the latest Clydesdale bank closures and on the role and responsibilities of high street banks?

Mr Lidington: It is right that the banks stick to their own code, which requires that particular attention be paid when the last banking outlet in a community is scheduled for closure, but these are independent businesses facing a future in which many of their customers are choosing to bank online rather than in person at a local branch. It is a challenge for them to get the balance right and to ensure that everybody in the hon. Lady’s constituency has the access to banking services that they need.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

The Government have commissioned a report on electoral fraud, but what we actually need is a review of the behaviour of political parties during election periods and the punishments available. The Lib Dems were fined £20,000 for non-declaration of £200,000 of spending—money down the drain, by the way—Labour was also fined £20,000 and there are investigations into the Leader of the House’s own party. The Electoral Commission has said that a fine of £20,000 is no longer a strong enough deterrent to ensure that the rules are properly followed. Can we have a debate on that in Government time and take a serious look at the punishments available?

Mr Lidington: We have an independent, investigative and legal system that can look into political parties and ensure that expenses are checked, but I have to say that for Members of the Scottish National party to give lectures about good practice during election campaigning is a bit rich. There are plenty of independent-minded journalists who very much resented the bullying to which they were subjected during the last Scottish election campaign and referendum.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Just before the Christmas recess, I served on a European Committee on asylum that had two glaring problems: first, all the deadlines involved had already passed, and secondly, the House had decided on the motion before the Committee the previous week. What steps is the Leader of the House taking to ensure that nothing like this happens again?

Mr Lidington: I dealt with this matter in some detail in my evidence to the European Scrutiny Committee yesterday. There was an error on the Government’s part in the handling of that business, for which an apology was given to you, Mr Speaker, and to the Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, and steps have now been taken to ensure that there is no repetition.
Point of Order

11.48 am

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance regarding the response I got from the Leader of the House earlier. On 23 November, the farming Minister, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), said,

"we will provide an update on the review of CAP allocations before the end of this year."—[Official Report, 23 November 2016, Vol. 617, c. 884.]

We have had no such announcement from the Government. If these remarks are to mean anything, what powers do Back Benchers have to compel the Minister to give a fair and honest response regarding his promise of an update on the review of the convergence uplift money? These are important matters. We are talking about money that should be in the pockets of crofters and farmers in Scotland, but once again we have not got it. On behalf of my constituents, I say that this is not good enough.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The short answer is that the recourse available to him—and, I am afraid, the only recourse available to him—is his own quality of persistence. The hon. Gentleman must use the opportunities afforded by the Order Paper, and, indeed, those that he is able to create for himself through the tabling of further questions. As the hon. Gentleman says, those matters are extremely important. However, I have no reason to believe that, at the time when the Minister said that an update would be provided by the end of the year, he intended anything other than to meet that deadline. It has not been uncommon, under successive Governments of all colours, in this country and around the world, for there to be slippage. Where there is slippage, it is not a matter of order for the Chair; it is a matter for a perspicacious Back-Bench Member to continue to raise. The hon. Gentleman has many qualities, one of which is his perspicacity.

Backbench Business

Kashmir

11.51 am

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes the escalation in violence and breaches of international human rights on the Indian side of the Line of Control in Kashmir; calls on the Government to raise the matter at the United Nations; and further calls on the Government to encourage Pakistan and India to commence peace negotiations to establish a long-term solution on the future governance of Kashmir based on the right of the Kashmiri people to determine their own future in accordance with the provisions of UN Security Council resolutions.

Let me start by thanking my fellow members of the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to stand down from the Committee briefly in order to apply for the debate, and for agreeing that it could take place today. I should also declare that I am the current chairman of the all-party parliamentary Kashmir group.

I thank all the groups who have campaigned so steadfastly on this issue for so many years. I particularly thank Raja Najabat Hussain of the Jammu and Kashmir Self Determination Movement, who works tirelessly to keep up the profile of the issue of Kashmir with MPs, but I also thank Fahim Kayani and the Kashmir Movement UK, Sabiya Khan and the British Muslim Women’s Forum, Azmat Khan of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front, Najib Afzar and the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Council, and Dr Syed Nazir Gilani and the Jammu and Kashmir Council for Human Rights.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. May I ask him also to put on record his thanks to all the ordinary Kashmiris, in this country and back in Kashmir, who fight time and again, in a peaceful manner, to ensure that this issue is high on the agenda so that we take some action?

Mr Nuttall: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. I certainly put my thanks to those people on record.

Let me explain why the motion was tabled. Essentially, it was tabled because this issue matters to thousands of my constituents who are of Pakistani and Kashmiri heritage, and I know that it matters to the constituents of a number of other Members who are present today. Many of my constituents have families in Kashmir, and in some cases they have personally lost loved ones, or seen loved ones scarred for life as a result of violence.

Some Members may not be familiar with Kashmir. It is an area of territory that runs across the border between Pakistan and India. The root causes of the conflict can be traced back to 1947, when the colony of India was granted independence by Britain and was partitioned into two separate entities, India and Pakistan. The state of Jammu and Kashmir, with a predominantly Muslim population but a Hindu leader, shared borders with both India and West Pakistan.

The area has a long and complex history. Obviously there is not enough time for me to go into all of it, but suffice it to say that the argument over which nation would incorporate the state led to the first India-Pakistan
war, in 1947-48, and there have been several further upsurges in the conflict since then. I do not need to remind the House that both countries are now nuclear powers. Just to complicate matters further, some of the historic territory of Kashmir is now under the control of China.

I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), the Minister for south Asia, in his place and I am grateful to him for taking the time recently to meet members of the all-party group on Kashmir. I know he will be aware that the fact that Britain was responsible for the partition leads many in the Kashmiri community to believe this country could and should be doing more to try and help resolve this matter. The fact that partition was 70 years ago demonstrates the intransigence of this problem, and I am under no illusion that there are any easy solutions.

I wish to cover two areas: the recent increase in violence and human rights abuses, and the longer-term issue of trying to resolve this long-running conflict. The most recent increase in violence began last year when, on 8 July, 22-year-old Burhan Wani was killed by the security forces in Indian-administered Kashmir. Tens of thousands attended his funeral, at which clashes broke out between the security forces and protestors. Security forces fired live ammunition into the crowd, killing several people and a police officer was also killed.

Since then the authorities have declared a succession of curfews and closed down mobile phone services and media outlets. Attendance at mosques and adherence to religious practices has been restricted. Protestors have organised a series of general strikes. Schools, colleges and universities have also been closed. The economy has been badly hit. Funerals have often led to further clashes between protestors and the security forces. Critically, scores of Kashmiris have been killed and many thousands of civilians have been seriously injured.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. He rightly points out the recent escalation in human rights violations, but does he agree this is a much longer-term problem and that human rights violations have happened in that region for decades?

Mr Nuttall: As I have said, there is a long and complex history to this issue and, as the hon. Gentleman says, there have been many upsurges in violence over the years and many human rights abuses that have been catalogued and recorded.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is imperative that an international investigation into those human rights abuses is carried out as soon as possible?

Mr Nuttall: Yes, I do agree, and that is something I will mention briefly later in my speech.

The use of pellet guns has left thousands of people, including children, injured and in many cases blind. Armed militias have increased their attacks on the security forces. In September 2016 an attack on an army base killed 19 Indian soldiers, the army’s worst loss of life for well over a decade. There has also been a serious flaring up of tension between India and Pakistan, with regular exchanges between their forces along the line of control. These have led to significant military casualties. Senior figures on both sides have been ratcheting up the hostile rhetoric, leading to growing fears of another major escalation in the conflict between the two countries.

I know the Government are concerned about any allegation of human rights abuses—Ministers have said so many times in answer to both oral and written questions—but I urge the Minister to condemn the attacks and the use of pellet guns. The fundamental human rights that are enshrined in the Indian constitution must be adhered to. There must be an end to the use of pellet guns on innocent civilians. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other interested parties must be allowed free and complete access so that they can make an objective assessment.

I turn now to the role of the United Nations in securing a long-term settlement. There has been 70 years of inaction since the original resolutions requiring the conflict to be resolved by peaceful democratic means were passed, so it is easy to see why so many in the Kashmiri community think that the United Nations has lost interest in their problem. I have often said that the dispute is all too frequently ignored by the media. There is always some other conflict elsewhere in the world that grabs the headlines. I know that the United Kingdom, as a member of the United Nations, supports all UN bodies and wants to help them to fulfil their mandate, but there has surely been a failure on Kashmir if the resolutions have gone unfulfilled for so long. I appreciate that the Government have to tread a careful path and that we want to be friends with both India and Pakistan, but a candid and true friend is one who sometimes says things that the other friend may find unpalatable.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I support my hon. Friend’s motion. This is not a question of supporting either the Indian Government or the Pakistani Government; it is about supporting the people of Kashmir. He and I campaigned for many years for a referendum to decide whether our country should be part of and governed by the European Union, and the people of Kashmir should be afforded the same liberty of deciding how they want to be governed in future.

Mr Nuttall: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In a few lines’ time, I will mention the historic decision that this country took on 23 June last year.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I concur with the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) that this issue is about Kashmir, but it involves not just India and Pakistan, but China, so we have to concentrate on all of them to ensure that the civil and human rights of the Kashmiri are the priority in this debate.

Mr Nuttall: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the matter involves more than one nation and, crucially, is about the rights of the Kashmiri people.

We have to make it clear to both India and Pakistan that we want to help them find a permanent, peaceful solution to the conflict. Of course, this country cannot impose a solution, but we may be able to do more to
bring the parties closer together. I want to be absolutely clear that this is not about taking sides and saying, “If you are a friend of Kashmir, you are not a friend of India.” The problem must be resolved by peaceful means. I want the people of Kashmir to be given the right to decide their own future through self-determination, a right which was so historically exercised by the people of this country on 23 June last year when a majority voted to leave the European Union.

No one believes that there is an easy answer, but anything has to be better than having a military-controlled line of partition between the two neighbouring countries. I suspect that there will always be a rivalry between India and Pakistan, but that rivalry should be contained on the field of sport. In responding to the debate, I ask the Minister to set out not only the Government’s position on Kashmir, but what more this country can do.

Mr Nuttall: I entirely agree. Perhaps I should have finished my sentence, because that is exactly what I was saying. I ask the Minister to set out not only the Government’s position on Kashmir but what more this country can do, either through the United Nations or by working directly with India and Pakistan, to bring the two nations together to find a lasting and peaceful solution to this conflict.

I commend the motion to the House.

12.4 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I declare that I am privileged to be the first Member of Parliament of Kashmiri heritage. I also have a significant number of Kashmiri constituents, who have a significant interest in this issue. I am sure that many other Members have been contacted by constituents with such an interest.

The key issues when discussing Kashmir are Kashmiri geography and Kashmiri self-determination, and many people are very concerned about that. For me, the key issue today is the violation of the human rights and civil liberties of the Kashmiri people—that is the most important thing. There have been violations of the Geneva convention by Indian armed forces.

As other Members have said, Kashmiris are having their human rights violated and abused. That has gone on for at least the past six decades, since Indian forces unlawfully invaded Kashmir in 1948. Kashmir was then an independent state under the reign of Maharaja Hari Singh. In 1953-54, a resolution was presented to the United Nations by the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, to allow the Kashmiri people the right of self-determination. To date, to the shame of the United Nations, such resolutions have not found their way to the General Assembly. People still wonder—certainly the Kashmiris are still wondering—whether the plight of the Kashmiris is worth its salt; it certainly seems not to be worth hearing in the General Assembly of the United Nations. That is very significant.

A number of Members wish to speak, so I will try to be as brief as possible. I recognise the work of the shadow Foreign Office team, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who has responsibility for south-east Asia, and the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). They have both made remarkable contributions to human rights and civil liberties a significant policy issue for the Labour party. The shadow Secretary of State has written to the Foreign Secretary, ahead of his second visit to India, asking him to raise the issue of human rights and civil liberties in Kashmir when he discusses trade. I hope that, on his return, he will report to the House that he has raised those issues with the Indian Government.

There are currently more than 500,000 Indian troops in Kashmir, and they are protected by the Armed Forces (Jammu & Kashmir) Special Power Act 1990, which allows them complete free rein to abuse and torture people. There is no accountability when people go missing, and there is no court in India than can hold Indian troops to account. It is a clear violation of the Geneva convention for any military to be able to do such things, and I am surprised that we still do not raise it. I hope the Minister takes note and raises it with the Indian Government.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this debate, and I congratulate him and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) on their powerful speeches. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a particular concern about the use of pellet guns in Kashmir? Does he agree with me and Amnesty International that there should be a ban on the use of such guns, which are causing such serious injuries to so many people?

Mr Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend for that. I will deal with that issue later in my speech, but I wholly agree with what she is saying.

I was talking about half a million soldiers in Kashmir who have no control over how they behave and how they abuse the people. There are serious concerns in Kashmir, particularly about the situation of the civilian population. We are very concerned that when a woman leaves the house, whether she be a mother, a daughter or a wife, we do not know what state she will return in—if indeed she will return at all. There have been gang rapes by the military—an absolutely atrocious act by any individual or community.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I am sorry to interrupt such an incredibly passionate speech. One thing the Government fail to recognise is the passion, worry and fear that our constituents, British citizens of Kashmiri and non-Kashmiri extraction, have about this issue. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister and the Government really need to listen and start paying attention to the needs and demands of their citizens?
Mr Mahmood: I wholly concur with my hon. Friend, who makes a very valid point, particularly on the issue of the abuse of women. We do not allow and accept that in any way at home or in any other country, so why should we allow it to go unchecked when we are talking about the Indian forces in India and in Kashmir? Why should this be allowed to continue? I find it absurd and we should be making far stronger representations—I urge the Minister to do that.

When a man goes out of a house, whether he be a father, a husband or a son, there is no guarantee that he will come back and what state he will come back in. We have seen beatings taking place. We have seen videos on YouTube, Facebook and other social media of people being summarily beaten up in the streets—they are held by a disproportionate number of military personnel and beaten to within an inch of their life. They are tortured and taken away; people go missing. In some instances, when they go missing, they do not come back. That is a serious issue.

Children in Kashmir have no stake in their normal community or society. We expect our children to have a proper education in normal society, but Kashmiri children do not have an ounce of the protection needed in order to have that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) said, when they go out into the streets they are greeted with pellets and such like. They have no proper education facilities and no healthcare. They have no real stake in the society that they are part of, and the generations go forward: this is the sixth generation of Kashmiris growing up under this tyranny and they have no protection whatsoever.

The pellet gun issue that my hon. Friend raised is about a horrendous act by the military. They have not just fired these guns to warn off crowds; they have specifically targeted the upper body of individuals. They have aimed at the face and at the eyes, and a number of people have lost their sight. Aiming these guns at the upper body means that people cannot even receive medical treatment, because the medical people will not use a scan on them as magnets are used when a body is scanned and so a scan would further assist the movement of the metallic pellets inside the person. That might lead to further injury, be it in their head, eyes or upper body, including their heart, arteries and so on. That would cause a significant problem for most people.

Those are the issues involved with the use of pellet guns. When someone is penetrated by these pellets and they go through a security barrier, it is easy to assess that they have been involved in these sorts of activities and so they will be pulled out, again to be held accountable. We are talking about torture of a whole community and so they will be held accountable. As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) said, when they go missing, they do not come back. That is a serious issue.

I appreciate that we have an urgent debate to come after this and that a significant number of colleagues wish to speak, so I wish to conclude by saying that this is about the abuse of human rights and civil liberties, and the contravention of the Geneva convention. I would like the Minister to take note of those three important things when he sums up, and to say what he is going to do about it and how he will have an interaction with the Indian Government to hold them to account. If India wants to be a serious trade partner with the UK, these are the responsibilities it must carry. These issues are very important to my constituents and to all of us in this place, so it must ensure that that is considered and taken forward.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): In order to give everybody equal time and a fair crack of the whip, will Members please just take up to eight minutes?

12.16 pm

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): First, I wish to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this debate and on being such a strong advocate for Kashmir and Kashmiris in the Chamber.

In 1947, India and Pakistan partitioned, bringing about the largest migration of people in history, with more than 14 million people—refugees—crossing the newly formed India-Pakistan border for safety. One border disputed to this day is Kashmir, a small piece of land in the Himalayas which today is an unstable home to 12 million Kashmiris. On 24 January 1949, the first group of United Nations military observers arrived in Jammu and Kashmir to oversee a ceasefire between India and Pakistan. Almost 70 years later, India and Pakistan have evolved but Kashmir is still a region beset by political disagreement, violence, and human rights violations. Its population is just 12 million, yet more than 3,000 people have disappeared during the past 70 years and the conflict has left more than 47,000 people dead, including 7,000 police personnel. The death toll continues, with both India and Pakistan at an impasse, as was depressingly noted in a House of Commons Library research paper on Kashmir. It stated:

“Currently, the two governments”—

those of India and Pakistan—

“are engaged in a process of rapprochement. This is not the first such process, but it has given rise to optimism.”

That paper was written in 2004, and India and Pakistan have still got nowhere. Optimism has run dry, and bloodshed and bullets in Kashmir have taken over.

UN observations have taken place at various times since 1949, at considerable cost, but to what effect? Resolutions have been passed calling for ceasefires, for security forces to be withdrawn, and for a plebiscite giving Kashmiris the opportunity to decide whether to join India or Pakistan, or even to determine their own future—that is the cornerstone of any civilised democracy.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The UN clearly has a pivotal role to play in Kashmir, but does my hon. Friend believe it has sufficient skills, resources and political will to do what we are expecting of it in securing peace?
Nusrat Ghani: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I would say that the UN has considerable skill and considerable resources, but it is falling down on political will. Seventy years have been lost and Kashmir pays the price with lost lives and livelihoods. Last year, it saw an unprecedented level of violence and curfew, with 68 civilians killed and more than 9,000 people injured during months of unbroken violence. This was the bloodiest episode in Kashmir’s recent history. The shame of the international community in failing to recognise the violence and offer support to Kashmiri civilians is a bloody stain on all our history books.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights emphasised the importance of an “independent, impartial and international mission” within the conflict-ridden region, with “free and complete access”. Top UN officials have said that they continue to receive reports of Indian forces using excessive force against the civilian population under India’s administration, yet India has refused the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees access to investigate allegations of human rights abuses. I freely accept that Pakistan, not just India, has to allow the UN access to Kashmir so that it can evaluate the damage that the conflict has caused before it becomes another footnote in Kashmir’s history.

The UN has had 70 years to help Kashmiris, but instead has for too long wilfully sidelined the dispute. We need a renewed effort for honest UN involvement to resolve the current crisis, with the UN using all its powers to investigate the crimes committed. What pressure can the UK, by taking advantage of our privileged position on the Security Council, put on the UN? The UN has to show some humility and give some backbone to its statements. No resolution or reconciliation can resume until there is acceptance, not dispute, over the lives lost and damaged. Unlike at any other time in history, we have a real role to play, offering our hand of friendship and partnership. Pakistan is one of the biggest recipients of our aid funding and a partner in tackling terrorism.

Only last year, the Prime Minister visited India to secure a substantial trade deal. During that trip, what discussions took place on Kashmir? Will the Minister update the House on his discussions on Kashmir with his counterparts in both Pakistan and India?

Prime Minister Modi of India said that “any meaningful bilateral dialogue necessarily requires an environment that is free from terrorism and violence”, and he is absolutely right. The recent escalation of violence creates terror where no authority is trusted, not even those that are meant to offer protection.

In Kashmir, pellet guns are being used by security forces. The Indian Government have advised that pellet guns should be used rarely, and only in pressing circumstances, yet the Central Reserve Police Force continues to use them persistently. These guns cause life-threatening injuries and brutally blind people—so far, more than 9,000 people have been injured. By their very nature, these pellet guns are the antithesis of targeted precision. They spray and maim through a 6-foot circle. It is impossible to limit the number of casualties with a 6-foot fan of pellets. These are not precision weapons or defensive weapons, and their use in open public places must constitute a human rights violation.

With a pellet gun, anyone and everyone within that 6-foot circle is a target, even children sitting at home. Twelve-year-old Umar Nazir was in the courtyard of his home—he was not protesting—when his eyes were hit by pellets. Both his eyes are injured, with little vision left. He is recovering in Srinagar, where the ophthalmology department has stated that it lacks the medical supplies to proceed with surgeries for injured retinas because the demand is so high. Depressingly, a former Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir was forced to tweet Prime Minister Modi to ask for eye surgeons and eye trauma experts to be sent to Kashmir to help those with injuries. People’s lives are being lost and people’s vision is being removed for life, and the best way to get help from Government agencies seems to be by sending a tweet. That is how desperate the situation has become.

Will the Minister ask his Indian counterparts what their justification is for using pellet guns in public spaces? I can see none. Does he agree that the indiscriminate nature of such weapons constitutes a crime when they are used in public spaces? The Central Reserve Police Force has refused to share its operating procedure for this lethal weapon. Will the Minister put pressure on India to disclose its justification? Perhaps the Indian authorities can share with us which other liberal democracy uses such a weapon on its own people. Will the Minister tell the House what aid or medical support is being provided to Kashmiri hospitals?

The human rights violations I have described should be argument enough for UN access for observation. Human rights violations will not disappear without observation; they will just be disputed. If the UN takes the Vienna declaration seriously, it must step up its activity and willingness to be involved.

This is not just a regional issue. India and Pakistan both have nuclear weapons, so the stakes in the dispute are high. Pakistan is reputed to have the 11th strongest military in the world; frighteningly, it is also ranked as the 14th most fragile country. This regional dispute is not just regional: when two nuclear powers fail to resolve such a volatile dispute, it affects us all and has the potential to threaten us all. That is especially true as the terror has taken a new, violent form.

Access to books and education is key to building a strong community. For the first time, schools and educators have become targets. Village schools are being targeted for destruction, with at least 24 being burned to the ground last year. In one incident, the principal of a school in Bugam, Mohammed Muzaffar, rushed to the school as it was burning to the ground. He cried out that it was like his home being burned. It was no ordinary school: built in 1948, it housed 3,000 books.

With schools on fire, teachers fearing for their lives and books burned to ashes, the future is bleak for both young and old in Kashmir, as it is its economic security. It is in all our interests that the crisis in Kashmir is resolved, with the UN using all its expertise to be sent to Kashmir to help those with injuries. With a pellet gun, anyone and everyone within that 6-foot circle is a target, even children sitting at home. Twelve-year-old Umar Nazir was in the courtyard of his home—he was not protesting—when his eyes were hit by pellets. Both his eyes are injured, with little vision left. He is recovering in Srinagar, where the ophthalmology department has stated that it lacks the medical supplies to proceed with surgeries for injured retinas because the demand is so high. Depressingly, a former Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir was forced to tweet Prime Minister Modi to ask for eye surgeons and eye trauma experts to be sent to Kashmir to help those with injuries. People’s lives are being lost and people’s vision is being removed for life, and the best way to get help from Government agencies seems to be by sending a tweet. That is how desperate the situation has become.

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Mr Virendra Sharma

Two and a half years ago this House last debated Kashmir, and this is only the second debate in nearly 20 years. I declare that I am the chair of the Indo-British all-party group, and a person of Indian origin who was born in India, studied there, and then came here. I do not know how many Members have visited Kashmir; I think that, between my schooldays and now, I have visited Kashmir 14 times in my life, so I am quite familiar with the economic, social and political conditions there. I am not going to say anything that is hearsay; there will be no vested interests or ill-informed information here. I say that because I have seen practically what is happening and has happened, and the political situation over there.

Having listened to previous speakers, I feel sad that we are bringing together issues that are not linked at all and that are not happening in the way they are being presented. Let us look at the political situation. I strongly condemn any violation of human rights. For the past 45 years I have canvassed and campaigned on human rights issues. When India has violated human rights, I have criticised it—I have criticised India for many other traditions that the Indian Government or people have failed to tackle. That is why I feel strongly about the way we are debating the Kashmir issue today: the questions that are raised are untrue and not relevant to the situation.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): My hon. Friend mentioned that he has visited Kashmir 14 times, but does he accept that the Indian authorities make it exceptionally difficult for British Members of Parliament to visit that part of the world?

Mr Sharma: I am sure that happens. The reason is that when someone wants to visit a place, they must be free of any prejudices before they go. If they have declared beforehand what they think is happening and publicly denounced it, no Government would allow them to visit. Give me one example of a Government who have allowed people to visit who have previously criticised their country.

Imran Hussain: I thank my hon. Friend, who is well respected in this House, for giving us his expertise. Does he at least accept that by speaking up against human rights violations in any country, one is not necessarily against that country?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Can I help Members who are going to speak shortly? There is a danger that their interventions will take time away from somebody else. I do not mind having the debate, but Members must recognise that I want to treat everyone equally.

Mr Sharma: I am not saying that that is not the way one presents the argument or that that is not right. I am saying that no Government or authority would allow people to visit if they are not free of prejudice.

Robert Fiano: Will my hon. Friend allow me to intervene?

Mr Sharma: No, I will carry on. I am sure that my hon. Friend will be speaking later. [Interruption.]

Robert Fiano: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. I am chair of the justice for Colombia group in Parliament. I criticise the Colombian Government time and again, and they let me into their country where I criticise them again.

Mr Sharma: Let us look at what has been happening since 1947. In 1948, after a line of control and a ceasefire were declared, India and Pakistan advocated that they should be part and parcel of the negotiations. In 1965 and 1971, India was attacked in an attempt to change that line of control. Again, in 1999, Pakistan tried to seize an opportunity to redraw the internationally accepted line of control. In total, that happened three times: in 1965, 1971 and 1999.

Having been unsuccessful in full-scale military manoeuvres to take control of more of Kashmir, subversive elements within the Pakistani Government have, since the millennium, turned towards terrorism to further their ends. In 2004, Pakistan made a public commitment to prevent terrorist groups from using its territory to plan, prepare or launch attacks against India. Since then the Pakistani spy agency, Inter-Services Intelligence—ISI—has been heavily implicated in India’s most notorious terrorist incidents, most notably the 2008 Mumbai attacks which left nearly 200 dead.

That behaviour—[Interruption.] I will come on to Kashmir, but I am giving some background. That behaviour is regularly seen across Kashmir. Although the line of control is demarked, fighters from Pakistan launch attacks across the state. Those terrorist atrocities are perpetrated only to destabilise the region. They do not help the people of Kashmir or make anyone stronger. All they do is further the misery of millions.

Since the 1948 riots, there has been an attempt to cleanse the region of native people opposed to Pakistani intervention. In the 1990s, we saw the most sustained civil activity aimed at driving Kashmiri Pandits from the Kashmir valley. In 1947, a quarter of a million Pandits lived in Kashmir, now only around 20,000 remain. The majority live in squalid camps in Jammu, desperate to return to their homelands. They are unwilling to settle elsewhere and prejudice their right to return.

The threat of communal violence looms large—an ever present threat for millions. That is why we see images of soldiers across Kashmir: they are there to protect citizens of all stripes. People who want to go to work, school, or university are allowed to do so only under the protection of the Indian army. Without the protection of Indian troops, we can see all too easily what happens. The horrifying stories of brutality from the Peshawar school attacks that left more than 132 schoolchildren dead or the assassination attempt on Malala would not be so uncommon. Very few Members of this House would have done anything but affirm the actions of the British Army in trying to maintain the status quo in Northern Ireland. The army is there to protect the border, just as it did in Ulster, and, just as it did in Belfast when it made sure that young boys and girls from Catholic and Protestant families could continue to live the lives that they wanted.

The National Human Rights Commission of India has freely criticised and called for punishments when the rule of law has not been upheld to a rigorous standard. That is not a level of freedom allowed to those residents in Pakistan, which is recognised as the world’s leading sponsor of terrorism.
Mr Deputy Speaker: May I just say to the hon. Gentleman that he has now been speaking for nearly 11 minutes? I did suggest eight minutes; we are now well over. I know that this is a very important matter, but I want to ensure that everyone’s voice is heard.

Mr Sharma: By working every day for a safer, more prosperous Kashmir, the Indian Government are fulfilling their commitment. The people desire a life unblemished by random acts of terror, where they are free to pursue their own dreams of education, employment and a peaceful life. Why must we again listen to hyped media accusations rather than look at the evidence of patterns of peaceful elections?

12.36 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I rise to support the motion. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this debate and on the spirit with which he moved the motion. I am very proud that we are having this debate—the second one since I was elected—and that I am rising in support of the position that I took in the previous debate on 15 September 2011.

I should also say that I am very proud of the Kashmiris in the United Kingdom, and in Wycombe in particular; for the dignity and determination with which they pursue this issue, despite the difficulty of doing so and in the context of the seriousness of the issues involved. I wish to make three points to the Minister: the first is about the intractability of the issue; the second about some lessons from our own referendum; and the third about how we might make progress.

It is the long-standing position of the Government that this is a matter for the two independent nations of India and Pakistan to resolve. I have reliably found that in the Foreign Office gallows humour is applied to this issue, which is known as the graveyard of Foreign Secretaries. That is a matter of very considerable regret. This issue of self-determination, which we have seen in the United Kingdom, is not one to be thought of as impossible to meet. We have just met it, and this is a moment when the Foreign Office should know that self-determination is not an issue on which no progress can be made in the 21st century. It is not good enough to adopt such a view. I am acutely aware, as is everyone here, that this is a long-standing policy, which Governments of all colours have held, so I mean no criticism of this Government or this Minister. However, it is not good enough to continue this policy for two reasons: first, it is incumbent on all of us in this House to represent the many thousands of people in our constituencies whose family origins will be in India, Kashmir or Pakistan, and they deserve to have their voices heard in this place and internationally.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very important point. What Kashmiris say to me, particularly those in Nottingham but also from across the country, is that there needs to be a much greater urgency from everyone to tackle this problem. It has been going on for decades. The worry is that, in 10, 20, 30 or 40 years’ time, people will still be discussing the same issue.

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and that is why I begin with the point about intractability. The other reason it is not good enough to adopt the current position is that this is a legacy of the British empire and we should acknowledge our historical responsibility. There is a conversation to be had about world views and the willingness of individuals to accept ancestral responsibility, but that is perhaps for another day. Just because it is difficult to make a stand on this issue does not mean that it is not the right thing to do. It is right for the British Government to make a stand on this question.

Secondly, I have some questions about lessons that we might learn from our own referendum. Those of us who are asking for a referendum for the fulfilment of United Nations mandates have to ask ourselves, what if we win, what if we make progress and what if a referendum were held? I want to make two points in particular. The first question is about the collective basis on which a referendum could be held. What would be the demos? Who would vote and on what basis would the result be enforced? We know that in the UK there are those who do not wish to accept the national referendum result: we know, for example, that the Scottish National party picks up on the point about how Scotland voted. These will all be live issues in the event that a referendum is held in Kashmir.

I appeal to all Kashmiris who work on these issues to give serious thought to what the demos would be and on what basis the result would be considered legitimate by all parties, because the other issue—which is of foremost seriousness—is that we saw passions run extremely high in the United Kingdom, where politics generally proceeds no further than harsh language. Given that we are dealing with a region of the world where live conflict among major nuclear-armed powers is a risk, we must ask ourselves how a referendum in Kashmir would proceed peacefully not just during the campaign but afterwards.

Finally on this point let me say something about unity and division. I know that in Wycombe there are British Kashmiris who voted remain, and perhaps many who did not vote at all, who supported the fundamental principle that we should have had a referendum. I am pleased and proud to stand with them, united that as we go forward we should have a referendum for Kashmir.

The third point is perhaps the most contentious: how should we make progress? The hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) described as untrue some of the things that the House has already heard in the course of the debate, and this is a very important point. At different times, we have heard Pakistan accused of state-sponsored terrorism, and India accused of using inappropriate weapons, of gang rape and of murder. I do not wish to see either nation slandered and, of course, the crucial difference between a valid charge and a slander is truth. When it comes to making progress, I appeal to everyone to focus relentlessly on objective fact, and to the Government to facilitate that.

I know what I have seen with my own eyes in the videos that have been shown to me. I have seen what is purported to be Indian soldiers beating a confession
from a man and what is purported to be Indian soldiers killing a man in the rubble of his own home in Kashmir. They are images that I would prefer never to have seen and that I would never wish to see again, but the crucial question is whether they are a set-up, or propaganda, or whether they are true.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): rose—

Mr Baker: Will the hon. Lady bear with me a moment?

If the videos are true, Kashmir is a matter for the whole world. The most commented on videos on my YouTube channel are from the beginning and end of the 2011 debate on this subject. The overwhelming consensus is that we should stay out of Indian affairs, but if these allegations are true the whole world cannot stay out of Kashmir and of India and Pakistan’s affairs.

Stella Creasy rose—

Mr Baker: I will not give way, because I am being encouraged to wrap up.

I understand that the Foreign Office thinks that this issue is intractable, but we have seen in our own country that it need not be. Yes, there are lessons to be learned and the Government can facilitate them, but for goodness’ sake let us recognise that if even a fraction of the allegations being made are true this is an urgent and pressing issue for the whole world.

12.44 pm

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): The House will know of my long-standing interest in Kashmir. Many thousands of British citizens of Kashmiri extraction have made their home in my constituency, and I take an interest on their behalf, but I have a more personal interest as my family originates from Kashmir. All four of my grandparents were born in Kashmir before my family moved to this country, so this debate has very personal resonance for me.

The hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) has already set out the background to this long-standing dispute and I pay tribute to him and to others who led the charge to secure today’s Backbench business debate.

We have heard already that this is a long-standing dispute between two nuclear-armed powers in one of the world’s most heavily militarised regions. It does not receive enough attention anywhere outside the region, and certainly not in our own country given the size of our British Kashmiri population; it certainly has a lot of attention from that population, but not enough from those outside it. I therefore pay tribute to all the doughy campaigners from all parties who have taken every opportunity available to raise this serious matter in the House of Commons and to press both our current Government and previous Governments to do more to help to build a resolution to this long-standing crisis.

The further push for debate on Kashmir has come as a particular result of the upsurge in violence and fighting in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir since last summer. We see the unacceptable failure of the whole world, the refusal to give effect to UN resolutions and the denial of respect for the self-determination of the Kashmiri people playing out in the worst possible way. People have lost hope and are rising against that loss of hope to try to force to have their rights be respected.

That significant upsurge in violence has elicited a brutal response from the Indian authorities. I am afraid that I wholeheartedly disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma). I do not believe that it is possible to minimise the extent to which the Indian authorities have acted in a disproportionate manner that has significantly harmed and, indeed, created great tragedy for the Kashmiri people in the region. This is the biggest uprising in two decades and the brutality of the response of the police and security services cannot be ignored. The fact that that is the case is upheld by human rights organisations across the world, including Human Rights Watch, whose world report for 2017 found clear evidence that the police and security forces have acted with impunity, that there have been extra-judicial killings and that mass rape has occurred. All those things are not acceptable.

I concur with the comments made by the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker). Of course, there will be questions about the veracity of the videos we will see on YouTube, on Facebook and elsewhere on social media, but there should be an open investigation to prove the veracity of the videos. If they are true—I believe that they will be found to be true—there are big questions for the Indian Government to answer.

I have to say to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall that the big difference between the Indian Government and other Governments that commit human rights abuses is that India is the largest democracy in the world. Being a democracy is not simply about giving people a vote to decide their Government. It includes much more. It is about fundamental respect for the rule of law and for basic human rights that must be protected and that sit alongside the ability of the people to elect their Government.

Nusrat Ghani: Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Shabana Mahmood: I am afraid that I would be doing other Members out of their time if I gave way. I apologise.

The use of pellet guns has been mentioned. This is a significant issue for the Indian Government, and our Government must press them more on it. The Indian defence for the use of pellet guns to see off protestors who they say are throwing stones is that pellet guns are non-lethal. Of course, a pellet gun will probably not kill, but I defy anyone to see the pictures of the victims of pellet gun attacks and say that that is a proportionate response against civilians in a democracy. It is not, and I do not believe that anybody would stand up in this House and say that it is.

When we debate Kashmir, people who speak more in favour of the Indian Government’s stance will often say that the position of those who live in Jammu and Kashmir is better because they are able to vote, they are free to take part in the democractic process and they are basically free, and that self-determination is not necessary because they are a free people, freely electing their own local leaders with a significant devolution of power. Nobody—not one person—in Jammu and Kashmir has voted to be hurt, injured, beaten up, raped, blinded or
killed. Pellet wounds are brutal. They are a brutal response by the Indian authorities and send a brutal message to the Kashmiri people. They leave brutal scars, which are not just carried by the individuals who bear the physical scars but are borne by the whole community in Jammu and Kashmir itself and all around the world by those of us of Kashmiri extraction. They are a symbol of the population's repression, its desire to resist that repression and its cry to be heard.

That cry is falling on deaf ears in the largest democracy in the world, which wants to do more business with the rest of the world and play a greater role in world affairs. That position is simply not acceptable and our Government must not shy away from making that plain, especially in relation to the use of pellet guns. Tremendous, appalling, sustained and deliberate misery has been visited on the people of Kashmir for too long. The stories of disappearances and the discovery of mass graves have brought no official UN-led investigation whatever. The police and the security forces have impunity, especially given the implementation of the Special Powers Act of 1990. If a people are humiliated, abused and allowed to lose hope, and offered only despair in turn, and given no answers and no rights, there will be an uprising. It is inevitable.

None of us as responsible legislators, also working in a democracy, can watch these events unfold and sit on our hands. We can do more. The legacy of empire demands that we do more. We have a duty to speak out more regularly. We have a duty to challenge as well as to encourage both the Indian and the Pakistani authorities. I have to say to the Minister that the written answers to the questions tabled, particularly last summer, are so bland it is as though these matters are a daily occurrence that can be ignored. That is not good enough. There are other disputes in this world that elicit much stronger responses from the Government when Members of this House table written questions. That has not been the case in relation to the dispute in Kashmir. In particular, there has been no definitive answer on whether the Prime Minister specifically raised the issue of human rights abuses with the Indian Government. It is not enough to tell us that the issue of Kashmir was raised. We need to know whether the human rights abuses and the use of pellet guns were raised.

I believe that it is now incumbent upon the British Government to make a clear call to raise this issue at the United Nations and to ask for an independent, UN-led investigation into human rights abuses, so that we can at least demonstrate that although some parts of this world see this as a forgotten conflict, or a conflict they want to be forgotten, we will never forget it and will keep fighting.

12.53 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood). I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) for the calm and measured manner in which he introduced the debate. I hope that we can continue that throughout the debate.

No one in the debate has yet mentioned that 19 January 1990 was an evil day in the history of Jammu and Kashmir—the day when 65,000 Hindus were forcibly expelled from the Kashmir valley by Islamic jihadists, under the slogan, “Die, convert or leave”. They forced only the men out. They said, “Leave your women. We will convert them, we will rape them and we will make them all Muslim.” One of the sad facts of this large forgotten area of conflict is that it has a religious element as well as the aspect of where people wish to live.

I had the opportunity in February last year to visit Jammu and Kashmir. I went to Srinagar and to Jammu. I was heartened by the fact that when I met people from all walks of life in Srinagar, particularly those from the chamber of commerce, they came with a series of opportunities, including trade, hydro-electric power, agriculture, canning goods to be sold across the world, as well as using the beauty of the Kashmir valley to attract tourists to the area. It is an area that we would all love to go and visit and that we would all love people from across the world to be able to go and visit. The one fundamental issue that they all raised was that of safety and security.

The reality is that when we talk about the suffering in Jammu and Kashmir, we have to concentrate on the human rights abuses and violations against Hindus, Sikhs and minority Muslims. The sad fact is that this has been used as a means of ethnically cleansing this part of the world.

I hope when the Minister replies he will comment on the fact that the European and Indian authorities identified terrorism as one of the major sources of concern to both the European Union and India. Jointly, in their communiqué, they condemned the terror attacks in Brussels, Paris, Pathankot and Gurdaspur and recalled the November 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai. They called for the perpetrators of these attacks to be brought to justice. Leaders called for decisive and united actions to be taken against ISIL, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, the Haqqani Network and other internationally active terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Those terrorist groups all operate from Pakistan. They are along the international line of control. They are infiltrating terrorists into the sovereign state of Jammu and Kashmir.

We should remember that the fundamental element of this is when Britain ceased to be the colonial power. The decision on whether states opted either for Pakistani control or for Indian control was left to each independent state. The Maharaja Hari Singh, who was the last ruling Maharaja of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, signed the instrument of accession to India, bringing the state under India on 26 October 1947. We should be clear that under international law, the whole of Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India. It is the crowning glory of India. As such, every other aspect that has gone on after that date has been a violation of international law.

Several hon. Members have alluded to the United Nations resolution, and we must remember the detail: Prime Minister Nehru took the issue to the United Nations in the first place, seeking to get the Pakistani forces that illegally occupied part of the sovereign state of Jammu and Kashmir to leave. The UN resolution does—this is the first element—on the illegal occupying forces of Pakistan to leave Jammu and Kashmir, then for the Indian forces to reduce to what is required for security purposes and then, and only then, for a decision to be made on a plebiscite for the people of Jammu and
Kashmir on what should be their destiny. Pakistan has never accepted or complied with that UN resolution. That is one of the fundamental reasons why we have this challenge and problem today.

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend is making an articulate case, as always. Does he think there is any chance of India engaging in confidence-building measures with Pakistan on this point so that that element of the resolution might ever be fulfilled? Is India willing to give appropriate assurances?

Bob Blackman: Clearly, I cannot speak for the Indian Government and the UK has ceased to be a colonial power. We are not the power that will tell India or Pakistan what to do and, in that respect, I am concerned that the motion could be misinterpreted in other parts of the world—[Interruption.] I think that Mr Deputy Speaker will hold me to account if I give way.

There have been numerous violations of the ceasefire along the line of control, and a recent upsurge in violence, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North mentioned. Studies have found that the shells, GPS units and everything else that emanated from the site where those Indian troops were killed and murdered came from Pakistan military use, so it is quite clear that Pakistan was behind that conflict. The number of violations across the line of control has been frequent and well documented, and that needs to be understood. The recent upsurge in violence resulted from the Indian forces eliminating Burhan Wani, the Jihadi John poster boy of jihad.

The use of pellet guns and other human rights abuses have been taken up by the state Government of Jammu and Kashmir, who have had four debates on the subject. Those human rights abuses have been called to account and will be fully investigated, and any proven perpetrators will be suitably punished. I think we can say that the sovereign state is looking after those aspects. We want a peaceful resolution to the situation so that the people of Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh, can live in peace and harmony.

1.2 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this extremely important debate that, as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary Kashmir group, I assisted in bringing to the House. I am privileged to take part because the issue matters deeply to many of my constituents and to me personally, as my family originates from the state of Kashmir so I know the region well. Although the seriousness of the issue means that I could talk at great length, time does not permit so I will try to keep my contributions to several key areas.

I believe that the most pressing matter is the long-standing and ongoing human rights abuses taking place in the region. Last summer and long after, we saw the devastating deployment of pellet guns that resulted in the indiscriminate maiming and blinding of hundreds of Kashmiris, and the horrific photos of the aftermath of their use, with pellets embedded in the bloodied faces of demonstrators and children—images we would all like to forget. But security forces did not stop there. Thousands were injured, phone lines were cut, internet access was constrained and the region was placed under a strict curfew. We would expect such moves under a repressive regime, not one with the hallmarks of a free, open and liberal society.

The abuse then turned deadly, with the illegal use of live ammunition by security forces on unarmed demonstrators resulting in their deaths. Unfortunately, however, this is nothing new. The reality is that human rights abuses have gone on, largely unchecked, for decades in the region, as is well documented by many well-respected human rights organisations. Unaccountability for these crimes is rife. If we are to address the abuses, we must first look at the draconian Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act, which allows the security forces to escape justice and accountability. It was only ever intended to be invoked on a temporary basis, but has continued in force since 1990. It has been widely criticised by well-respected human rights organisations, with numerous calls for it to be repealed. I repeat those calls today because the Act grants security forces in the region heavy-handed powers to kill, arrest and search. It is because of the Act that there have been near unspeakable horrors and abuses of human rights including extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, tormented and tortured civilians, mass rapes, widowed wives and orphaned children.

According to recent figures published in the Journal of Law and Conflict Resolution, between 1989 and 2010 there were almost 7,000 custodial killings. Some 118,000 civilians were arrested, almost 10,000 women were raped or molested, and as many as 10,000 Kashmiri youths were forcibly disappeared. There is no doubt that such abuses are taking place—I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma)—as they are well documented. To deny that they are well documented is to go against many well-respected human rights organisations and the evidence, including video footage and photographs, that we have seen with our own eyes.

Nusrat Ghani: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Imran Hussain: I may come back to the hon. Lady, but she knows that time is very limited.

As has been mentioned, we must not turn a blind eye to abuses that take place. We must not ignore them or just stand by. We must send a clear message today that wherever it takes place, injustice is injustice, and it will never be tolerated.

The second important issue is that of self-determination, specifically the right of the sons and daughters of Kashmir to self-determination and the urgent need for them to be able to exercise that right. A lot has been said about UN resolution 47, calling for a plebiscite on the future of the region. The resolution is crucial to the story of Kashmir, past and present, but it is non-binding, which is why the plebiscite has not yet taken place. However, I call again for the implementation of that resolution, whether it is called UN resolution 47, a free and fair plebiscite or whatever we name it. The ultimate choice must be for the sons and daughters of Kashmir to determine their own destiny. They have waited for more than 70 years for their voice to be heard and to make a decision on their future to determine their lives. For more than 70 years, they have been denied their
The international community must do what is fair and proper, allowing the sons and daughters of Kashmir their birth right.

I am passionate about the subject and could go on, but time is not permitting, so I will conclude. I have previously asked the Minister in this House to condemn the human rights abuses in the region. I ask him again today to use this opportunity on behalf of the Government to condemn those abuses. At the very least, Minister, please accept that the abuses are taking place, and assure us that the Government are doing everything they can to allow for a peaceful resolution on the basis of the sons and daughters of Kashmir determining their own destiny—something that is very much overdue.

1.9 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this timely and important debate.

It is said that in war there are no winners, only losers. If so, the people of the Kashmir region have surely paid too great a price. The UN resolution was passed in 1948—almost 70 years ago—and we seem no closer to self-determination in the Kashmir region than we did then.

As we know, and as many have said and will say in this debate, the last six months have seen nothing but backwards steps. We have curfews; censorship; the wounding, maiming and killing of civilians; the death of military personnel on both sides; the economy crumbling; food shortages; a refugee crisis caused by tens of thousands of displaced civilians; and skirmishes along the line of control. We have seen international pacts under threat, water shortages, deep divisions on both sides of the line of control, and progress well and truly in reverse.

As we all know, it has been the position of this Government and of successive Governments that the issue of Kashmir is for India and Pakistan to resolve at a pace they see fit, and in a way they see fit, and that it is not for our Government to intervene, suggest solutions or mediate. But what, then, do this House and this Parliament stand for? We have loss of life, widely reported civilian casualties is estimated to be over 13,000, due to the action by security services. We have seen communication—internet and telephone services—restricted. We have seen an attack on the free press, and particularly the Kashmir Reader, which was banned from publishing for months.

Many have talked today about the use of pellets. How a standard operating procedure of firing below the knee can be used for a shell of pellets that have a 6 metre dispersal range is a question for the ages. That is, by any definition of the term, an indiscriminate use of force when used in a crowd, and reports have shown that that is the case in practice, with many civilians losing their sight due to this modern form of crowd control.

One widely reported story that struck me was that of a 14-year-old girl who died of respiratory illness. She died as a result of inhaling PAVA chili gas. For six days, she lived with burns to her throat and lungs, and she eventually passed away in a hospital on a ventilator.

The motion raises a number of issues that need further consideration by the House. One is that the Government need to do more at the United Nations to encourage the de-escalation of tension, to encourage both sides to give the UN access to the Kashmir valley and to assess the reports of human rights violations.

Stella Creasy: Does my friend agree that one of the more constructive things the Government could do is press for an independent UN inquiry into human rights abuses? That has helped in other situations around the world.

Naz Shah: I absolutely agree that we need to push for an independent inquiry.

We are not asking the Government to prescribe how Pakistan and India resolve the entrenched issue of peace in Kashmir, but everyone here will recognise that, with the situation as it is on the ground—with civilians being killed, oppressed and impoverished—there can be no progress towards peace or a resolution. We have an obligation to do everything in our power to help the region return to a level of normality—I use that term loosely—before any progress can be made towards peace.

The motion also recognises that, for there to be any meaningful and lasting peace in the region, the people of Kashmir have to have the freedom and security to make a decision for themselves. We have long talked about the self-determination of the Kashmir people, but under the current occupation, and without robust and lasting local representation, can we truly expect to reach a position where the will and wishes of the people in this region are not only heard but truly listened to?

When uprisings like this are met with excessive force, that only further entrenches differences. These things have played out many times since the 1990s; at the end, the bodies of civilians are counted, and the people who survive and who struggle to live in this region become further embittered towards those they hold responsible for their oppression.

It is in the interests of Pakistan and India to improve relations, for the security and prosperity of the over 1.4 billion people who live in those countries and the region as a whole. The situation requires strong international leadership—not to force India and Pakistan into a solution but to invest in the foundations that can lead to a lasting peace and to the self-determination of the Kashmir people, and I call on the Government to take the lead.
We have a responsibility 70 years in the making. We as a nation have a vested interest in both these countries. We are intrinsically linked to both of them. We have had a major impact on their history, and we must help them to create a future. We have just signed a massive trade deal with India. The China-Pakistan economic corridor will have an impact on the wider world in terms of trade, growth and prosperity. There is an international perspective, and it is to our benefit.

I spent my teenage years in what is known as Azad Kashmir. Azad, means “free”: free to go to the shops, free to play, free to go out into the street, free to visit—free to go wherever I, or my family, want. My family remain in Azad and continue to enjoy the freedoms of Azadi, but the children in occupied Kashmir do not have those freedoms. They might not return if they go out. A son might not return with his eyesight, and that will affect 70% of his abilities as a human being—I know that from my experience of working with disabilities. A young girl might not return, and if she does, has she been raped and violated? These things—these disabilities—are the reality of the occupation in Kashmir. We cannot and must not abdicate our responsibility. It will be quite frankly shameful if the Government continue in their inaction.

I ask Members to support the motion and to call on the Government to use the current climate to help push Pakistan and India into more prosperous diplomatic relations. I finish with the words of Martin Luther King:

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

This House and this Government cannot remain silent on the issue of Kashmir anymore.

1.17 pm

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a tragedy in some ways that we are still here debating this issue, although I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee and hon. Members for securing the debate. Here we are again—I think it is a couple of years since we had a substantive discussion of this matter.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), it is 70 years since the partitioning of the region, where Britain, of course, had an integral responsibility and role. It is for that reason that we cannot wash our hands of this problem, just ignore it or sweep it under the carpet. The UK has a long-standing duty and responsibility to take an interest and to be involved in this issue.

We have heard, of course, about the United Nations resolution and the call for a plebiscite to solve the issue, but nothing really moves forward. The frustration of many of my hon. Friends in the Chamber is palpable. We do not particularly relish having to come here to talk about this issue time and time again, but we find ourselves having to do so.

Decades on, we find ourselves talking about some of the tragedies that are occurring. Yes, there are occasionally brief spells of calm, but those are then broken by rising tensions, by conflict and by the flare-up of issues. Often, that is because funerals breach curfews that are put in place, which in turn escalates the conflict in this heavily militarised part of the world—and on and on the cycle goes. We have heard a lot about the effects of pellet guns, for instance; I am glad that many hon. Members have raised that. The UK Government must make it clear that there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to address civil issues that arise on the streets.

Lots of different organisations and parts of the community have a role to play, as well as the UK. The United Nations clearly has a role. This issue should not be parked and hidden away, often because there is very little media coverage and not much information about what is happening in this part of the world. India and Pakistan do not just have a role—they have a responsibility to do more to move away from the heat and the conflict in this situation to find a better path to the future. Perhaps a wider regional approach to finding peaceful solutions should be explored, given that we see this in other conflict zones around the world. Often where there are bilateral disagreements between two countries in a region, trying to find ways of saving face on either side is incredibly difficult, as we have seen in the middle east, so there is an argument for involving other parties and nations in that part of the world to think about ways of breaking the deadlock.

The Kashmiri community themselves clearly want to have a role, and they do have one; they are a very vocal community in many of our neighbourhoods. As I have said to many groups that press for attention to be given to human rights and for self-determination in Kashmir, it would help massively if they could all co-ordinate and work together. That includes communicating with Members of Parliament, because we are not getting information about what is happening in that part of the world. Much more could be done in the new ways in which we operate, even on social media, to make sure that the wider community and policymakers are aware of issues that arise, and effective co-ordination would make a difference in that regard.

We need to start to think laterally about how to crack this problem so that we are not here again in two years’ time. What different mechanisms could be available to try to find peaceful solutions? The UK has a role and should think about promoting peacekeeping, which means encouraging Governments to demilitarise and stop the attacks to take out the tension and the heat; promoting peace-building, which means reversing some of the destructive steps that have been taken in recent years; and promoting peacemaking, which means searching for negotiated resolutions where possible. All these things can and should be taking place simultaneously.

Leaders in India and Pakistan must all dial back on aggression and not be provoked by individual attacks, although that is of course difficult if they feel that different governmental forces are behind, or alleged to be behind, certain attacks. Normalisation of the situation in Kashmir is absolutely essential so that we can open the routes and channels for dialogue. As my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford East and for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) said, we must go back to the rule of law as a matter of urgency, and have the accountability for the police and the armed forces that has been lacking in many ways.

I know there is a long-standing position in terms of the Foreign Office’s policy on this, but I call on the Minister and the UK Government to think about ways of promoting conflict resolution and confidence-building
measures between the different sides—for example, a summit to learn lessons about peacemaking tactics in areas where the UK has been involved in times past. The conflict in Northern Ireland was lengthy, and it took a lot of time to get people around the table, sometimes not even in the same building or the same room, but the UK Government have expertise in this field and they should find ways of applying it. It is also worth thinking about the potential role of economic development and regeneration in reciprocation for dialogue that we might want to have, because that has worked in other situations.

I thank those from the Pakistani and Kashmiri community who have made strong representations to me. On Friday 24 February, I will host a Nottingham roundtable on Kashmir, trying to bring together, as independently as I possibly can, all those with an interest in this issue to try to drill down into what the community is looking for and the solutions that might be viable, and then to make representations to the Government. I am grateful for the opportunity to make that point directly to the Minister this afternoon.

1.25 pm

**Simon Danczuk** (Rochdale) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie), who made a very good and solution-focused speech. I thank the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) for securing and leading this debate.

I first visited Kashmir in 2011 just after I was elected to serve Rochdale, a town with a vibrant Kashmiri community. Kashmir was just as beautiful, and the people just as welcoming, as I was told would be the case. Yet I knew that this wonderful part of the world was wrought with fear and tension. While I was there, I heard from people on the ground about the human rights abuses regularly carried out by the Indian army, and ever since I have kept a close eye on the situation. The brutality of the Indian army was seen in full force last summer when unrest broke out in the region. The use of live ammunition and pellet guns against crowds was entirely disproportionate, as a number of speakers have described. I thank my colleagues, in particular, for having already raised those issues with our Government. Tensions are still simmering away, manifesting themselves in small clashes that could escalate in the foreseeable future.

In such circumstances, Britain really does have to step up to the mark. We all know the old Pottery Barn rule: “You break it, then you have to fix it”. Thanks to our long imperial history there are plenty of broken pots all across the world, from Palestine to Hong Kong to Kashmir. It is therefore unacceptable for the British Government to wash their hands of the matter, as they are currently doing. While I accept that Pakistan and India must be at the forefront of striking a deal, there is no reason why Britain cannot play a more active role in mediating the conflict by bringing people round the table and monitoring the human rights situation in Kashmir. I understand that during the Prime Minister’s meeting with Indian Premier Modi last November, the issue of human rights abuses in Kashmir was not even raised. Can the Minister confirm this? If true, what does it say about Britain’s place in the world?

Earlier this week, the Prime Minister outlined her vision for a “global Britain” that is confident across the world. I welcome this ambitious vision for our country, but I have my reservations. This new outlook cannot solely be about forging trade links across the world. The promotion of human rights and liberal democratic values must be at the heart of British foreign policy if we truly wish to be a positive global player. I worry that in the coming years human rights will be pushed even further down the agenda as the Government seek to secure Britain’s economic future. We have a vastly expanded team working on international trade, who I am sure will be keen to strike some sort of free trade deal with India. I wonder what this will mean for the people of Kashmir. It is perfectly reasonable for a Prime Minister to raise sensitive issues like human rights and territorial disputes behind closed doors, as many Prime Ministers have done with their Indian counterparts previously, but I am not confident that this will happen in future. I would like the Government to provide me and Britain’s Kashmiri diaspora with reassurances that settling the issue of Kashmir will remain a substantive part of the UK’s dialogue with India and Pakistan.

This is not just about India and Pakistan finding a solution; Kashmiris must also be part of any future dialogue. Britain should promote their voice in this debate—a voice that is too often shut out. While we talk about human rights today, it is important to remember that the most important right for a people is the right to self-determination. It is therefore incumbent on the British Government to help the people of Kashmir to determine their own future.

1.29 pm

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) for securing the debate. The political situation in Kashmir continues to be a long drawn-out conflict, ranging back to 1947. Since then, there have been occasional surges in violence, leading to the deaths of hundreds of civilians in the area. Although attempts at dialogue to resolve the conflict have been made by both the Pakistani and the Indian Governments, ultimately those attempts have amounted to nothing substantial for the people of Kashmir and their calls for self-determination.

In 2010, Kashmir saw one of its most brutal episodes of violence when 120 civilians, most of them teenagers, were killed at the hands of the Indian military. However, the violence of 2010 was overshadowed by the tragic series of events that we witnessed in the summer of 2016, which appear to constitute a violation of human rights. The killing of a rebel leader in Kashmir who was revered by the Pakistani population and known as a terrorist by the Indian state resulted in hundreds of Kashmiri citizens flooding to the streets in protest against the killing.

Undoubtedly, such events are but triggers in this long-standing conflict, which is perpetuated by a feeling of frustration and anger among the Kashmiri community, who have often found themselves restricted by curfews and limits to their freedom of speech, and who have been, at times, bullied and humiliated at the hands of Indian officials. The protestors threw stones when confronted by the Indian military, and the retaliation by the Indian military was staggering: they used pellet guns in an attempt to disperse the crowds, although the use of live bullets and CS gas was also noticeable.
By the end of August, after six weeks of violence, some 6,000 civilians had been injured. Almost 1,000 of them suffered injuries to their eyes.

Let us be clear: pellet guns are seen as non-lethal crowd control weapons, but they have devastating and long-lasting consequences. In a report entitled “Lethal in Disguise”, the International Network of Civil Liberties Organisations and Physicians for Human Rights made it clear that pellet rounds cause “an indiscriminate spray of ammunition that spreads widely and cannot be aimed” and that they are “likely to be lethal at close range, but are likely to be inaccurate and indiscriminate at longer ranges”.

The report goes on to state that most countries “prohibit the use of metal shot as excessively dangerous but several countries, including Egypt and Bahrain, use it regularly.” It appears that we should add India to that list of states.

India is the largest democracy in the world, with a thriving economy and an increasingly educated population. I am therefore appalled by its attitude to the use of such methods, which have such damaging and, at times, life-threatening effects. In the long term, such methods only sow feelings of anger and resentment within the Kashmiri community that will no doubt spill over when something else triggers a reaction.

In answer to a question that Lord Ahmed tabled on 14 December in the other House, Baroness Anelay of St Johns assured us on 23 December that the Government of India are reviewing the use of pellet guns in Kashmir. A recent report in The Independent suggests that India will swap this non-lethal method for alternative mechanisms. Although that is welcome, India must make a clear commitment that it will not use pellet guns, and that any alternative crowd control mechanisms will be used proportionately and in line with human rights laws and international legal obligations.

India and Pakistan are both friends of the UK, but we should use that friendship to drive forward a policy of dialogue between them on the issue of Kashmir, and to encourage respect for human rights, freedom of speech and freedom of expression. I strongly condemn the violence in Kashmir, and in particular the use of pellet guns, which have devastating effects on civilians. Although we welcome the review of the use of those weapons, it may fall short of a clear commitment. As the UK is a member of the UN Security Council, I urge the Government to raise these human rights abuses at the UN and to call for an investigation into them. As touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) in her intervention, a wider review of human rights throughout the world would be very welcome.

It is in everybody’s interest that dialogue between India and Pakistan continues on the issue of Kashmir so that a long-term sustainable solution can be found to the conflict, which has already gone on for too long. I therefore support the motion.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Because of the number of Members who want to catch my eye for this debate and the following debate, I am going to drop the unofficial time limit—there is no official limit on this—to five or six minutes, with 10 minutes each for the wind-ups. Then we will come in just on time. If Members could keep to that time, that would be great.

1.35 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I rise to support the motion and to congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing the debate.

Like many hon. Members present, I represent a richly diverse constituency, the people of which owe their origins to more than 120 countries. Those whose family roots are in Kashmir are one of the largest groups. One of the many advantages of having so many diaspora communities in my constituency is that when we see issues around the world, we feel them back home. For example, when the devastating earthquake hit northern Pakistan and Azad Kashmir in October 2005—killing around 90,000 people, leaving 3.5 million homeless, and destroying vital infrastructure—we felt the pain in Sheffield, through friends and neighbours whose families were in the region, and the city responded. As well as offering immediate support, we set about raising funds to rebuild the infrastructure. As a result of those efforts, seven years later Sheffield College opened on a wooded hill overlooking the city of Bagh—a community at the heart of the quake that lost 10% of its population. I pay tribute to my constituent Abdul Assim and all those who led the fundraising.

Just as that link through the diaspora community gives us a special responsibility for natural disasters beyond our control, so it gives us a special responsibility for events that we have shaped and that we can influence. The UK clearly has a special responsibility, dating back to our occupation of Jammu and Kashmir and the terms of our withdrawal after independence in 1947, so events of the sort that have occurred since last July should focus us all again on seeking a settlement to one of the most long-standing post-war grievances. The basis for that settlement should be, as others have mentioned, UN Security Council resolution 47, which was agreed almost 70 years ago in April 1948, calling for a plebiscite to enable the people of Kashmir to determine their own future.

The wave of protests and their suppression in the Kashmir valley following the killing of Burhan Wani have been a tragedy for the people of Indian-occupied Kashmir, and they should have prompted a concerted effort by the international community to reach a political solution. The Indian authorities have responded to the wave of strikes, rallies, protests and demonstrations with what looks to the whole world like disproportionate repression. In November the BBC estimated that more than 85 protesters had been killed and thousands more had been injured.

As many Members have said, of particular concern has been the use of pellet guns by the Indian authorities. Those are guns that fire shrapnel directly at protestors. As the BBC reported, despite Indian soldiers supposedly being required by their own standard operating procedure to target only the legs, and to do so only in extremely volatile conditions—the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusart Ghani) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford
West (Naz Shah) have described the nature of those weapons, which make that standard operating procedure irrelevant—90% of those who were injured received injuries above the waist. Those were horrifying injuries, and many children were blinded. That simply cannot go on.

I hope the Government will make the strongest possible representations to the Indian authorities and support the Amnesty International call for a ban on the use of pellet guns, but we need to go further and actively seek a political solution. When I tabled questions to the Minister, for whom I have high regard, in September, he confirmed that “The longstanding position of the UK is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation in Kashmir.”

Of course that is right, but it is not enough. In other situations around the world, where we see the sort of injustice that exists in Kashmir, and we see it exploding, as it has recently, the international community tries to bring pressure to bear on the protagonists to seek a solution, and to engage all the key stakeholders in realising that solution. That is why I asked what the UK Government were doing within the United Nations and the Commonwealth to seek action. Frankly, the Minister’s reply that he had had no discussions and that: “The United Kingdom does not intend to support an international conference or a plebiscite on Kashmir in line with UN Security Council Resolution 47” is unacceptable.

I ask the Minister to think again. The UK played a part in creating the problem; let us now play a part in finding a solution.

1.41 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) for bringing the debate to the House today. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) on her detailed and passionate speech and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) on the determination and clarity in her speech.

Like many other hon. Members, I have been horrified at the ongoing violence in Kashmir and I know that trying to get peace for the region is enormously important to a great number of my constituents. A couple of months ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) came to Batley and Spen in her role as shadow Foreign Secretary. Speaking to a packed hall in our Pakistani Kashmiri Welfare Association centre, we heard heart-breaking stories from my constituents, who were stressed and anxious about friends and loved ones in the region. Their anxiety was intensified by frustration at the seeming lack of political will to resolve the crisis. If the Minister had been in the hall that afternoon, he would have been left in no doubt of the urgency of the situation. A number of constituents have also contacted me in the lead-up to this debate, all stressing their desire that peace be agreed in the short-term and that self-determination for the people of Kashmir be negotiated in the long-term.

As we know, the UK’s long-standing position on Kashmir is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a genuine political solution, while respecting the wishes of the Kashmiri people. The Prime Minister has previously stated that it is not for the UK to prescribe a solution, or act as a mediator. That said, we cannot ignore the urgency of the situation. We are considering two nuclear powers with a volatile history of mistrust, violence and brinkmanship.

As the Minister will know, under the partition plan of the Indian Independence Act 1947, Kashmir was free to accede to either India or Pakistan. Time does not permit me to give a full history of the Kashmiri conflict, but we cannot avoid the fact that there is a very clear link back to the conflicts there and the decisions made here. We have a moral duty to encourage Pakistan and India to commence peace negotiations to establish a long-term solution on the future governance of Kashmir, based on the rights of the Kashmiri people to determine their own future in accordance with the provisions of the UN Security Council resolutions. So far, we have not done enough.

For example, the Prime Minister had a unique opportunity to raise human rights abuses in Kashmir when she met Prime Minister Modi in November. We have heard in a reply to a parliamentary question that the Prime Minister discussed Kashmir with the Indian Prime Minister, but sadly we have no information about what was said or agreed.

However, we know that the Prime Minister engaged in a charm offensive to secure a lucrative trade deal with India. My concern is that the Prime Minister’s anxiety to secure a trade deal may have diluted her comments on Kashmir. With that in mind, I would be grateful if the Minister expanded on what the Prime Minister raised with her counterpart and the responses she received.

Did the Prime Minister raise the arbitrary and excessive force carried out by the Indian security forces? Can the British Kashmiri people be assured that their Prime Minister took meaningful steps to leave Modi in no doubt that the recent conflict is completely unacceptable? Amnesty International has stated that the excessive use of violence violated international standards and worsened the existing human rights crisis in the region.

The flare-up of violence that the world has witnessed since July 2016 has shocked us all: a devastating loss of civilian life and injuries counted in their thousands; closure of universities and schools; general strikes; curfews and the closure of media outlets and mobile phone services. As we have discussed, the authorities’ use of pellet guns has left people blind and with other severe injuries. Lives have also been lost. I wholeheartedly support Amnesty International’s call for a ban on the use of pellet guns against stone-throwing protesters.

The injuries that pellet guns leave are devastating. Insha Mushthaq who, at just 14 had dreams of being a doctor, is now blind, possibly for the rest of her life. When hit by the bullet, Insha was sitting by a window. She wants to know what she did wrong. My constituent, Amjed, told me of the state of anxiety his family live in every single day. Some are lucky enough to have made it out of Kashmir to Pakistan, others are left living in fear. The women and girls in his family do not leave the house for fear of being raped or attacked. The menfolk have to tell family members precisely where they are going in case they never return.

It is no wonder that women and girls do not leave the house. According to Asia Watch and Physicians for Human Rights, rape by Indian police and the armed
militia is commonplace throughout Kashmir. The victims are generally poor women and those who are vulnerable and low caste, and tribal minority groups. Vicious acts routinely go unpunished.

The British Kashmiri community in my constituency has been at pains to stress that they want a peaceful solution. The lives of their friends and families in the region rely on it. We must continue to call on all parties to engage in meaningful dialogue to break the cycle of violence and breaches of international human rights on the Indian side of the line of control in Kashmir, and seek a lasting bilateral resolution. The wishes of the Kashmiri people must be at the forefront of those negotiations, because the world is watching.

1.47 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on a fine speech. She is a great addition to the House and I welcome her to it.

Much has been said that does not need to be repeated, but I commend so many of the serious, weighty and important speeches and I hope that the Government are listening. Like many hon. Members here today, I represent several thousand Kashmiris in my Luton North constituency. Many came to Luton decades ago, but they have not forgotten the painful experiences of their fellow countrymen and women, which continue to this day. Indeed, in recent months, those experiences have got worse, and we must all stand against the violence and human rights abuses that are being inflicted on the people of Kashmir.

The Government must be pressed to do more in international forums to secure an end to those abuses. I have spoken in previous debates on the subject in the Chamber and have been with other hon. Members to the Foreign Office to make representations to Ministers and to press them to use their influence to help eliminate the human rights violations as a first step to resolving the Kashmir dispute once and for all.

I have visited Kashmir. I have been to Mirpur and the town of Kotli, where many of my constituents come from. The region is therefore not just a distant continent to me. As the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) pointed out, India and Pakistan are nuclear powers, and Kashmir is prime source of tension between the two countries. It is therefore of the greatest interest and concern to the wider world to find a solution to the Kashmir dispute to make the world a safer place.

I have had many meetings in Luton with Kashmiri constituents. Although all are united in wanting freedom for the people of Kashmir, there is a range of views about what its future should be. Some believe that Kashmir should simply become part of Pakistan, and doubtless others will want it to remain to part of India, while yet others want it to be an independent state. However, the concept that unites all of them is that Kashmiris should decide their future for themselves; that there should be self-determination. I support the Kashmiris in that aspiration. They should determine their future and we should support them.

1.49 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): According to Reuters, at least 80 civilians were killed by Indian forces between July and December last year, many of whom were participants in protests. The protests began on 8 July after the death of Burhan Wani, the popular leader of the largest Kashmiri independence group. The authorities imposed a curfew, and disabled internet access and mobile phone networks, but this did not prevent an escalation. Both tear gas and live ammunition were used to disperse large crowds and groups of stone-throwers.

There have been expansive contributions in the Chamber about the indiscriminate use of pellet guns to disperse protestors. Pellet guns have the predictable effect of blinding those they hit. At close range, the hundreds of projectiles they fire can carry enough kinetic energy to penetrate skin and organs. They can therefore be fatal if fired at much of the body. A very large number of pellet injuries have been to the face, with 570 people seeking treatment for eye injuries at the main hospital in Srinagar on 8 November. According to hospital’s figures, more eye surgeries were performed in the three days between 10 July and 12 July than throughout the whole of the previous three years. That cannot be right.

Many children are among those who have lost their sight as a result of such tactics. In the case of 13-year-old Mir Arafat, the pellets penetrated deeply enough to become embedded in his blood vessels, neck, oral cavity, lungs and heart. In the case of Junaid Akhnoon, also 13, the pellet injuries to his head and chest were severe enough to kill him. At a minimum, this is evidence that insufficient care is being taken to ensure that civilians are not seriously injured by security forces’ tactics. It is also suggestive of something far more serious: that the security forces in the region are intentionally using tactics that blind civilians to discourage protests against Indian rule. According to a spokesperson for the state Government, the use of pellet guns is “a necessary evil”. But it is not. It will never be necessary for security forces to blind children to ensure the restoration of order.

Both India and Pakistan have been responsible for deaths from army shelling and military raids across the line of control in recent months, in a cycle of retribution that regularly claims civilian lives in addition to those of soldiers. There are accusations that Pakistan has used the popular unrest of ordinary Kashmiris as cover for renewed attempts by proxy groups to enter and further destabilise the border regions under Indian control. I am sure that the Minister, like me, is deeply troubled by these recent reports, but equally disturbing is what goes on behind the scenes.

Amnesty International cites the example of Khurram Parvez, a prominent Kashmiri human rights defender who was arrested repeatedly and held without proper process for a total of 75 days last year. Eventually, his detention was ruled to be arbitrary and illegal by the Jammu and Kashmir High Court, and his release was finally secured following international pressure on 30 November. I am pleased the Minister is in his place and I beg him to hear that international pressure does have an effect. The case of Khurram Parvez is part of a pattern that human rights organisations have been detailing for years, most comprehensively in Amnesty International’s 2015 publication, “Denied”. Amnesty’s view is that the dire situation the report describes remains largely
unchanged. Due process is still frequently denied both to those accused of militant activity or support, and to those victims—along with their families and communities—of state security abuses. They never see any progress towards justice and peace.

As we continue to work on these issues, we must ensure that humanitarian concerns remain at the forefront of our minds. It is clear that this conflict has gone on for too long. The individual stories we have heard today are really nothing new. Much of the conflict goes on a way too long. The individual stories we have heard today are

1.55 pm

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome this debate. I hope our Government, who in a post-Brexit world are now very outward-looking and want to develop their foreign policy, use Kashmir as a good example of where they can use their new clout in a way they have failed to do, I am afraid to say, in relation to Israel and Palestine. I had assurances from the Foreign Secretary last week that the Government were involved in all forums when it came to Israel and Palestine, and were actively seeking a solution to that conflict. What hon. Members did not realise was that he meant the Government were not in fact going to be sending any Ministers to the Paris conference. That will no doubt be a subject of a future debate and it would be inappropriate of me to focus on it in this debate.

We have heard many eloquent contributions from Members with significant Kashmiri communities. They have run through the historical analyses of the situation, and set out distressing and harrowing descriptions of the injuries and deaths that have occurred in Kashmir, and the human rights abuses that Kashmiris have suffered. I will not repeat them, but in the few minutes available I would like to put some questions to the Minister. I hope he will be able to, either off his own bat or through the media, further highlight and set out distressing and harrowing descriptions of the injuries and deaths that have occurred in Kashmir, and the human rights abuses that Kashmiris have suffered.

Does the Minister accept that this is an international conflict that requires the international community, and in particular the United Kingdom, to assist in its resolution? Does he support the idea of an international investigation into the human rights abuses committed by the Indian army or any other alleged perpetrators? Does he accept that as long as the Indian army presence remains at its current scale throughout towns in Kashmir, such allegations will continue to surface regularly? Do the UK Government challenge the Indian Government on the immunity granted to its army? Do the UK Government challenge the use of the pellets many Members have referred to? Do the UK Government regularly raise the issue of human rights in Kashmir? In the House of Lords on 12 December, my noble Friend Lord Hussian asked whether the Prime Minister had specifically raised the issue of human rights abuses in Kashmir in her discussions with Prime Minister Modi, but he did not receive an answer.

Finally, what exactly is the role of China? We have not heard much about China, but it is clearly one of the occupying powers, albeit in perhaps the more sparsely populated areas. What is China’s role in this conflict?

The hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) suggested that the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) had made a solution-focused speech. I, too, want to put to the Minister a possible way forward: the opening of the line of control, so that family and cultural ties can be re-established; the formation of a Kashmiri forum to negotiate what powers can be ceded by India and Pakistan to an autonomous elected authority; the retention of Indian and Pakistani bases; and, some years after that, a treaty to guarantee everything from water to power provision for India and Pakistan, as well as the strategic regional defence needs of the two countries. That might be a way forward. I hope that the Minister will set out the Government’s precise approach.

As others have stated, Kashmir is just another long-standing dispute in respect of which the UK played a central role in creating the conditions that led to conflict and where it must now play an equally critical role in finding a resolution. We must now hear from him how he sees our role developing, what our role in the peace process will be and how peace in Kashmir will be secured.

2 pm

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the speech from the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), and I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this debate. I am proud to have been a member of the all-party group on Kashmir for the 12 years I have been in the House and to have been a secretary to it in the past. I also pay tribute to the speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) and for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), who spoke with particular power.

When I look back on the 12 years I have campaigned on this issue in the House, I am afraid it is the lack of progress on which I have to remark, not on progress that is worth celebrating. Of course, there have been advances around border controls, trade and transport, but the truth is that today we are not one step closer to honouring that basic requirement set out in the UN mandate all those years ago to grant the right—not the privilege—of self-determination to the people of Kashmir. Over the 12 years, among our most urgent calls have been those for the free movement of human rights observers and the media throughout the area of Kashmir, and my goodness the events of the last six months have underlined why we were so right to call for that. The abuses perpetrated—with pellet guns, rape, chili powder—have maimed, scarred and destroyed lives, and not just among this generation; the memories of the abuse will cascade down the generations, and that will not make the solution or the arrival of peace happen any sooner; it will make it tougher and slower.

In particular, we have to ask ourselves why we have learned so much about these abuses not from the mainstream media but from social media. I pay tribute to those who have the courage to post news about the atrocities so that the world and we in this House could not look away. We could see it on our phones and on our screens. The BBC has at least started to produce
some coverage, but it is of no comparison to the kind of coverage we used to see from South Africa when I was a teenager or of the kind we see from Israel and Palestine week in, week out. We have to call on our media organisations to give us the benefit of transparency so that the world might be forced to look at what is happening.

The moral arguments for a solution are pretty clear and have been well articulated this afternoon, and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr alluded to some of the geopolitical demands for a solution too. China’s new silk road strategy will see $4 trillion to $6 trillion of investment poured into the business of integrating the Eurasian landmass. Indeed, yesterday in Dagenham we celebrated the arrival of the first train direct from China. This great continent is changing, and relations between China and Pakistan are changing. If we get this right, there is a tremendous economic prize ahead, and the principal beneficiaries could well be India and Pakistan, but not if they continue to pour money, arms and troops into the most heavily defended and dangerous border on earth. That is why both sides now surely have an interest in a solution and why we in this House have a moral obligation to help push that solution forward.

I have been part of a group of people in the House who have argued for change for the last 12 years. It is time now for some honesty and candour about whether that political strategy is going to produce any more change or further advance in the 12 years ahead. I do not think it will. We in the House now have to look to other Parliaments around the world—in Europe, the developing world, the US—and begin to think about how we might construct an international alliance of parliamentarians to call for change. We all know about the limitations of the United Nations. It has not made a lot of progress in the last 50 or 60 years. Do we really believe it will make any more in the years ahead? Let us take direct action now, as parliamentarians, not on our time now for some honesty and candour about whether that political strategy is going to produce any more change or further advance in the 12 years ahead. I do not think it will. We in the House now have to look to other Parliaments around the world—in Europe, the developing world, the US—and begin to think about how we might construct an international alliance of parliamentarians to call for change. We all know about the limitations of the United Nations. It has not made a lot of progress in the last 50 or 60 years. Do we really believe it will make any more in the years ahead? Let us take direct action now, as parliamentarians, not on our own but in alliance with others who believe in the same things we do, and let us together campaign for some basic changes that we all want: the repeal of the special powers Act, which is in clear breach of the UN obligation to which India has signed up; a ban on pellet guns, which many hon. Members have called for this afternoon; free movement of human rights groups throughout Kashmir; an investigation into the 2,200 mass graves that we know are there; and, yes, finally, self-determination for the people of Kashmir.

We have to make a choice in this House about whether we stand on the side lines of this debate, as impotent bystanders, or whether we are to be protagonists for change, just as we were in South Africa and Burma. One of my constituents put it to me like this:

“People of Jammu Kashmir seek a peaceful resolution of the issue and want their country to become a bridge of peace not a bone of contention between India and Pakistan.”

We in the House should support the motion and that basic instinct.

2.5 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow that incredibly articulate speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne). This has been an excellent debate, and I pay tribute to all those who have made contributions, particularly my colleagues from neighbouring constituencies in west Yorkshire, which all have significant Kashmiri communities. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this debate and on the broader contribution from the all-party group on Kashmir, which has sought to keep Kashmir on the political agenda in the UK—with varying degrees of success, despite its best efforts.

In preparation for today’s debate, I watched the recording of the last debate on Kashmir, secured by David Ward, the then Liberal Democrat MP for Bradford East, back in 2014. That, too, was a Back-Bench business debate. It is a testament to the Backbench Business Committee that it finds time for debates on issues often overlooked in the day-to-day business of the House, so I thank it for allocating time for this debate.

As I have already mentioned, many of my constituents are of Kashmiri heritage, and so Halifax will always keep a close eye on what is happening in that part of the world. Before Christmas, I met a number of local residents at the local Madni mosque for a constructive discussion about the deterioration of the situation in Kashmir and to consider what practical steps we could take locally. I mentioned that one of the challenges was accessing the latest information directly from the region—my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill just made this point too. We know that this is a consequence of the restrictions on the ground, but I also worry that because this conflict has gone unresolved for so long, it is overshadowed and goes largely unreported by the mainstream media. It is a challenge for us all to get it back on to those media platforms. Even the Foreign Office, in a written response to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Flello), said we had limited access to the Kashmir valley, which made it challenging to obtain accurate information on the situation there.

The House will appreciate, however, that, as others have said, for some of those families in Halifax and other communities throughout the UK, the problem is not that they cannot access information—information comes directly from their family and friends still in Kashmir; rather, the challenge is their sense of helplessness on hearing just how desperate the situation has become, feeling unable to protect loved ones and unable to bring about the civil protections and stability we need in order to keep people safe and to work towards a long-term sustainable resolution to the conflict.

Among other issues, we discussed at that meeting the role constituents could play in securing a debate, so once again, although we are all frustrated at how long this conflict has gone unresolved, that we are having this debate in the main Chamber is a sign that a little progress has been made. The Member who led the 2014 debate outlined that the conflict was long standing and complex; as we have heard today, he was not wrong. Kashmir is one of the longest-running territorial disputes in the world, and the region sits between two nuclear powers, so it is astonishing to think that the world does not pay more attention. Not only have we failed to make any progress since that debate in 2014; the situation has deteriorated. As the motion indicates, we have all grown increasingly alarmed by the recent escalation of violence on the Indian side of the line of control. Depressingly, progress seems to have gone backwards.
I could spend a long time describing the incidents and the timeline that have brought us where we are today, but a number of Members have already done so, and I want to focus, once again, on the human rights violations that are taking place in the region. I am fairly confident that the Minister will tell us that it is the UK’s “long-standing position... that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or act as mediator.”—[Official Report, 18 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 652.]

After all, that is what I have been told on a number of occasions in response to both written and oral questions.

I appreciate the complexity of the issue, and I do not believe that anyone here is asking the Government simply to prescribe a solution to the problem of either India or Pakistan. Along with many others, I believe in self-determination for the Kashmiri people, and believe that only by empowering those who actually live in Kashmir to determine their own future through the ballot box will we bring about a long-term solution. However, as a responsible member of the international community, we have a responsibility to seek to put a stop to human rights abuses, and that is the work that I am asking the Government to undertake today.

When tensions escalated dramatically last summer, we saw a sharp rise in the use of pellet-firing shotguns by the Indian forces as a means of controlling crowds. I will not go into that particular horror, and the damage that those pellet guns have caused, because other Members have already done so very articulately.

Back in 2008, Doctors Without Borders—MSF—published a report. Although the research was undertaken a number of years ago, the report makes the most comprehensive attempt that I have found to map the health requirements of Kashmiri people living in close proximity to the line of control, in terms of both their physical and mental wellbeing. I found it a harrowing read, and given that the situation has only deteriorated since 2008, I felt that it was worth sharing some of its findings. The research involved household surveys, conducted in person, in two districts in the Indian-controlled region of Kashmir. Of the 510 people who were interviewed, a staggering 86% reported frequent confrontations with violent authority and exposure to tear gas, 67% said that they had witnessed torture, and 34% said that they had had personal experience of forced labour. The report found that violence affects nearly everyone living in Kashmir; 40% of interviewees said that they had witnessed somebody being killed, and a horrifying 13% said they had witnessed rape.

Inevitably, MSF concluded not only that the requirements of the region were high in terms of physical injury as a result of the conflict, but that the prevalence of insecurity and prolonged violence had substantial implications for mental health. A third of those interviewed had contemplated suicide, and over a third had symptoms of psychological distress. Within that, the level of psychological distress among women was significantly higher. The prospects of any economic regeneration of the region are hopeless in those circumstances and in the face of such conflict. Fifty-three per cent. of those interviewed had had no formal schooling, and 24% reported high or total dependence on financial assistance from authorities or charities. I am struggling to find evidence that the position has improved substantially since 2008.

Given that the sustainable development goals are high on the world’s agenda this year, may I ask the Minister to work with his colleagues in the Department for International Development to explore all the ways in which we can improve the situation in Kashmir? There is no way that we can make progress in terms of education, health and the alleviation of poverty, or support economic recovery, unless the violence stops. Both Pakistan and India are world players and have obligations in relation to the sustainable development goals. How can we ensure that Kashmir does not get left behind? I am one of the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for Fairtrade. One of the things that we discussed at our meeting in Halifax was the role that it might be able to play, and the direct link that my local town could establish in supporting little independent businesses in Kashmir that might stimulate economic recovery.

I see that I am being encouraged to wind up my speech, so I will leave it there. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say in response to my contribution, and those of other Members.

2.14 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak about human rights issues. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on setting the scene so well. Members have made some incredible speeches today about an issue that has clearly fired them up.

It is well known in the House that I speak passionately about human rights and the treatment of people in places such as Kashmir and, indeed, places throughout the world. Human rights in India are fundamental rights that should include freedom of religion and freedom of speech, but it is clear that they fall short of that on many occasions. Although every individual has those rights in India, Kashmir often experiences violence and the Indian army, the Central Reserve Police Force and various separatist militant groups have been accused of and held accountable for severe human rights abuses against Kashmiri civilians. The problem is that they have not been held accountable enough for some of the things that they have done, and that worries us considerably. I firmly believe that we in the House have a role to play, and that we should use any diplomatic influence that we have to bring about change. Indeed, part of our role is to influence and ask for change.

Human rights are often defined as principles to which any human is entitled, and the individuals who were targeted with violence were therefore entitled to express their religion, but because their religion was seen as a threat, that turned upon them. The attackers are rarely charged, and perhaps the Minister will give us an idea of how we can make them accountable. With a strong nationalist leader and Government, it is incredibly hard for justice to be brought. It is also clear that the Government have little interest in speaking out about atrocities. They are almost like Nelson, closing one eye and seeing nothing that is happening.

Certain ethnic minorities in areas of India, like Kashmir, are often exposed to all sorts of human rights abuses. Smaller religious groups such as Christians are often targeted. Christianity is seen as a threat to Hinduism, and despite the existing human rights policy that exists
on paper in India, Christian minorities assert that the authorities do not do enough to stop the brutal violence against them. That violence is often perpetrated by Hindu nationalists who harass, intimidate and attack Christians to prevent conversions from Hinduism and Islamism, which they would see as a major threat in destroying the Hindu faith and promoting Christianity. That concerns me greatly. I have spoken about it before, and I have taken the chance to do so again today.

The human rights policy does refer to freedom of religion, but it also asks Christians in Kashmir if they feel free to share their faith. No, they do not: when they are asked that question they feel threatened and fearful, and they need help. In August 2016, the BBC reported violent actions taken against Kashmiri civilians and smaller minorities. That violence included arson attacks on Christian churches, and forced re-conversions from Christianity to Hinduism which often involved violent assaults. Other reported instances included sexual abuse of nuns and young Christian girls. Members have already referred to the systematic rape, abuse and sexual attacks on women and girls in an awful, violent fashion, which is totally unacceptable. Christian priests and other key religious figures have been murdered. We in the House who engage in the democratic process and through our influence and our Commonwealth and through our influence and our Commonwealth can help prevent such things from happening.

During 2008, anti-Christian riots perpetrated by Hindu nationalists killed at least 50 Christian people, and arson attacks were made on some 730 houses and 95 Christian churches. These are not just statistics; they are the facts of life for many people. Stones were often thrown with force through people’s windows, and still very little was done on their behalf. The police turned a blind eye. Violent attacks against minority groups have been an ongoing issue in Kashmir. I strongly believe that the discrimination must come to an end, and that we must play a part in that. It is often said in the House that evil triumphs when good people do nothing, but that does not make the point any less important. We must not ignore this issue. Through the House, through the debate and through our influence and our Commonwealth ties, we must do something. We must stick up for those who cannot speak for themselves. We must be a voice for those who look to us to speak on their behalf.

The innocent people of Kashmir have faced murder, forced disappearance, brutal attacks and the destruction of their own homes. India and Pakistan have called for curfews to try to restrain the violence. General strikes and protests have also been called to halt violence for a limited time, but without success. Senior figures have encountered an escalation of tension, which increases fear of an escalation of conflict between both sides. That is a fear that we have: we fear things could get worse. The steps that have already been taken are not enough; we must do more.

We must speak for all those whose cries are ringing today in our ears. We in this greatest seat of democracy are duty-bound to respond; we have the greatest opportunity to speak on behalf of those people. Our voice has been, and must continue to be, very clear from all parts of this Chamber and all parties. We look to our Minister today to outline action that will bring about change now. We must change the policies in Kashmir. Those people need us to speak for them, and I believe we are duty-bound to do so.

2.20 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this important debate. We have heard some magnificent contributions, some from those of us with roots in India and Pakistan who speak from a hugely personal perspective, and some from others who are clearly speaking strongly and with such determination and passion on behalf of constituents. I hope the feeling in the Chamber will be hugely instructive to the Minister in terms of the direction that Members would like the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to take on future relations with India and Pakistan and the issue of Kashmir.

The Scottish National party fully supports this motion, which calls on the Government to encourage Pakistan and India to commence peace negotiations to establish a long-term solution on the future governance of Kashmir. It is absolutely vital that we use the influence that we have as friends of both nations to encourage people and authorities within Kashmir to work constructively together to calm tensions and reduce violence. In particular, the Indian authorities, both in New Delhi and Srinagar, should be encouraged to engage in genuine and constructive dialogue with moderate factions in Indian-administered Kashmir and help empower such groups over armed militants.

We wholeheartedly support the right of the Kashmiri people to determine their own future in accordance with the provisions of UN Security Council resolutions, and call on all parties and the international community to recognise that right. We urge the UK Government and the international community to fully support UN Secretary-General António Guterres in his efforts at mediation and serving as an honest broker between India and Pakistan.

We understand that this is a difficult and long-lasting issue and that Kashmir has been a disputed territory since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, but over the past year we have seen a significant and deeply regrettable escalation in protest and violence. There was considerable unrest in Kashmir throughout 2016, particularly in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, beginning in July when Burhan Wani, a well-known and popular militant of Hizbul Mujahideen, was shot dead by the Indian security forces. As we have already heard, his funeral drew 50,000 mourners, and in the ensuing violence over 100 people were killed and 11,000 injured, a great many sustaining serious eye injuries when fired upon by Indian police using “non-lethal” pellet guns. We have heard much in this respect from many Members in the Chamber today.

Human Rights Watch has called on the Indian authorities to launch an impartial investigation into the use of both lethal force and pellet guns. On 6 December, Physicians for Human Rights issued a report accusing Indian police and paramilitary forces of using excessive,
indiscriminate force against protesters and blocking medical care since the start of the current protests. The hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) made an excellent point about human rights: wherever human rights abuse occurs, we must call it out. But it must feel to many people in various countries that we prioritise the human rights of some over those of others; this cannot, must not, will not continue.

We urge the Indian security forces to exercise much greater caution and restraint in their methods of crowd and riot control, including by discontinuing their practice of firing pellet guns at protesters. The authorities must allow full and unrestricted medical care in Kashmir and above all facilitate treatment by specialist eye doctors to the many people injured by these guns over these past months.

At the same time, we urge organisers of legitimate protests to deter their supporters from engaging in violence of any kind. Although the level of unrest de-escalated over the remainder of 2016, largely owing to the decisions of separatist leaders who have gradually scaled down their programme of shutdown and protests, local leaders have promised more to come.

Of great concern are the continued clashes between Indian and Pakistani forces which have been ongoing for some time. There have been exchanges of fire along the line of control, including the Indian artillery shelling on 16 December that reportedly hit a school bus in Mohra, Kotli district, in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, killing the driver and wounding several children. Most recently, on 15 January Indian security forces killed three militants in an operation described by the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs as "a continued act of state terrorism".

This escalation in military action is of great concern, and it would be wise for both Governments to reflect on their actions and tone down the increasingly violent rhetoric.

Further to this military escalation, there have been increasing and unprecedented suggestions that the Indian Government are considering using water as a means of applying pressure on Pakistan. Tension in Kashmir should not be allowed to affect other aspects of the India-Pakistan relationship, such as the Indus waters treaty.

Pakistan is hugely dependent on the six rivers of the Indus basin, all of which flow through India before reaching Pakistan. The Indus basin provides drinking water and livelihoods to almost three quarters of Pakistan's population of 192 million. More than 95% of Pakistan's irrigated land is in the Indus basin, and farm income amounts to a quarter of Pakistan's GDP. In 1960, the two countries signed the Indus waters treaty which guaranteed Pakistan's continued access to water and provides for inspections, data exchanges and arbitration processes administered by the World Bank. The treaty is regarded as the most successful example of an international agreement on water and has survived three wars without modification. However, India is increasingly threatening to revise the treaty or to moderate Pakistan's access to water as a form of leverage. This is a deeply regrettable act, which could have significant and dangerous implications for the region.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a review of the treaty in September, outlining specific treaty provisions which India could use to apply pressure on Pakistan, and stated:

“Blood and water cannot flow simultaneously.”

Sartaj Aziz, foreign policy adviser to Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, responded by saying that revocation of the treaty would be considered an “act of war”.

On 12 December, the World Bank halted two Pakistani and Indian arbitration processes under the treaty, citing concerns that current tensions could endanger the treaty. We urge all parties to uphold the Indus waters treaty, both in letter and in spirit, and not to use vital access to water as a means of diplomatic leverage—that is just so wrong.

Within the scope of the treaty, any changes should be mutually agreed through the proper channels and only after very careful consideration of the humanitarian and economic consequences for the people living in the Indus basin. We encourage the UK Government and the international community to provide all necessary support to the World Bank in its arbitration of the treaty and to encourage India and Pakistan to resume meetings of the treaty commission and to continue to successfully implement the treaty provisions regardless of tensions caused by other developments.

In conclusion, The SNP absolutely supports today’s motion and this hugely constructive debate. The Government must continue to encourage both Pakistan and India to start peace negotiations as soon as possible. The Kashmiri people should be able to determine their own future in accordance with the provisions of UN Security Council resolutions. It is in everyone’s interests that a long-term solution is found on the future governance of the beautiful place that is Kashmir.
Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne). Calls for the Government to work to settle the Kashmir situation were made, notably, by my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie), for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) and for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin).

An element of controversy was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma). Our historical responsibility for Kashmir was highlighted by the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). The role of China, to which not a great deal of reference was made during the debate, was mentioned in particular by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill and the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington. Many Members spoke passionately on behalf of their constituents of Kashmiri origin.

The Kashmiri people have seen a perpetual rise in conflict over the past year. It is the worst spate of violence in the region since 2010, when 110 people lost their lives. Inside and outside this House, I and many others have already called for a ban on pellet guns, tear gas and live ammunition in civilian areas. Will the Minister update us on the current situation in the Jammu region, with particular regard to the police and the Muslim community?

Some 400 people in Kashmir have been detained by Indian security forces under the repressive Public Safety Act, which allows preventative detention for offences defined by vague, overbroad terms and violates international due process standards. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International called it a “lawless law” and called for the Indian authorities to end its use. If people are suspected of committing offences, they should be properly charged and given fair trials. Does the Minister agree with that assessment of the PSA?

The region has seen the introduction and implementation of numerous curfews over this disruptive period, the longest of which lasted 53 days. Mobile phone services have been down and media blackouts have been imposed, leading to numerous protests, including a series of general strikes, the closure of schools and universities and regular public rallies against Indian rule. Of course, this is not a one-sided affair. We also encourage Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Government to condemn and take immediate action against abusive militant groups operating in Jammu and Kashmir and other parts of India, which would be an important move to help extinguish the conflict in the region. Will the UK Government consider their future military aid and sales, and the issue of Kashmiri origin?

The unrest has led to the tragic loss of over 80 lives in violent clashes since the beginning of July, including a police officer and 19 soldiers killed in a militant attack on a security base. Sadly, the violence continues to this day, with some 4,000 people wounded over this seven-month period. The line of control is at the heart of the divisional tension, with both countries cranking up the rhetoric and levels of military action on the border. Given the history of the line of control, what are the Government specifically doing to counter that ongoing retaliation? Even as recently as 2015, such action had disastrous costs when Indian and Pakistani border guards traded gunfire, leaving nine civilians dead and another 62 wounded.

As a symbolic destination for her first prime ministerial trip abroad, we welcomed the Prime Minister’s visit to India given our countries’ historic ties and heritage. However, like many other hon. Members, I want to know from the Minister what discussions the Prime Minister had with Prime Minister Modi on that visit. The visit came at the height of the current troubles, so will the Minister tell us what progress has resulted from those diplomatic talks? The Minister would find support for such a question among his own Back Benchers, notably the hon. Member for Wealden. In addition, will the Minister also inform us whether the Foreign Secretary ever discussed the letter sent to him just prior to the Prime Minister’s visit by the shadow Foreign Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), in which she raised the issues of human rights and civil liberties in Kashmir?

It should be stated for the record that Labour party policy on Kashmir has not changed since we were in government: we must allow all parties who are directly involved to determine their future through peaceful dialogue and co-operation. We also acknowledge the importance of the work of international organisations, the UN in particular, and their efforts to negotiate with all parties and member states involved to bring India and Pakistan to the negotiating table. We continue to encourage both India and Pakistan to seek a lasting solution on Kashmir in accordance with the provisions of UN Security Council resolutions, which take into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. Their wishes are fundamental to the success of the process and to obtaining peace in the region.

Through the conflict prevention programme, the Labour Government funded several projects designed to support efforts to facilitate dialogue, which addressed the causes and impact of conflict and proposed to improve quality of life for Kashmiris. In 2010, an opinion poll was conducted on both sides of the line of control for the first time since the UN-brokered ceasefire in 1949. Despite the complexity of the political situation, it found that there are other clear concerns for the Kashmiri people, with 81% saying that unemployment was the most significant problem. Government corruption, poor economic development and human rights abuses also polled highly. Kashmiri citizens wish for an end to the violence in the region, the dispute, the division and the disruption so that they can access economic prosperity, good education and vital healthcare. Those should be the main points of consideration in all dialogue and actions in 2017. The need for a rapid response to the situation in Kashmir is now upon us.
I hope that the whole House and the Minister will agree that the UN must be involved at every stage of the process. On his first day in office, the new UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, pledged to make 2017 a year for peace. I hope those words lead to a rapprochement and then, step by step, a long-term resolution between the two countries. However, the first step must be the acceptance of the rule of humanitarian law and the starting point for negotiations between the bordering nations must be to uphold the UN universal declaration of human rights, therefore ensuring equal and inalienable rights for all Kashmiri people.

2.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): We have had a long, detailed debate with powerful speeches from Members on both sides of the House, and I am grateful to all hon. and right hon. Members who have contributed.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) on securing this important debate and thank the members of the all-party parliamentary Kashmir group for their commitment to the issue and for welcoming me to their meeting in December.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North said in his speech, the region has a long, complex history. The situation in Kashmir continues to attract significant public attention and parliamentary interest in the UK, as shown by this debate, not least because of the thousands of British nationals with connections to Kashmir. An estimated two thirds of British Pakistanis hail from Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

Before I respond to the many points raised by right hon. and hon. Members, I will briefly set out the Government’s position on Kashmir and India-Pakistan relations. A number of Members set out what they believe to be the Government’s position, and I can confirm that what they said is consistent with our position. It has been the long-standing position of successive Governments of all hues, and the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) has also stated that the Opposition’s position has not changed.

India and Pakistan are both long-standing and important friends of the United Kingdom, and we have significant links to both countries through Indian and Pakistani diaspora communities living in the UK—I have many in my constituency. We also have strong bilateral relations with both countries, which we hope to make even stronger.

The long-standing position of the UK is that it can neither prescribe a solution to the situation in Kashmir nor act as a mediator. It is for the Governments of India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. In our discussions with both India and Pakistan, we encourage both sides to maintain positive dialogue, but the pace and scope of that dialogue is for them to determine.

I will address the issues in the order in which they came up in the debate. First, on the violence across the line of control, I agree that a strong relationship between India and Pakistan is crucial to maintaining regional stability and prosperity. I am pleased that the escalation of incidents between India and Pakistan along the line of control showed some signs of decreasing in the run-up to Christmas, but there have been recent reports of renewed activity this year.

A number of Members talked about combating terrorism. As Members will be aware, following the attack on the Indian military base in Uri last September, the Foreign Secretary publicly condemned all forms of terrorism in the region and stated that the UK “stands shoulder to shoulder with India in the fight against terrorism, and in bringing the perpetrators to justice.”

He reiterated that message during his visit to Pakistan shortly before Christmas.

Following her visit to India last November, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and Prime Minister Modi released a joint statement in which they reiterated their strong commitment to combating terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. They also stressed that there can be no justification for acts of terror on any grounds whatsoever.

The UK and Pakistan are, of course, also committed to working together to combat the terrorist threat, and the extremism that sustains it, in line with human rights. The UK regularly highlights to Pakistan at the highest level the importance of taking effective action against all terrorist groups operating in Pakistan, as Pakistan has committed to do. The UK will continue to encourage both India and Pakistan to ensure that channels of dialogue remain open as a means of resolving differences.

Many Members mentioned the use of pellet guns. I have said in this House on a number of occasions that I am very concerned about the violence in Indian-administered Kashmir, and I extend my condolences to the victims of violence and their families. I have also discussed the use of pellet guns and alternative methods of crowd control with representatives of the Indian Government. The use of pellet guns in Kashmir has recently come under review by the Government of India. The results of the review have not yet been shared publicly, but I understand that alternative methods are now being used. I believe that, since September 2016, pellet guns have been replaced by chilli powder shells as a preferred non-lethal crowd control device.

From media reporting, it appears that the number of fatalities and injuries has since declined, which I am sure the whole House will welcome. We will, of course, continue to monitor the situation.

A number of hon. Members mentioned the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act, and we are aware of the concerns regarding allegations of the immunity from prosecution for Indian armed forces personnel in Indian-administered Kashmir under the PSA and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act. The Indian Government have put in place a mechanism that allows people to request that they investigate such concerns, and we expect all states to ensure that their domestic laws are in line with international standards. Any allegations of human rights abuses must be investigated thoroughly, promptly and transparently.

I also understand that, on 11 January, Chief Minister Mufti told the state Assembly that the Indian Government have ordered the establishment of special teams to investigate the deaths of civilians and to look at the involvement of police personnel during the unrest over the past five months.

Mr Baker: On the face of it, it is very encouraging that the investigations have been launched, but will the Government take steps to make sure that there is international confidence that those investigations can be relied on to determine what is true?
Alok Sharma: Of course we continue to monitor the whole situation in the region and, if my hon. Friend will allow me, I will talk about the UN and other such matters.

The establishment of dialogue and confidence-building have also been mentioned, and the UK already supports a number of existing initiatives to encourage open dialogue between Pakistan and India on the basis that those attending are able to share their views in confidence. We hope that such opportunities will continue.

On the motion itself, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North calls for the British Government to raise the situation in Kashmir at the UN. As I have set out, the British Government believe that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting solution to Kashmir, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. Of course we stand ready to support both countries in that goal, but it is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or to act as a mediator. He made a powerful speech in the Westminster Hall debate in 2014, in which he said:

“The Governments of India and Pakistan are the principal parties who can bring about a resolution of the problem.”—[Official Report, 11 September 2014; Vol. 585, c. 365WH.]

That really is the case.

The UN and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights were raised by a number of Members. As a “permanent five” member of the UN Security Council, and as a member of the UN Human Rights Council, the UK is a long-standing supporter of the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and I am aware that the high commissioner has requested access to Kashmir from both the Indian and Pakistani Governments. Of course we encourage all states to consider visits by the high commissioner.

Imran Hussain: It is absolutely right that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has extended that request, and Pakistan has sent a letter saying that it will accept if India accepts. India has not got back to the high commissioner. What will the Minister be doing to encourage India to accept that request?

Alok Sharma: Let me reiterate the point I made to the hon. Gentleman, which is that we encourage all states to consider visits by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and I know that we have had this discussion previously.

We had a discussion about the Prime Minister’s visit to India in November. Of course, as Members would expect, she discussed a range of issues, including on Kashmir, and I hope that will be a source of reassurance to Members.

Tom Brake: I would like the Minister to be a bit more specific and confirm that “a range of issues” includes that of human rights abuses.

Alok Sharma: The right hon. Gentleman should take comfort from the fact that the subject of Kashmir was discussed by the two Prime Ministers. It was a bilateral discussion and he, as someone who has been in government, will know that we cannot comment on private discussions. Today, we have also had a discussion about the Foreign Secretary’s visit to India, and of course he is also discussing a range of issues, including regional security issues.

Let me conclude by saying that the UK Government will continue to encourage and support both India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation in Kashmir, in line with the wishes of the people of Kashmir. We cannot, however, mediate in the process. I am fully aware of the strength of feeling about Kashmir among many people in Britain, and of course in this House, and I am glad that this debate has given me the opportunity to set out the Government’s position. Once again, I thank right hon. and hon. Members for raising issues today and for their contributions.

2.49 pm

Mr Nuttall: This has been an historic debate, comprehensively covering the extremely important matters relating to Kashmir. I thank all 19 Members who have spoken in the debate and those who have made interventions. I particularly wish to thank the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh), who spoke for the Scottish National party, and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), for their contributions. I hope that in the light of this debate, the Minister will reflect on the many positive suggestions for action that have been made. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the escalation in violence and breaches of international human rights on the Indian side of the Line of Control in Kashmir; calls on the Government to raise the matter at the United Nations; and further calls on the Government to encourage Pakistan and India to commence peace negotiations to establish a long-term solution on the future governance of Kashmir based on the right of the Kashmiri people to determine their own future in accordance with the provisions of UN Security Council resolutions.
Holocaust Memorial Day

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Before I ask Peter Kyle to move the motion, may I point out to Members that we are very limited on time, with 13 Members wishing to speak? I am therefore going to impose an absolute limit of 15 minutes, including interventions, on the opening speaker and suggest an informal limit of five minutes for Back Benchers. If that is not adhered to, I am going to have to drop it down to four or even three minutes. However, I hope it will all go well and everyone can have five minutes.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered Holocaust Memorial Day 2017.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will try not to rush my speech after that introduction. Let me start by thanking the hon. Members who supported me in the application for this debate, the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it and all the Members, from both sides of the House, who are participating today. Holocaust Memorial Day was established in 2001 as a result of Andrew Dismore’s private Member’s Bill. We owe him a debt of gratitude because since that time it has provided our nation with the annual opportunity to pause to reflect on the holocaust. It is necessary to pause because of the enormity of the holocaust and the impact it had on millions of individuals, on families and on humanity as a whole. It is not something we can consider lightly.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Towards the end of last year, I visited Auschwitz with a group of students from my home town of Newcastle. It was an incredibly challenging and moving visit, but it was made really powerful by the presence of so many young people from the region. Does my hon. Friend agree, therefore, that we also owe a debt to those at the Holocaust Educational Trust, who make this visit possible for so many young people to ensure that we never forget and that we never repeat?

Peter Kyle: I am extremely grateful for that intervention, and in a few minutes I will very much echo my hon. Friend’s sentiments. I will carry on with my speech and not take any more interventions, as we can see the ferocity with which Madam Deputy Speaker is clearly encouraging us to make progress. I will get through my speech and allow others to speak.

The theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is “How can life go on?” It invites us to consider how our generation can comprehend the holocaust and act on its lessons when so few of those who survived it remain with us. We are entering an age when the lived experience of the second world war and all its horrors is being replaced by one where we experience it through stories handed down, or through the media, books or film. Because fewer survivors remain, it is easier to get away with trivialising those events or making light of them. It is not uncommon these days to hear people who are involved, or are perceived to be, anti-Semitic. As individuals and as a political party, we must do more. Not only should we react swiftly when there is anti-Semitic activity; we should be doing more to prevent it in the first place, because the point of offence is the point at which we know we have failed.

It is hard even to imagine the events we are remembering today, because of the sheer scale of human suffering involved. Approximately six million Jewish men, women and children were murdered by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during the second world war. Anti-Semitism was the defining element of Nazi ideology. The persecution of Jews started immediately after Hitler’s accession to power in 1933, with policies designed to force emigration. The intensity, ferocity and brutality of such policies escalated throughout Nazi rule, resulting in mass murder and genocide. It is therefore understandable that the holocaust plays such a painful and powerful role in modern Jewish culture, both here in Britain and around the world.

I am fortunate to have a large and thriving Jewish community in my constituency of Hove and Portsllade, which is proudly home to four well-attended and active synagogues. The community plays an active role in all aspects of life in our beautiful city on the south coast, from participating in festivals to hosting a dedicated Remembrance Day event to remember Jews who fell fighting the Nazis as part of the allied offensive. The community has welcomed me to events and helped me to understand Jewish culture and traditions, including the impact and importance of the holocaust in modern Jewish life. Rabbi Andre and Rabbi Elie in particular have invested many hours in answering my questions and discussing the complex history and modern faces of Judaism, both in my own community and further afield.
The great thing about a group that is so welcoming and integrated into the ebb and flow of community life is that it inspires others to share, learn and join in, which is why next week I will proudly join students and staff at Blatchington Mill, a local school that is holding an event to mark Holocaust Memorial Day at which people from throughout the city will come together to reflect on the meaning of the holocaust for today’s generations. As we approach Holocaust Memorial Day next week, it is appropriate that we in this House memorialise these terrible events. The memorial date was chosen to respect the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau by allied forces on 27 January 1945. The death camp sited in the Polish town of Auschwitz has become symbolic of the holocaust because of the sheer scale of murder that occurred there: 1.1 million lives were savagely ended at that place.

In November last year, I visited Auschwitz with 200 students from throughout Sussex, along with my colleague from across the Floor, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). Our visit was under the auspices of the Holocaust Educational Trust. I cannot praise highly enough the thoughtful, engaging and extremely powerful way the trust guides students through the process of learning about and experiencing Auschwitz. Before the visit, students get together in a set of structured seminars to learn the history, policies and facts behind the holocaust, even meeting a holocaust survivor. They then visit Auschwitz. Finally, when they return, they meet again to talk about the lessons and what it means for them as individuals and us as a society—the past, the present and the future. These fortunate young people will carry the burden of knowing the full horror meted out to Jews by Nazi Germany. They will also benefit from the wisdom that experience bestows.

Two of the students on my visit were from Brighton and Hove—Joe and Mattie from Cardinal Newman and Brighton College schools. They showed the depth of thinking, sensitivity and thoughtfulness that makes me so proud of young people today. Together, we saw: the cells in which people who tried to escape were bracketed up and starved to death; the wall against which so many people were shot dead that the ground beneath could no longer soak up the blood; the desperately cold cabins where people slept; the train tracks that brought people to their deaths in cattle trucks; and the sidings where doctors—the people trained to save and enhance life—used their training to decide who was strong enough to work and who should be put to death that very day. For those of us who celebrate the good of which humanity is capable, it is a shattering place to visit.

At the end of our tour, guided by extraordinary staff from the Auschwitz museum, we gathered at the top of the Auschwitz-Birkenau rail tracks. We stood directly between the remains of two former gas chambers where tens of thousands of people lost their lives. There in the darkness, we listened to poetry read by students. Then a rabbi sang prayers, which echoed around the still remains of huts, gas chambers and the forest. The beauty of the prayers, for a moment, pierced the horror of our location. The symbolism of Jewish prayers being sung in that place was lost on no one.

As we departed, we left behind us lighted candles along the tracks. From the entrance, they looked like a blazing pathway of light into the terrible darkness that still hangs over that place. That is the image that remains most strong in my mind, because a blazing pathway of light is what history needs from our generation and those in the future. It will come in the form of remembering, of learning and of being brave enough to confront hatred. For those of us in public life, it will mean using the power we have to unite and temper at times of anger and confusion and never to exploit.

Those are just some of the many lessons that I have learned from listening and discussing not only the holocaust, but its role in shaping modern Jewish life in Hove and across Britain. It is also why moments of reflection such as this, in the House of Commons through to the community schools and living rooms across the country, are so desperately important.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) who made a very thoughtful speech. I have to say that I agreed entirely with what he said.

Last April, I visited Treblinka, the former Nazi death camp, which the people of Poland have preserved as testimony to man’s inhumanity to man. No country suffered more than Poland and the world is grateful for the way in which it has acted as the custodian of these absolutely terrible places.

Treblinka was unambiguously a death camp. Most victims survived only a few hours, and those who were too frail to make it to the gas chambers were escorted to a hospital, which was a façade—it was an open pit at which they were shot and then thrown in. Some of the victims were still alive when they were thrown in.

The Nazis, in their shame, destroyed their apparatus of genocide in the face of the advancing Soviet troops. The best estimate is that somewhere between 700,000 and 900,000 Jews and around 2,000 Roma were killed in Treblinka’s gas chambers. More Jews were killed at Treblinka than at any other Nazi extermination camp apart from Auschwitz. It is a grim place. There is a dignified monument and carefully laid stones remembering the different communities.

I laid a wreath at the site and following the visit, as most politicians do, I tweeted my observations. Within minutes I received a tweet that said:

“No one died at Treblinka, it was a transit camp. There were no gas chambers, no crematoria, no mass graves”.

I have no idea whether the person who sent me that tweet believed it or not, and it is too easy to dismiss this as yet another example of our post-truth world’s fake news, which is all too prevalent on social media, but I think there is something more sinister going on. Members will recall the long-established 10 stages of a holocaust or genocide starting with classification and working through persecution and extermination. Of course, the 10th and final stage is holocaust denial: it did not happen; the numbers are exaggerated; there were not that many Jews in the first place; they brought it on themselves; the Jews are using it to justify their actions. To forget or belittle continues the holocaust.

This month sees the release of the film “Denial”, which depicts one of the most infamous libel trials of the past 20 years involving the American historian, Deborah Lipstadt, and David Irving. If one looks at the trailer, and at the comments made beneath it, one can
see that there are thousands of abusive comments claiming that the holocaust was a fake. Only a few days ago David Irving claimed that he is inspiring a new generation of “holocaust sceptics”—a fancy way of dressing up holocaust denial.

It is in that context that we should see the building of the new holocaust memorial and learning centre just a short walk from this Chamber in Victoria Gardens. I am proud to be a member of the foundation alongside the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond). It will establish the memorial in a massively important place. An international design competition was launched in September 2016, and 92 teams have expressed an interest. Ten were shortlisted and when the competition ends on Monday we will see them on the web and will take the exhibition around the country.

It will be a lasting monument of which we can be immensely proud, but, as we are running short of time and others want to speak, and, given that last year we lost Elie Wiesel, I would like to end with a quote from him that explains why we are doing this. He said in his Nobel prize acceptance speech:

““What all victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs”.

3.8 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I very much welcome this debate and the fact that it was a decision of this Parliament, made on an all-party basis, that has led to our having Holocaust Memorial Day in this country. Holocaust Memorial Day gives us an opportunity to focus on reflections about the enormity of the holocaust and the extermination of millions of European Jews with the aim of eradicating European Jewry, who were seen as a malignant, evil force, as well as an opportunity to reflect on current anti-Semitism.

Anti-Semitism is indeed a virus. It spans different religions and different political parties, and it changes its form over time. I very much welcome the Government’s acceptance of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of anti-Semitism, because it is important that we focus on what anti-Semitism means in this day and in this era, as well as what it has meant historically.

Figures from the Community Security Trust show us shockingly that there has been a resurgence of anti-Semitism and of anti-Semitic discourse. It is important not to exaggerate that—most British Jews will go about their lives without experiencing anti-Semitism—but there is a profound unease across the UK’s Jewish community with the increase in both anti-Semitic incidents and comments. As the Community Security Trust report on anti-Semitic discourse shows, that sometimes reflects insinuations and allusions if not direct anti-Semitism.

It is always important to remember that anti-Semitism does not lie solely in one religion. Historically, Christianity was often the source of anti-Semitism, but anti-Semitism is found in extreme Islamic sources, too. We have only to look at the Hamas charter to see very clear, explicit anti-Semitism, with references to Jews wanting to rule the world.

Anti-Semitism is not only found on the right. Conventionally, people sometimes think that anti-Semitism is confined to the right of politics. That is not, and has never been, the case. It is a fact that people who declare themselves anti-racist are not necessarily opposed to anti-Semitism, and do not necessarily even understand what anti-Semitism is. Shocking as I find that, as a person of the left and a Labour party member, I recognise that there is a fight-back and that it is being led by non-Jewish people as well as by Jews.

This week, there has been a showing of the film “Denial” here in Parliament. The film shows, as the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) mentioned, the trial where the holocaust denier, David Irving, sued Deborah Lipstadt. He was alleging that the holocaust did not happen. It is truly shocking that today, as that film is being shown, and as he was defeated so conclusively—indeed, he had sued Deborah Lipstadt, not the other way around—it is reported that there are more supporters for the lie of holocaust denial, including more online supporters who appear to be gathering new force. This is a reminder of the importance of Holocaust Memorial Day, this debate and the continuing role of the UK Government, with all-party support, in combating modern day manifestations of anti-Semitism.

3.12 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is an honour and a privilege to co-sponsor this debate to mark this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day and to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Transport, on which I serve.

Last November, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) and I stood with 200 young people from across the south-east of England on the train tracks at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where 1.1 million Jewish men, women and children were murdered by the Nazis. I had travelled to Poland as part of the “Lessons from Auschwitz” project, run by the excellent Holocaust Educational Trust.

The train tracks run right into the camp. Ahead are the watchtowers where the guards would have been positioned at all times. At the end of the tracks are the remains of the gas chambers. To the left and right, as far as the eye can see, are the barracks where those selected to work were held.

As we stood on the train tracks, our educator read to us an extract from a young boy who stood on those same train tracks some 74 years earlier. That extract has stayed with me and I want to share it now:

“‘Men to the left! Women to the right!’ Eight words were spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight short, simple words. Yet that was the moment when I parted from my mother. I had not had time to think, but already I felt the pressure of my father’s hand; we were alone. For a part of a second I glimpsed my mother’s hand; we were alone. For a part of a second I glimpsed my mother’s hand. I saw them disappear into the distance; my mother was stroking my sister’s fair hair, as though to protect her, while I walked on with my father and the other men. And I did not know that in that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother. I had not had time to think, but already I felt the pressure of my father’s hand; we were alone. For a part of a second I glimpsed my mother’s hand. I saw them disappear into the distance; my mother was stroking my sister’s fair hair, as though to protect her, while I walked on with my father and the other men. And I did not know that in that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother and Tzipora forever. I went on walking, my father held my mother’s hand. I saw them disappear into the distance; my mother was stroking my sister’s fair hair, as though to protect her, while I walked on with my father and the other men. And I did not know that in that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother and Tzipora forever. I went on walking, my father held on to my hand.”

These are the memories of Professor Elie Wiesel, Nobel laureate, who has already been mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles). Elie spent the rest of his life working to ensure that the holocaust was never forgotten. He passed away in July 2016 aged 87, just a few months before my visit.
[Huw Merriman]

Today we debate this horror, and we speak in honour of Elie and all those who either perished in the camps or, against all odds, survived. Many of those who lived on dedicated the rest of their lives to ensuring that their experiences would never be repeated. Their stories act as a reminder of the evil that mankind can deliver to itself when hatred, prejudice and violence are left unchecked.

Yesterday in Parliament, I spoke to six young people who have made the same trip to Auschwitz over the past few years with the Holocaust Educational Trust. They have all been young ambassadors for the trust and have devised imaginative ideas to ensure that the horrors of the holocaust act as a flame to guard against the darkness of hatred and division. Time does not permit me to mention all their stories, but I will mention the final young ambassador I met—a lady called Charlotte Heard.

Charlotte told me that she had been keen to develop her knowledge of the holocaust, as she had a great-grandmother who was in a concentration camp in the last year of the war. Little was spoken about the experience and Charlotte lost her great-grandmother in 2015, motivating Charlotte to complete her “Lessons from Auschwitz” project in April last year. On her return from Auschwitz, Charlotte and a fellow attendee from her school set about creating a memorial that would inspire others. This is how she described her work to me:

“We wanted to involve the students within our school as a way of uniting them. We have a school that has 40+ different languages. We thought this was very poignant as many cultures and races were victims of persecution, but of course in particular the Jews. Therefore the hands represent the many different students within our school and although they may be different in appearance, language or traditions, their hands are something that unite them, and join them together. The words I have painted on one of the panels read: ‘I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining. I believe in love, even when I cannot feel it. I believe in God, even when he is silent.’ These words were written inside a cell in the Cologne concentration camp, and we chose this because it shows the struggle that the Jews had faced. However the prisoner had never lost faith in his God. Therefore, as ambassadors whose role is to ensure we make the existence of the Holocaust in our past live on, these are key words that could inspire all the students in our school.”

These young ambassadors are doing an outstanding job of reminding their peers of what happened during the second world war. The importance could never be greater. First-hand experiences truly deliver the power but, 75 years on, these voices are being lost. We therefore have to find imaginative ways to appeal to the consciences of others. We live in a society where negativity, cynicism and casual insults are never far from the surface.

We should never assume that the horrors of the Third Reich could never be repeated in Europe. The Germany of the 1930s had culture, history and people of differing creeds living side by side, yet the murmurings of hate quickly turned an entire country into a place where sending Jews, Romany Gypsies and other groups to their graves was accepted by millions of people who had previously lived and worked among them. The noise of hatred in 2017 may be low, but a civilised society must aim to switch it off before it can deafen us.

I conclude by thanking Karen Pollock and her team at the Holocaust Educational Trust for continuing to ensure that this country remembers the unspeakable evil that created the holocaust. I also thank the trust for delivering these new voices—the young and not so young—who will continue to ensure that we never forget what occurred and that we do all we can to stop the undercurrents that, if left unchecked, could make it occur again.

3.18 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Holocaust Memorial Day marks a crime that we must never forget. We must never forget the genocide committed by Nazi Germany, and we must always remind ourselves of the horrors that anti-Semitism can produce.

At 10 am on 27 January—Holocaust Memorial Day itself—the Holocaust Educational Trust will host a live webcast with holocaust survivor Mala Tribich. The webcast will be livestreamed to schools across the UK, and more than 600 schools have signed up so far. The filming will take place at Kingsmead School in my constituency. I am very proud that it is happening there, and I commend the school for hosting it. The event at Kingsmead is very important, and it will have a significant impact. We thank Mala for being willing to share her terrible experiences and give her testimony to educate our young people. We also thank the Holocaust Educational Trust for organising the event.

Even when it makes for difficult hearing, we have a moral duty to listen to holocaust testimony. Survivors speak not only for themselves but for those who did not survive to tell their story. Arek Hersh is one such survivor. When he was 11, the Nazis invaded his home town in Poland and transferred him to the Lodz ghetto. He was then taken to an SS camp called Otoschno, near Poznan. After 18 months, Arek was one of only 11 of the original 2,500 men left alive.

Arek escaped transfer to the gas chambers at Chelmno twice, before being transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau. At Auschwitz, he was selected for death by Dr Josef Mengele, but when he saw that healthier and fitter people were in the other line, he ran across while the SS guards were distracted. Arek was a slave labourer in Auschwitz, before being forced on a death march to Buchenwald. He was then transferred to Theresienstadt, where he was liberated by the Russian army.

Arek describes life at Auschwitz and the death march:

“We were chosen to work on agriculture for the SS. First with two horses they ploughed the field and for fertilisation they bring us ashes from the crematorium and we strew it on the ground and the bones, you could feel the bones.

We marched out on the 18th January 1945, the death march, and we walked for about 3 days without any food in the striped pyjama, we were freezing, it was so cold.

It was terrible.

And we arrived at the station and we were loaded on the station and we were taken to a place called Buchenwald next to Weimar in Germany.

The camp was about 8km from Weimar in a forest. And there we were more dead than alive when we arrived.”

Arek lives in Leeds today, and is now 88 years old. His first-hand testimony reminds us of the brutality of Nazi anti-Semitism. His testimony is also a powerful rebuttal to those today who continue the awful practice of holocaust denial. Let us be clear: those who minimise, trivialise, distort or deny the horrors of the holocaust
do so to legitimise the anti-Semitism that fuelled it. We must recognise that whenever people claim the gas chambers are a myth, argue that the Holocaust is Jewish propaganda, distort Nazi history, minimise the number of Holocaust victims or attack Holocaust Memorial days, they do not do so out of historical interest or a desire for debate; they do so from nothing but prejudice, bigotry and naked anti-Semitism.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Do not the testimonies that my right hon. Friend is referring to show the continuing relevance and importance of Holocaust Memorial Day? The vast majority of people in this country are decent, but we have seen a rise in hate crime—41% between July 2015 and July 2016. Although it has since gone down, it is still higher than it was, so the continuing relevance of those testimonies speaks to us all.

Joan Ryan: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I would add that we must never be bystanders.

When Arek wrote his autobiography, he called it “A Detail of History”. He chose that title as a direct riposte to French fascist leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, who disgustingly referred to the Nazi gas chambers in those terms.

Our words of remembrance today will mean nothing if we do not commit ourselves to action. Preserving the memory of the murdered is not a theoretical exercise. We must act to oppose all those who deny, distort or dismiss the Holocaust in the present day. As Arek Hersh has said:

“What hurts the most is not the actions of the oppressor, but the silence of the bystander.”

We must support the brilliant work done by groups such as HOPE not hate to counter racism and fascism in our society. Perhaps most of all, we must support the fantastic work done by the Holocaust Educational Trust.

The only way to truly eradicate racism, anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial in our society is through educating people. This is what Arek Hersh has devoted his life to for the past 20 years. In his words, “If you talk about”

the Holocaust

“to people...people learn, and if anything like that could come up again they would stand up against it, so that’s why I talk about it all the time.”

In his words we must follow. We must remember, we must mourn, and above all, we must educate, so that racism and anti-Semitism can never flourish again.

3.25 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan). I commend the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for the way in which he introduced this debate.

Jewish people have suffered anti-Semitism throughout the centuries; there is nothing new in that. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) reminded us, it is still rife not only all over the world but in this country, and we can never forget that fact. However, it reached its peak with the systematic attempt by the Nazis to wipe out Jews from across the world.

I grew up in an area where we were educated among Jewish people, Hindu people, Muslims, and people of all religions and origins, but the Holocaust was never talked about. On my first to Israel in 1992, I saw not the wonderful museum that is now Yad Vashem, but the original museum. That brought home to me what life was like for the Jewish people in Germany and beyond who suffered the systematic attempt to wipe them out. It also brought home to me that we must educate young people across this country on the need to remember what happened, because it is very hard to contemplate that systematic attempt to wipe people out, and very easy to think that it was about just a small number of mad people. But it was not: large numbers of people were involved. We must remember that it is not good enough to pinpoint just the evil people who did this; we should also pinpoint those who stood by while recognising what was going on.

I remember my visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau; it is seared into my consciousness. Going there and seeing at first hand what happened brought home to me the importance of the testimony of those who survived the death camps in proving what had happened. I was privileged to welcome to this House—together with the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), who is unfortunately unable to be with us today—Kitty Hart-Moxon, who, aged 16, was forced to go to Auschwitz-Birkenau at the point of a gun. She survived to tell the tale, and to come to this country to give her life to being a nurse, to build a family, and to build a life. When, on her arrival, she went to live with the Jewish community in Birmingham, they wanted to ignore the fact of the Holocaust—to forget about it. It was a terrible thing, but they wanted to turn a blind eye to what happened. It is important to recognise that in this country way back then, there was almost an attempt, not to belittle the Holocaust, but to try to forget about it. In 1978—a long, long time ago, before Holocaust Memorial Day was ever thought of—she went back to Auschwitz-Birkenau to do a documentary, “Return to Auschwitz”, and she wrote a brilliant book. That is almost the forerunner of what we now see in the Holocaust Educational Trust. She is a very brave lady who is very outspoken, quite rightly so, on the work she has done and what we have to do to combat such attempts.

There are three major feature films on this subject: “Schindler’s List”, “Sophie’s Choice”, and now, “Denial”. The first two will be well known to right hon. and hon. Members across the House. “Denial” will be on general release next Friday—Holocaust Memorial Day. It is about the trial of David Irving. Having brought the case himself, he was eventually put on trial, where he was proven to be a Holocaust denier and shown to be the fool that he was. I think that that is symptomatic. It is a brilliant film, and I recommend that colleagues across the House see it.

I pay tribute to an honourable lady in my constituency, Gena Turgel. She was born in Krakow in 1923, the youngest of nine children. When the Nazis bombed her home city on 1 September 1939 at the outbreak of the second world war, her family planned to move to the United States, but unfortunately they tried to do so too late. The family moved to just outside Krakow, and in 1941 she had to move into the ghetto. She entered the ghetto carrying a sack of potatoes, some flour and a few other belongings, and she stayed there with her...
mother and four siblings. One of her brothers was shot by the SS in the ghetto, and a second brother fled from the ghetto and was never seen again.

Gena and her surviving family were eventually sent to Plaszów labour camp on the edge of Krakow. She later discovered that her sister Miriam and her husband, who had married in the ghetto, had been shot after the Nazis caught her trying to bring food into the camp. In the winter of 1944-45 the camp was liquidated, and Gena and her family had to walk to Auschwitz-Birkenau as part of a forced death march.

In January 1945, Gena and her mother were sent on a death march from Auschwitz, leaving behind Hela, Gena’s sister. They never saw her again. After several days, they came to Leslau—that was the German name for the place—where they were forced on to trucks. They travelled under terrible conditions for three to four weeks, eventually arriving in Buchenwald concentration camp. Then they were sent on cattle trucks to Bergen-Belsen, where they arrived in February 1945. Gena worked in a hospital for the next two months and tried to support her mother as best she could.

On 15 April that year, the British Army liberated Bergen-Belsen. Among the liberators was Norman Turgel, who became Gena’s husband just half a year later. Today Gena lives in Stanmore and is in close touch with her children and grandchildren. She wrote a book recently called “I Light a Candle”. At the age of 93, she goes to schools up and down the country to inform people about what happened.

I commend the early-day motion that was tabled in my name, on a cross-party basis, commemorating Holocaust Memorial Day. It has been signed so far by 44 hon. Members, but I hope that many more will do so later. The book of commitment from the Holocaust Educational Trust is available for Members to sign—it has been available this week and it will be available next week—in the Members’ corridor. I encourage Members from right across the House to sign the book of commitment, to demonstrate that we commemorate those victims and make sure that we all know that life will go on.

3.33 pm

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for his speech and for calling on all hon. Members to sign the book of remembrance over the next few days.

I declare an interest as a member of the Holocaust Memorial Foundation, along with the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles). It is the first commission that I have ever served on with the right hon. Gentleman, and it may be the first time that we have ever agreed on anything. It is an honour to serve with him in that task. When I was First Minister of Scotland, I was responsible for the “Lessons from Auschwitz” project, working in conjunction with the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust.

The right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar talked about man’s inhumanity to man. That is a quote from Robert Burns; the full quote is “Man’s inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn!” It is highly appropriate, because Burns night is on 25 January, two days before Holocaust Memorial Day.

The debate has been moving, as hon. Members have recounted their personal insights and, in some cases, recollections. It has also reflected the fact that although the holocaust was the greatest crime of the 20th century and perhaps the greatest crime in human history—the greatest example of man’s inhumanity to man—anti-Semitism was not restricted to the 20th century, and certainly not to Islam, but was the norm in medieval and early modern Europe, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) reminded us.

Some years ago, I was privileged as First Minister to write the foreword to a book called “Scotland’s Jews”. I claim no special virtue for the Scottish nation, but I was able to recount that Scotland was one of only two nations in the whole continent that have never had any anti-Semitic legislation on the statute book. Scotland’s declaration of independence of 1320 contains an appeal to Pope John XXII to respect the rights of Jews, Greeks and gentiles, all of whom, the declaration says, are equal in the eyes of God. It stands alone among medieval documents in making that call. We should remember that anti-Semitism and its consequences have been with us for the greater part of recorded human history.

I want to say a word about the work of the Holocaust Memorial Foundation and the Auschwitz project because it gets to the heart of what many Members have said. The Auschwitz project takes Scottish schoolchildren to Auschwitz-Birkenau. There is a similar project in England. Since its inauguration in 2013, 358 post-16 establishments have taken part in the project—more than two-thirds of all local authority, independent and special schools and colleges in Scotland. I was privileged as First Minister to hear the personal testimony of the pupils who had been to concentration camps. Without question, not one of those pupils will forget that experience or have any truck with a holocaust denier.

Some hon. Members even yesterday expressed some doubt about building a memorial in Victoria Gardens, but—trust and believe me—it is a highly appropriate place for it. Regardless of where it is built, it should be emphasised that one aspect of the Holocaust Memorial Foundation’s work is the learning centre that goes with the memorial, as was shown in the past few days in the special edition of the “Antiques Roadshow”, which took place in the Palace of Westminster. It included many moving stories, including one about Jane Haining from near Dumfries that was told by her nieces. Jane was arrested by the Nazis for protecting Jewish girls at the Scottish mission school in Budapest, which was run by the Church of Scotland. She was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944. That testimony to powerful action showed that not everyone stood aside as the atrocities were happening, as the films that have been mentioned exemplify. Many people rallied to their fellow human beings.

The educational project and the learning that goes with it are vital because, sadly, few survivors of the holocaust are still with us and their number gets fewer by the day. The teaching and personal experience that can be imbued through family connections, the learning centre and visits to the concentration camps are therefore all the more vital.

There will be no dissenting voices from the Benches today, but I want to argue one fundamentally important point. Recognising and commemorating the significance of the holocaust, of man’s inhumanity to man, is not restricted to any religious grouping or any point of
view. It should be commemorated by those who take a pro-Palestinian, a pro-Israeli or just a pro-peace view of the middle east. Last year, as a Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I commemorated Holocaust Memorial Day outside the Strasbourg Assembly. I was led to make a point of order because the Israeli diplomat representing the Israeli Government at that commemoration launched an attack on President Rouhani of Iran who was visiting France at the time. It was inappropriate in that context and it was particularly inappropriate because President Rouhani is one of the Iranian leadership who is not a holocaust denier.

All of us who are a part of humanity, regardless of affiliation, point of view, political party, religion and all the rest of it, must recognise that there are those among us who would seek to deny the terrible crimes of the past for their own cynical motivations. Those who do not deny it—who acknowledge it, face up to it and recognise it, which is the first step in preventing it from happening again—should be embraced by us, whatever their point of view, as fellow human beings.

3.40 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for securing the debate. It is very relevant at this time of year, but it is also very relevant to me and many of my constituents. The right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) is correct to say that there are fewer and fewer survivors, but a significant number of them live in my constituency: people who lived through the holocaust, people whose families perished in the holocaust and people who escaped the holocaust because their relatives came here. One former constituent, Rev. Leslie Hardman, was a witness to what happened. He entered Bergen-Belsen on 15 April 1945 by the British Army, and later in the day he was engaged with burial and cremation.

It is appropriate that the theme for this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is “How can life go on?” I want to take this opportunity to highlight the work of the Holocaust Survivors Centre in my Hendon constituency, which I have visited on many occasions. It houses several survivors who visit regularly to eat together, give each other support and receive pastoral care in the later years of their life. As I know from the many people who visit, it is a much-cherished organisation that serves the community.

I would like to mention one person in particular. Renee Salt lives above the survivors centre and speaks to schools on behalf of the Holocaust Education Trust. Renee was born in Zdunska Wola, in Poland, in 1929. She lived with her parents and her younger sister. When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, the Nazis marched into her town and decided to take over her flat because they liked it so much. Renee and her family were simply thrown out into the street with no possessions. She went to live with various relatives who were able to look after her. By the end of 1939, as the war continued, however, the Nazis established a ghetto in the town where all the Jewish inhabitants had to live. Seven people lived in one room, which must have been a terrible existence. In 1942, the Nazis announced that everyone in the ghetto would be moved. Believing that they would soon return to their one room, the family hid Renee’s grandparents and four-year-old cousin in the attic. That was the last time they ever saw them.

The people who had been assembled were told to hand over all the children under the age of 18. Renee’s mum had decided to hide Renee and her sister under her coat, but her sister was found and taken. Renee was fortunate enough not to be noticed, so she went with her parents to the Lodz ghetto. In 1944, the Nazis said that the ghetto was to be liquidated and that they should all go the train station to another camp. Renee and her parents volunteered to go, and were taken by train to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where they managed to survive a selection.

Renee and her mother were then transported to a warehouse in Hamburg. In 1945, they were moved again, this time to Bergen-Belsen—a repeat of the nightmare. Renee and her mother were liberated from Bergen-Belsen on 15 April 1945 by the British Army, including by Rev. Leslie Hardman, whom I mentioned at the beginning of my speech. Unfortunately, Renee’s mother died 12 days later.

Like other Members, I have visited Auschwitz on several occasions. Seeing really is believing and understanding. Watching the faces of the pupils from my constituency was not only very moving but very telling. I last visited Auschwitz on 27 January 2014, when, alongside Lord Howard, I attended the International Holocaust Memorial Day through the inter-parliamentary gathering at Auschwitz. The temperature that day fell to minus 10°—never in my life have I been that cold—and I remain incredulous that people survived those conditions. But survive they did, and many then moved to the UK, including to Hendon. On another visit to Auschwitz, I discovered the book “Night” by Elie Wiesel. In it, he speaks about his time in the camp and the problems he faced. One line, in particular, has remained with me:

“The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference.”

That is why we continue to remember and to commemorate the holocaust.

On Monday, I visited Edgware and District reform synagogue, where I heard Mala Tribich tell over 100 pupils from a local school about her experiences of the holocaust. Mala’s name has been mentioned already for the work she does for the Holocaust Educational Trust, and I pay tribute to the trust and to Karen Pollock and her team for the work they do—it was an inspiring move in 2012 to take the England football team to Auschwitz to show them what occurred there. We also heard first-hand testimony from Mala’s brother, Ben Helfgott, about his experience. It not only highlighted the issue but brought the holocaust to the attention of a new generation.

Some of my staff have asked me about my experiences and visits to Auschwitz, and I am pleased to say that when it gets warmer, in the spring, I will be taking my parliamentary office staff to Auschwitz. I think I can give them a good experience, given the number of times I have visited and the number of books I have read.

I want to finish on a positive note, by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) for the work he has done. He has been a tireless campaigner on this issue and a real friend to the Jewish community. On behalf of my constituents, I truly thank him.

Finally, I want to thank every Member here today. I have many Jewish constituents, as I have said, so one would expect me to be here—I understand that—but I
am particularly grateful to each and every Member here today who does not have Jewish constituents or those who experienced the holocaust.

3.47 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): One day last November, I had the unforgettable experience of visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau with students from Ealing Independent College and the Holocaust Educational Trust. I say “one day”, but it was a long and, in some ways, difficult day. We flew out of Luton at 6 am and were back at 11 pm. For all of us—200 of us from schools across the London region—the memory of that day will remain with us forever. The icy conditions—it was minus 4°C—and the emotional demands of the day set a harsh context for bearing witness to the horror of the atrocities committed in the death camps. Startlingly, if a one-minute silence had been observed for every person who perished at that camp, we would have been there for more than two years.

Seventy-plus years on from the liberation of Auschwitz, this subject still has enormous contemporary relevance. It has been pointed out that with the passage of time there are fewer and fewer camp survivors, Kindertransport children and people who liberated the camps, so we owe a huge debt to people and organisations such as the HET and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, headed up by Olivia Marks-Woldman, whom I was at school with in Ealing. The commemorations next week up and down the country are crucial to educating successive generations. We can only understand our present and future if we understand our past.

This is a debate about the 6 million Jewish victims of the holocaust, but it extends to the millions of others the Nazis exterminated, including Romani Gypsies, communists, socialists, trade unionists and gay people. It also includes those slaughtered in other genocides. Holocaust education campaigning evolves. We have already heard mention of the “Antiques Roadshow” at the weekend featuring memorabilia and other astonishing artefacts from Auschwitz and of those on display at Yad Vashem in Israel. That brought it into the nation’s living rooms on prime time television.

This year’s Holocaust Memorial Day schools pack contains recipe cards—things such as Rwandan vegetable stew. That is another way of digesting information about cultures attacked in genocide. I think there are other recipes from Cambodia and Bosnia. Culture is transmitted subtly, and when there are no grandparents, culinary tradition and memory die.

All communities must learn lessons and be vigilant against racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and all forms of hatred in the contemporary world. There are worries that following the verdict in the EU referendum, and even following the events across the Atlantic that will come to fruition tomorrow, prejudice and racism are in danger of becoming acceptable, and that holders of those abhorrent views may feel disinflicted by expressing them.

Holocaust Memorial Day has renewed significance this year. We live in a time of post-truth politics and fake news. Members have mentioned the film “Denial”, which I had an opportunity to see earlier this week. It deals with the trial in which the Nazi David Irving opposed the American academic Deborah Lipstadt. I warmly recommend the film, which is a fact-packed treatment of the downfall of the UK’s most notorious rewriter of history. It is frightening to hear that he is making something of a resurgence. I think that such views are as ridiculous as those of people who think that the earth is flat, and we need to call them out.

At the end of last year, I attended my first-ever Rabbi’s Tisch, which is a Friday night meal. It was a great event, which was held at Ealing Liberal Synagogue. The presence of a Community Security Trust guard on the door served as a reminder that, while all communities deserve to worship in safety, that is not always possible.

It is deplorable that pigs’ heads are left on the doorsteps of mosques in the UK, and that we hear of the desecration of Jewish graveyards in Europe. Just over the border of my constituency, the Hammersmith Polish centre was attacked in the wake of the Brexit result. It seems that there has been a resurgence of hate-filled political rhetoric—ditto the scapegoating and vilification of migrants and refugees.

Last year the Kindertransport refugee Ernest Simon addressed us at Ealing town hall. He told us about the train trip from Austria into the unknown that he had made as a child in 1939. The first question posed to him in the Q and A session was “Should we take in Syrian refugees?” His answer was an emphatic “Of course”: we had a moral duty to do so. All debates such as this resonate with contemporary events.

There is a large Polish community in my constituency, and this week, along with members of the all-party parliamentary group on Poland, I met here a cross-party delegation of visiting Members of the Polish Parliament. They, too, voiced concern about the rising tide of hate crime, and we reassured them that strong ties bind our two nations. They also asked me whether I had been to Poland. I did not have a straightforward answer to that question. Yes, I had flown to Krakow, but what we saw there was something that all of us will remember forever: something utterly unforgettable and outside the accepted norms of what takes place in everyday Poland, the like of which we must make sure that we never witness again anywhere.

The diversity of my constituency is one of the reasons why it is the best in the whole world, along with the strength of our many communities. I have constituents of all faiths and of none, and the constituency contains numerous churches, a mosque in Acton and another in Ealing, and a liberal as well as a reform synagogue. I am proud to say that next Friday we will have our annual remembrance event to mark Holocaust Memorial Day. It has become an annual date in the calendar—as has this debate, a parliamentary fixture that is much looked forward to.

At that event in Ealing and throughout the country, we should mark this shameful episode in history, and also subsequent genocides. We must assess our own responsibilities in the wake of such crimes. We must never forget the holocaust, and we must ensure that such events never occur again.

3.53 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is always a great privilege to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. Let me add my thanks to the truly amazing Holocaust
Such events leave an indelible mark. After experiencing such intense horror, it is understandably difficult to go on with life in a new place among strangers. Stories like those of Adam and Alicia are relevant to how we should treat today’s refugee survivors—those for whom the question of how life can go on must be so pressing.

It is so important that we create an environment for them that offers genuine shelter for body and mind, that genuinely reaches out, instead of shying away, when faced with deeply troubling past experiences and their consequences, and that gives survivors a genuine chance to create a new life in this country, just as Alicia and Adam, remarkably, have had the strength to do. I am delighted to be able to tell the House that Adam and Alicia are still with us today, and nestled in the bosom of their loving family.

I hope today the House will recommit to extending a welcoming, understanding, careful hand to refugees today and tomorrow. We must never let survivors of murderous horror feel such loss and despair that they might question how they can go on with life in our country.

3.59 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I start by thanking those who keep the memory of the holocaust alive. There will soon be no living memory of the event, but it will have been passed on to future generations. I particularly thank the Holocaust Educational Trust. Like many Members here, I have visited Auschwitz and Birkenau and what struck me most was the industrial scale and the degree of planning to make the camps as efficient as possible. I also thank the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and Eve Gill, a holocaust survivor whom I have heard speak a couple of times. She speaks at many schools in my area and Surrey more widely. I heard about her ambitions and aspirations as a teenager and then about how they were blown apart by the holocaust and that had a real impact on me and on the pupils who listened to her.

We live in a troubled world, and extremism and nationalism are on the march. With ISIS, Le Pen, Geert Wilders, the AfD and Putin, this is an easier environment in which to whip up hatred of people of different faiths—Jews, Ahmadi Muslims or Christians—races or sexualities, such as the gays in Russia. We should not think that the UK is immune from that—other Members quoted a rise in hate crime of 40% over the past three years. It is therefore essential to recall the holocaust each year. We do that not only out of respect for its victims and those of subsequent genocides, but to debunk holocaust deniers, to which the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) referred in his remarks. Such people have had an easy outlet for their bile since the explosion in social media. We also do it to increase the chances that we detect future genocides before they occur. That is our greatest challenge, because we have seen genocides since the holocaust in Bosnia, Rwanda and other countries.

I will finish by mentioning South Sudan. There is evidence from the chair of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan that a genocide is under way and that a steady process of ethnic cleansing is ongoing in several areas, with killing, abduction, rape, looting and the burning of homes. Millions of people have been displaced by civil war, different groups are being dehumanised, and a large humanitarian crisis is ongoing.
due to a lack of food. While it is essential that we recall the holocaust and that significant events take place, we must also learn the lessons and seek to apply them when we identify genocides that are potentially under way, such as in South Sudan. In addition to officially recognising the holocaust, I hope that the Government will take action on the situation in South Sudan.

4.2 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Backbench Business Committee and the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for enabling this extremely important debate to happen in the House and across the country. I declare an interest in that I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group against anti-Semitism.

Holocaust Memorial Day is vital. We must learn from the past and educate for the future. There can be no excuses for anti-Semitism or any other form of racism or prejudice. I congratulate the Holocaust Educational Trust and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance for their invaluable work supporting holocaust education, remembrance and research, which is recognised both nationally and internationally. The Home Affairs Committee recently produced a comprehensive report on anti-Semitism in the UK, and I urge the Minister and all parties to take appropriate cognisance of it.

Genocide does not happen out of the blue. There is a gradual process of victimisation, discrimination, hatred, words, actions, maligning, inferences and looking the other way. That leads to psychological distancing, and then to dehumanisation. That is the path to genocide.

I will never forget reading the diary of Anne Frank when I was at school and later visiting the site of her home in Amsterdam, where she and her family hid for two years before being discovered and arrested in 1944. I recall reading of her childhood pain that she could not go outside, of the lack of food and of her abject fear for herself and for her family, and then visiting and seeing those cramped conditions and wondering how my own family could have coped if placed in such danger and despair. Children could not make a sound and could not go to the bathroom until evening, and they lost their formal education and friends. It was impossible to go outside for fear of being shot. Such a burden on their young brains.

Education and remembrance are so important because, out of tragedy and suffering, Anne Frank, a 14-year-old girl, wrote some of the most inspiring words that I have ever read. The theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is “How can life go on?” Anne Frank wrote that she kept to her ideals “because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.” She wrote:

“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

And:

“Whoever is happy will make others happy too.”

Holocaust Memorial Day commemorates, and it is important to pay tribute to all survivors and to never forget those who were lost and those who experienced such traumatic circumstances. Anne Frank wrote:

“What is done cannot be undone, but one can prevent it happening again.”

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), who is not in his seat, for the tone he set at the beginning of this afternoon’s debate with such great sensitivity and, indeed, insight.

This year marks the 72nd anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps set up by the Nazis to prosecute the holocaust. The tragedy of the holocaust affected so many, directly and indirectly. From the millions of victims, their families and communities to the forces who liberated them in 1944 and 1945, the ripple effect of this tragedy casts its shadow far and wide. The physical and emotional trauma was shared by victims and those who witnessed it. Even today, the scars have not healed.

The holocaust raises deep and profound questions for all of us today, which is why the theme of this year’s commemoration, mentioned by so many Members, “How can life go on?” is so important today and every day. In the face of such fundamental evil, it is human to feel a sense of hopelessness, but the theme challenges that. Even in the face of unspeakable evil, we are not hopeless.

The commemoration, and today’s important debate, give us all an opportunity to reflect, and it helps us to find ways of coming to terms with the unthinkable. If we are to live beyond the tragedy of the holocaust and not just survive, we must resolve today to ensure that reconciliation and rebuilding take place wherever in the world they are needed. We must continue to learn from these experiences and remember them, taking care that our response to contemporary genocide in Srebrenica, Rwanda and Cambodia is guided by the need to ensure that those who make it through the darkness can eventually emerge into the light.

Most of all, if we are to guarantee that life goes on, we should try not to counteract hate with more hate of our own. This week I listened to the words of that great American civil rights campaigner John Lewis, who spoke so movingly on how we must instead meet hate with love:

“The way of love is the better way.”

He went on to invoke Dr Martin Luther King Jr., who said:

“Hate is too great a burden to bear.”

Holocaust Memorial Day takes place at a time when we should seek to learn the lessons of the past. We must understand that genocide is often the evil culmination of a gradual process that begins with unchecked discrimination, racism and hatred. In the wake of Donald Trump’s election victory in November and the Brexit vote in June, we have witnessed deeply worrying increases in intolerance across Western democracies. We must be vigilant and continue to provide positive leadership if we are to effectively address the root causes of hate in our communities and beyond.

The Scottish National party Government in Scotland have long supported remembrance and the importance of holocaust education, and the Scottish Parliament will also play its part in remembrance. Next Tuesday, Jessica Reid and Callum Docherty, two students from Braes High School in Falkirk, will deliver the Scottish Parliament’s “Time for Reflection”. These school students recently took part in the Holocaust Educational Trust’s
“Lessons from Auschwitz” project, which has been referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) and which gives two post-16 students from every school and college in Scotland the opportunity to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau. This project is supported by a grant from the Scottish Government. They also set up the Independent Advisory Group on Hate Crime, Prejudice and Community Cohesion in 2015 to engage with minority ethnic stakeholders and communities in considering what more can be done to tackle these issues. This group gave a report in September 2016, setting out practical suggestions on how to advance this crucially important agenda.

The holocaust did not begin with the murder of millions; it began with what we now know as hate speech, perpetuated by a small minority and tolerated by the vast majority. We cannot make the same mistakes again. But as John Lewis so eloquently stated this week, we must face this reaction with tolerance, respect and understanding. We can and should be very proud of the diversity of modern Scotland, and the diversity we see across the British Isles, but we should never take that diversity or tolerance for granted. We want our Jewish community to feel safe and welcome, and so we condemn repetition of events similar to this. I used to question why we do not stand like former Members in this House, too—and I make no apologies for that. I work hard for my constituents to provide a quality of life and support when needed. I also work on behalf of those who cannot ask me to help although the facts of their lives demand that I do what I can to help. It is a responsibility that we all have in this House and that we all must take very seriously. We all have a responsibility in preventing genocide and mass killings throughout different parts of the world, including our own country.

An important lesson we have to learn from the holocaust relates to the continuation of an ideology of hatred within different communities. I am very passionate about tackling the ongoing genocide faced by Christians in the middle east. I am chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief—that is about the religious belief of Christians and those of other faiths, and those with no faith. The genocide in the middle east contributes to the mistreatment of vulnerable minorities. Evidence of that includes mass murder, forced deportations, the destruction of Christian institutions such as churches and monasteries, and forced conversions to different religions.

My interest in this matter extends to the Kindertransport children. We all know the story of the children who were smuggled out of Germany, some of whom ended up at what is now McGill’s farm outside Millisle in my constituency. That gave them a chance, which is very important.

The history of this period of time astounds me. Following the outbreak of world war two, there was a drastic change in attitudes towards the Jews. After plans for their mass relocation to the island of Madagascar were disrupted, the Jews were forced into blocked-off sections of towns called ghettos, and used for slave labour, which often resulted in death because they were deprived of food and water and overworked. Right hon. and hon. Members have told personal stories about those very things.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we are immensely lucky that there are brave individuals—including my constituent, Mala Tribich—who survived the horrific experiences he is talking about and are prepared to speak out about the horror they experienced? If we hear at first hand what happened, we can learn the lessons so that we can all work to make sure that nothing like that ever happens again.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Lady succinctly makes a point that everyone who has spoken today believes. We have to remember those people and what they have been through.

The escalation of violence did not stop until the end of the war in 1945. As the Nazis established themselves in power, they built on the idea of an Aryan race that planned to eliminate any individual who was classified as genetically inferior. Such people were alienated from society, with all their social, civil and political rights removed. Nowadays, that seems highly discriminatory, as we live in a different generation and a different time...
with regard to race. The Nazis intensified their scheme from forced labour to unjustified murder, while the destruction of war covered up the fact that thousands of individuals were losing their lives because of the strong leadership in Nazi Germany at that time. It sounds so far-fetched that it could only be a film—if only that was the case. Members have referred to some of the films that correctly recreated the events that took place at that time.

All that happened during my mother’s lifetime; it should not happen again in the lifetime of my grandchildren. I often consider what I would have done had I been a German citizen and seen my Jewish neighbours shipped off. Would I have stood up? We like to think that we would. Had the opportunity been there, I certainly hope that we would. Martin Niemöller wrote a very good poem that most Members present probably know. It is very clear:

“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

That is very good poem that illustrates the issue very clearly.

When we discussed this debate in my office, a secretary said that she had been to Auschwitz and that everyone should go. Other Members have said in clear terms that they have been there and been changed. I believe that we must be changed. We should face this harrowing lesson and determine that in our personal lives and in this place we do all we can to prevent anything that even resembles what happened in the holocaust from taking place again. I was not able to stand with my Jewish brethren at that time, but I stand with them now as we solemnly vow never to forget the holocaust and to make sure that it never happens again.

4.18 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is an honour to follow that excellent speech by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It is a real honour to be a co-sponsor of this debate and to be able to sum up for my party on such an important issue.

I thank the Holocaust Educational Trust for the help, briefings and advice it has given to all Members, and for the excellent work that it does all year. I commend everyone who has made such excellent and thought-provoking contributions to the debate. I was particularly struck by the comments by the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) about the importance of language, which were particularly well made. Like him, I think it is hugely important that we do not ever normalise the language of hate but always challenge it loudly. We must also challenge those who would shamefully deny something so eloquently spoken about by the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles).

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) spoke about man’s inhumanity to man and the importance of learning the lessons from the distant past. I know that many people in my local area will be focused on what is said here today. I hope that the same is true for people around the UK and beyond, because it is vital. I agree with the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) that now more than at many other times in our life, we must be steadfast in our desire to make sure that everyone understands exactly what happened and that the lessons of this terrible stain on history are learned and understood as widely as possible. There is no place for anti-Semitism here or anywhere else. Where it exists, it is our responsibility to challenge it vigorously and to challenge discrimination in all its forms.

The holocaust saw more Jewish men, women and children perish in ghettos, mass-shootings and extermination camps than the entire population of Scotland. As the hon. Member for Hove said, it was an almost unbelievable scale of deliberate terror against ordinary people simply because of their identity as Jews. As time passes and memories fade, we must not lose our focus on this or on making sure that it cannot happen again. The right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) was entirely right in stressing the importance of testimony and education. There is no doubt about the impact on hon. Members who have visited the camps.

I am very fortunate to represent the majority of Scotland’s Jewish community. I live in a vibrant diverse place, where people from all religions, backgrounds and cultures live together harmoniously. That ability to live together and to appreciate the richness of our diversity and what it brings to society is hugely important. It was important, too, to the late Rev. Ernest Levy, who was Cantor of Giffnock and Newlands synagogue in my constituency. Rev. Levy, who died in 2009, survived seven Nazi concentration camps, having been taken from his home in Budapest to Auschwitz at the age of 19. Although it was understandably very hard for him to speak about his terrible experiences, he did just that, making it his mission to speak to young people in particular to make sure that they understood the terrors that people had faced, and the extraordinary level of cruelty inflicted on the Jewish community and others who incurred the wrath of the Nazis.

The things that Rev. Levy experienced are beyond our comprehension in many ways. He called them dehumanising and horrifying. He described how his family were forced to flee their home in Bratislava in 1938, after being persecuted by fascists. When we all go home tonight, feeling secure in our place in the world, let us reflect on that, because the Levy family was no different from the rest of us. They just found themselves in the eye of a hellish storm, simply because they were Jewish. That storm followed them, and he and his family were captured. He was sent to Auschwitz, which he described as a world of evilness beyond description. He experienced his brothers being compelled to dig their own graves, and he described the terrible stench that tore at his lungs.

We can probably never fully understand what happened, but we absolutely must try. I can easily empathise with how Rev. Levy must have felt when he tried to return to normality after he was released, by then from Belsen. He was very grateful to be alive, but, at the same time, he was beset by a loss of trust in people, in God, and in prayers. Who would be any different? It is testimony to his great strength of character that he did find that trust
again, and that he dedicated his life to helping others. His belief in the light of humanity is a lesson to us all in the strength of the human spirit, and in the need to stand up and never let racism gain credence in society.

That is the sentiment that led me to make a trip this year that will stay with me for the rest of my life. I was very fortunate to be part of my party’s first official delegation to Israel and Palestine. The first place we visited was Yad Vashem, the memorial to those who died in the holocaust, which is a quite remarkable place. The impact that it had on me was immense, and it must be the same for anyone who visits. The stories of all those people were laid out so plainly. They were just ordinary people—like you and me, the man down the road, or the woman in the office. All of them were murdered so cruelly because they were different. The way that the Nazis targeted people and created hostility to those groups who did not fit into their idea of society was particularly frightening, because I could see only too well why we need always to be ready to stand up against those who foster hate.

Yad Vashem was a peaceful and thought-provoking place, for all the awful story it tells. It is a place that honours the dead and makes sure that we remember each one of them, individually, as a human being—a person to be valued and acknowledged. That focus on each person as a human—one of us—cannot be emphasised enough. In everything I saw, I was struck by its very personal nature. There were individual possessions—some red shoes, a comb, and a pair of broken glasses, painstakingly laid out in a display case. They had belonged to someone’s mum and they were all that was left when the Nazis murdered her. These glasses had been cherished for decades by a daughter who had hidden them during her time in a concentration camp, after her mother had been taken away. She had simply nothing else to remember her by, and she felt her mum was closer to her through these cherished old glasses.

In the garden of remembrance there commemorating the righteous among nations—those people from around the world who stood fast against the Nazis and protected their Jewish friends and neighbours, paying with their lives—I saw the memorial to Jane Haining, whom my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) mentioned, the only Scottish victim of the concentration camps. Jane’s selfless devotion to the children she looked after as a matron saw her sent to Auschwitz, where she died. The Church of Scotland, her employer, had repeatedly ordered her home, but she refused to leave the children and was sent to her death.

The heritage centre to be opened in her hometown of Dunscore will be a particularly important place where people can learn what she stood for as a beacon of hope against hate, which is so important now, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) described. We could all do with thinking about Jane Haining and how she was not described all too clearly what can happen if we stand back and do not act.

I close with the words and sentiments of Jane Haining, who stood so fast against hatred and paid so dearly for her principles and compassion. She said:

“If these children need me in days of sunshine, how much more do they need me in days of darkness?”

4.27 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): The tales this afternoon have been extremely moving and that strengthens why these lessons should never be forgotten. The theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is, “How can life go on?” It is intended to promote consideration of the aftermath of the holocaust and subsequent genocides. As has been eloquently observed many times in this place and elsewhere, the industrial mass murder of millions did not begin with state-sponsored violence and the intimidation of Jews in Germany. It did not begin with the construction of camps. It began with the view that someone’s racial background marked them out as inferior. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) said in this debate last year, “we should never avert our eyes from the most uncomfortable truth of all—that its perpetrators were not unique. They were ordinary men and women carrying out acts of extraordinary evil”—[Official Report, 21 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 1635.] while others stood by.

Society can only progress when such a fact is recognised and the memory of those awful times must be shared with future generations. We must teach our future generations that they must stand up to hate, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and any other injustice. As the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) eloquently put it, we have a solemn duty to remember the victims and to educate young people about the horrors unleashed on continental Europe through hate less than a century ago.

Through the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust, children from schools and sixth forms across the country have the opportunity to visit the former concentration camp of Auschwitz. Since 1999, more than 30,000 children have been able to benefit from the trust’s “Lessons from Auschwitz” programme and become ambassadors for the trust, communicating their experiences to friends and peers. Students from my constituency of Blackburn, in particular from St Bede’s school, have benefited from the opportunity and were very keen to share their experience with other young people in Blackburn.

This month, we will see the exhibition of the 10 finalist concept designs for the national memorial of the holocaust to be constructed in London. We must not allow the
[Kate Hollern]
generational memory of the holocaust to fade and the establishment of permanent physical memories has a huge role to play in that.

Many people have had the opportunity to listen to the incredible stories of holocaust survivors and those who worked against the Nazis. As the years pass and the number of living holocaust survivors decreases due to the passage of time, sadly there will be fewer and fewer opportunities to hear their incredible stories, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) already stated. However, thanks to the bravery of individuals during the war and its aftermath—including the young lady who preserved her mother’s glasses, whom the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) spoke about—letters, diaries, documentation and personal belongings are all publicly available. Recordings of survivors remain with us. Museums dedicated to the preservation of their experiences will continue to communicate our shared history with the public. Historians will continue to inspire discourse. We will never forget, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) said.

In some circles, there is a view that young people will become less interested in the subject if it becomes simply history, but that does a tremendous disservice to the empathy of the next generation. As we think about how life can go on after the holocaust and subsequent genocides, the role of the next generation is even more crucial. Through establishing permanent memorials and the continued presence of the holocaust in schools through the national curriculum, and the support of devolved Governments, young people must be given every opportunity to engage with the difficult subject of the holocaust and other atrocities that have happened. Dedicated and conscientious teachers of history can convey the gravity of the holocaust and young people can draw parallels between historical events.

The concerning rise, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), in anti-Semitic incidents in the first half of 2016—an 11% increase on the same period last year—shows that we have more work to do in combating anti-Semitism. We must fight attitudes that cast any group as somehow less than any other and that define any group as unable to be British. Vibrant, accepting communities are possible. We must work to make that the legacy of the holocaust; when we joined 45 other Governments in signing the Stockholm declaration, this year’s theme—“How can life go on?”—underlines the importance of the events arranged by faith groups, schools and community organisations that take place in the days and weeks leading up to the day.

For 20 years, I was honoured to stand on the steps of Blackburn town hall, paying respect and remembering the atrocities of the holocaust with Jews, Christians, Muslims, people of no religion whatever and people of many other religions. It is important that every area in the country recognises what our parents went through in the war and what the Jews went through at the hands of the Nazis. We must never ever forget and it is important that we keep those memories alive. The Holocaust Educational Trust will do just that, raising awareness in the community and the educational profession about the holocaust and lessons that can be drawn from it. It already does exceptional work in training teachers and equipping students to understand the attitudes that led to the unique crime of the holocaust.

The Government’s ongoing funding of educational programmes is essential. Since 2008, the Government have funded the Centre for Holocaust Education at University College London’s Institute for Education, which had benefited more than 7,000 teachers as of March last year. The ongoing funding of the “Lessons from Auschwitz” project benefits so many students and, it appears, hon. Members. Through those students we must confront head-on holocaust denial, distortion and equivocation; the denial of the historical reality; the deliberate effort to minimise the effect and impact of the holocaust; and the drawing of false equivalence between the unique crime of the holocaust and current events.

The establishment of Holocaust Memorial Day and the continuing efforts of the Holocaust Educational Trust are invaluable not only in commemorating the awful crimes and ensuring that the legacy of the holocaust is not forgotten, but in providing an example of bringing communities together and instilling values of tolerance and acceptance in young people.

3.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): It is a real privilege and honour to respond to a debate from this Dispatch Box for the first time since becoming a Minister, not least because this was such a consensual debate and because I was a secondary school history teacher in Yorkshire before I was elected to this place, so I used to deliver holocaust education to young people. It is also a privilege for me because of my own journey within Judaism, which has become so important to me over the past couple of years.

I am grateful for the contributions that have been made across the House, which have been thoughtful, insightful and, in many cases, moving. I thank the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) for securing the debate.

We can be proud of the UK’s role in establishing Holocaust Memorial Day, when we joined 45 other Governments in signing the Stockholm declaration. This year’s theme—“How can life go on?”—underlines the importance of the events arranged by faith groups, schools and community organisations that take place in the days and weeks leading up to the day.
Many of us know the Holocaust Memorial Day events in our constituencies well, and we take part in them. I pay tribute to the ones organised in my constituency; if I may be permitted to say, to a big Jewish population—as my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) pointed out, that is the case in many seats—but the community wants to mark the day and to remember the horrors of the holocaust. So I pay particular tribute to Brigg Town Council for its work in organising the event in Brigg on the same basis as happens in many other constituencies.

As so many colleagues have said today, the theme for Holocaust Memorial Day is, “How can life go on?” It is a powerful and thought-provoking question, and I wish I was back in the classroom so that I could pose it to the young people I used to have the privilege of teaching. We have heard many moving testimonies today from people who prove that life actually can go on. I want to reiterate their names—I have tried to make notes as we have gone on—because it is important to repeat that people came to this country after the holocaust, and their lives did go on. We have heard of Renee Salt, Kitty Hart-Moxon, Arek Hersh, Gena Turgel, Ben Helbigott, Mala Tribich, Ernest Simon, Eve Gill, Reverend Levy, and Alicia Goldschlag and her husband, Adam.

I have heard some of their testimonies myself, and I want to pay particular tribute to Zigi Shipper BEM, who survived the Lodz ghetto, Auschwitz-Birkenau, another camp near Danzig and a death march. He came to the UK in 1947. He is now married, and he has children and grandchildren. With the Holocaust Educational Trust, many Members will have seen the film produced by the trust and one of his grandchildren, which was shown in the House of Commons not so long ago. He proves what can be achieved as life goes on, and we should thank him and all the survivors who came to this country who have kept the memory of all those who perished alive in the work they do going into schools and communities to speak about the horrors that took place.

We heard a lot today about the “Antiques Roadshow”, which was aired at the weekend. I got a text from my mum saying, “You must watch this,” so I went on iPlayer. It was truly moving, as she said, and so many colleagues have made reference to that today. It was very moving to see those items—often the only connection that people have to people in their families and in their lives who were so brutally murdered in the holocaust—and to see just how important they were to them.

That programme showed us what a story of survival this is. Despite the horrors of the past, and despite their unimaginable experiences, survivors have gone on to become Nobel laureates and to make a contribution in this country and internationally in the worlds of science, medicine, politics and so many others. There are also people who just came here and got on with their ordinary lives, building, out of that horror, a family and a future for themselves. They overcame terrible odds, and that is why this year’s theme is all the more poignant: it is very personal, and it can resonate with all of us.

All of us in here will have experienced the loss of a loved one and wondered how we would cope—how would life go on? Let us imagine someone’s feeling of loss when it involves generations of their family; that is unimaginable to so many of us. Great-grandparents, grandparents, children, nieces, nephews, brothers and sisters—all lost. And beyond all that very personal loss, there is the loss of their very way of life, their home and the community they grew up in—a place that has gone and that will never be again. That is so difficult for so many of us to imagine.

We can all look at the black and white photos of loved ones in albums; we look at them from time to time, and we remember. I just imagine looking at those same pictures and realising—as we saw with some of the photographs on the “Antiques Roadshow” last week—that everybody in them are from you had perished in a death camp or in more recent conflicts, such as the killing fields of Cambodia, in Rwanda or in Srebrenica.

However, such photographs, and some of those we saw on the programme last week, also invoke strength and renewal, and they encourage new lives and new memories. That is why Holocaust Memorial Day is not only about commemorating past genocides and honouring those who died, but about standing with those who survive and about the new lives they have built. It is also, as many Members on both sides of the House have said, about standing up against intolerance and hatred, whatever form it may take. Today, for most of us, standing up against intolerance does not involve the same risks as it did for those who stood up against the Nazis or Pol Pot. Hassan Ngeze was a journalist sentenced to 35 years in prison by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda for spreading anti-Tutsi propaganda that led to the slaughter of 1 million Rwandans. We all know very well the crimes against humanity committed by Radovan Karadžić. For us, standing up against intolerance does not involve imprisonment, staring down the barrel of a gun, or thinking that somebody is going to come and round you and your family up in the night, but it does require us to speak out and to stand firm, because we all know, as many colleagues have said, that evil flourishes when good people stand idly by.

In the context of the Holocaust, we are also required to bear witness—we hear that all the time. We must not trivialise the Holocaust. We have to recognise the uniquely evil of the Holocaust, and that is why we must bear witness to it. There are many ways that I personally, and colleagues here, have done that: it can take many different forms. A lot of colleagues have mentioned Yad Vashem in Jerusalem—a place I have visited a number of times. I think that anybody who has been to Yad Vashem will be very touched by how it is put together in telling the story of the development of hate and the horrors of what happened. The most powerful thing, which really touched me, was that on leaving, having seen all that horror, one goes slightly up an incline to a balcony that overlooks what must be the most peaceful scene in Jerusalem of trees and quiet below. When I looked at that, I thought that it symbolised the hope of people who survived the Holocaust, and how sad it was that people who were murdered in the Holocaust will never know the peace and tranquillity of a new life that it represents.

Closer to home here in London, at the synagogue I am proud to attend—Westminster synagogue—there are 1,564 Czech scrolls, of which there are many around the world being used in prayer in synagogues. They are housed at the synagogue in the Czech Memorial Scrolls Museum, which is well worth a visit. Each of those scrolls represents a community that does not exist any more—hundreds of years of Jewish history in eastern Europe were wiped out.
Many of us have mentioned how we have borne witness at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Like many others, I took the opportunity to visit with the Holocaust Educational Trust, and with 200 post-16 students from across Yorkshire and northern Lincolnshire. I had never been there before, despite teaching and delivering education on the holocaust in schools. I had visited Dachau—another evil place—but had never taken the opportunity to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau to pay respect to those who were murdered by the Nazis and more fully to understand the scale of that killing operation.

I found the experience incredibly moving, but the place I found most moving was the Jewish cemetery in the nearby local town, where the Nazis took the headstones from the cemetery and used them on roads and pavements. Many of the headstones were recovered and are looked after by the Jewish community from Krakow, but they are not looked after by the Jewish community in that town because that community does not exist any more. The saddest thing about the cemetery is the burial of the single Jew who, almost in an act of defiance, went back and lived in the town following the end of the war. Perhaps what I found most difficult about visiting Auschwitz was the time of year that I went, because it was a beautiful, warm spring day. Colleagues have referred to being there in the depths of winter at minus 5° or minus 10°, but for me, going there on a spring day, it was very difficult to understand how such horror could have taken place in that setting with the trees and woodland around; it simply defied belief. As many colleagues have said, we hear and read the stories and poems, and see for ourselves the true horror of what took place there.

As I have said, I used to deliver holocaust education to young people in Hull. I agree with Members from across the House that we must ensure that holocaust education remains in place across all these islands. I used to find with the young people I taught that the problem was not denial, fortunately, but disbelief. As I showed them the photographs and the footage of the holocaust, the young people were silent and some of them were moved to tears at having to believe that this had actually happened, and that human beings could be so cruel.

One piece of film that I used to use was a scene from “Schindler’s List”. There is always a debate about using Hollywood movies in holocaust education, but the scene in that film showing the liquidation of the ghetto is so powerful that I used to use it, and young people were stunned into silence at the thought that that could have happened. That is why visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau help to ensure that the holocaust is never forgotten, and it is why we should all do everything we can to ensure that holocaust education is at the heart of the curriculum, in this country and across the world.

I thank all the holocaust organisations that are involved. They have been mentioned a lot today, but I am going to refer to them again. I particularly thank Karen Pollock, the CEO of the Holocaust Educational Trust. She and her team are an inspiration for us all. I sat down with Karen and young people in Auschwitz-Birkenau on my visit, and in Tel Aviv in Israel. The work of the trust is absolutely fantastic. I pay tribute to the trust for campaigning to ensure that the holocaust is part of the national curriculum and particularly for advocating that the subject be taught at the later stages of key stage 3, when young people are emotionally developed enough to understand the full horror of it all; I know that that is important to the trust.

I pay tribute to the work of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and its CEO Olivia Marks-Woldman. Along with her team, she delivered a most successful Holocaust Memorial Day last year.

I would also like to mention some of the other holocaust remembrance, education and survivor organisations, as colleagues have done. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon spoke about the Holocaust Survivors Centre in his constituency. The Anne Frank Trust uses Anne’s diary, and the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) made reference to her visit to Anne Frank’s house. I also want to mention the Wiener Library, the Association of Jewish Refugees and the National Holocaust Centre in Newark, Nottinghamshire.

I pay tribute to the businesses that are playing their part in marking Holocaust Memorial Day. I met the Royal Bank of Scotland yesterday, which informed me of the work it is doing through its Jewish society and by encouraging its employees on Holocaust Memorial Day to take time out and reflect.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the work of the Prime Minister’s post-holocaust issues envoy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles), who spoke brilliantly, particularly about his recent visit to Treblinka and about holocaust denial. He has not only focused on the restitution of property and art, but has been the driving force behind the Government’s adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of anti-Semitism.

The definition, although not legally binding, is an important tool to help criminal justice agencies and other public bodies to understand how anti-Semitism manifests itself in the 21st century. It is really important that we recognise the definition—the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) mentioned this—because we cannot deny that there has been an increase in anti-Semitism across the country and across Europe.

I used to serve on the all-party group against anti-Semitism. I visited a Jewish school in Brussels, and I was shocked by the fact that outside the school Belgian armed forces were guarding the young people who were inside. I asked those young people, “Would you wear your kippah out and about in Brussels?” They laughed; they would not. In a modern, western European capital that is the home of the European Union and a liberal, open-minded place, Jewish children are not prepared to walk about outside with a kippah on because of the risk of attack and abuse. Of course, sadly, that has happened on campuses here. Swastikas have appeared and meetings organised by Jewish societies have been violently disrupted. That is not acceptable and we cannot be silent about it.

The right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) was right to say that we must all acknowledge Holocaust Memorial Day, regardless of our views on the middle east—whether pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli. Unfortunately, there has been an increased Israeliification of anti-Semitism, using Israel and Zionism as a proxy for Jews. I have seen that and been on the receiving end of it, particularly on Twitter. There are pictures of the Star of David represented as the Nazi flag—that is unacceptable and a form of anti-Semitism.
At an event in Parliament, it was wonderful to see Laurence Rees, who produced the documentary, “The Nazis: A Warning from History”, so beautifully destroy the arguments of those who argue that Hitler was a Zionist and so on. There has been too much of that. It is ignorant and sinister and we should call it out for what it is: anti-Semitism. That also applies to attending a rally in support or holding a flag of Hamas or Hezbollah.

We should be proud of what we have done in this country to tackle anti-Semitism and our work on the UK holocaust memorial. I want to give the hon. Member for Hove time to sum up, so I will end with a quote from Zigi Shipper, whom I mentioned earlier. It epitomises Holocaust Memorial Day’s theme of how life can go on. Zigi Shipper returned to Poland about a decade ago and said:

“I went to Auschwitz after being nagged by my children.”

He recalled standing under the “Arbeit macht frei” sign at the camp entrance:

“It meant nothing to me. I stood under that sign and said: ‘After all that Hitler tried to do, he didn’t succeed, for I am still here!’”

Life can go on, but only if we all take responsibility for reconciliation, rebuilding lives and communities and preventing such events from ever happening again by calling out intolerance wherever it may be.

4.57 pm

Peter Kyle: It is the first occasion in my short time in the Commons that I have agreed with every single word that has been spoken by Members of all parties, and it was a privilege to be here for that. I would like to single out one or two Members.

The right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) spoke with steely determination to confront holocaust denial wherever they see it, but also helped to educate us about the pathways towards that.

I thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for accompanying me on the metaphorical and literal journey on the pathway and for his contribution. My right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) powerfully brought to life survivors’ testimony and related that to today’s political challenges.

I thank the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), who spoke with tremendous power and provided a forthright analysis of the challenges of disentangling the holocaust from today’s events in the middle east. Some people stumble naively into mixing them and we should confront that when we see it because they are separate issues that need our intellectual inquiry in two separate ways.

I have discovered that the Chamber thrives on difference and often on conflict. I hope that today we have also seen strength through consensus. I hope that that strength does not mean that we agree to walk away benignly, but that the consensus gives us steely determination to ensure that the events of the holocaust and the issues that we have discussed today are driven into the fabric of our communities so that lessons continue to be learned.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Holocaust Memorial Day 2017.
5 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): This evening’s debate could not be more important to the good people of Ayrshire. As everyone at home and everyone in the Chamber can see, it is also very important to the MPs from across Scotland who have turned out to show their support for the Ayrshire growth deal. The Ayrshire growth deal is of huge importance to re-energising of the economy of the whole county of Ayrshire. The whole of Ayrshire, including the part I represent, has quite breathtaking natural beauty in parts. However, no one would deny that it also has its challenges.

The Ayrshire growth deal, should it secure the necessary support from the UK Government, would represent a step-change in economic growth and the economic prospects of Ayrshire. The Scottish Government are already supportive, but UK Government support, and the value it can bring cannot and must not be underestimated. Indeed, the entire Ayrshire growth deal depends on support from the UK Government.

Targeting the costed £359.8 million of investment would support a number of exciting projects, and generate and stimulate real, lasting and inclusive economic growth. The Scottish Government are enthusiastic and I understand—correctly, I hope—that the UK Government are receptive to it as well. I am keen tonight for the Minister to articulate his Government’s support for this bold, ambitious, innovative and transformative vision for the whole of Ayrshire. The feedback from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has been most encouraging and I understand that the Secretary of State for Scotland has also expressed his support for this initiative. I am therefore both lobbying and urging the Minister today to do all he can to ensure that on the day of the spring Budget, 8 March, the Ayrshire growth deal is firmly on the UK Government’s agenda. There is no doubt that on the Scottish National party Benches and across the whole county of Ayrshire there is a collective will to maximise the considerable and significant economic potential of this particularly picturesque part of Scotland.

We all know that in the past such growth deals have focused on cities. However, I sense that there is some interest in seeing how such an initiative would work on a diverse county such as Ayrshire, with its mix of urbanisation, towns, rural elements and two islands. Ayrshire is a diverse county with so much to offer. There is no doubt that stimulated growth would be repaid, as it would do much to re-energise, galvanise and revitalise the considerable untapped potential of the Ayrshire economy.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important debate for our area. She rightly says that to date the Government have focused on city deals. City deals certainly have a place and we welcome the investment they have brought to Scotland. However, in terms of connectivity and distance between cities, there is no doubt that another approach needs to be undertaken to regenerate areas like Ayrshire, which have suffered from de-industrialisation.

I was looking today at the latest unemployment figures: 1,960 in my constituency of Kilmarnock and Loudoun, the 76th highest claimant rate by constituency; 1,745 in ayr, Carrick and Cumnock; 1,635 in Central Ayrshire; and 2,185 in North Ayrshire and Arran, the 29th highest claimant rate by constituency. It is therefore really important that a new way is found to re-industrialise our area.

Patricia Gibson: The figures my hon. Friend quotes paint their own picture of the challenges faced by the entire county of Ayrshire. I am sure the Minister was listening keenly and will take them on board.

For Ayrshire to truly reach its potential, it is essential to reduce inequalities across communities and give everyone a stake in Ayrshire’s growth. Therefore, inclusive growth is, and must be, an integral part of the Ayrshire growth deal business case. A successful economy must ensure that all the talents of our people are harnessed, which will help Ayrshire to be truly competitive and resilient to emerging technologies and challenges. We must work to ensure that Ayrshire folk are better connected to the economy, and have better and greater opportunities to prosper. I believe, and all MPs on the SNP Benches believe, that the Ayrshire growth deal provides a compelling route towards achieving that. We have so many resources and successes in Ayrshire to build upon, with our aerospace and space industry, life sciences and manufacturing.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): As well as the beauty that my hon. Friend has mentioned, we also have incredible potential. Even in my small part of Ayrshire, we have life sciences at one end and at the other an airport that not only was Scotland’s first passenger airport but has the potential to be the UK’s first spaceport, with its long runway, its clear weather and an air traffic control centre and aerospace cluster. We have the pieces of marble in the grass; we just need help to put them on top of each other.

Patricia Gibson: My hon. Friend has well articulated the importance of the spaceport to Ayrshire and the opportunities it would bring to build on that to spread and attract growth to Ayrshire.

In addition, we can enhance Ayrshire’s beautiful coast and capitalise on the considerable opportunities that Ayrshire’s harbours and ports provide. Indeed, proposed projects are well placed to feed into the delivery of national tourism strategies, such as marine tourism. This is an area in which there is great potential for growth in Ayrshire, but the infrastructure to make it possible is essential, alongside opportunities for the provision of land for the development of new housing.

I am particularly excited about the coastal regeneration of Ardrossan. Investment of about £22 million will deliver a transformation of the port as a regional transport interchange, serving south-west Scotland. Ardrossan is Scotland’s largest and busiest ferry terminal and is well placed to play a key role in delivering wider benefits to communities and businesses across Ayrshire. The prize is a port that will serve and promote a range of opportunities—cruising, leisure, marine tourism, waterfront
residential—as well as improving lifeline services to the Isle of Arran, which I believe will continue to be served by the port of Ardrossan.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) mentioned the exciting project for the establishment of a spaceport at Prestwick airport. Estimates from the Spaceport UK report of 2014 show that a spaceport has the potential cumulatively to realise a baseline of £320 million of additional economic activity.

The vision is also for Ayrshire to be recognised as a centre of excellence for digital skills. This can be done by developing—indeed transforming—the use of digital technology in schools, weaving technology through the teaching and learning process. Ayrshire’s Connected Classroom initiative is a recognition that digital is a key enabler of science, technology, engineering and mathematics—the so-called STEM subjects—and aims to ensure that young people are well prepared for our increasing digital world. Such a digitally savvy generation will support the exciting potential of Ayrshire’s space industry and aerospace innovation district.

**Alan Brown:** The digital connectivity initiative is a fantastic scheme giving every kid in Ayrshire from the age of three to 18 the highest level of digital connectivity. It is a welcome ambition and will help to close the skills and productivity gaps, as those young people move into the workforce, and the aim of a 40% higher entry level into the digital workforce is laudable. Just yesterday, I was reading an EU Commission report saying that the UK has 5,000 such skills vacancies but that this figure is predicted to rise to 161,000. So such an initiative could open up opportunities across the entire UK.

**Patricia Gibson:** Indeed, it could. The importance of upskilling our population cannot be underestimated when we are talking about inclusive economic growth.

North Ayrshire schools have the third-highest rates of positive outcomes for school leavers in Scotland. By continuing to ensure that our transitions from school are robust and continue to develop, Ayrshire is well placed to meet changing economic challenges, and this will enable our communities to become more prosperous, ambitious and vibrant. The UK’s medicine industry is one of the leading manufacturing sectors, with exports worth more than £22 billion. The medicines manufacturing innovation centre is a national innovation centre for the life sciences and pharmaceutical industries, and north Ayrshire is supported to host it. Infrastructure funding secured through the Ayrshire growth deal would go a long way to seeing it constructed in Ayrshire’s i3 investment park in Irvine before too long. Ayrshire has so much to offer. All Members, including the Minister, are invited to sample some of its delights, both in the gastronomic sense and in the context of business potential.

**Corri Wilson** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I am lucky enough to have some fantastic drinks companies in my constituency, including the company that produces Hendrick’s gin, and Caledonian Bottlers and Ayr Brewing Company, as well as wonderful food suppliers such as We Hae Meat, Barwhesy Dairy, Chocolati and Roundsquare Roastery, which roasts coffee beans. In fact, there are too many to mention. Does my hon. Friend agree that the growth deal would give a welcome and much-needed boost to Ayrshire, which would include the food and drink sector?

**Patricia Gibson:** Indeed. One of Ayrshire’s real selling points, and one of the reasons why so many tourists go there—is the provision of gastronomic delights, some of which my hon. Friend has just mentioned. However, I would not want the Minister to think that it was just about the alcohol. We have so much more to offer—although the alcohol does go down well too.

The event at which the gastronomic delights that the Minister, and indeed all Members, are invited to sample will take place on 8 February. It will be hosted by all four Ayrshire Members, and what it will show—if, indeed, it needs to be shown to those who have not yet been lucky enough to visit the county—is that Ayrshire is one of the most productive agricultural regions in the United Kingdom, which is well known for its outstanding and award-winning food and drink produce. It is home not just to a range of dairy, beef and seafood suppliers, but to world-renowned farmhouse cheese makers, ice cream producers, bakers, brewers, smokehouses, chocolatiers, and, of course, all the businesses that my hon. Friend mentioned.

**Alan Brown:** And the world Scotch pie championships.

**Patricia Gibson:** Yes, indeed.

Perhaps it is because of the presence of all the businesses that might supply the gastronomic feast that we could put in front of you in Ayrshire, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the town of Dalry, in my constituency, houses a very well-respected Michelin-starred restaurant, which I recommend to you.

Ultimately, the Ayrshire growth deal is about people. It is about removing barriers to employment, upskilling our workforce to address the issue of low pay, and promoting apprenticeships.

**Dr Whitford:** I am sure my hon. Friend agrees that we have an additional strength. The three separate campuses belonging to Ayrshire College work closely with our local employers in the aerospace and food and drink sectors to ensure that the young people training in those sectors—along with other young people from the senior sections of our schools—have access to the same equipment and materials that they would use professionally. It is a great relationship: the college is delivering the skills that local industry needs.

**Patricia Gibson:** Absolutely. That is an excellent point. I think that the other colleges in the United Kingdom should note the links between Ayrshire College and local employers. That delivery to young people of the skills that employers say they need and that are in short supply is second to none. The college has won many accolades—far too many for me to mention to the Minister today—for its work in this sphere, and in several others as well.

**Alan Brown:** Ayrshire College recently opened a £53 million new campus in Kilmarnock. It is a fantastic facility, and it is all about getting people ready to go into the workplace. It has been built on the site of the
former Johnnie Walker bottling plant; that iconic industry has been lost to the town. As part of the growth deal, the HALO project is expected to achieve the final regeneration of the entire site. It is predicted that the project will generate nearly 1,000 jobs, and it is shovel-ready. That is another fantastic aspect of the Ayrshire growth deal: some projects come out of the ground very quickly, and we see real results within a very short time.

**Patricia Gibson:** I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. As the Minister will be well aware, economic growth creates more economic growth: it creates its own dynamic. If we secure this investment, Ayrshire will grow from a flower into a tree. [Interjection.] That was very poetic; I may represent some of the parts of the country that Robert Burns was familiar with, but I do not have his skill in that regard.

We want to remove the barriers to employment, to upskill our workforce to address the issue of low pay, to promote apprenticeships, linking them with schools and investing in our schools and local colleges, and to support local companies with the greatest ambitions for growth. We also want to attract new inward investment, to deliver on key infrastructure projects such as the Dalry bypass—which is very close to starting—to improve connectivity, to improve public transport, and to improve digital connectivity by investing in the roll-out of superfast broadband.

I am very pleased that we have secured this debate on the Ayrshire growth deal in the Chamber of the House of Commons. I am delighted that, as far as I have been able to establish, this is the first time Ayrshire has been centre-stage in the House of Commons. I am proud that my colleagues have, with me, set out the ambitious plans for Ayrshire—our bold vision which requires what is, in the scheme of things, quite a modest £359.8 million of investment, which will of course be in partnership with the Scottish Government and local authorities. I am delighted that the UK Government are engaged in this debate and I hope that, with this investment forthcoming, Ayrshire can enjoy inclusive growth and her greatest asset—her people—can reach their true potential.

If I may be permitted to have another bash at the poetry, I will add that, relative to what it is now, as much as it is now, the Ayrshire growth deal could awaken what may be called the economic sleeping giant of Ayrshire. Wonderful as this part of the country is, it could be—and I hope, with the UK Government’s help, it will be—so much more.

The Ayrshire growth deal seeks to create a virtuous circle of growth: growth in business leading to growth in employment, and growth in individual household prosperity—and, as a benefit from that, growth in health outcomes. I urge the Minister to support it, and I urge the Chancellor of the Exchequer to offer support to Ayrshire’s growth deal when he delivers his deliberations in his spring statement on 8 March. I urge him to work with us—the four Ayrshire MPs—the three Ayrshire local authorities, and the Scottish Government.

This vision is a partnership of the best in the private and public sectors and represents key stakeholders in Ayrshire. It represents the local knowledge of Ayrshire College, the University of the West of Scotland, and the Ayrshire chamber of commerce, which has been fused with the national expertise of Scottish Enterprise, Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Futures Trust and the Scottish Council for Development and Industry. We are all working together for the good of Ayrshire and her people. I ask that the UK Government in their spring statement join in with and support that work and invest in the county and the people of Ayrshire.

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**The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis):** I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this debate. She spoke so well for her constituency and area that I felt like I was sitting through a 20-minute commercial from the Ayrshire tourist board, if there is such a thing, for the picturesque and beautiful area she has the honour to represent. I certainly found the gastronomic delights very interesting.

I am aware that the hon. Lady raised this matter in Treasury oral questions earlier this week and has recently written to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland on the matter. She has clearly been working hard for her constituents in raising this matter at every possible opportunity, and I congratulate her on that. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has asked me to answer this debate today.

As the hon. Lady and the House will know, the UK Government are committed to ensuring that all parts of the country have the tools to grow their local economies. As such, I am pleased that we now have the city deal that has been referred to, which is either in progress or in pre-negotiation for each and every one of Scotland’s seven cities. That is important. It was mentioned earlier, but I want to reiterate it. No other part of the United Kingdom has achieved that. Every one of Scotland’s seven cities now either has a city deal in progress or has one in pre-negotiation. That is an indication of the UK Government’s commitment to ensuring that all parts of the country have the tools to grow their local economies.

In Scotland, such deals are tripartite, meaning that the arrangements involve the UK Government, the Scottish Government and the local area in which they are active. Since 2014, the UK Government have worked well in partnership with the Scottish Government to agree three ambitious city deals, which cover the Glasgow city region, the Aberdeen city region, and Inverness and the Highlands. It is worth noting that local leaders in those three areas believe that, once fully implemented, the deals will unlock significant new investment in Scotland. At the 2016 Budget, the UK Government committed to opening city deal negotiations with Edinburgh and south-east Scotland and those negotiations are now in progress. At the autumn statement, the UK Government similarly committed to opening negotiations with Stirling and Clackmannanshire and the Tay cities. Our priority now is to take forward this significant body of work, in partnership with the Scottish Government and all the relevant local authorities. Following the autumn statement, I am pleased to confirm that the Scottish Government will have more than £800 million of additional capital funding through to 2020-21 to support such proposals.

There is interest in other areas for further deals. It is of course open to the Scottish Government, given their devolved responsibility for economic development and
using the significant resources available to them, to take forward projects to enable growth in places such as Ayrshire—that beautiful area—if they wish to do so. It is important to emphasise that the Scottish Government do have devolved responsibility for economic development. Significant resources are available to them—those resources have been increasing—enabling them to take forward projects, such as the one to which the hon. Lady refers, and to support growth in areas such as Ayrshire.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this debate and on speaking so passionately. The Minister will be aware that my constituency is one of the areas that is currently under discussion. Industrial areas such as mine and Ayrshire were damaged beyond recognition under the previous Conservative Government, so it is absolutely incumbent on him and his colleagues to ensure that those wrongs are righted by deals such as the one proposed for Ayrshire.

Michael Ellis: I do not accept that characterisation. It is important to note that employment in North Ayrshire and Arran is up by 1,100 over the past year and by 300 overall since 2010, so things are clearly moving in the right direction.

Patricia Gibson: The Minister is correct to talk about the importance of city deals, but is it fair that communities that do not happen to be part of a big city are left to suffer without UK Government support? He was quite right to mention the Scottish Government, which are on board and doing all they can, but I said in my speech—I know he was listening—that UK Government support is essential here. Is Ayrshire to be punished simply because, through an accident of geography, it does not happen to be part of a city?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Lady clearly represents a picturesque rural area, but she will no doubt recognise that the United Kingdom Government have provided very significant support to large conurbations, to city areas, by way of the city deals, which we use as an example of the Westminster Government’s support for such areas. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the city deals are an example of the Government’s support. This option is open to the Scottish Government, who have devolved responsibility for economic development. There is no rationale for disregarding the fact that the Scottish Government, wishing to have that devolved responsibility, do have it and can use the very significant resources available to them.

Alan Brown: I had hoped that this would be a consensual debate and that we would talk about working together. We are hoping to achieve another tripartite agreement involving the UK Government, the Scottish Government and local councils, but that is not the message that we are hearing, which is a bit disappointing. Many of our Ayrshire communities have been devastated by the loss of open-cast coal mining, particularly in my constituency and in that of my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). The UK Government did not contribute anything to the restoration of those mines, so I hope that they can work with the Scottish Government to provide money for this growth deal.

Michael Ellis: The United Kingdom Government are working with the Scottish Government in myriad different ways, and I could give many examples of positive developments in those areas. For our part, in addition to working to deliver the seven city deals across Scotland, we will look at this proposal in the context of wider UK Government policy, including the industrial strategy and the national productivity investment fund.

Dr Philippa Whitford: That leads exactly to my point. In the meeting that I secured between the four of us and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Secretary of State seemed particularly interested in the deal, as a non-city deal. We have three large towns but no city in Ayrshire, and there is therefore potential to learn from projects and ideas that could be shared elsewhere. Ayrshire is way up the left-hand end of the gross value added scale. All the cities that have deals are starting from a better position than Ayrshire. We have pockets of absolute rural and urban deprivation.

Michael Ellis: We want to look at all these issues, and I have said that the Ayrshire growth deal is being looked at in the context of UK Government policy, including the industrial strategy and the national productivity investment fund. The Secretary of State for Scotland went to Ayrshire just a few months ago—in June 2016, I think—and my noble Friend Lord Dunlop is due to go. The industrial strategy is due to be published shortly, after which the United Kingdom Government will want to consider carefully how it sits alongside the asks being made by the partners in Ayrshire, and by others, so that we can help to deliver the economic benefits that such proposals represent.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran spoke eloquently about the area she has the honour to represent. We are due to publish the industrial strategy shortly, and as the United Kingdom Government we will be considering carefully how it sits alongside the asks being made by others, including in Ayrshire. Every consideration will be given to this matter so that we can help to deliver the economic benefits that such proposals represent.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.
Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163).

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Speaker: Would the Serjeant care to investigate the delay in the voting Lobby?

The House having divided:

Ayes 1, Noes 40.

Division No. 127] [9.34 am

Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob

Tellers for the Ayes: Philip Davies and Mr David Nuttall

Barwell, Gavin

Blackwood, Nicola

Blomfield, Paul

Bone, Mr Peter

Brokenshire, rh James

Crouch, Tracey

Ellison, Jane

Ellwood, Mr Tobias

Esterson, Bill

Eustice, George

Evannett, rh David

Freer, Mike

Garnier, Mark

Gibb, Mr Nick

Glen, John

Glindon, Mary

Gummer, rh Ben

Harrington, Richard

Heaton-Jones, Peter

Hollobone, Mr Philip

James, Margot

Jones, Andrew

Tellers for the Noes: Julian Smith and Chris Heaton-Harris

Merchant Shipping (Homosexual Conduct) Bill

Second Reading.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am very pleased to bring the Bill to the House because, by repealing sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, it completes the removal of historical provisions that penalised homosexual activity. I am proud to do so because of my commitment to justice and opposition to unjustified discrimination.

When it comes to employment, in the merchant navy or anywhere else, what matters is a person’s ability to do the job—not their gender, age, ethnicity, religion or sexuality. Hon. Members across the House share that commitment. Many will be surprised—astonished, even—to learn that this anomaly still remains on the statute book. There is no place in our society today for employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, through which one provision applies to heterosexual individuals and another to homosexual individuals. The Bill repeals the now defunct provision that authorised the dismissal of a merchant seaman on the grounds of homosexual conduct. It is the last such provision penalising homosexual activity that remains on our statute book, and it should be removed.

The repeal of historic provisions that penalised homosexual activity started with the Wolfenden report in 1957. That landmark report argued for the decriminalisation of homosexual conduct. It was not universally popular at the time, attracting criticism from across the party political divide, but it wisely saw that private, consensual sexual behaviour was not a matter for the law. The internal debates within the Wolfenden committee were mirrored in the wider public debate; the debate between Professor H. L. A. Hart and Patrick Devlin, later Lord Devlin, was studied as a matter of course by law students. That debate is instructive to this Bill as it sets the entire tone for how we think about the law in the area of private sexual behaviour.

Lord Devlin took the view that the enforcement of morals was a proper function—even the primary function—of law. He was right to the extent that the law cannot be divorced from morality; it has an interest in what is good and in identifying wrongs that should be dealt with in society. However, he was wrong to imagine that, essentially, if the majority of people in society thought that something was morally wrong, it should be illegal. H. L. A. Hart took the view that the reality is more complicated than that—that there is a private sphere where the law should not run. The Wolfenden report set out that, as a matter of principle, sexual acts between consenting adults were not, in fact, a matter for the law.

It may sound initially as if Devlin’s view is the more Conservative, but actually Hart saw that there is a distinction between the state and society: they are not the same thing. Governments may protect and create the conditions for a flourishing society, but they do not intervene in every area unless there is a very good reason. The late Mrs Thatcher drew the same distinction.
in her misunderstood dictum that there is no such thing as society. There is no such thing as society that is different from the institutions of family, individuals, businesses and other civic organisations.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): My hon. Friend mentions what must be one of the most frequently referred to of the late Mrs Thatcher's quotations: that about there being no such thing as society. Has he ever looked up the full Woman's Own quote, which lends itself to an interpretation completely different from the one usually ascribed to it?

John Glen: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for correcting the misunderstanding about that quote. He is absolutely right that it is a total misrepresentation of what the late Mrs Thatcher was trying to say.

It is worth noting that the Wolfenden committee broke new ground, as it was the first time openly homosexual citizens in this country gave evidence to a Government committee. It is perhaps evidence of how contentious the Wolfenden report was at the time that it took a further 10 years before its recommendations were implemented and decriminalisation took place in the Sexual Offences Act 1967.

The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994—the Act that the Bill is concerned with—was seen at the time as a liberalising Act, mainly because it reduced the age of consent for homosexual activity. In addition, sections 146 and 147 repealed the clauses in the 1967 Act that made homosexual activity in the armed forces and on merchant navy vessels a criminal offence. That was done, however, partially because of the anomaly that an individual could not be prosecuted under criminal law but could be prosecuted under service law for that same offence.

However, sections 146(4) and 147(3), which I hope the Bill will repeal, specifically required that nothing in the Act should prevent homosexual activity from constituting grounds for dismissal. They were added to the Act through non-Government amendments during the House of Lords Committee stage. Those amendments were supported by peers who wished to have the then policy on administrative dismissal in the armed forces on the face of the Act. The amendments were initially resisted by the Minister at the time, but they were pressed to a Division, which the Government lost. So although the criminal penalty was taken away, discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation remained. During the passage of the 1994 Act, the anomaly that there were no equivalent provisions for heterosexual activity on board a ship, for example, was pressed by some Members of this House and the other place.

The equivalent provisions for the armed forces in the 1994 Act were struck down as a result of a European Court of Human Rights case in 2000. In Smith and Grady v. the United Kingdom, the Court found against the armed forces policy at the time of investigating whether personnel were of homosexual orientation or had engaged in homosexual activity and of pursuing administrative discharge as a matter of policy if that was found to be the case.

The case raised a number of issues relating to the place of homosexual men and women in the armed forces, but I want to touch on one aspect in particular: bullying. The submissions to the Court during the case argued that one reason for the armed forces policy at the time was the threat of “assaults on homosexuals, bullying and harassment of homosexuals, ostracism and avoidance”.

The ECHR responded, as we would today, by arguing that that should be dealt with robustly through clear codes of conduct, complaint procedures and training programmes, in the same way as racial and sexual harassment or bullying. In its decision, the Court said: “The Court considers it important to note, in the first place, the approach already adopted by the armed forces to deal with racial discrimination and with racial and sexual harassment and bullying...The January 1996 Directive, for example, imposed both a strict code of conduct on every soldier together with disciplinary rules to deal with any inappropriate behaviour and conduct. This dual approach was supplemented with information leaflets and training programmes, the army emphasising the need for high standards of personal conduct and for respect for others.”

As a result of that judgment and the implementation of appropriate codes and procedures to tackle bullying and harassment of homosexual servicemen and women, the armed forces are clearly not today as they were at the time of that case; nor is the merchant navy.

However, despite that very positive development in recent years, we need to acknowledge that homophobic bullying is still a live issue today, particularly in schools. No one should be assaulted, bullied or harassed as a result of their sexual orientation, and it is important to recognise that such things can be particularly damaging when they happen among one’s close peers in such a crucial and formative environment.

I am pleased the Government have made £2.8 million available to tackle homophobic bullying. The programme funded by this additional money began in September 2016 and will run to March 2019 to prevent and respond in a sustained way to homophobic bullying across primary and secondary schools in England. As part of the programme, which will build on the previous £2 million grant, which was announced in October 2014, the Government are funding six initiatives that will deliver whole-school approaches and staff training to help prevent and tackle homophobic bullying. I hope that the passage of the Bill today, in reaffirming that there is no place for discriminatory employment practices, will also send a clear signal that homophobic bullying and harassment are completely unacceptable.

The firms that constitute the merchant navy were not actually within the scope of the 2000 Smith and Grady v. the United Kingdom case, because they were private employers, and cases brought in respect of European convention rights are brought against Governments rather than private individuals or entities.

The provisions relating to the merchant navy were eventually superseded by the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003, which integrated into UK law EU equal treatment directive 2000/78/EC.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): My hon. Friend is setting out in great detail the background to the Bill. Perhaps he can confirm whether UK merchant ships are classified as residences as well as workplaces, which means that shipowners can make up their own rules about what is and is not allowed to happen on board their ships.
**John Glen:** I will come to some of those points later, but that is why it is important that we are clear about the Bill needing to pass today to leave no ambiguity on the statute book.

The Equality Act 2010 introduced a comprehensive new framework, which updated, simplified and strengthened the previous legislation and created a simple framework of discrimination law that protects individuals from unfair treatment. The Act introduced protection from discrimination for individuals in respect of protected characteristics: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation. When the Act was first passed, section 5 did not automatically apply to the shipping industry, but it was applied to shipping through the Equality Act 2010 (Work on Ships and Hovercraft) Regulations 2011.

Despite the fact that the provisions to be repealed by the Bill have been superseded, it is important that they are taken off the statute book for four reasons, and I would like to take a little time to set out those four principled reasons, which have brought the Bill before the House today.

First, as I have indicated, the Bill is symbolic. The provisions it deals with are the last remaining historical legislation on our statute books that penalises and directly discriminates on the grounds of homosexual conduct.

**Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): There will be those who will argue, “Well, the law has moved on so there’s no point in doing that,” but the symbolism of sweeping it away is so important.

**John Glen:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very wise observation. That is absolutely critical, which is why I have spent time setting out the background, to show that this is the conclusion of a journey that this country has been on for essentially 60 years.

By removing the distinction and applying the provisions to all individuals, passing the Bill will affirm this House’s commitment to justice and equality and show that there is no place in society for discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. What matters in employment is the ability to do the job, nothing else. And what matters in society is how you can contribute and serve others, not your background, race or sexuality.

Secondly, the Bill completes the process, started by the Armed Forces Act 2016, of repealing those provisions. As a result, it delivers on the commitment made during the Act’s passage to introduce legislation to deal with the merchant navy provisions in just the same way as the armed forces provisions.

Thirdly, the Bill gives reassurance. At the moment, an individual could look up the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 online and be alarmed or confused that it apparently allows for the dismissal of a seafarer in the merchant navy on grounds of homosexual conduct. As I have said, although those provisions have already been superseded, that is not clear from an initial reading of the 1994 Act itself. Rather, someone would have to already know about the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003 or the Equality Act 2010 (Work on Ships and Hovercraft) Regulations 2011.

Fourthly, the Bill will tidy up legislation. Our statute book is complex enough without the retention of defunct and superseded provisions. Apart from anything else, this Bill is a useful tidying-up exercise to make the status of the current law regarding employment discrimination absolutely clear, and, as I have explained, it gives important reassurance to anyone who might be concerned about an apparent provision in our law.

The Bill is very straightforward, with a single clause that simply repeals sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act. The territorial extent of the Bill is throughout the UK.

**Mr Nuttall:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the size of a piece of legislation has nothing to do with how important it may be, and that a one-line Bill could have a far bigger impact on society than a Bill that is 100-pages long?

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Article 50.

**John Glen:** Absolutely. I think we know what my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) is referring to.

I want to address the territorial extent of the Bill, because there was some ambiguity about whether it is an equalities Bill or a maritime Bill. The reason that matters is that, given the territorial extent of the Bill, a legislative consent motion could have been required, because maritime matters are reserved, whereas equalities matters are devolved. I am informed that the Bill is classified as a maritime matter, so, being a reserved matter, a legislative consent motion is not required from the devolved Administrations. The Department for Transport has also signalled the Bill’s compatibility with ECHR rights.

The Bill mirrors the repeal of equivalent provisions relating to the armed forces in the Armed Forces Act. Those provisions were widely welcomed in the House during the passage of that Act, and I trust that the support that those provisions received will be indicative of support for this Bill.

I want to anticipate the objection that the Bill’s provisions could have been dealt with earlier. The Armed Forces Act could not have included sections relating to the merchant navy, because legislation covering the merchant navy is a transport matter, rather than a defence matter. As a result, the provisions fell outside the scope of that Act.

On Second Reading of the Armed Forces Bill, the Minister said:

“These provisions in no way reflect the position of today’s armed forces. We are proud in the Department of the progress we have made since 2000 to remove policies that discriminated against homosexual men, lesbians and transgender personnel, so that they can serve openly in the armed forces.”

The then Labour spokesman, the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), who understandably is not in his place, said that removing the provisions “from the statute book is a welcome step forward so that the explicit refusal to discriminate against homosexual servicemen and women is expunged from the service book, just as it has in practice been outlawed. That is an important step forward, and we welcome it very strongly.”—[Official Report, 11 January 2016, Vol. 604, c. 601-3.]
Just as the armed forces today do not discriminate against homosexual servicemen and women, so the merchant navy does not do so any more, and homosexual men and women make a full and valuable contribution to our shipping industry.

A few years ago, in the last Parliament, I was fortunate to take through the Presumption of Death Act 2013 as a private Member’s Bill. At the time, I was grateful for the support and help of charities and organisations that had been lobbying on the issues for a long time. Similarly, I am very pleased that this Bill has been welcomed by, and enjoys the support of, key bodies representing the merchant navy. I hope that will give us confidence that the repeal is not something to which the industry is indifferent; in fact, it warmly welcomes it.

The UK Chamber of Shipping, the industry body for the merchant navy, has welcomed the Bill and said:

“The UK Chamber of Shipping is fundamentally opposed to any discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Whilst subsequent equality legislation has superseded the law, this is a welcome move which would create legal certainty.”

The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, the industry union, has also lent its support to the Bill, saying:

“The RMT is fundamentally opposed to all forms of workplace discrimination, including on grounds of sexuality. We support all efforts to reinforce LGBTI workers’ rights in the merchant navy and Mr Glen’s Bill should finally end any perception of a threat of legalised persecution, particularly of gay or bisexual seafarers. We welcome this legislative step and see that it has Government support. We urge all MPs and Peers to ensure that this Bill is passed into law as quickly as possible.”

Finally, I was particularly pleased to receive the backing of long-standing campaigner Peter Tatchell, who wrote in an email to me:

“It is surprising and shocking that this exemption from the equality laws remains on the statute books, after so many years of gay law reform. Repeal is long overdue and most welcome.”

In conclusion, I hope that the Bill will enjoy support from across the House, to signal our commitment to equality and justice, and to give real reassurance to individuals that no discriminatory employment practices are allowed in law, in the merchant navy or elsewhere in the United Kingdom. As I said at the beginning of my speech, I am pleased to promote this Bill and I commend it to the House.

10.19 am

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) for introducing the Bill. It repeals provisions in sections 146 and 147 of the 1994 Act that purport to preserve the right to dismiss a seafarer from a UK-registered merchant navy vessel for an act of homosexuality. Although neither of the provisions has any effect as a consequence of other legislation, most notably the Equality Act 2010, repealing them would prevent any possible misunderstanding about their current effect, as has been said, and thus would tidy up the statute book.

There are other good reasons for repealing the provisions, but first it is necessary to reflect on the legal background and legislative developments of the past 50 years that have enabled us to consider doing so. Sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the 1994 Act have been rendered obsolete by the gradual development of LGBT rights. Fifty years ago, section 1(1) of the Sexual Offences Act 1967 decriminalised homosexual acts in private in England and Wales. However, section 1(5) of that Act ensured that committing a homosexual act was still an offence in military law, while section 2 stipulated that a homosexual act on a merchant ship continued to be an offence.

Moving forward a generation, we come to the 1994 Act—the very Act to which the Bill refers. That Act covered a plethora of areas, including young offenders, bail arrangements, justice, police powers, trespassing, squatters, terrorism and prisons, to name just a few. Part 11 of the Act covered topics relating to homosexuality. Perhaps most notably, section 145 reduced the homosexual age of consent from 21 to 18. It has since been lowered again to 16. Elements of sections 146 and 147 removed the criminal liability that remained under the 1967 Act.

Sections 146(4) and 147(3) were added to the Bill that became the 1994 Act as a result of non-Government amendments. I understand that the proposer of the amendments was concerned that making homosexual conduct legal in the armed forces and merchant navy might mean that homosexuals could not be dismissed for engaging in such conduct, or that that could not be used as the basis of prosecution under military discipline. The same provisions were designed to restrict the meaning of the rest of the 1994 Act, and as a consequence they have no effect on any other measure. Indeed, the wording of sections 146 and 147 makes it possible, by means of other legislation and Government policy, to prevent anyone from being dismissed solely on the basis of homosexual conduct.

As has been mentioned with regard to the armed forces, in September 1999, in the case of Smith and Grady v. the United Kingdom, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the ban on homosexuals in the UK armed forces broke the European convention on human rights, which safeguards the right to privacy. Until that point, the position of the Ministry of Defence had always been that homosexuals in the military were bad for morale and that they were vulnerable to blackmail from foreign intelligence agencies. Indeed, the armed forces policy guidelines on homosexuality stated that the homosexual lifestyle was “incompatible” with military life “because of the close physical conditions in which personnel often have to live and work, but also because homosexual behaviour can cause offence, polarise relationships, induce ill-discipline and...damage morale and unit effectiveness.”

As a result of the ban, dozens of homosexual servicemen were forced to leave the services every year as a consequence of the prejudice that they encountered. Following the decision of the European Court of Human Rights, the UK Government formally lifted the ban on 12 January 2000.

With regard to the merchant navy, dismissing a crew member from a merchant ship because of a homosexual act—that is, specifically because the act was homosexual, as distinct from dismissal for participating in a sexual act irrespective of sexual orientation—would constitute sexual orientation discrimination, which contravenes regulation 4 of the Equality Act 2010 (Work on Ships and Hovercraft) Regulations 2011 in Great Britain. In
Northern Ireland, regulation 6 of the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 achieves the same outcome.

The provisions of the 1994 Act thus have no current legal effect. Over the years, both sections have been gradually amended until they have reached their present composition, whereby they make reference only to the merchant navy. The measures in those sections that dealt with offences relating to military discipline were repealed by the Armed Forces Act 2006, and all references to the armed forces were removed by section 14(3) of the Armed Forces Act 2016.

Section 14(3) of the 2016 Act was the consequence of a Government amendment tabled on Report. It was initially thought that it was not possible to repeal the aspects of sections 146 and 147 of the 1994 Act relating to the armed forces because they were tied up with the merchant navy, which was outside the scope of the 2016 Bill. The Government subsequently agreed to decouple the two issues, so they dealt in the 2016 Act with those aspects of sections 146 and 147 of the 1994 Act that related to the military and stated that the aspects dealing with the merchant navy would be addressed as soon as possible.

The Bill that we are debating advocates a similar approach to that taken by the Government in the 2016 Act. Although the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), suggested last year that the Department for Transport intended to deal with references to the merchant navy as soon as possible, my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury has beaten the Department to it with his Bill. I am pleased to note that the Government receive the support of the industry. Such references from the statute book will, I am sure, be removed by section 14 of the Bill—I will—but that fact is clear from the merchant navy code of conduct, which sets out much more up-to-date disciplinary and grievance processes, as well as guidelines for preventing bullying and harassment.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is doing a sterling job of setting out the background to and the detail of the Bill. Does he agree that it is important to recognise that, as is the case in most of society, the position of LGBT sailors has markedly improved over the last 20 years? That is not to say that I will not support the Bill—I will—but that fact is clear from the merchant navy code of conduct, which sets out much more up-to-date disciplinary and grievance processes, as well as guidelines for preventing bullying and harassment.

Craig Whittaker: What my hon. Friend might not know about my past is that I grew up in Australia and my father was in the merchant navy. I am going back many years, but I know from some of the old seafaring stories he used to tell me when I was a much younger man that bullying in the navy, particularly the bullying of homosexual and bi people, was absolutely rife, which was totally unacceptable. I therefore absolutely agree that the conditions for LGBT personnel on merchant vessels are now far better than they were in the days when my father was in the merchant navy, but I dare say that the Bill will make those conditions even better.

The “Code of Conduct for the Merchant Navy” was approved in 2013. It was agreed between Nautilus International, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and the UK Chamber of Shipping, and approved by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. The code takes into account the unique nature of working on a merchant ship and the fact that seafaring is a civilian occupation that imposes on seafarers certain demands that are not found in land-based jobs. To pick up my hon. Friend’s intervention, one of the key aspects of working on a merchant vessel is that those doing so live and work together with their fellow colleagues, so if they do not get on and there is bullying and intimidation, there is far greater stress for those on the receiving end of the bullying, because of the confined environment of the ships they work on.

Furthermore, “Guidance on Eliminating Shipboard Harassment and Bullying”, which is produced by the International Chamber of Shipping and the International Transport Workers Federation, affirms the importance of eliminating discrimination in respect of employment and occupation. It states:

“All seafarers have the right to work without suffering harassment and bullying”.

It also outlines

“the serious consequences for the physical and emotional health of seafarers”

subject to such bullying. The guidance makes it explicit that harassment and bullying based on a person’s sexual orientation is unacceptable, and sets out formal complaints and investigations procedures to ensure that all incidents of homophobic bullying are dealt with properly.

It is absolutely clear that the sentiment expressed in sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the 1994 Act is not shared by those in the shipping industry and is incompatible with their current policies, aims and values. The implication of the provisions as they currently stand—that being homosexual is incompatible with employment on merchant vessels—is outdated and unhelpful, so removing them and any possible ambiguity should be welcomed. Both the code of conduct and the guidance make it clear that LGBT people are welcome in the merchant navy. Any suggestion to the contrary is clearly wrong, and efforts to avoid any possible misunderstanding by removing such references from the statute book will, I am sure, receive the support of the industry.

There are a number of practical reasons for removing the sections and therefore for supporting the Bill. As several Members have already told me, doing so is also highly symbolic. In a sense, that aspect is arguably the most compelling reason for supporting the Bill. As I have outlined, legislation and Government policy relating to LGBT people have changed substantially during the past 50 years. However, the fact that we are discussing this issue today demonstrates that there is still a way to go.
Beginning with the Sexual Offences Act 1967, which decriminalised homosexual acts in private, we have witnessed many important milestones for LGBT rights over recent decades. I have already mentioned some of them, such as equalising the age of consent, removing the ban on serving in the armed forces and outlawing all other discrimination practices. Other measures implemented prior to 2010 include, but are not limited to, the repeal of section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, the right of same-sex couples to adopt children, and civil partnership legislation.

Since 2010, there have been further measures to enhance LGBT equality, as well as a consistent desire from the Government to tackle any remaining prejudices and discrimination. As my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury said, £2.8 million has been made available to tackle homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in primary and secondary schools in England as part of a three-year project that will finish in March 2019. The Government have worked alongside LGBT organisations to combat online abuse and harassment through the launch of the Stop Online Abuse website. Sport England has been asked to ensure that the involvement of LGBT people in sport receives an equal emphasis as part of its efforts to encourage wider involvement in sport.

Furthermore, for those who doubt how far we have come in a relatively short period, it is worth reflecting on the fact that our armed forces came second in the world’s first league table of the most LGBT-friendly militaries in the world in 2014, 14 years after the ban on serving in the military was formally overturned. We now have the Women and Equalities Committee, which is able to hold the Government to account on their approach to these issues. We have seen the development of the world’s first LGBT action plan produced by Government, and a number of measures to address the specific challenges that trans people face in their everyday lives.

The Government have also built on the posthumous pardon of Alan Turing with their announcement in October that those convicted for consensual same-sex relationships before the change in the law would be formally pardoned through an amendment to the Policing and Crime Bill. However, the most high-profile measure was the introduction of marriage for same-sex couples. The latest figures for England and Wales suggest that, since the first same-sex marriages took place in March 2014, over 15,000 marriages were recorded in the 15 months following the change in the law. The total figure will now be somewhat higher.

Sadly, we cannot change the events of the past or the discrimination and prejudice that LGBT people often experienced in society. We can, however, change the present. We can seek to tackle discrimination and intolerance where it still exists, and we can lead by example in this House when it comes to challenging legislation that is plainly inappropriate and inconsistent with the values that we hold today. For obvious reasons, approving this Bill will not generate the headlines that many of the legislative changes of the past have generated, and nor will it be remembered in the same way, but it is symbolic none the less. Its purpose is very much in keeping with the other legal and policy developments and changes within society that have radically improved LGBT rights over the past 50 years.

The Bill must be seen through the prism of that changing landscape. It is a small but important change to ensure that LGBT people are protected from discrimination in the workplace. If the Bill is passed, it will no doubt be seen in years to come as part of the gradual journey of improving LGBT rights in this country and of ending the historical prejudice that LGBT people have experienced. I am pleased to have been able to contribute to the debate, and I am pleased to support the Bill.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate at such an early stage. I serve on the Select Committee on Transport and am also an openly gay man, so I hope that I can bring my knowledge from both perspectives to our deliberations.

I start with the customary congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) on his good fortune in securing such a high place in the private Members’ Bills ballot and on choosing this subject. If I heard him correctly, if the Bill is successful it will be his second change to the laws of the land. I imagine that will make him eligible for membership of a fairly exclusive club of Back Benchers who have secured not one but two changes in the law, but we must not get ahead of ourselves. This is only Second Reading, and there are many more stages to come in this place and the other place.

I welcome the important point that both my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury and my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) made that the Bill is much more than a simple tidying-up exercise. Reading the explanatory notes and some of the briefings that were provided, I had some concern that the Bill’s sole purpose was to tidy up some clumsy legal arrangements in previous legislation. That is important, for the reasons that they set out, but I am glad that they appreciate the Bill’s wider significance in continuing the journey on LGBT issues that we have been on for many decades.

I appreciate that there would have been clumsiness in binding together the removal of discrimination in merchant shipping and in the armed forces. It would have been difficult to put the two together in a single measure in the Armed Forces Act 2016, and I am glad that the sensible decision was taken to decouple them and allow the welcome changes to the armed forces law to proceed without delay, rather than getting into a bit of a pickle by putting the two together. As both my hon. Friends have said, the Bill is the completion of a journey that has already been started. They gave a helpful précis of the changes that have happened, from the decriminalisation of homosexuality to the steps towards equality over the past few decades under Governments of all colours.

My hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley touched on the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. I would like to focus on it too, because there is a strong parallel between the process by which we arrived at that point and the Bill. If the House will indulge me, I would like to explain that thought.

When the Civil Partnership Act 2004 was introduced under Tony Blair’s Government, it was a recognition that it would be difficult to move straight to same-sex
marriage in law. There was wide acceptance at the time that although that was a desirable ultimate goal, the legal difficulties and the objections of many of the Churches would have made it difficult to go to that point straight away. I was not a Member of the House at the time, but I was perfectly comfortable with the Civil Partnership Act, as it gave same-sex couples pretty much the same rights that heterosexual couples had under civil marriage. There was a small legal difference in the provisions, but it was about 98% the same, and I thought that was good enough.

Craig Whittaker: It is interesting that my hon. Friend focuses on the same-sex marriage Act but also mentions the Civil Partnership Act introduced under Tony Blair. Does he agree that the latter was probably the most significant Act for equality, because it put those who went into civil partnerships on a footing of legal equality with married couples for the first time?

Iain Stewart: I agree with my hon. Friend to an extent. It almost put us on the same footing, but there was a difference—if he will forgive me, I will come on to that point in a minute.

Once the Civil Partnership Act was in force and many thousands of couples had taken advantage of it, the debate then became about whether we should move to full same-sex marriage. At the time I thought, “Do we really need to do this? Haven’t we got what we wanted, in practice, and aren’t we just going to be indulging in a bit of a sideshow that will not really make much difference?” I think other colleagues felt the same. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realised the importance of moving to full equality, as my hon. Friend has said. Although the Civil Partnership Act almost gave us equality, it was still not the same. Gay people and straight people were still treated differently under the law.

I mention that because we could argue today that the provisions of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 and the Equality Act 2010 would make it difficult for a seafarer to be dismissed because they were homosexual or had engaged in a homosexual act. However, that discrimination exists on the statute book, and there could be a case in which someone was dismissed for that. That is wrong, so the Bill is not just a tidying-up exercise but will send out a powerful signal. It might not be a huge thing, as they grow up. Having discrimination in the law on this matter adds to that. It might not be a huge thing, but it is part of the same problem.

I can relate my personal experiences. Growing up thinking that you are different is very tough. Even in these more enlightened times, people still think something is wrong with them, and they might be inhibited from pursuing what they want to do. It is not a well-known subject, but a growing body of evidence in psychology is unravelling and pointing out the damage that can be done. If Members are interested in reading about it, I would point them to a very good book by Professor Alan Downs called “The Velvet Rage”. He documents both in America and here how, even after homosexuality has been decriminalised, when we have same-sex marriage and civil partnerships and when much of the discrimination has been removed, lots of young people still grow up feeling different. Some deal with it better than others, but it still does long-term damage to a lot of people, and that is why removing discrimination in this non-legislation is so important; it is not just a tidying-up exercise.

If someone wants to pursue a career but thinks they cannot, that can be very damaging. For a long time in my teenage years and early 20s, when I had decided that politics was my passion and a career I wanted to pursue, I did think, “I can’t do it.” I thought I would live in fear of being revealed for who I was on account of something innate in me—I cannot change being gay; it is how I was born. It is as natural as being left or right handed or the colour of one’s hair. None the less, I thought that I could not pursue a career in politics because I was so afraid of being cast aside or being exposed for who I was. And that was in the late 1980s, early 1990s.

That is why section 28—or section 2A, as it was in Scotland—was so damaging. It really did have a detrimental effect. The Conservative party has apologised for it, but we should not underestimate the damage it did. I know it was introduced not as a discriminatory measure but to curb the excesses of some local authorities, but that was the effect it had. I decided it was not right not to be dissuaded from my career choice because of that. Can we imagine if Terry Wogan had been told he could not be a radio broadcaster because he had an Irish accent? It was that ridiculous.

I got through it, but it took me a long time to realise that I could still have this career, and now it is not an issue at all. Just this week, Parliament was voted one of the most LGBT-friendly places to work for both Members and staff, which is an incredible achievement of which we should be proud. The Bill is, therefore, more than symbolism. My hon. Friends the Members for Salisbury and for Calder Valley are right that it is symbolic, but it goes much deeper than that. It will not make the headlines—events over the pond might make the front pages tomorrow—but that should not detract from the effect the Bill will have.

Looking forward, I hope that our merchant navy has a bright future. In the post-Brexit world, I hope that this nation will regain its seafaring traditions and sell its goods right around the globe under lots of free-trade agreements with countries near and far, and I hope that...
those goods will be transported on the high seas. In making that happen, we need to have the best people to crew our ships. I do not want any young gay person thinking, “That’s not for me, I can’t do it. I’d be bullied, discriminated against and possibly dismissed”, and so being dissuaded from entering that profession.

The Bill is symbolic, and it is important for our future economic prosperity, but, above all, it is another important step on the journey to proper equality and towards breaking down those barriers, injustices and fears that afflict too many young people growing up. I hope that my comments today have helped to explain the Bill’s wider significance, and once again I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) on bringing it forward. I wish it every success in today’s vote—if it comes to that—in Committee and its remaining stages and in the other place. I will be proud to support it all the way through.

10.55 am

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): I will be brief, as the point I wish to make is not complicated. The Labour party wholeheartedly supports the Bill and everything it signifies, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) on bringing it forward. I wish to associate myself with his important comments about bullying in general but particularly homophobic bullying in schools. It is also a pleasure to follow my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), whom I congratulate on a heartfelt and powerful contribution.

The Bill’s intention is relatively straightforward. It will repeal two provisions in the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 suggesting that it could be lawful to discharge a member of the armed forces for a homosexual act; and out of date in terms of legislation, since, as we have heard, those provisions are from another age: they are archaic leftovers from a more illiberal time that, having been so hard won, we must recognise that still more to do. On this day in particular—reference in this country, but let us also remember that there is a reminder of how far we have come in increasing equality and that if I were to introduce a private Member’s Bill saying that there should forever and a day be seven days in the week, somebody would talk it out, just for the hell of it. I have no idea why they would feel so motivated, but I am sure that there would be a concerted effort to do so—I would obviously understand those reasons. My hon. Friend, who, for understandable reasons, is much more popular than me has no such problems.

My hon. Friend not only gave a very good explanation of his reasons for bringing forward the Bill but made a very powerful speech. The previous speakers on the Conservative Benches have pointed out that the Bill cannot be seen in isolation, but is part of a journey of many years and the progress we have made on social issues generally but particularly on gay rights. I do not even see these things as being about gay rights. In many respects, this is about dealing with things that should never have been illegal in the first place. It sometimes feels, when we talk about gay rights, as if we are doing someone a favour. It is nothing to do with that; it is all about making it clear that some of this legislation should never have been enacted in the first place.

It is very easy for us, living in our age, to criticise those who went before us, in years gone by, or to try in effect to impose our standards on them. It is a dangerous route to go down, and I do not intend to go down it, even though from our perspective, in this day and age, those pieces of legislation should clearly never have been enacted in the first place. However, people in different times obviously had different views, and we should not be too critical, because I dare say that in 50 or 100 years’ time there will be people in this place criticising the laws that we pass, saying that they were absolutely ridiculous, authoritarian and draconian and asking how on earth we could possibly have passed them, so it is dangerous for us to play that game.

I was struck by the reference that my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury made to the Wolfenden report, back in 1957, as the starting point for his Bill. It is good to be reminded of what an important part of our country’s history that report was—how important it was that Sir John Wolfenden and the 13-strong committee recommended that homosexuality should not be a crime and how obvious that seems to us today, but how big a deal it was back in 1957. My hon. Friend also made it clear that although many people today—indeed, virtually all of us—would criticise the Sexual Offences Act 1967, at the time it was seen as a liberalising measure. I guess that piece of legislation should also be seen in that context, and I very much congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing forward his Bill today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) also made a powerful speech. I was struck by his reference to his family background in the merchant navy. I have a feeling that other Members will say that they have some family connection to the merchant navy, and it is great to have that expertise in the Chamber. I was also struck by what he said about how we cannot change the past but we can change what happens now and in the future. That is the important thing to concentrate on in this place. Instead of always apologising for what other people did in the past, we should take responsibility for what we do now and what we can change for the future. That was a very good point he made.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) on steering the process of steering his second private Member’s Bill through the House in such a short space of time. It is something that I will never be able to do. I have a feeling that if I were to introduce a private Member’s Bill saying that there should forever and a day be seven days in the week, somebody would talk it out, just for the hell of it. I have no idea why they would feel so motivated, but I am sure that there would be a concerted effort to do so—I would obviously understand those reasons. My hon. Friend, who, for understandable reasons, is much more popular than me has no such problems.

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My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) gave a particularly powerful speech. Not only did he bring to bear his expertise from the Transport Committee, but the perspective he gave as a gay man on what this kind of legislation and the legislation it seeks to repeal mean to people was very powerful. Again, he talked about how this Bill was part of a legislative journey, and it should be seen in that context, rather than being seen in isolation.

I thought the most powerful message that my hon. Friend gave was when he talked about people not being able to do the job that they wanted to. It is an incredibly powerful point and one that is very easy to underestimate. Thank goodness he did pursue his career in politics: the House is much stronger for it and the Conservative party is much stronger for it, so it is great that he continued to pursue his passion. I cannot emphasise how ridiculous it is that someone should think, “I can’t pursue a particular career,” whatever it may be, simply because of their sexuality. It is sheer lunacy, in any day and age, but the fact that it happened to him so recently shows what a powerful point it is and how we should take it to heart. He is absolutely right: there will no doubt have been many people who wanted a career in the merchant navy who were deterred from pursuing it simply because of such legislation. The impact of that on people’s lives should not be underestimated. My hon. Friend’s speech was absolutely excellent, and I am sure that it will not have been lost on my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury that it was a clear pitch to serve on the Bill Committee.

I was also struck by the interventions made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who has clearly done an awful lot of research into this Bill and this subject. I was unaware of some of the points that she made in her interventions. [Interjection.] Here she is, right on cue. She made the point in one of her interventions about a ship being a residence rather than a place of work. I hope she will have the opportunity to go into that in more detail, because it is an important point that I had not grasped in looking at the Bill.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am struck by my hon. Friend’s remarks. He clearly has a depth of knowledge. I wonder whether he could enlighten the House about how his role on the Select Committee on Women and Equalities informs his views on this subject.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing attention to my place on the Women and Equalities Committee, of which I am very proud. In fact, I am rather touched that my candidature for the Committee was so popular that nobody even wanted to oppose me in the election. My hon. Friend is absolutely right; in fact, I believe in equality so much that I would rather the Committee were renamed the Equalities Committee, as it shadows the Government Equalities Office.

I do believe in equality. That is the agenda that I want to pursue on the Committee, and my hon. Friend is right: this issue is a key part of that. In fact, we should always make it clear that nobody should ever be discriminated against on the basis of their gender, race, religion or sexuality. All those things should be irrelevant; we should be blind to them. That is the agenda that I want to pursue and I hope that the passing of this Bill will help in that. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South talked about a journey, and that is the journey I want to see, where we do not see everything in terms of race, gender, sexuality or religion, but are completely blind to them and see them as irrelevant. This Bill is part of that journey.

As I hope I have indicated, the Bill clearly has support from across the House. I want to make it clear from the outset that I, too, will support it, should there be a Division. I am here to try to aid its passage through the House: I am certainly not here to try to block it. However, it would not be unreasonable for somebody to say that this Bill is a solution looking for a problem, in the sense that, oddly, it would bring about no tangible change in the law, so to speak, because subsequent legislation has effectively made the sections in question unenforceable and therefore already redundant. As the Library briefing for the Bill states:

“The Bill would repeal aspects of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 which suggest it would be lawful to dismiss a seafarer for a homosexual act. That law is in fact of no effect, as such a dismissal would fall foul of equality legislation. The current Bill is therefore primarily of symbolic value.”

Even the explanatory notes from the Government say that “the sections are no longer of any legal effect” and that the policy implication is “ambiguous” at best, pointing out that “repealing them would both be symbolic and would prevent any misunderstanding as to their current effect,” but would not change the law per se.

Mr Nuttall: It was probably a slip of the tongue, but I thought I heard my hon. Friend mention that the explanatory notes were from the Government, when surely this is a private Member’s Bill.

Philip Davies: That is a fair point, but the explanatory notes state that they “have been prepared by the Department for Transport, with the consent of” our hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury “in order to assist the reader of the Bill and to help inform debate on it.”

This is, of course, our hon. Friend’s Bill; that is not in any doubt. My point was that the explanatory notes had been prepared by the Government and their team of experts in the Department for Transport. It is probably fair to say that anyone who is tabling a private Member’s Bill will need the help and support of the sponsoring Department, and will need to tap into expertise that an individual Back Bencher will never be able to muster. I do not think we should carp too much about that particular point.

The aim of the Bill is to tidy up the legislative record and remove legislation that is no longer relevant—I think we can all agree that the existing legislation is absolutely not relevant; in my opinion it was never relevant, but it certainly is not relevant today—and also to clarify the legal position. As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South, people could quite easily read the current provisions and presume that they were still law. They might not realise that those provisions had been superseded by measures such as the Equality Act 2010. Although,
strictly speaking, the Bill will not make any practical difference in that sense, I think that for those reasons it is worth supporting.

The Bill is straightforward in many respects. It is short. It repeals sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, both of which preserve the right to dismiss a seafarer on a UK-registered merchant navy vessel for an act of homosexuality. Those sections relate not to criminal offences, but only to the right to dismiss a seafarer for an act of homosexuality. It is interesting to note that they do not state that seafarers should be sacked for homosexual acts, but do state that they could be sacked for such acts. That is the law that we are repealing, and rightly so. There is no justification for retaining the current provisions.

Section 146 states:

“Nothing contained in this section shall prevent a homosexual act (with or without other acts or circumstances) from constituting a ground for...dismissing a member of the crew of a United Kingdom merchant ship from his ship”.

Section 147(3) makes identical provision in respect of Northern Ireland.

The Sexual Offences Act 1967 decriminalised homosexual acts in private. Section 1(5), however, maintained that that this did not prevent a homosexual act from being an offence in military law, and section 2 maintained that homosexual acts would also remain an offence on merchant ships. I shall return to that point later, but I want to refer briefly to some case studies, because I think they bring to life the reasons why the Bill is important, and the problems that the existing legislation has caused for people—not abstract problems, but real ones.

It should be noted—because I think this has been an issue in the past—that section 2 refers to a homosexual act on a merchant ship. I believe that not only is the legislation that my hon. Friend seeks to repeal wrong in principle, but in some cases its practical application has stretched far beyond the actual wording. I shall return to that point later as well.

The 1994 Act dealt with homosexuality. Section 145 reduced the age of consent for homosexual acts from 21 to 18, and sections 146 and 147 removed the remaining criminal liability which existed under the 1967 Act. Sections 146(4) and 147(3) were added during its passage. During the passage of the Armed Forces Bill, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), said:

“When sections 146 and 147 were enacted, it was Government policy that homosexuality was incompatible with service in the armed forces and, accordingly, members of the armed forces who engaged in homosexual activity were administratively discharged.”


That policy was abandoned in January 2000, following the case in the European Court of Human Rights that my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury mentioned in his opening remarks.

Both sections have been progressively repealed over the years, leaving only the lines that I have just mentioned to be dealt with today. Related sections on military discipline and the sections relating to the armed forces have been repealed through both the Armed Forces Act 2006 and more recently the Armed Forces Act 2016. As Jeremy Hanley said during the passage of the 1994 Bill, as the Armed Forces Minister:

“It would clearly be anomalous for the situation in the Merchant Navy to be different from that in the armed forces.”—[Official Report, 12 April 1994; Vol. 241, c. 171.]

That, at the time, was the reason for ensuring that the legislation was in line with the current view about the armed forces, and it seems that that is the position in which we are now left. Back in 1994, the Minister was making the point that it should be anomalous to treat those in the merchant navy differently, yet here we are trying to tidy the legislation up.

This is not new. On 25 October 1982, Leo Abse, the Labour Member for Pontypool, said in the House:

“How absurd it is that the law should say that a man on a merchant ship can have a relationship with a passenger but that he cannot have such a relationship with a fellow sailor without an offence being committed. Absurdities are buried in the 1967 Act: that was the consensus of that time.”—[Official Report, 25 October 1982; Vol. 29, c. 850.]

I think that Leo Abse made a very good point back in 1982. The Bill has been a long time coming.

As for the distinction between the armed forces and the merchant navy, it is somewhat curious that the whole section was not amended in one go. Why was the distinction made between the armed forces and the merchant navy? Why have we repealed legislation for one but not for the other? It is not that a distinction was made between the two units in respect of how the legislation affects them, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury suggested, as the merchant navy is not part of the armed forces, it was outside the scope of the Bill that became the Armed Forces Bill Act 2016.

During the passage of that Bill, the Minister explained the reasoning, and my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) made the following intervention:

“During the evidence session for the Select Committee, on which I served, I asked Mr Humphrey Morrison, from central legal services, whether this could be done.”—[Official Report, 11 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 600.]

The answer was that it could not. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North, said that the issues had been decoupled, that the armed forces would deal with the first bit and the Department for Transport with the second, and that they would move ahead quickly. My hon. Friend’s Bill follows the commitment made by the Government then.

Some Members may take issue with that, and say that it should not have been left to my hon. Friend to deal with the issue through the luck of the draw and the Government should have legislated before now. I hope that when the Minister has the chance to turn his arm over later, he will be able to explain why the Government have left it to my hon. Friend, and not legislated as his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence suggested they would during the passage of the Armed Forces Bill.

Much has been said about this issue, but I think it important to reflect on why homosexual acts were grounds for dismissal in the first place, so that the reasons can be revisited today in that context. One of the best explanations in relation to military life came from my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) in 1996, when he was a Defence Minister. He said:
“The current policy of excluding homosexuals from the armed forces is not—I repeat, not—the result of a moral judgment. The prime concern of the armed forces is the maintenance of operational effectiveness and our policy derives from a practical assessment of the implications of homosexual orientation on military life. I do not believe that the services have a right to be different, but I firmly believe that they have a need to be different.”

My right hon. Friend went on to say that military life is different from civilian life, and this was a cross-party view at the time; it was made in the same debate by Dr John Reid—now Baron Reid—from the Labour Benches. My right hon. Friend went on to say in the debate:

“Service personnel are regularly required to live in extremely close proximity to one another in shared, single-sex accommodation with limited privacy and sometimes under stressful conditions.”

He also pointed out that the belief was that those conditions, with

“the need for absolute trust and confidence between all ranks, require that the potentially disruptive influence of homosexual orientation and behaviour be excluded.”—[Official Report, 9 May 1996; Vol. 277, c. 505-06.]

That was the view at the time, and I might add that General Colin Powell, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in America, held the same view at the time. He saw sexuality as different from race and sex. He said:

“Unlike race or gender, sexuality...is manifested by behaviour. While it would be decidedly biased to assume certain behaviours based on gender or membership in a particular racial group, the same is not true for sexuality.”

As I have said, this was the view at the time. We consider it to be a ridiculous view to hold. I do not condone or understand those views, but that was the consensus at the time—cross-party, in different countries. It was not unique to this country.

Kwasi Kwarteng: What significance does my hon. Friend place on the fact that the views he describes were enunciated only 20 years ago? That is a very short period in the social history of our country.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and in some respects we should be concerned that these things were still believed in, and legislated for, so recently, but it cuts both ways and the other side of the coin is that we should also be pleased that attitudes and views have changed so quickly. My hon. Friend is right that this is recent history—this is not from a long time ago. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South made that point very powerfully in his speech.

Lord Craig of Radley also said at the same time;

“The Armed Forces do not lend themselves to the concept of freedom from discrimination...For very good service reasons we discriminate against certain people, such as

“for eyesight, for hearing and for height...It is thus not reasonable to insist, when it comes to sexual proclivity, a very human condition, that it is wrong for the Armed Forces to discriminate or that it is wrong for them not to adopt the perceived contemporary civilian norm.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 20 June 1994; Vol. 556, c. 89.]

These were all views that were expressed relatively recently. I am delighted that things have moved on. As we have all seen, these are now not academic matters, because since these things have been resolved and common sense has prevailed, has the effectiveness of our armed forces been impaired in any way? Are our armed forces any less good today than they were back then? Of course they are not; they are still the best in the world. These are therefore not now academic exercises; it has been proved to be the case that these restrictions and this discrimination was completely unnecessary and pointless, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South said, they have deprived people who would have been excellent at a particular career of the opportunity of pursuing that career, which we should all regret hugely. The proof of the pudding has absolutely been in the eating.

It is significant, and perhaps inevitable, that the most widely reported spokesman of the people who were arguing for gay rights, Sir Ian McKellen, took a different attitude. My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex, a Minister at that time, reported him as saying:

“Why are Ministers even asking the military?”

My right hon. Friend went on to say:

“The not so hidden agenda of those who want to change Ministry of Defence policy is to steamroller aside the judgments, experience and wishes of the military.”—[Official Report, 9 May 1996; Vol. 277, c. 509.] I understand that in 1992 the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill recommended that the criminal law for members of the armed forces and the merchant navy should be changed so as to be the same as for civilians. In accepting that, the responsible Minister at that time said:

“It is not intended to alter the present disciplinary climate of service life.”—[Official Report, 17 June 1992; Vol. 209, c. 990.] The result was that after 1992 this had not made any difference to the administrative discharge procedure that had previously been adopted, but nor, apparently, were there any criminal prosecutions.

Viscount Cranborne, a Minister at the time, said in the House of Lords in 1994:

“Our Lordships’ permission, I should like to cover briefly the merchant navy aspects. My noble friend Lord Orr-Ewing has expressed considerable reservations about certain clauses. The clauses...provide that members of the merchant navy should cease to be subject to any special and additional criminal liability for homosexual acts on British merchant ships. The decision to decriminalise homosexual acts by repealing Section 2 of the Sexual Offences Act 1967 was announced in a Written Answer in another place last December. We believe that the clauses here achieve the purpose which was announced then and, as in the case of the Armed Forces, also amend the equivalent Scottish and Northern Irish legislation.

The basis of the decision was essentially to bring the merchant navy into line with the Armed Forces. The fact that the provision appears to have been used very little in the merchant navy is some encouragement to us. The shipping industry, including the unions, had been widely consulted before the announcement was made, and the general consensus within the shipping industry was clearly in favour of repeal. Again I look to my noble friend Lord Aldington when I say that unlike in 1967, the seamen’s union—now the RMT—is now clearly in favour of repeal. The Department of Transport is taking steps, in consultation with employers and unions in the shipping industry, to amend the code of conduct for the merchant navy. The effect of these amendments will be to make it an offence against the code to demand or solicit sexual favours from another member of the crew or to make unwelcome sexual advances to another member of the crew. Such offences, which will apply equally to heterosexual and homosexual conduct, will be subject to the industrial disciplinary sanctions provided for in the code of conduct.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 20 June 1994; Vol. 556, c. 104.]
However, in June 1994, Lord Boardman moved an amendment in Committee in the House of Lords to ensure that homosexual acts on merchant ships would continue to be grounds for dismissal after it had previously been removed by a last-minute amendment. As was reported in the 20 June debate, Lord Boardman said:

“I am in a perhaps happy position of moving an amendment the principle of which I believe has the support of most of the Committee. In effect it says that homosexual conduct in the Armed Services and in the Merchant Navy…will continue to be a ground for administrative discharge.”

That was not the original intention, and Lord Boardman continued:

“Unfortunately, I have been unable to persuade the Government as to how this can best be done. To avoid misunderstanding, it is probably necessary and helpful if I briefly run through the procedure which exists at the present time.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 20 June 1994; Vol. 556, c. 85-86.]

I am not going to go through that today as it is not particularly relevant, but this is how we got to the situation we are in today, and the then Minister of State for the Armed Forces, Jeremy Hanley, confirmed:

“The code of conduct for the Merchant Navy is being amended in consultation with the unions and employers. Now is an appropriate opportunity to enshrine in law our acceptance of the position and repeal the special provisions of section 1(5) of the Sexual Offences Act 1967.”—[Official Report, 12 April 1994; Vol. 241, c. 171.]

Successive Governments have kept this issue under constant review.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex also said in 1996:

“The High Court recommended that we should review our policy in the light of changing social circumstances, and of the experience of other countries where homosexuality is not a formal bar to service.”

An internal review was carried out but, unfortunately, it concluded that homosexuality was “incompatible with service life, if the armed forces were to be maintained at their full...operational effectiveness.”—[Official Report, 9 May 1996; Vol. 277, c. 508.]

That decision was clearly wrong, because nothing that has happened has made any difference to our operational effectiveness.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury was helpful when he said that this legislation would apply to the entire United Kingdom and that the matter was not devolved. Perhaps the Minister will be able to tell us a bit more about how that decision was arrived at and whether it could be challenged through the courts. I cannot imagine that any of the devolved Administrations would object to the Bill, but would it have been worth seeking their agreement anyway to prevent a vexatious legal challenge? I hope that it will not come to that, but perhaps the Minister will explain why it would have been so wrong to seek the permission of the devolved Administrations.

In Northern Ireland, a Mr Dudgeon complained to the European Commissioner for Human Rights that the Northern Ireland law on homosexual offences was in breach of articles 8 and 14 of the European convention on human rights. During the passage of Homosexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 1982, the Earl of Gowrie stated:

“Under Article 5 a homosexual act on a United Kingdom merchant ship between members of the crew of that or of any other United Kingdom merchant ship will continue to be an offence, as now.”

He also said:

“The two articles in question deal with the right to respect for private life and to freedom from discrimination. The commission concluded that the law in Northern Ireland breached Article 8 but that there was no need to examine the case under Article 14. The case was then referred to the European Court of Human Rights who, while taking into account the argument put forward by Her Majesty’s Government that the existing law in Northern Ireland was justified by the great and particular emphasis placed on religious and moral factors in relation to the law on social matters, decided that there was not sufficient reason for the interference with private life entailed in the present law in Northern Ireland. The court accordingly issued their judgment on 22nd October last year that the law in Northern Ireland breaches Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 26 October 1982; Vol. 435, c. 413-14.]

That was an equalisation between the countries of the UK, but it still left a homosexual act as an offence.

There was a Commons debate on the matter in 1994, but an early-day motion in 1993 alluded to the human side of the debate, which is what I will turn to next. These are not just abstract points; these are things that have affected real people in their real lives, and we should not underestimate their impact. The early-day motion stated:

“That this House believes that discrimination against homosexual men and lesbians serving in the armed forces should end; notes that an Able Seaman Brett Burnell serving abroad HMS ‘Active’ was discharged from the Navy recently purely on the basis of his homosexuality; further notes that this case is featured in a Channel Four Cutting Edge film transmitted on Monday 29th November; believes that the way in which this case was investigated by Naval authorities contradicted the undertaking given by the Minister of State for Defence Procurement in June 1992; and calls on Her Majesty’s Government urgently to review the ways in which the Royal Navy and the other armed forces deal with cases of this kind.”

From what I can gather from the case to which the early-day motion refers, Brett Burnell was seen going into known gay establishments and that was the reason for his dismissal. He was simply seen going into known gay establishments; he was not actually caught engaging in any homosexual acts, particularly not on a ship. As I said, section 2 of the Sexual Offences Act 1967 maintained that a homosexual act on a merchant ship would remain an offence. Bad though that legislation was, it strikes me that its application went way beyond what was actually written in statute and what was intended. Even under the law at the time, surely someone should not be dismissed simply for going into a known gay establishment. How on earth could that possibly constitute reasonable grounds for dismissal? It is absolutely ludicrous, but that was what happened to Able Seaman Brett Burnell, and it is a travesty that that ended his career in the Royal Navy. I do not know what happened to him following his discharge, but it is a disgrace that he lost his life in the Navy, serving our country, on those grounds. Such legislation led to his dismissal.

Why has this issue not been tackled before? As I mentioned earlier, the Bill will not have any tangible effect on the current practices of seafarers because the relevant provisions in the 1994 Act have been superseded by other legislation, notably the Equality Act 2010. However, it is interesting that those provisions were not repealed during the passage of the 2010 Act, because
that would have been the obvious vehicle through which to do so. I asked the House of Commons Library to confirm whether that would have been possible or if there was a particular reason why it was not. The answer to my first question was:

"on whether the law could have been amended by the Equality Act 2010: I would have thought that’s correct, and that the issue would likely have been in the Equality Bill’s scope.”

It seems bizarre. The whole point of the Equality Act was to put together lots of existing legislation in one Act, so it seems rather strange that this particular bit of the legislation was passed over during its passage.

I recall that the 2010 Act went through Parliament shortly before that year’s general election, so it might not have received the scrutiny that should have been carried out because it was being rushed through to meet the pre-election deadline. I will say in passing that this shows why all legislation that goes through the House, however well-meaning it is, should be properly scrutinised before it becomes law.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend is being generous in allowing interventions. I understand that he is a known sceptic of all legislation, so his point illustrates his general philosophy of bringing forward legislation sparingly. We must be thorough and we have to get things right. Does not this omission from the Equality Act suggest that his general approach is correct?

Philip Davies: I would not go so far as to say that I am against all legislation. In fact, I did say at the start of my speech that I support this Bill, and when the article 50 provisions come forward, it is likely that I will vote for them, too.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I know that we said that we would have quite a broad debate, but I certainly do not want to enter into a debate about what Bills will or will not be supported in the future. The hon. Gentleman probably has a good 20 minutes ahead of him and I would not want the discussion of other areas to add to that.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) led me astray, Mr Deputy Speaker, and you are quite rightly not allowing him to do that. I shall see him later to discuss Kempton Park’s closure.

My serious point is that this matter could have been dealt with many years ago if the 2010 Act had been scrutinised properly. The omission from that Act has meant that we have needed an entirely new Bill simply to correct a failure, and that is a great shame. The Equality Act 2010 (Work on Ships and Hovercraft) Regulations 2011 appear to be the final confirmation that this Bill is not going to change anything, because those regulations are the key piece of legislation relating to the 2010 Act that makes the original provisions redundant. Those regulations were made on 18 July 2011 and came into force on 1 August 2011.

I know that other Members wish to speak, so in the interests of time, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will not test your patience any further by reading out the part of the regulations that, in effect, makes the 1994 Act provisions redundant. They deal with the application of “Part 5 of the Act to seafarers working wholly or partly in Great Britain and adjacent waters” and make it clear that the 2010 Act does apply to seafarers and to ships working in this environment, so the position is clear. The regulations also come with an interpretation, which makes it clear that the 2010 Act is the Act that applies, goes through what is meant by a “United Kingdom ship” and a “United Kingdom water”, and sets out the legal relationship of a seafarer’s employment within the country.

The regulations therefore did make the position clear, but may hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South made the pertinent point that somebody who reads the 1994 Act might not know about the 2010 regulations. How many people in here know about the Equality Act 2010 (Work on Ships and Hovercraft) Regulations 2011? It is our job to deal with these things, but how many of us know about those regulations? How on earth can we expect the general public, who might well have been made aware of the law that was in place, to have known that it was superseded by the 2011 regulations? For that reason—normally I might have been tempted to say that the Bill is a solution looking for a problem, and therefore not necessary—I think that the Bill serves a useful purpose.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The historical understanding was quite clear: any subsequent Act implicitly repealed a previous one. In recent years, however, the courts have developed, particularly in relation to the European Union, an understanding of a hierarchy of legislation. They have decided what are and what are not constitutional Acts. We do not list Acts as constitutional and non-constitutional—all Acts that we pass are of the same level—so this is just about creating certainty.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes a very good point. The Bill therefore does not just have the advantage of being symbolic and removing something from the statute book that I feel should not have been there in the first place, as he makes a good case for saying why it might well have a practical application in law, too. It certainly removes any doubt about the situation—we can all agree on that—which has to be a good thing.
Finally—I do not want to test the patience of the House too much—let me just raise the concern relating to historical cases. During the debates on the Armed Forces Bill, people raised the issue of historical cases in which individuals had been treated unfairly under the 1994 Act and asked whether something could be done. This touches on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley when he said that we cannot really do anything about what happened in the past, and what we can affect is what happens now and in the future. Although I wholeheartedly agree with the repeal of the 1994 provisions, I wish to raise a note of caution about the pardoning of historical cases. A private Member’s Bill has been introduced about the whole issue of pardons for those convicted for homosexuality in the past. I am not going to get sidetracked down that road—

Mr Nuttall: It is the fourth Bill down today.

Philip Davies: Indeed, so we might well get on to that Bill again today. I will maintain a distinction between the two Bills, however, because there clearly is one. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) has made a point that shows how powerful contributions can be when we are discussing such details. He said:

“I had the sad duty of discharging a man administratively from my battalion. I really regretted it happening at the time, but I must urge caution about our going back in time to try to put right what was apparently right at the time but which was clearly wrong.”—[Official Report, 11 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 602.]

He put that very neatly, and I agree. There are plenty of ugly and wrong parts of our past in this country, but we cannot rewrite what happened or impose our beliefs on past generations, just as we would not want people in 100 years’ time to judge what we do today.

Craig Whittaker: On pardoning, does my hon. Friend agree that the situation is not as simple as he has just outlined? In our past, the age of consent has been 21; today it is 16. Someone might have had sex with a 14-year-old minor way back when, and that would still be illegal today. Does he therefore agree that it is very difficult to give a blanket pardon in such cases?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but my point is that I would be nervous about in effect giving pardons on the basis of what the law is today as against what the law was buck then; we have to accept that the law was what it was at the time.

In 1994, Lord Craig of Radley said:

“Finally, am I right in my concern that we no longer have complete confidence that European law may not one day attempt to rule that discharge on the grounds of homosexuality is discriminatory and illegal, and that this could apply whether discharge was by court martial or administratively and, even worse, be made retrospective and/or liable to compensation?”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 20 June 1994; Vol. 556, c. 90.]

Bill Walker, a former colleague of ours, said the following in this House:

“Can my hon. Friend the Minister give an assurance that if existing law is changed as a result of these amendments, anyone dismissed from the service under the existing legislation will not be able to appeal to the European Court and receive large sums of public money?”—[Official Report, 12 April 1994; Vol. 241, c. 172.]

This raises something that has not really been spoken about in this debate, but I hope that the Minister will address it. As I say, I am all for changing the law on this, and I support the Bill and will do what I can to secure its passage through the House. However, I hope that if we change the law, we will not have any unintended consequences whereby we open ourselves up to retrospective claims for compensation just because we are putting right today what was clearly wrong in the past. I genuinely do not know whether that needs to be made clear in the Bill, but perhaps the Minister will reflect on it. It might be something to consider in Committee or on Report, because that would allow us to be clear about whether that matter should be addressed by the Bill and if we might be opening ourselves up to unintended consequences.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury on his Bill for many of the reasons that have already been given, but especially those cited by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South. I would advise anyone inside or outside the House to read the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South if they did not hear it first time round. He made it perfectly clear why we should all support the Bill, whether it is technically necessary in law or not. It certainly should be supported, and I hope that it will pass into law.

11.50 am

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) and I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) on securing this incredibly important debate and on being successful in the private Member’s Bill ballot. If I understood his comments and those of colleagues correctly, it looks like this is the second time that he has piloted a private Member’s Bill on to the statute book.

John Glen: Not yet.

Peter Heaton-Jones: No; we will not count our chickens, but I hope that in a few weeks or months it will be the case. He is truly becoming a legislative leviathan, and I congratulate him on it.

My hon. Friend follows in a long line of Back Benchers who have piloted important legislative developments in the arena of social policy through the House, and I welcome his addition to this important historical trend. I want to say, in complete support of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, how struck I was by the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart). His comments, the way he framed them, and his personal testimony express better than any legal language could why we need to do this today. It is a personal matter for so many people and it has been swept under the carpet for so long. Even if this is a tidying-up exercise, if I can use that phrase, even if it is purely a symbolic change to make sure that different bits of our legislation do not give the wrong message, that sort of personal testimony is why it is so vital that we make it. I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley in saying that, if anyone outside this place reads...
just one speech in today’s debate, it should be that of my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South.

As has been said, the change that the Bill proposes is largely a symbolic one, but it is still vital. The Bill seeks to rectify an anachronism in our current legislation, which is the law as it applies to merchant ships. The Bill would repeal certain aspects of sections 146 and 147 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which suggest that it would be lawful to dismiss a seafarer for a homosexual act. Those sections repealed in England, Wales and Scotland and revoked in Northern Ireland laws that criminalised homosexual acts in the armed forces and aboard merchant ships. However, the two particular aspects of those sections that my hon. Friend’s Bill seeks to address today still maintain that homosexual acts could provide grounds for dismissing a member of Her Majesty’s armed forces or dismissing a member of the crew of a UK merchant ship. The Armed Forces Act 2016 repealed those parts of that previous Act as they maintain their hold over the Navy—Her Majesty’s armed forces—but they left in place the aspects relating to merchant ships. As such, we still have on the statute book in this country legislation that says:

“Nothing contained in this section shall prevent a homosexual act from constituting a ground for dismissing a member of the crew of a United Kingdom merchant ship from that ship.”

I am afraid that that wording on the statute book—even though it has been superseded, I am so pleased to say, by the Equality Act 2010—gives rise to a perception that is the last thing we want as a country that has moved so far to equalise the rights of the LGBT community. That is why, as symbolic as it may be, the change that the Bill seeks to introduce is so important.

Merchant ships are in the unusual position of being both workplaces and residences, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who has a habit of appearing back in her place just as she is being referred to—it is very clever; it is a skill that all Members should develop—pointed out correctly in an intervention, and that is partly why we are in the position that we are in. Many owners of merchant ships are able—because they are the outright owners of a residence as well as a workplace—to introduce and enforce rules and regulations on those vessels, as anyone in their own home can do for a visitor. They are able to ban alcohol, or smoking even by seamen in their own cabins while off duty. They can impose stringent restrictions on many other activities on health and safety grounds or merely because they feel that it is the right thing in their own residence. The danger is that, with this historical anachronism once and for all, even though it has been superseded by subsequent legislation. As right hon. and hon. Members have said, that should not have been legislated for in the first place. I am really glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury is using this opportunity to remove that from the statute book. It is absolutely the right thing to do.

The Bill’s implications are largely symbolic because, as has been mentioned, the Equality Act 2010—a very welcome piece of legislation—makes it absolutely clear that employers cannot fire or dismiss an individual employee because of their sexuality. That is, of course, welcome. None the less, it remains in my view incredibly important that we tidy up the statute book to remove that historical anachronism once and for all, even though it has been superseded. We need to ensure that we send a very clear message about the direction that we are taking, which is why the Bill, symbolic as it is, is still incredibly important.

There have been many pieces of legislation over the years, symbolic and otherwise, that have had tangible and very welcome implications for the lives of our LGBT citizens. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, which the Bill amends, was only passed in 1994, but since then we have taken so many positive steps: the equalisation of the age of consent, the repeal of section 28, which is the law as it applies to merchant ships. The Bill introduces same-sex marriage, which I wholeheartedly supported.

It was only a matter of time before Oscar Wilde’s name appeared in this debate; he once remarked that, yes, “we shall win, but the road is long, and...with monstrous martyrdoms.”

He was right. The road for our LGBT citizens has been too long, and too many people have suffered for too long. I am sure Oscar Wilde would be proud of the pace at which change is now coming. The list of changes that I mentioned, which have all really come in the last 15 or 20 years, have been significant and extremely welcome. My hon. Friend’s Bill continues that very welcome process. It purges the statute book of, frankly, pernicious clauses in historical and outdated legislation. That is vital.

Progress is being made, but we still have much to do. It is a source of regret that discrimination still exists in our society, despite the best efforts of legislators in this place over the years to try to put that right. There is still much work to be done. Fears still exist among the LGBT community that there is still not 100% protection. It is indeed very difficult for any Government to provide such protection, because so much of this comes down to individual attitudes and behaviours. We as a society still have a great deal of work to do to try to ensure that
people at quite a young age are educated and given the maturity to be able to deal with issues that are of such importance to our LGBT community. Sadly, there are still gaps in that understanding.

The Bill seeks to prevent dismissal on the basis of sexual orientation, which is welcome. However, one in five lesbian, gay and bisexual employees across all workplaces still say, according to the latest surveys that I have seen, that they have experienced bullying in the workplace in the last five years—one in five of the LGBT community! That needs to change. My hon. Friend’s Bill sends out the very clear message that here is yet another workplace in which we insist that the change is put in binding legislation.

Another figure worth quoting is that one in eight LGBT people have said that they would not be confident in reporting homophobic bullying in the workplace. Homophobic bullying in any workplace needs to be utterly condemned, but the fact that so many people who may be its victims do not feel comfortable in reporting it, or that the mechanism exists for them to report it, is simply something that we have to change. I echo earlier comments: I was pleased to see this week that, if I remember the statistics properly, Parliament is now among the top 30 best employers in the country for members of the LGBT community. That is something that we, and particularly the staff of the House, should be extraordinarily proud of.

We are told that even today 26%—more than a quarter—of LGBT workers are not open with their colleagues or managers about their sexual orientation; that echoes the comments that my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South made about how he felt unable to be open about his sexuality during his early career. That feeds into the comments I was making earlier. We have to change perceptions—hearts and minds—and the Bill helps to send that message loud and clear. The Bill may be largely symbolic, but the fact that we are having this debate and are determined—I hope—to make this symbolic change will send a clear signal that we will not allow any further discrimination.

It is all well and good tackling the relationship between the employer and employees—that, of course, has important material implications for LGBT citizens and workers—but changing hearts and minds must be the main aim. Symbolic Bills such as this, although limited in their legislative effect, are important, but only with a change in opinions will individuals such as those who feel they have to hide their real identities in the workplace feel confident enough to be open and out. Until that day, we cannot say that we truly have an equal society for our LGBT citizens, and workers in other countries.

Today, events across the Atlantic may knock this fine debate off the top of the news bulletins, surprising as that may seem; as a former journalist, I have a hunch that it will not lead the six o’clock news tonight, but let us do our best. On the day when President Obama leaves office in America, let us pay tribute to his work in advancing LGBT rights in the USA. The job is not finished by any means: in many states, someone can still be denied public services or dismissed from their job simply for being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. However, President Obama leaves office after eight years with the LGBT community in the States far more protected than it has ever been. Let us hope that nothing is done over the next four or eight years to unwind any of that good work.

The Bill seeks to tidy up legislation in the UK so that we in this country can, hopefully, say the same sort of thing about ourselves as we can say about President Obama on the day he leaves office: that a clear signal has been given that we will not tolerate discrimination against the LGBT community—on merchant ships or in any other workplace, or in society and the country as a whole.

Reference has been made to the European Union. Mr Deputy Speaker said earlier that we should not go down that particular debating cul-de-sac, so I shall not do so for too long. I simply say that, as we leave the European Union, which we will do, we must ensure that the progress that many of the nations in it have made continues. However, we must be aware that, in some of our European neighbours, particularly in eastern Europe, there is more to do on understanding, on educating the citizenry and on attitudes towards LGBT communities.

It is absolutely the case that people in employment have a right to be free from discrimination because of their sexuality, and that is the case in any nation. That is as important to a young eastern European who, growing up, aspires to work on a merchant ship as it is to a young person in any other country. As we leave the European Union, we must keep it in mind that some of our former European Union partners—we will still be in Europe, if not in the European Union—still have a little way to go. We must therefore continue to advocate our values in Europe, and the Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury goes a long way towards achieving that and sending that very clear message, which is another reason why I welcome it.

We must also use our position in the Commonwealth to push for even more fundamental rights for LGBT people. In far too many Commonwealth nations, regrettably, members of the LGBT community still have to hide their identities and still have to lead lives where they pretend to be somebody they are not. Outside our family of Commonwealth nations, in countries across the globe, it is a disgrace that there are still places where people are criminalised simply because of whom they love. Thank goodness, the UK is no longer one such country, and the Bill helps absolutely underline that fact, which is why I welcome it.

I have just a final thought on the wider implications of the discussion we are having today, reflecting the international flavour of some of the points I seek to make. It is often said that the UK ought to have a more “muscular” international development policy and that we should maybe even withdraw, or threaten to withdraw, funding from nations where there is discrimination against
LGBT people and whose Governments are not, in our estimation, addressing that speedily enough. In my view, that would not be the solution; the solution is to double down and to make absolutely clear what the UK’s view is.

The key to ending discrimination is influence and education. Our international aid budget has an important role to play in educating countries with some of the poorest people in the world, and changing the attitudes of young people through that education is vital. It is important to do that internationally and in the UK as well, and my hon. Friend’s Bill gives an incredibly powerful and important sign to young people in this country that the UK is leading the way. It is important to send that message in this country, and indeed across the globe, which is why I am so pleased to support the Bill today.

In conclusion, we have come a long way in the UK. We are almost there, but we are not all of the way there yet. There still exists on our statute books this historical anachronism, which seems to suggest that we will allow, or at the very least turn a blind eye to, discrimination against gay people serving in the merchant navy. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury has secured this debate, and he will hopefully secure the passage of the Bill, to ensure that we no longer have these pernicious measures on our statute books. The Bill does nothing less than advance the cause of equality.

We have already heard some excellent speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) made a powerful speech, as other Members have said. He gave his personal view of the Bill and said how important such measures are for him and the gay community in general. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) gave a tour de force of how the legislation has developed over the years.

I am not sure whether my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury realise how lucky he is that his Bill was first in line for debate today, this far into the parliamentary year of private Members’ Bills. In most other years, a Bill this far down the list would not even have been debated, because other Bills would have been at Report stage. Even though my hon. Friend’s Bill was No. 18 in this year’s ballot for slots for private Members’ Bills, he has had good fortune in the way in which the Bills have fallen and, as luck would have it, his is the first Bill to be debated this morning.

Before I start, I want to mention briefly, in passing, that there is a curious link between both my and my hon. Friend’s constituencies and the merchant navy. It involves the merchant navy class No. 35009 Shaw Savill steam locomotive, which was named after a merchant navy company. Apparently the design drew on British merchant naval heritage. When it was built it was allocated to the Salisbury shed in my hon. Friend’s constituency, but at the end of its life it finished up at Riley and Son Ltd, the locomotive engineers in my constituency of Bury North. Of course, anybody who is expert or who takes an interest in these things—perhaps many have only a passing interest in them—may think that they have heard that name before. I never miss a chance to give a plug to a company from Bury, so this is a great opportunity to mention—

Mr Nuttall: The reason that hon. Members may recall having heard the company’s name is that it has recently been in the news for having restored the Flying Scotsman, which is the most famous of all steam locomotives. Were it not for the merchant navy, that steam train would not have existed.

Mr Nuttall: I have finished talking about that, Mr Deputy Speaker. I said it just briefly in passing.

Any private Member’s Bill has to be assessed against several criteria, the first of which is: what is it designed to do, and is there a real purpose for it? Having looked at it, I think that this Bill is essentially about clarity. I would like to be clear about what the Bill is and is not designed to do. It is a short Bill that would omit sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which allow the dismissal of a person from the merchant navy just because they have engaged in homosexual conduct. The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights campaigner Peter Tatchell has said:

“It is shocking that this exemption from the equality laws remains on the statute books, after so many years of law reform for gay equality. Repeal is long overdue, and most welcome.”

Section 146(4) of the 1994 Act extends to England, Wales and Scotland. Section 147(3) is the equivalent provision in Northern Ireland. The 1994 Act repealed section 2 of the Sexual Offences Act 1967, which stated—in the language that was used at the time—that “buggery” and “gross indecency” by a member of crew on a merchant navy ship constituted an offence.

MR DEPUTY SPEAKER (MR LINDSAY HOYLE): It is if it is in scope.

Mr Nuttall: The reason that hon. Members may recall having heard the company’s name is that it has recently been in the news for having restored the Flying Scotsman, which is the most famous of all steam locomotives. Were it not for the merchant navy, that steam train would not have existed.

Mr Nuttall: I have finished talking about that, Mr Deputy Speaker. I said it just briefly in passing.

Any private Member’s Bill has to be assessed against several criteria, the first of which is: what is it designed to do, and is there a real purpose for it? Having looked at it, I think that this Bill is essentially about clarity. I would like to be clear about what the Bill is and is not designed to do. It is a short Bill that would omit sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which allow the dismissal of a person from the merchant navy just because they have engaged in homosexual conduct. The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights campaigner Peter Tatchell has said:

“It is shocking that this exemption from the equality laws remains on the statute books, after so many years of law reform for gay equality. Repeal is long overdue, and most welcome.”
homosexual conduct could be used as a ground for dismissal. Section 146(4) states:

“Nothing contained in this section shall prevent a homosexual act (with or without other acts or circumstances) from constituting a ground for dismissing a member of the crew of a United Kingdom merchant ship from his ship.”

It is interesting to look back in Hansard at the objections that were raised against decriminalising the offences set out in section 2 of the 1967 Act. During the debate on the Bill in the other place on 10 May 1966, the Earl of Kilmuir quoted objections from seafarers’ organisations that believed that homosexual conduct could lead to “dissension” among the crew, and even to “violence”.

In the book “Hello Sailor! The Hidden History of Gay Life at Sea” by Jo Stanley and Paul Baker, which was published in 2003, the authors discussed the problem faced by gay crewmen in the merchant navy. They wrote:

“In the 1950s...all gay men were, to an extent, part of an anti-society, but this was even more apparent in the Merchant Navy, where being gay could result in dismissal or transfer.”

As I think my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South said in passing, this was a genuine fear of being dismissed. Homosexual crewmen were so frightened of being discovered that they communicated in a slang code—a form of secret code—that they called Polari. Apparently, its name comes from the Italian word “parlare”, which translates as “to talk”. Those are snapshots of a different attitude from a different era. The provisions in the 1994 Act remind us of what things were like in the 1950s, and I suggest that that is evidence for why they have no place on the statute book in the 21st century.

The next factor I look at when considering a private Member’s Bill that comes before the House on a Friday is how big the problem is that the Bill seeks to address: having established that there is a problem, how big is it? For this Bill, the question is: how many merchant navy crewmen would it affect? In the book “Maritime History and Identity: The Sea and Culture in the Modern World” by Duncan Redford, published in 2013, it is observed that one of the practical obstacles for shipping lines wanting to dismiss homosexual crewmen was that demand for stewards exceeded supply, and a total dismissal of gay or bisexual workers

“would have decimated the workforce and made ships inoperable.”

The short answer to the question of how many have been dismissed even in recent times is, I suspect, either not many or perhaps no one.

The maritime news website Lloyd’s List stated in an article about the Bill we are now considering posted on 6 July:

“Both shipping employers and shipping unions said...they were unaware of anyone losing a job on such grounds, at least in recent decades.”

I must confess—I am pleased to say this—that it is not an issue that has been raised with me as a constituency MP. I would be interested to know whether other hon. Members in the Chamber have had constituents raising the problem with them. It is perhaps why repealing sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 has not been seen as a particularly urgent matter.

Philip Davies: That is only one side of the equation, because it does not address the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) about how the provisions may have deterred people from pursuing such a career in the first place. When it comes to asking how many people have been affected, the answer is in a sense unknown, because the provisions may have affected an awful lot of people who decided not to pursue a career in that industry.

Mr Nuttall: My hon. Friend makes a very good and pertinent point. The provisions may well have had a hidden effect, and we may never know how many people have been affected in that way. People may have stumbled across the provisions or, if they live in a seafaring community on the coast, someone—this is the established law and has been in place for many years—may have said, “Well, I wouldn’t go down that road if you’re homosexual. I wouldn’t go to sea because you risk losing the job.” That could have put people off, so my hon. Friend is right.

I have explained why repealing the provisions has not been seen as particularly urgent and why we are talking about omitting these sections of the 1994 Act only now. The problem that the Bill seeks to address is not one to which we can ascribe a specific number of people who have been dismissed, because the provisions we are discussing no longer have any legal effect.

I would argue that the Bill seeks to address another problem, which is the very important point that we should not have a potentially confusing provision on the statute book. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon also made an important point about making it clear to the homosexual community where we are and where the law is. We should go further in making sure that we do not have pieces of legislation on the statute book that are contradictory or no longer have any validity. I believe it would be sensible if it were regular practice that, in each successive Parliament, the Government brought forward a tidying-up consolidation Bill so that matters such as this could be dealt with. That would give the Cabinet Office the opportunity, at least once every five years, to collate any bits of legislation that Members had come across, or had had brought to their attention by members of the public, that needed repealing. They could all be dealt with in a repeal Bill. I appreciate that the Minister is from the Department for Transport, so that is not necessarily his responsibility, but perhaps he will discuss the idea with colleagues across Government, including in the Cabinet Office.

It is worth mentioning briefly why the provision in the Bill was not introduced when the provisions relating to the armed forces in the 1994 Act were dealt with in the Armed Forces Act 2016. The 2016 Act repealed the equivalent parts of sections 146 and 147 of the 1994 Act to the ones that we are discussing. It appears that it was because of how the Armed Forces Act was drafted. Consideration was given to whether it might be possible for that Act to repeal the provisions relating to homosexual conduct in the armed forces. In fact, that was done only through a Government new clause on Report, moved by the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster). He said:

I am delighted to be speaking to this new clause today. It reflects the Government’s commitment to the fair and equal treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender armed forces
personnel. It repeals two provisions regarding homosexuality in the armed forces that are inconsistent with the Department’s current policies and the Government’s equality and discrimination policies more generally.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) asked him specifically about the merchant navy, saying:

“During the evidence session for the Select Committee, on which I served, I asked Mr Humphrey Morrison, from central legal services, whether this could be done. The answer I was given was that because it was tied up with the merchant navy, it could not be done. What has changed to allow this to go forward?”

The Minister replied:

“We have simply decoupled the two issues. We will be dealing with this matter in this Bill and the Department for Transport has made it clear that it intends to deal with the merchant navy aspect as soon as possible. I am delighted to say that we are therefore moving ahead quickly, as we said we would.”—[Official Report, 11 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 600-601.]

The result of that statement, I think, is the Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury.

There was a high-profile case that went to the European Court of Human Rights, that of Smith and Grady v. United Kingdom. The first applicant, Jeanette Smith, was a senior aircraftwoman who had been dismissed from the Royal Air Force in 1994 after being found to have been in a relationship with another woman. I took the trouble to read through the full report of the case—obviously the judgments in such cases are lengthy—and it was harrowing and disturbing to see what had happened. It must have been enormously distressing for the individual involved. According to the judgment, an internal armed forces report described her “general assessment for trade proficiency and personal qualities as very good and her overall conduct assessments as exemplary.” She was dismissed, however, because at the time homosexuals were barred from the armed forces.

The second applicant, Graeme Grady, was a sergeant posted as a personnel administrator to Washington at the British Defence Intelligence Liaison Service. He was also dismissed from the RAF in 1994 after being found to be in a relationship with another man, but was described as a “loyal serviceman”. The report of the case sets out the rigorous and intrusive investigations that these individuals had to undergo. The European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Government had breached both the applicants’ rights under article 8 of the European convention on human rights—the right to a private and family life—and the case resulted in the Government changing their policy and allowing homosexuals to serve in the Army, as was reflected in the Equality Act.

What is the scope of the Bill? One further question that I always like to consider in respect of any private Member’s Bill is: are there likely to be any unintended consequences? This was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley. It is always worth while considering whether a Bill would have any consequences that might not be obvious at first sight. I am pleased to say, however, that the Bill does not fall foul of that inquiry. We always need to be precise about the scope of a Bill, and we should be clear that the Bill, which we all support, is about tidying up the statute book. We should not try to mislead anyone into thinking that it will have an enormous effect on their personal lives. Repealing the relevant sections of the 1994 Act will not mean that fewer gay or bisexual people in the merchant navy are dismissed, because, as mentioned, under part 5 of the Equality Act, they already have protection against any employer who tries to dismiss them for having a gay relationship.

The Equality Act prevents an employer from discriminating against an employee, by, for example, dismissing them on the grounds of a protected characteristic, and one of those characteristics is sexual orientation. The Equality Act 2010 (Work on Ships and Hovercraft) Regulations 2011 extended the provisions in part 5 of the 2010 Act to include merchant ships. Seafarers, irrespective of their nationality, working on board a UK-registered ship enjoy protections under this legislation. We need to stress the point that this covers all seafarers, not just UK nationals. As I said earlier, my brother is in the merchant navy, so I know that the crew come from all over the world; it is a united nations approach to employment.

The Bill does not make discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation on a merchant ship any more unlawful than it is now, but it does remove any ambiguity on this point. It is worth noting the unusual position of ships: they are both a workplace and a residence for those on board. My brother spends some of his day on duty but at other times he is free to be in his cabin, relax and do other things. As a result of this dual-purpose approach on board ships, operators may impose restrictions at work that extend into what might otherwise be considered a person’s private life. An example might be prohibiting the consumption of alcohol, because even off-duty crewmen might be called on to work at very short notice, presumably in rough seas or in an emergency, to carry out duties that would require a clear head. Some shipping operators do allow alcohol off duty, but state that crew must never be intoxicated at any time. Breaching such a requirement could lead to dismissal.

Craig Whittaker: Does my hon. Friend agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) said about merchant ships? Not only is a merchant ship a workplace, but it is considered a person’s home for much of the year. The mere fact that merchant seamen have these restrictions on their private lives as well as their working lives—they are working in a confined space—increases stress levels, particularly where they are potentially being bullied because they are homosexual.

Mr Nuttall: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I would venture to suggest that being in a confined space for weeks or months at a time can indeed increase the stress factor. There is a further impact, in that some operators impose bans on things such as smoking on safety grounds, even though they apply to what is a private living space—one’s home—and would not apply in other areas. Nevertheless, this Bill would put it beyond any doubt that homosexual conduct, which would be perfectly lawful in all other spheres, would not provide any grounds for dismissal and would protect any seafarer should an employer try to enforce the old rules.

As the explanatory notes to the Bill make clear, the problem with leaving sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the 1994 Act on the statute book is that it gives the impression that gay or bisexual people are not welcome in the merchant navy. Anybody who comes across those provisions on the internet, or as they are passed down from generation to generation, could be deterred from applying for a job.
in the merchant navy. As we position Britain as an outward, globally trading nation, it is important that we encourage people from all backgrounds and walks of life to go into trading and commercial professions. From cargo to leisure, recruiters will need skilled and capable workers who are undeterred from applying. Any artificial barriers to employment that may be construed from the 1994 Act are very unhelpful indeed.

I believe that laws should be clear and precise, so even though we are not faced with an enormous practical problem, in terms of vast numbers of dismissals, it is necessary to neaten up the statute book to avoid any confusion. It is simply good practice. Indeed, Andrea Woelke, the chair of the Lesbian and Gay Lawyers Association, is reported in Lloyd's List as saying that repeal of those sections of the 1994 Act “creates legal certainty and sets the right sign”.

One other question that I always ask when considering a private Member’s Bill is that of cost. It is important when scrutinising private Members’ Bills on a Friday to ask whether there will be any cost to the public purse. So often worthy issues are raised, but we then find out that they come with a hefty price tag attached, requiring a money resolution and ultimately diverting taxpayers’ funds from other important calls on the public purse. I am pleased to say, however, that, as the explanatory notes make clear, there is no anticipated cost to the public purse.

The Bill has two clauses, and I have dealt with the first, but I want to touch briefly on the second, which deals with the Bill’s commencement, extent and short title. Clause 2(1) states:

“This Act comes into force at the end of the period of two months beginning with the day on which it is passed.”

On the face of it, that is a standard and routine provision, and it would seem reasonable. There would be no requirement for a longer adjustment period, because the merchant navy is already required to abide by the Equality Act 2010, and thus would not have to make any changes in what it already does. Arguably the only change is the confirmation that the provisions in the 1994 Act no longer apply, and therefore could no longer be used as grounds for dismissal. If the merchant navy tried to do that, it would be prevented, and a seafarer would have protection under the equalities legislation.

I do, however, believe that there is an argument for a shorter period. Having thought about the matter, I can see no reason why the words in the middle of that sentence should not be omitted, so that the sentence would read: “This Act comes into force on the day on which it is passed.” My hon. Friend and the lawyers would read: “This Act comes into force on the day on which it is passed.” My hon. Friend and the lawyers may wish to give some thought to that before the Bill proceeds further.

As a rule, I have no truck with legislation that is purely symbolic. To my mind, legislation is not there simply to make gestures, and I would not support a Bill solely on that basis. However, I believe that this Bill serves a genuine purpose. It tidies up existing legislation, and clarifies the issue with which it deals for the benefit of both the public and employers. It has identified an anomaly in the law, and seeks to address it. I think that it will make life easier for employers and employees in the merchant navy, and is therefore a good step forward. I note, incidentally—I do not think that this has been mentioned so far today—that there is an annual Merchant Navy Day on 3 September. Many local councils participate, including Bury council in my constituency, and the red ensign, the official flag of the merchant navy, is flown on public buildings.

Our commercial seafaring operations will continue to be a crucial part of this country’s global future, and it is important for the legislation applying to it to support equality and be fit for the 21st century. I believe that this Bill is relatively uncontroversial, as well as being straightforward and sensible, and that it should be allowed to make progress. I will support it, and I urge Members on both sides of the House to do likewise.

12.48 pm

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in the debate, and also to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall). I very much enjoyed his extensive and detailed speech. It was good to hear about his personal and family connection with the merchant navy, and I know that that connection is shared by our hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), who made a very good speech. It is also a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart)—he is no longer in the Chamber, but he made a moving, personal and powerful speech in support of the Bill—for Shipley (Philip Davies) and for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones). I hope to build on their important contributions. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on his contribution and support for the Bill.

Of course I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) on introducing this important Bill. He had the good fortune of securing a place on a Friday in the private Member’s Bill ballot. I congratulate him on his hard work to bring the Bill before the House, as well as on his campaign on this important issue of updating the law relating to our merchant navy.

My hon. Friend is a strong champion of equality and diversity in this House and his constituency. He has been a strong advocate of equal rights in this House and outside it. I particularly enjoyed his “PoliticsHome” article this morning in which he set out some of the background to the Bill and his reasons for bringing it to the attention of the House. Although the Bill comprises only one substantive clause, it corrects an important legal anomaly. Such action is long overdue and greatly to be welcomed.

The Bill sends a strong message from the House that equality is a key aspect of Britain’s modern society and our industrial practice. It repeals erroneous provisions in the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. It will avoid confusion to anyone investigating the law by looking through Hansard or the statute book. It will mean that no one will be able to interpret previous provisions as in any way representative of the modern, diverse society that Britain is today, or the modern, diverse profession that is now the merchant navy. I congratulate all my hon. Friends on their detailed, informative speeches and on bringing this topic to the attention of the House.

I want take the House back to Christmas eve 2013—just over three years ago—when Alan Turning, the wartime
codebreaker, was granted a posthumous pardon by Her Majesty the Queen for his criminal conviction for homosexuality. Dr. Turing was the man who helped Britain to win World War Two, but he killed himself after receiving that conviction in 1952. He was a scientist, an innovator and a mathematician. He is widely considered to be the father of theoretical computer science and artificial intelligence, both of which are foundations of the fourth industrial revolution, which is a topic that hon. Members know that I have been keen to bring to the attention of the House and the country as a whole.

Today, Dr Turing is widely recognised across Britain in public life, not just in this House. The computer room at King’s College, Cambridge, Turing’s alma mater, is called the Turing room, and the Alan Turing Institute, which is headquartered at the British Library, is our national institute for data science. Five founding universities—Cambridge, Edinburgh, Oxford, University College London and Warwick—and the UK Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council created the institute in 2015 to answer the national need for investment in data science and research. The centre’s mission is to make great leaps in order to change the world for the better, and the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury does a similar thing by making sure that people in our modern merchant navy receive the equality and respect they deserve for their hard work.

Turing’s conviction is one of the greatest travesties of modern justice. Today, such an appalling and blatantly wrong decision would be unthinkable, and rightly so. Only since 2000 have gay and lesbian people been allowed to serve openly in Her Majesty’s armed forces, and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is now rightly forbidden. In fact, the military actively recruits gay men and women. Hon. Members who, like me, hold jobs and apprenticeships fairs will know of that from the recruitment officers who proudly come to our events to talk about the great work that our armed forces do to protect us night and day, both at home and abroad. I know from first-hand experience at such fairs that the Royal Navy actively recruits through gay magazines and allows gay sailors to hold civil partnership ceremonies on board ships. Since 2006, the Navy has allowed sailors to march in full naval uniform at gay pride parades.

I have seen that spirit of equality myself over the past 18 months because I have had the pleasure and honour of participating in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, which gives Members from both sides of both Houses the opportunity to do a little bit of light work experience with the Royal Navy and the other armed forces. Although he is not here, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) on his hard work in co-ordinating the programme and on bringing parliamentarians from both sides of the House into closer contact with members of not only the armed forces—the Royal Navy in my case—but the merchant navy and the wider armed forces military and civilian family. From the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom in Wiltshire—the county of my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury—to the deck of HMS Duncan, where I had the opportunity to spend time with the crew on a passage from Cardiff to Portsmouth, and also to the freezing shores of the Norwegian Arctic, where my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and I trained with Royal Marines, I have seen the spirit of equality that pervades our armed forces today, which we hope will continue at all ranks of the merchant navy.

The Bill has great relevance to my Havant constituency, the wider Solent region and the south coast of England. Havant and the south coast have a proud seafaring tradition. Many generations of constituents have joined the Royal Navy and the merchant navy. Generations of seafarers have been part of Britain’s maritime past and will form part of our maritime future. Members of the merchant navy have sailed proudly under the red ensign and helped to further the UK’s commercial and maritime interests.

From an old heritage to the age of ultra-modern cargo and container ships, today’s commercial shipping fleets, which form part of Britain’s maritime capability, span the globe, using the latest technology to help to transport more than 90% of the world’s trade. Specially designed vessels support the oil and gas industries, and the colossal bulk carriers made for iron ore, grain, coal and other commodities are proud symbols of Britain’s maritime strength.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South said, in the age of Brexit, we must be an outward-looking, global trading nation and strengthen our connections with the world. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North is right that we must ensure that the merchant navy is accessible to people of all backgrounds and sexualities. That is why the Bill is so important. We have to send out the right message and ensure that our merchant shipping capability is open to people of all backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, races and sexualities.

The work of my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South on international trade is important. He mentioned free trade agreements, and we know that we can trade in the modern world only if our merchant shipping fleet is fit for purpose. We can make legal agreements with our friends and partners in Europe, Asia, north America, Africa, Latin America and other parts of the world, but we have to turn those paper commitments into practical reality, and this country’s merchant shipping capability plays a key role in that.

The merchant navy has evolved over many centuries. It has changed as industry and society have changed. I draw the House’s attention to the merchant navy’s code of conduct and the position of LGBT sailors in the merchant navy, which has improved markedly over the past 20 years. The code of conduct has traditionally been the basis of disciplinary and grievance processes. There are also now clear guidelines on preventing bullying and harassment, which were adopted by the merchant navy and then our European partners, and subsequently internationally at the UK’s instigation. The UK’s international role in trying to change views on homosexual conduct is important and I will return to that later in my speech.

The national maritime occupational health and safety committee has published guidance for shipping companies on HIV and AIDS, which includes advice on prevention and policies for employing those living with HIV. It is important that we ensure not only that the merchant shipping industry is open, but that those who employ our merchant sailors are mindful of the specific challenges that people may face, such as medical issues.

How is it that, in 2017, a provision remains on the statute book to provide that a homosexual act on a
registered merchant navy vessel may constitute grounds for discharging a member of the merchant navy? This makes no sense at all. Although, as a number of hon. Members have mentioned, the provision could never be applied, thanks to the Equality Act 2010, it sends completely the wrong signals and is open to misinterpretation. My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury mentioned that in his opening remarks. It would not be right if anyone investigating the statute book to understand the UK’s legal framework for merchant shipping in the context of trade and investment in the age of Brexit found provisions that seem to purport to allow people to be dismissed from the merchant navy as a result of their sexuality.

We are talking about only two sections here, but we need to change them completely to make sure that the principles embedded in our modern armed services, which I mentioned earlier, are reflected in our merchant shipping fleet and the legislative framework around it. The whole of our society is based on those principles, and everyone in this House can say with pride that the UK now has the highest number of openly LGBT parliamentarians in the world. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South rightly made a point of that in his personal and powerful speech when he talked about how he is a living example of somebody who has not allowed prejudice about sexuality to stop him building a successful career here in Parliament and elsewhere. We should try to repeat that model for our merchant navy fleet.

I am proud that this Government introduced the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, which legalised marriage for same-sex couples in England and Wales, and that we are keen to continue tackling homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, particularly in terms of bullying. This Bill is very much in that vein. My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury mentioned the three-year Government programme—it runs from September 2016 to March 2019—that aims to prevent and respond to bullying in primary and secondary schools in England in a sustained and meaningful way. As a former school governor, I welcome the emphasis on not just our merchant seamen and employers, but on educating our children and young people about the need to make sure that homophobia, transphobia, biphobia and other types of discrimination are not part of British society, and about the fact that when they enter the workplace, be it in the merchant shipping fleet or any other sector, that sort of behaviour will not be tolerated. As we help my hon. Friend to get his Bill to its next stage, we send a strong message that Britain is a global leader in the fight for human rights and gender and sexuality equality. That is why it is essential that we continue to show global leadership on this matter and lead the way in defending the rights of the LGBT community, whether on merchant shipping vessels, in the workplace on land, in our armed forces, in our schools or in other areas of our civic, public and commercial life.

British values such as tolerance, respect, democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law are the values that bind us together as a nation. That is why we are promoting British values and strengthening the institutions that uphold them in the work that we do in this House and through the Bill today. I am pleased that over the years the rights that the LGBT community enjoys have gone from strength to strength, and that public support for those rights has gone from strength to strength too, as we work that we have done in this House. I hope that the legislation similar to that proposed by my hon. Friend has raised the level of knowledge and education outside the House.

I am also important to note that the previous coalition Government issued the world’s first LGBT action plan in 2011, further promoting the Government’s commitment to equality, which I hope will be spread to the merchant navy through the Bill. The then Government showed further leadership in December 2011 when they published the world’s first transgender equality action plan, which set out actions to address the specific challenges that trans people face in their daily lives. That followed the largest ever survey of trans people in Britain. I therefore wish to use this opportunity to talk about not only homophobic bullying, which has been a challenge for some years and is well known, but bullying of the bi and trans community. I hope that the Bill will play a key role in highlighting those important issues, too. I also want to draw the House’s attention to the fact that the Government published guidance for employers and service providers in November 2015 on how to deal sensitively with transgender and homophobic issues, further outlining their commitment to defending the rights of the LGBT community.

The Government have taken steps in every area of public life—from the workplace to schools, as I mentioned, and in our immigration policy. They have taken steps to stop the deportation of asylum seekers who have had to leave a country because their gender identification puts them at risk of imprisonment, torture or execution. As mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon, who is no longer in his place, it is still illegal in many countries to be homosexual and in some countries it is punished by the death penalty. By taking my hon. Friend’s Bill to the next stage, we will send a strong message that Britain is a global leader in the fight for human rights and gender and sexuality equality. That is why it is essential that we continue to show global leadership on this matter and lead the way in defending the rights of the LGBT community, whether on merchant shipping vessels, in the workplace on land, in our armed forces, in our schools or in other areas of our civic, public and commercial life.

For example, in 2004, a poll by Gallup reported that 52% of the public agreed that marriages between homosexuals should be recognised, but 45% said that they should not. We have come a long way since then. In 2009, for example, a poll by Populus reported that 61% of the public agreed with the statement that gay couples should have an equal right to get married, not just to have a civil partnership, and only 33% disagreed, so things are moving in the right direction.

Support for gay marriage has traditionally been highest among those aged 25 to 34—78% agreed and 19% disagreed—and it was lowest among those aged over 65, so we still have some work to do to make sure that any legislation we pass in the House is understood and felt and promulgated by all sections of society, regardless of age, background or geographic loyalties. Equality must be for everyone, not just people of a certain age group or from a certain geographic location or a certain industry. As other hon. Members have said, the armed forces have been leaders in this.
The House has a strong track record in this regard. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon referred to some important statistics, and other hon. Members have spoken about the work that has been done in various industries. Today’s Bill will make sure that the merchant navy is seen in the same light. It has been working hard for many years, but owing to the anomalous provisions in the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, someone investigating the statute book may well be confused. It is therefore right that today’s legislation goes forward, and I will certainly be supporting it later today.

The statistics that I mentioned show that in recent years public opinion on LGBT rights has been changing fast, and it will continue to do so. The provisions in this Bill will be in the same vein and will push that work forward.

I want to draw the attention of the House to the positive reception that the equal marriage legislation has had, regardless of people’s previous views on it or how they voted—it was introduced before my time in the House. There has been a change of opinion and the provisions of the legislation have been taken up. There were 1,409 same-sex marriages between 29 March and 30 June 2014—56% between female couples and 44% between male couples. There has been high take-up. There was a sea change in people’s behaviour and the way in which the LGBT community was viewed after new legislation came into the House and was debated and eventually passed. I hope that that optimistic, positive outcome will be repeated if and when my hon. Friend’s Bill receives Royal Assent and reaches the statute book, which I hope it will.

In the UK it has simply become the norm for people to accept same-sex marriages and diversity in the workplace, whether that is in the armed forces, on board ship, on land, on bases or in any other sector. Unfortunately, that has not always been the case. At the end of 1954, for example, in England and Wales there were a staggering 1,069 gay men in prison for committing homosexual acts.

In an attempt to curb those figures, Labour MP Leo Abse, to whom I think my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley referred, and Conservative peer Lord Arran proposed to change the way that the UK law treated gay men in the Sexual Offences Bill. Thankfully, that was passed, but it was not until 1967 that the then Labour Government finally showed support for Lord Arran’s proposals and the Bill received Royal Assent on 27 July 1967, after what I understand was an incredibly intense late-night debate on the Floor of the House. The Bill proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury will not, I hope, be in any way as contentious and will command the support of this House and the other place. The hon. Member for Cambridge has indicated that that will be so, which is a very welcome step.

If any Scottish National party Member were present on the Opposition Benches, they would be surprised to learn that the 1967 Act did not extend to Scotland at the time. All male homosexual behaviour remained illegal there for another 13 years after the law was changed here in England and Wales. It is a very positive step that they are equally committed to equality in Scotland. The lesson to learn is that the updating of our laws and the improvement of rights for the LGBT community has not always progressed at the same pace in all the nations of the United Kingdom. That is a signal to us all that we need to make sure that, in the work of this House, we are leading, and that when it comes to making United Kingdom law, we are very much at the forefront of legislative developments across the nations and regions of the United Kingdom.

As a footnote, I would add that it was only very recently that the people who were persecuted and prosecuted prior to 1967 received pardons for those convictions—it has taken around 30 years for that to happen. We cannot take for granted the freedoms and rights that the LGBT community rightly enjoys. We have to be vigilant, to make sure that we are always looking out for ways to improve those freedoms and to make sure that there is equality at every stage of the legislative process.

In support of the Bill, I contend that it fits neatly, in a political, legislative and conceptual perspective, with the UK’s rich and proud tapestry of human rights and progressive legislation. It very much builds on the social progress that we have seen in Britain as we have become a wealthier, more prosperous and more progressive nation. We begin, of course, in 1215, when Magna Carta was agreed, which protected the rights and liberties of citizens and began the tradition of due process. As hon. Members will know, that tradition travels through the Bill of Rights, which ensured, among other things, that there could be no suspension of laws without the agreement of Parliament, which was a very positive step. In the 19th century, the terrible conditions that children faced led to the Factory Acts. Then there was the Beveridge report of 1942, the signing of the universal declaration of human rights in 1948 and the Race Relations Act 1965—the first legislation in the UK to ban discrimination on the grounds of race. That was further complemented by the Equality Act 2010, which brought a whole range of anti-discrimination legislation under a single Act and added further protections.

My hon. Friend’s Bill sits very comfortably within that progressive, pro-rights tradition that stretches back all the way to 1215. In this new year, 2017, as we move from the second decade of the 21st century into a new, more progressive regime, the Bill sits very comfortably with all the successes that we have had in pioneering and securing liberty, equality and the acceptance of others, and in making sure that human rights are very much embedded alongside human responsibilities.

I am proud that our country has been not only strong here at home in passing legislation but a leader at the forefront of development on these matters abroad. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon rightly said, we can take a leadership role in the Commonwealth, where there is more to do, as well as in the UN and other international forums. We can make sure that the values that we strongly adhere to in this House and this country, which are being furthered today by the Bill, are reflected in the legislation, practices and culture of other countries, particularly in the Commonwealth. As we reach out to Commonwealth countries through international development aid, free trade agreements and other co-operation in international forums, we in the United Kingdom can play an important role in ensuring that we not only further our commercial and political interests, but try to change the cultures of countries that are part of the Commonwealth family of nations.
The UK has never been afraid to let other nations know that when injustices are committed, we will be a strong voice for equality—particularly on grounds of sexuality and race. While the UK continues to promote equality on the international stage in public forums, my hon. Friends the Member for Bury North said, the Bill should be safe and valued whatever job they do, particularly of equality for the LGBT community, who can and freedom and opportunity. We are an international beacon centuries to make sure that Britain is a country of work that the House has done over many decades and national debate as we recast our country in the light of south coast of England, and it has importance for our and the merchant navy as a seafaring community on the with its proud tradition of service in the Royal Navy and the merchant navy as a seafaring community on the south coast of England, and it has importance for our national debate as we recast our country in the light of the Brexit decision.

Let us not be bystanders. The Bill will continue the work that the House has done over many decades and centuries to make sure that Britain is a country of freedom and opportunity. We are an international beacon of equality for the LGBT community, who can and should be safe and valued whatever job they do, particularly in the merchant navy, and wherever they do it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North said, the Bill has no cost implications or visible unforeseen consequences. There must be a level playing field for all if we are to be a country that works for everyone.

As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, equality, freedom and non-discrimination must sit at the heart of the political agenda here in the United Kingdom. The Bill will help to stamp out any remaining instances of homophobia, biphobia or transphobia, and that is why I felt it was important to speak in this debate. The Bill has a strong resonance in my constituency, and that is why I felt it was important to speak in this

As a nation, we must continue to be the beacon of progress on LGBT matters, and the Bill is the next stage in all that hard work. Our approach appeals to other countries' enlightened self-interest: it is sensitive to their culture and history, just as the Bill is sensitive to ours for the reasons that I have set out. We must make it clear that LGBT rights are a key part of building a level playing field and that our progress as a society and economy depends four square on making sure that everybody can play an important and equal role in our society, communities and economy, in the defence of our nation and in our mercantile interests through the merchant navy, regardless of gender, sexuality or any other characteristic. There must be a level playing field for all if we are to be a country that works for everyone.

As we have heard, this is his second private Member’s Bill, so he really does understand the amount of work that goes on behind the scenes. I am also trying to get a second private Member’s Bill through this place during this Parliament, so perhaps we are in a bit of competition. But fear not, I will do all I can to make sure that my hon. Friend’s Bill has a safe passage through this place, because it really is an important piece of legislation.

I also pay tribute to all those Members who have contributed to the debate. In particular, I was struck by the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), who brought great personal insight to the Bill, and that has really added to the debate, so we should thank him for that. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr Mak), He has clearly put a lot of work into his research into the heart of the political agenda here in the United Kingdom. The Bill will help to stamp out any remaining instances of homophobia, biphobia or transphobia, and that is why I felt it was important to speak in this debate. The Bill has a strong resonance in my constituency, and that is why I felt it was important to speak in this

In turning my attention to the Bill, I want to start with a little background to it. After all, it is specific to the merchant navy, and while we talk so often in this place about the armed forces, we may all be a little guilty of forgetting that we have a merchant navy as well. I speak as the wife of a former seafarer, although he was in the Royal Navy, not the merchant navy, and it was good to hear other Members speak of the experiences of members of their own families with connections to the merchant navy.

It is important that we do not forget that Britain has depended on civilian cargo ships in wartime to import food and raw materials, as well as to transport soldiers overseas and to keep them supplied. The title “merchant navy” was granted by King George V after the first world war to recognise the contribution made by merchant sailors. The merchant navy has long played a part in the heritage and the history of our country, playing its part in shaping the nation we have today.

Britain’s merchant fleet was the largest in the world during both world wars. In 1939, a third of the world’s merchant ships were British, and there were 200,000 sailors. Many merchant seamen came from parts of the British empire, such as India, Hong Kong and west African countries. Sometimes, women also served at sea in the merchant navy. We can see just how important the merchant navy is, and that gives greater emphasis to the importance of the Bill.

During both world wars, Germany operated a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare—of sinking merchant vessels on sight. By the end of the first world war, more than 3,000 British-flagged merchant and fishing vessels had been sunk, and nearly 15,000 merchant seamen had died. During the second world war, 4,700 British-flagged ships were sunk, and more than 29,000 merchant seamen died.

In putting together my contribution to the debate, I tried to put into some sort of perspective the contribution
the merchant navy has made to our country over the years. That figure of 29,000 merchant seamen who lost their lives is almost half the electorate of my constituency, so it is not insignificant.

Turning to more recent times, some of us will remember the Falklands war in 1982 and the merchant ship the Atlantic Conveyor, which sank while under tow after being hit by two Exocet missiles. The ship, which was registered in Liverpool and built by Swan Hunter, was requisitioned during the Falklands war. The wreck site is designated under the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986. Twelve men died and the ship's master, Captain Ian North, was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. The Atlantic Conveyor was the first British merchant vessel lost at sea to enemy fire since world war two. Again, that shows the importance of the merchant navy. It is really important that we do all we can to ensure the safe passage of the Bill through this place, so that members of the merchant navy are put on an equal footing to those of the Royal Navy.

In honour of the sacrifices made in the two world wars, the merchant navy lay wreaths of remembrance alongside the armed forces in the annual Remembrance Day service. Following many years of lobbying to bring about official recognition of the sacrifices made by merchant seafarers in the two world wars and since, Merchant Navy Day became an official day of remembrance.

Today's merchant navy is, understandably, much smaller than it was in the days of world wars one and two. According to the statistics that I found in the CIA's "The World Factbook", there are just over 500 UK-registered ships in the merchant navy today. That is still a significant number, so a significant number of seafarers will potentially benefit from the Bill, should it receive Royal Assent.

In my research I also found a number of notable merchant navy personnel. Putting homosexuality aside, I found that Joseph Conrad joined the merchant navy in 1874, rising through the ranks of second mate and first mate to become master in 1886. He then left to write professionally, becoming one of the 20th century's greatest novelists. James Cook, the British explorer, was also a member of the merchant navy, as was Victoria Drummond MBE, Britain's first woman ship's engineer.

A couple of other names are worth mentioning. John Masefield served in the merchant navy in the 1890s and later became poet laureate, and the right hon. John Prescott, who is a member of the Opposition, served in the merchant navy as a steward, then joined this place and became Deputy Prime Minister in the Blair Administration.

What I am endeavouring to do is to set out just how important the merchant navy is. Members of the UK merchant navy have been awarded the Victoria Cross, the George Cross, the George medal, the Distinguished Service Order and the Distinguished Service Cross for their actions while serving. Those who served in either world war also received relevant campaign medals.

I would now like to turn to the issue of homosexuality in the merchant navy. Between 1950 and the 1980s, life at sea was one of the few opportunities for gay men to be themselves. They were able to embrace life at sea with enthusiasm and often with more confidence than they felt at home on land. They would often take part in performances and cruise shows and be members of the catering staff. Although men could no longer be prosecuted for gay acts after 1967, when homosexuality was legalised by the Sexual Offences Act, persecution in everyday life did not end. During the 1980s, gay career in the merchant navy because—this is hard to believe in many ways—it was more tolerant than other professions.

It is also hard to believe that it was in 1967 that the Sexual Offences Act received Royal Assent. It amended the law in England and Wales by decriminalising homosexual acts in private between two men. And here we are, almost 50 years later. Many of us were not even born—or only just—when that Act was introduced. Much has been said about this Bill being tidying-up legislation and symbolic, but I think that we have started to understand that it is about much more than that. I believe that it will mean a great deal to the men and women who serve in the merchant navy.

By the Sexual Offences Act, persecution in everyday life did not end. During that era, many gay men chose a career in the merchant navy because—that is hard to believe in many ways—it was more tolerant than other professions.

The Armed Forces Act amended the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to make sure that a member of the armed forces could not be discharged for being homosexual. The Ministry of Defence has insisted that it is committed to helping recruits achieve their full potential irrespective of sexual orientation, and all three branches of the forces have featured in Stonewall's top 100 gay-friendly employers.

In 2005, the Royal Navy joined Stonewall's diversity champions programme, and it was followed in 2006 by the Royal Air Force and in 2008 by the British Army. The programme was designed to promote good working conditions for all existing and potential employees and to ensure that there was equal treatment. At London Pride in 2008, all three armed services marched in uniform for the first time. Although the Armed Forces Act addressed the outstanding historical issue that we are discussing for the armed forces, as we have heard, it did not cover the merchant navy. That is why we are here today.

I want to touch on homosexuality in the armed forces, highlight the differences between the merchant navy and the Royal Navy, and explain why the Bill matters. I will build on some of the points that have been made by my hon. Friends. Before 2000, openly gay people were banned from service, and people who suspected personnel of being gay had a duty to report them to the authorities. In 1999, the European Court of Human Rights found that the armed forces had breached the rights of LGBT personnel by firing them after discovering their sexuality. The then Labour Government, led by Tony Blair, announced that the Government
would comply with the ruling and immediately lift the ban. Changes to the law came into effect from 12 January 2000.

Since 2000, gay men and lesbians have been allowed to serve openly in the UK’s armed forces, and that policy change means that personnel can no longer be fired merely because of their sexuality. It was years before the US did the same thing by repealing “Don’t ask, don’t tell” in 2011. Interestingly, in 2008 it emerged that 58 former military staff had been paid £3.7 million in compensation because the armed forces agreed that their human rights had been violated. It is also worth noting that the Royal Navy was so gripped by a security panic over gay servicemen in the late 1960s that admirals believed that at least half of the fleet had “sinned homosexually”.

It has been fascinating to research the background to the Bill and to gain a greater understanding of the merchant navy; as I have said, we talk much more about the Royal Navy and the services in this place. I want to share just one or two more facts and figures that I have unearthed, which further reinforce the need for us to give my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) all our support today and at all remaining stages of the Bill, to make sure that it has safe passage through the House on its journey to Royal Assent.

The evidence shows that as many as 1,000 gay men serving in the merchant navy supported the British effort in the Falklands War. That is no insignificant number of individuals who gave their time to serve our country. Is it not incumbent on us to support the Bill and give them something back, whether that is symbolic or something deeper? I spoke earlier about the Falklands war, so I will not dwell on it further, except to say that the Bill will give us the opportunity to put the Royal Navy and the merchant navy on an equal footing in relation to homosexuality.

Believe it or not, Thomas Cromwell piloted through Parliament an Act for the punishment of the vice of buggery—it does not feel like a parliamentary word, but it is the correct term—in 1533, during the reign of Henry VIII. I believe that was the first Act of our secular law to punish homosexuality. The sentence back then was death, with the state confiscating property, goods and chattels. Before that Act, matters concerning sodomy were dealt with in ecclesiastical law in an equally harsh way. The 1533 Act remained in force until it was replaced by the Offences against the Person Act 1828. The death sentence continued under that Act until it was revised in 1861, when the sentence was replaced with one of 10 years’ to life imprisonment. As I said earlier, we are still trying—50 years on from the Sexual Offences Act—to ensure that equality is restored to these individuals and that we move forward as a country in reducing and redressing discrimination.

I am starting to draw my speech to a close, but I want to turn to the Bill very briefly. It would repeal sections 146 and 147 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which would mean that someone can no longer be dismissed from a merchant ship for being gay. I believe it is a good Bill. It is needed because UK merchant ships are classified as residences as well as workplaces, which means that shipowners have been able to make their own rules about what is and is not allowed to happen on board. That point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who is not in his place at the moment, and other hon. Friends. Much has been made about the fact that merchant ships are classified as residences, but when my husband was in the Royal Navy, men served on ships—as, indeed, do men and now women—in very close confinement, so it is right and proper to deal through the Bill with what we can call an anomaly. The Bill would mean that someone can no longer be dismissed for being gay, and it would bring the laws affecting merchant shipping into line with modern equality laws.

It is fair to say that these sections of the 1994 Act no longer have any legal effect, as we heard, because of other legislation—the Equality Act 2010—but that is not an excuse for not supporting the Bill. As I keep reiterating, the Bill is important and it matters, and it is time that we did something: dealing with these provisions is long overdue. Repealing the sections is symbolic, but it will prevent any misunderstanding, and it will go a long way towards starting to redress this inequality.

I am very conscious of the fact that time is marching on, but I want to touch very briefly on the issue of LGBT equality. The UK has a proud record of promoting equality for LGBT people, including the introduction of marriage for same-sex people. The UK continues to be recognised as one of the most progressive in Europe on LGBT rights, and it has one of the world’s strongest legislative frameworks to prevent and tackle discrimination. The Bill builds on all that we have done in Parliament over the years. As other hon. Members have explained so eloquently, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South, let us get on and do all we can to make sure we give it the safe passage it deserves.

1.39 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It seems to be becoming a habit for me to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who gave a strong and thorough background to the Bill. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) on introducing the Bill. He is a diligent and hard-working Member, as was demonstrated in his speech today and in the work that he has done in preparing the Bill. He set out immaculately the case for why the House should support its Second Reading.

I am from a generation that finds it difficult to comprehend how we are in the position of needing to debate a Bill such as this. We are lucky to have grown up in this country at a time of increasing tolerance and increasingly cohesive communities, in which we respect and embrace differences and look out for one another. We appreciate and value that in our society. It is difficult to understand why the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 could lead to a seafarer on a UK-registered merchant navy vessel being dismissed for an act of homosexuality.

I am pleased that the Government have a proud record of promoting equal rights, and I understand from the contributions today that the Equality Act 2010 means that sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the 1994 Act no longer apply in reality. My hon. Friend got to the heart of the issue early in his remarks when he said that when we employ people, we should not expect anything other than their abilities and getting the best person for the job. That should apply to every walk of life and every job in this country.
Craig Whittaker: I appreciate both points that my hon. Friend has made—about how his generation cannot comprehend some of the things that have happened in the past, and about equality in employing people.

Does my hon. Friend agree that we are in a dangerous situation in our country? Hate crime is on the increase, as is anti-Semitism—particularly in our universities—and we must do everything we can to stamp down on such behaviours.

Tom Pursglove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is the most tolerant country in the world, and it must maintain so. I am lucky—I grew up in Wellingborough, in Northamptonshire, where we have incredibly cohesive communities. People from all different faiths and backgrounds come together, rub along well and look out for one another. I want every single community in this country to be like that, and where there are differences we need to work on them. We need to ensure that barriers are swept away, because we must protect the proud traditions of this country and stamp out hate crime. In no walk of life, and in no community, is it acceptable, so he is right to raise that issue.

I have looked at the Bill and done some research in advance of today’s debate, and it is clear that the law is messy. As I said, sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the 1994 Act are now essentially superfluous since the Equality Act 2010 came into force. Where we can, the House should clarify the law and remove any superfluous elements. The policy background section of the Bill’s explanatory notes is particularly effective in that regard, because it states:

“Even though it is of no effect, the policy implication of the sections is ambiguous, and may be seen as a statement that homosexual conduct, per se, is incompatible with employment on merchant vessels. Such a statement is not compatible with current values and should be removed.

There is also a risk that a person investigating the employment rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) people in the Merchant Navy might come upon the sections, and (understandably, but incorrectly) consider that they mean that LGBT people were not welcome inside the Merchant Navy.

Finally, as the sections are obsolete, removing them is of general utility, as doing so tidies up the statute book.

A similar approach to this Bill was taken by the Government in the Armed Forces Act 2016, which removed the parts of the sections which referred to the Armed Forces. During the passage of that Act, the relevant Minister made the following statement:

[T]he Department for Transport has made it clear that it intends to deal with the merchant navy aspect [of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act] as soon as possible.”

Those were the words of the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster).

The explanatory notes continue:

“Differing variations of this statement were also made in the Lords when the issue was raised there.”

That effectively sets out the entire scope of the Bill, why it is required, some of the difficulties with current legislation, the Government’s previous commitments and what needs to be done to put it right, and the Bill neatly achieves that. It is a short Bill, but the provisions are very clear, and the Minister’s remarks clearly indicate strong Government support for the sentiments in it.

I have just one query—I am happy for my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury to intervene now or for the Minister to address this point in his remarks—and it relates to the Bill’s commencement, should it complete all its stages and pass into law. Clause 2(1) states:

“This Act comes into force at the end of the period of two months beginning with the day on which it is passed.”

I do not think we should waste a moment. If the Bill is passed into law—I sincerely hope it will be—we should enact its provisions as quickly as possible. There might well be good constitutional reasons why we cannot do it immediately, but we should look at the matter, perhaps in Committee, and seize the first opportunity we have to implement the Bill. We should lay down a marker and not waste any time.

John Glen: I would be happy to look at this point carefully in Committee, and obviously I would be happy if my hon. Friend wishes to join me on that Committee.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his offer, and I would of course be delighted to join him on the Committee, because it is important that it has Members from across the House. I was pleased to see interventions earlier from Opposition Members. The hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) was right to call the Bill symbolic. Perhaps he will join us on the Committee as well. I think that commencement is one of the first things we should look at, because, as I say, I do not want to waste any time in resolving this issue and ironing out some of the ambiguities in the law.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury has explained very clearly why this matter could not be addressed in an Armed Forces Act. My early research on the Bill flagged up in my mind the question of why this had not been addressed in an Armed Forces Act, so I appreciate his setting out those very good reasons and clarifying the matter to the House.

I was also pleased to learn that the industry had come a long way since 1994. In the course of my research, I found out that several steps had been taken since the 1994 Act that further evidenced why the Bill was required. The work done includes guidelines, drawn up by the UK National Maritime Occupational Health and Safety Committee, on preventing bullying and harassment, and these were adopted by the European social partners and subsequently internationally. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency has also produced guidance on seafarer employment agreements that recommend including references to bullying and harassment. I think that all Members would welcome those steps. Steps have been taken organically within the merchant shipping industry to put right some of the challenges and problems of the past without legislation in this House, but tidying up the law will do much to add to that as well.

I very much welcome this Bill. It is fitting that we are debating it in the same week as the Speaker’s statement, which he made yesterday, about the recognition that Parliament as an employer has received from Stonewall. We take these matters extremely seriously in this House and it is important that they should be taken seriously in the paid service of the House. We should set an example in the House of Commons, but also in the House of Lords and across the parliamentary estate as a whole, that the country should follow. It was a commendable achievement to be in the top 30. I congratulate everybody involved in that work, which
of that kind were not something that Parliament’s legislation—in fact, the law—had much to do with before 1533.

The Buggery Act 1533, which was the first time this House legislated against homosexuality, was part of Henry VIII’s policy and was taken through by Thomas Cromwell. The fact that we have to mention it today is very relevant, because it was used not simply to attack homosexual practice in Britain, but to undermine the monasteries at the time of their dissolution. The Buggery Act was the main vehicle through which many monks and abbots were disenfranchised. It was one of the principal Acts through which the Crown managed to appropriate the monasteries.

Discriminatory legislation does not always only discriminate against minorities; it is often used as a pretext and an excuse to indulge in other forms of oppression. In the 16th century, very few people other than monks and abbots were condemned under the Buggery Act. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills mentioned, a number of people through the centuries were executed under the Act, but that did not necessarily happen very much in the 16th century. There was the famous case of the Earl of Castlehaven, I think in 1631, who was executed. As my hon. Friend said, all his lands were confiscated by the Government of the day. It was an extraordinary case of judicial oppression; it was not just about discrimination.

Let us wind the clock forward. It was only really in the 18th century that many people were condemned under the Buggery Act, which remained on the statute book until 1828. Many Members have mentioned Alan Turing and others who have suffered discrimination under the legal conditions of their time, but I think it fitting to pay due respect to the memory of James Pratt, a priest who was convicted under the Buggery Act, which remained on the statute book. It seems a long time ago—it was 182 years ago—that they were hanged for that crime. If Members want to demonstrate the distance that we have travelled in the intervening time, I think it is only right for us to pay a short tribute to people who actually lost their lives under very repressive legislation.

In the 19th century, the situation evolved. Attitudes were changing, particularly towards the end of the century. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, the death penalty for homosexuality was abolished in 1861, but that did not lead to much of an evolution of attitudes. In many cases, homosexuality was seen as being on the same level as murder and other graver crimes. The logic was seen to be that homosexuality was a crime against nature and against God, and that was the origin of a very penal, restrictive and draconian approach. Although monks and others who had benefit of clergy were exempt from the death penalty for murder—a priest who committed a murder could avoid the death penalty merely by virtue of the fact that he had benefit of clergy—a priest who was convicted under the Buggery Act could not be granted benefit of clergy. It was a crazy situation.

Many Members have mentioned discrimination in the modern era. The name Alan Turing comes up a lot, but someone else who suffered under our “code”, as it were, and who was probably even more famous and more widely celebrated throughout the world than Alan...
Turing was Oscar Wilde. Wilde was convicted in 1895 and served two years in Reading gaol because he had infringed the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885. As many Members know, that measure replaced not only the original Buggery Act, but amendments to it and the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. The 1885 Act imposed stringent penalties on homosexual behaviour. The real innovation in that legislation was that it prohibited acts between males, and that was not just confined to the sexual act. The Buggery Act was very specific in focusing on the act of sex, whereas the 1885 Act had a much broader scope. This was the Act that many of us will have known about from reading all the famous 20th century cases relating to homosexuality and the—crazy to us—judgments that my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) alluded to. The 1885 Act was the legislation under which many people were condemned, most notably Alan Turing.

The problem with that Act was that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr Mak), who is no longer in the Chamber, suggested, by 1954—shortly after the second world war—about 1,000 people were incarcerated solely on the grounds that they were gay. It seems extraordinary that so many people were incarcerated, especially when we consider that the British prison population today is about 90,000. That seems an extraordinary waste, and I should remind the House that the prison population in the 1950s was much lower—probably about half—than it is today. It seems extraordinary to us that as late as 1954, as many as 1,000 men should have been incarcerated purely on the basis of their sexuality.

That is, to us, rightly, an outrage, and even at the time it was sufficiently controversial and absurd to many people that the Conservative Government of the day initiated the Wolfenden report, which has long been famous. That report did a great deal to change Government attitudes about homosexuality and the decriminalisation of homosexual acts, and it also managed to shift society’s attitudes to these issues considerably. It was only really as a consequence of the Wolfenden report, which was finally published in 1960, that much of the journey that Members have described today was traversed. In 1967, we had the Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalised homosexuality for the first time since 1533—after 430-odd years—and roughly got us to the position that we are in today.

There were exceptions, however, and this is where the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury is so important. His Bill ties up many of the anomalies thrown up by earlier history. I only felt it necessary to touch upon various details of that history because we must understand the laws that we make in the much broader context of the development and evolution of our institutions. Sadly, that context is often omitted when we hold debates in this House, so I am glad that I have had the opportunity to touch upon some of the details.

When we look at the specific provisions of my hon. Friend’s Bill, we see that there is neat symmetry. As has been pointed out, sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 actually provided—this is incredible to many of us—for people to be dismissed from service simply because they were practising homosexuals, which is entirely wrong. However, we must note that that happened only in 1994—some current Members were Members at that time—so I am not talking about the 16th century or a period in the long and distant past. My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury is rightly trying to smooth out some anomalies, and this Bill will mark the end of a 450-year period during which we have had such legislation. I cannot envisage further equality legislation being necessary for a time. We are now well known throughout the world as a country of incredible tolerance, and the Bill marks the end of a chapter in the long evolution of equality legislation.

I want to make two remarks about the Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) suggested, it is a shame that the Equality Act 2010 did not overturn the provisions of the 1994 Act that we are discussing. It is also a shame that the Armed Forces Act 2016 was similarly unable to close this wide loophole in our legislation. It is only with the advent of today’s Bill that we are finally managing to bring an end to these anomalies.

Finally, it is fantastic that we have been able to debate the circumstances of the Bill widely and to pay homage to the invaluable work that courageous seamen and women have performed over decades in our merchant navy. Throughout the first and second world wars, the merchant navy was very much the unsung hero in our efforts to defeat first the Kaiser’s Germany and then the Nazis. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills said, the merchant navy has had an incredible impact not only on our country’s culture, but on its livelihood. The sacrifices made by merchant seamen and women should never be forgotten in this House. I want to use my closing remarks to pay homage and respect to those brave men and women who have contributed so much and, in many cases, paid the ultimate sacrifice for our country.

2.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) for bringing forward a Bill on an important issue and for briefing the Government on it. He will hopefully achieve a second change in the law. We have had a positive debate, and I have been struck by speeches from right across the House that have been considered, thoughtful, powerful, insightful and based upon experience. The Bill would remove wording from the statute book that is obsolete, unnecessary and wrong. As I shall explain, the wording currently on the statute book has no effect, but it represents a historical hangover from when it was possible that a seafarer—indeed, any employee—could be dismissed for being gay. That is no longer the case, but the laws that we pass in this place and that form our statute book represent, both practically and in the signals they send, the established morals and values of our country. It is right therefore that when the statute book contains wording that is inconsistent with those values we should change that wording. For that reason, the Government are happy to state now, formally, that we support this measure.

The sea and those who work on it—our maritime sector—contribute about £13.5 billion to our economy. More than 110,000 people are employed in the sector. That is significant to our country, and not just in economic terms; it is important to what we are and who we are as a people: an island race and a maritime
nation. Our UK maritime social partners, who represent the employers and workers, are respected globally for their commitment and drive to improve the social, working and living conditions of seafarers, not just those of the UK, but those worldwide. They work closely with government, and as a tripartite we have a powerful voice; we will not agree on every point of detail, but we agree on many, and we listen to and respect each other.

The International Labour Organisation’s maritime labour convention, which the UK social partners were instrumental in drafting, has done much to improve conditions for seafarers, but it is not a panacea or end product; it will continue to evolve and strengthen. Its sister instrument, the working in fishing convention, will bring similar improvements for those working in the fishing sector—again, we can expect that to evolve. I mentioned our proud maritime history, and I made reference to those two instruments as examples of our commitment to and recognition of the importance of the seafarer. We sometimes lose sight of the importance of the maritime sector to our everyday lives. We do not question how our bananas, our new computer or even our bread and butter reach the shelves of our shops—or, for those who prefer to use the internet, arrive at the distribution centre for onward transit to our homes. We may be aware that the product came from the other side of the world, but unless we live near the coast any consideration of the merchant navy or its seafarers might not be something that is at the front of our minds. But it does matter, which is why this Government commissioned the independent maritime growth study in 2014 to consider the opportunities and challenges the UK faced in maintaining its position as a leading maritime nation. The study looked at all aspects of the maritime sector and identified where action could be taken to generate growth. We have achieved much since the publication of the maritime growth study: we have put in place a solid set of structures within government, including a successful ministerial working group, based on constructive engagement with the industry. The efforts from across the whole industry have been impressive, bringing together so many organisations and bodies, often with very different objectives, many of which can seem contradictory. Yet, we are working under one promotional umbrella to address all the major issues affecting the sector.

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However, we cannot afford to relax; we must make the best of every opportunity. It is clear that Britain’s maritime sector has to be as great as it can be—greater than we imagined possible over the years. What might that mean? Of course the gateway for our exports and imports is through our ports, so it is not enough just to get goods off the ships—we have to get them to where they are needed. That is why the Government are investing in road and rail, as well as considering what the possibilities might be for improving connectivity to our ports. The point is that our transport is a network, one that includes the sea.

Above all, we also need to think about the essential contribution made by those who work within the sector. One of the four major themes from our study is “Skills”. The UK rightly prides itself on producing many of the best-trained officers and crew serving on ships around the world, as well as those with expertise in areas such as law, insurance, finance and the logistical skills for managing ships and ports. This is an incredible skills base that supports our whole maritime sector. The Government currently support that with a budget for maritime training, which we are taking the opportunity to review. We have also committed to increasing the quality and quantity of apprenticeships, including within the maritime sector. The sector has a very strong record on apprenticeships, and new opportunities are being developed all the time. We want to see the number of trainees, both ratings and officers, increase. We are looking across the board at the skills and opportunities that the sector needs, but the image of that sector is let down by those clauses still remaining on our statute book.

What the sector needs is to create and promote a bright, forward-looking, fully inclusive sector that provides well-paid, varied, fulfilling job opportunities with real long-term career prospects. Those seeking to fill vacancies should be able to do so on merit—a point made by several colleagues today—and they should not have to think that their sexuality might be a factor.

The UK has a proud record of promoting equality for LGBT people, including the introduction of marriage for same-sex couples. Part of the image of the maritime sector, a sector that has done much for the LGBT movement, is tarnished when such ludicrous and outdated clauses remain on the statute book. We are recognised as one of the most progressive countries in Europe for LGBT rights by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association. We have one of the world’s strongest legislative frameworks to prevent and tackle discrimination. We recognise that people who work in an inclusive environment, free from discrimination, are more likely to achieve their potential.

The Equality Act 2010 protects lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people from discrimination, harassment or victimisation in the workplace. I am pleased to say that the UK shipping industry is well ahead of us in removing discriminatory rules and practices with regard to the LGBT community. When consulted on the proposed repeal of the provision, the Chamber of Shipping and the maritime unions expressed surprise that it had not gone years ago. And industry publications bear this out. The “UK Merchant Navy Code of Conduct”, which forms the basis of disciplinary and grievance processes in many UK shipping companies, has not made use of the exception allowed to the merchant navy by this provision for many years, and uses entirely inclusive language, for example in the paragraphs prohibiting sexual harassment.

The UK’s National Maritime Occupational Health and Safety Committee has produced guidelines on preventing bullying and harassment, which were adopted by European social partners and subsequently internationally. These guidelines define harassment in the same inclusive way as we would expect in any company anywhere in our country. It has also published guidance for shipping companies on HIV and AIDS, including advice on preventive and on policies for employing those infected with HIV. There is doubtless more to do, but both I and the Department are always happy to do what we can to help with that. If anyone has any suggestions about how we can make the merchant
Of course, the situation for LGBT people has not always been as fair as it is now. Given that, I would like to spend a moment detailing how the current wording of the statute came about. In particular, colleagues may wish to have more information about the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which this Bill would amend. The Act took a significant step forward in the gradual development of LGBT rights in the United Kingdom, but still left much to be done. It is the last UK Act to have a whole part simply entitled "Homosexuality", and it was responsible for reducing the age of homosexual consent from 21 to 18.

The background to the sections we are now amending is as follows. Homosexual acts in private had been decriminalised by section 1 of the Sexual Offences Act 1967. However, that Act left a few areas in which homosexual acts could still be an offence. In particular, the Act allowed that a homosexual act could still be an offence under the Army Act 1955, the Air Force Act 1955 or the Naval Discipline Act 1957. It also remained an offence to commit a homosexual act on board a merchant ship. The Sexual Offences Act 1967 did not extend to either Scotland or Northern Ireland, but similar provision was made in those jurisdictions by section 80 of the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1980 and by the Homosexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 1982.

Sections 146 and 147 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 removed the remaining criminal liability. The Government had already decided in 1993 that prosecutions should not be brought under military law for homosexual acts per se. Following that, the decision that homosexual acts in the merchant navy should be decriminalised as well was announced in a written answer in the House of Commons in December 1993. This appears to have been influenced by the Government’s understanding that the provision had been very little used.

The repeals were therefore accomplished under section 146 (1), (2) and (3) for England and Wales and Scotland, and under section 147 (1) and (2) for Northern Ireland. However, sections 146 (4) and 147 (3) were added during the passage of the Bill, following non-Government amendments in the other place. There appear to have been concerns that making homosexual conduct legal in the armed forces and the merchant navy might mean that homosexuals could not be dismissed for engaging in it or that such conduct could not be used as the basis of a prosecution under military discipline laws.

The Government’s view at the time was that the amendments were unnecessary. As a general principle, just because something is legal does not mean that people cannot be fired from their jobs for doing it. Obviously, if someone decides to watch television instead of going to work, that is not illegal, but it may well result in them being fired. The Government considered that they could still continue to discharge people from the armed forces because they were homosexual, irrespective of the wording of the 1994 Act, and employers could continue to discharge homosexuals from the merchant navy. Of course, both situations have now changed and it is not possible to discharge people because of their sexual orientation, but at the time the amendments were thought unnecessary.

Even though the legislation is of no current effect, we would prefer that it gave no such implications. I will quickly detail how those sections have changed and why they have no legal application today. They have been progressively repealed over the years, and they now only refer to the merchant navy. The provisions that relate to military discipline offences were repealed by the Armed Forces Act 2006, and all references to the armed forces were removed from the sections by the Armed Forces Act 2016.

We have been on a journey. We have a story of progress that has left the merchant navy, despite all its historic achievements for our country, as a historical hangover that we must correct. There are protections, though, and it is fair to say that the merchant navy’s attitudes have been ahead of the legislative picture covering them. As colleagues have said, the merchant navy has a proud tradition of tolerance and respect for the individual. The seafaring culture has contributed to the development of gay culture worldwide. Homosexuality was illegal in Britain until 1967, but a voyage could be a slightly different world. Seafarers were and are exposed to different practices, cultures and attitudes around the world, and they could convey those insights home. Of course, that is not to say that life on board was a new world for all homosexuals. People could still lose their jobs and face hostility and bullying, but there were greater freedoms than on land.

What we have is a Bill that at its heart addresses a historical wrong and the inadequacy of legislation to keep pace with our culture and with the achievements in the cultures in merchant navy. We have a skilled and expert workforce who make a significant contribution to our country. We need to maintain and enhance that workforce. We need to celebrate and promote our whole maritime sector. We can be proud of our maritime past, and we should be even more confident of what we can be in the future.

The Equality Act 2010 and other legislation rightly protect the rights of individuals. The Bill is therefore symbolic, but it serves to remove obsolete sections, which have no place remaining on the statute book and reflect the attitudes of a different time. It sends a message that has been powerfully articulated by colleagues in the debate. The Government support the Bill.

John Glen: With the leave of the House, I should like to say a few words. I thank my nine colleagues on the Government side of the House who have made such an effective contribution to what has been a useful and necessarily thorough debate on the Bill. For some, it will be a symbolic tidying-up exercise, but for many it is a serious piece of legislation that completes much needed reform and removes discrimination from the statute book.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), I believe that all legislation should receive careful and thorough scrutiny. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) for his deep historical knowledge and to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart),
who made such a powerful contribution. However, I do not wish to detain the House any longer. I commend the Bill to the House.

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

[John Glen]

Caroline Lucas: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am delighted to have the opportunity at least to start speaking in support of my Bill to give children an entitlement to personal, social, health and economic education, including sex and relationship education.

Although I completely support the Bill that preceded mine, there is an irony that has not gone unnoticed: Members have spent many hours debating a wholly uncontroversial Bill, while my Bill is about tackling discrimination and bullying around lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues. It is a great shame that there is not more time to debate it.

My Bill has strong cross-party support from across the House from Members who have long shown commitment to and concern about the issue, including the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion); I pay tribute to both for their ongoing cross-party work on this issue. The Bill has such strong cross-party support because people are calling for it from all quarters. It is backed by 87% of parents, 88% of teachers and 85% of business leaders. YouGov and the PSHE Association found that 90% of parents believe that schools should teach pupils about mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Support also comes from two royal societies, five Select Committee Chairs—three of whom, I note, are Conservatives—five teaching unions, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Public Health England, the Children’s Commissioner, the chief medical officer, the national police lead for preventing child sexual exploitation, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Barnardo’s, Stonewall, the End Violence against Women Coalition, Girlguiding, the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and many, many more.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Lucas: There is absolutely no way I am giving way to Government Members, who have spent so many hours filibustering a perfectly serious Bill. [Interruption] There is no way I am going to give way.

To expand on the last example, I should say that the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners tells us that statutory status is needed because police and crime commissioners across the country—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady must be heard.

Caroline Lucas: Hon. Members will recall the freedom of information requests to the police made by the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) last year. They showed a 1,200% increase in sexting among under-16s—sharing explicit images or texts—and an

...
increasing number using the dating app Tinder. It is clear that children are being pushed into adult territory well before they are ready.

Some of the most powerful calls for action come from the young people themselves. A Terrence Higgins Trust report, which involved a survey of 900 young people aged 16 to 24, found that SRE is inadequate or absent from many schools. Some 99% of the young people surveyed thought that SRE should be mandatory in all schools and more than 60% received SRE just once a year or less. Three quarters were not taught about consent and half the young people surveyed rated the SRE that they received in school as either poor or terrible.

However, we should take heart from young campaigners for statutory PSHE because they are doing excellent work. As well as having tremendous support from groups such as Girlguiding, this year I have also had the privilege of forming links with an exciting group in my Brighton, Pavilion constituency called PSHE Matters. It is made up of students from the Dorothy Stringer School in Brighton who have got together under their own steam to campaign actively for PSHE to be mandatory. They recognise the value of the proactive PSHE provision at their school, and they want to ensure that all students across the country have access to similar high-quality teaching. Their work on PSHE is a testament to the success of the subject.

The students’ call to action comes in a context where one third of young people aged between 11 and 14 have watched online porn on a tablet or mobile phone, and half of 11 to 14-year-olds who had viewed pornography said it had affected their relationships. SRE is desperately needed to offset these messages with age-appropriate information about consent and healthy relationships.

Members will be well aware—

2.30 pm

The Deputy Speaker interrupted the debate (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24th March.

Business without Debate

RAILWAYS BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March.

Southern Rail

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

2.30 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Today, the world is watching political speeches of historic significance, and I hope my Adjournment debate does not disappoint.

I thank the House for once again allowing the issue of Southern rail to be debated in the Chamber. While many of my constituents—in fact, many people in the south-east region—were pleased to hear that next week’s strikes by the ASLEF union have been halted and that a normal Southern rail service should start again on Tuesday, the fear of a “normal” Southern experience is still filling some people with trepidation.

The normal service in the Southern region for the last 18 months to two years has been extremely poor. At times, performance has gone down to a level where fewer than 40% of trains have turned up on time, and the average is around 66%. That compares with over 90% for other operators, so we in the Southern region certainly suffer more than most. It is not just late trains and cancellations. Trains are often short-formed, going from 12 carriages down to 10 or eight. There is also poor customer service, and we have even had our trolley service removed from our trains, to add insult to injury.

Many constituents have been to see me, whether that is individuals who have shared their experience of getting to work late, getting home late and being at risk of losing their jobs, or businesses, and I recently attended the local chamber of commerce breakfast meeting in Seaford, where businesses told me that trade was down because no one could get to them to use their services. In my four towns of Lewes, Seaford, Polegate and Newhaven, the experience is exactly the same.

My constituency has suffered more than most. We are a Southern-only constituency, and we do not have Thameslink or Gatwick Express. We are a very rural constituency, so there are few other forms of transport available. Not all our little villages have a GP, a post office or a school, so people use the trains to get to the main towns or the neighbouring villages to use the services there. When there is no train, people are literally cut off from the rest of the world.

When people come to see me, I say that there are three reasons why the rail service has not been great in our Southern region. The first, of course, is the dispute. As I said at the beginning, that is hopefully on the way to being resolved. We are glad about that, and we praise all those involved in getting people back round the table.

The second issue is Network Rail. Over 50% of delays on the Southern rail network have been down to rail infrastructure issues. We have an old line in the constituency and across Surrey and London. It has lacked investment for 10 to 20 years, leading to recurring signal problems, point failures and track failures. I was pleased that one of the first tasks the Secretary of State undertook when he came into post was to outline some of the initial investment in the track.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a typically powerful case, as a diligent constituency MP. Does she agree that, while passengers understand that there will be service outages, what frustrates them is the lack of information? What we
need is proper co-ordination between the train operating companies and Network Rail in real time so that people can make alternative arrangements.

**Maria Caulfield:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is as if he is psychic, because that was going to be my very next point. As well as the investment, the Secretary of State has asked the Rail Delivery Group to bring together Network Rail and the rail operator so that when there are problems on the tracks, passengers have a better experience through better customer service and information about alternative routes. We have all felt frustrated on a Monday morning when engineering works have overrun and trains have been cancelled because of poor communication between Network Rail and the rail operator. Those two points, however, do not take away from Southern rail’s poor performance. As we move from the dispute to a normal rail service, my constituency wants a good rail service.

**Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab):** I thank the hon. Lady for bringing the issue to the House. Her constituents and mine suffer the daily misery of the failure of Southern rail. Does she agree that Southern’s performance has been so bad over the past two years that it should have been stripped of its franchise, and that it is because of a problem with the structure of the franchise that that has not been contractually possible? Will she join me in calling on the Secretary of State to look as a matter of urgency at ways in which the franchise can be stripped from the operator and handed to Transport for London or another part of the public sector, such as the Department for Transport, to run in the interim while the service is sorted out?

**Maria Caulfield:** The Secretary of State is on record as saying that once the dispute is resolved, the performance of Southern rail will have to be tackled. I can only speak for myself when I say that I would look at all the points, however, do not take away from Southern rail’s poor performance. As we move from the dispute to a normal rail service, my constituency wants a good rail service.

**Helen Hayes:** I wholeheartedly agree. I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement of a refund equivalent to the cost of a month’s travel for season ticket holders, but that is not working. Not one of my constituents has heard from Southern rail, and I would be surprised if anyone else has, either. They were supposed to be contacted in January and told how they would get the rebate, but not one of them has heard anything. That goes hand in hand with the heart-breaking experience of delays. The Government have tried to reduce the length of the delay for which people can claim from 30 minutes to 15 minutes, but time and again I hear from constituents who say that the system is not working. Passengers have to apply online or by post, and they often find that their forms are lost or their claims are challenged by Southern rail. Most of us do not bother using Delay Repay, so the train operator is getting off scot-free. Our constituents do not receive compensation for the taxis that they have to take when their train does not turn up or when it terminates early, or for the extra childcare that they have to pay for. Simply compensating people for the rail fare that they have paid is not enough.

Part of the issue is the key card system. Unlike in the TfL system in the zones around London, passengers have no opportunity to use a contactless card; they have to use a Southern rail key card. It must be pre-loaded before a journey, which means that passengers cannot spontaneously get on a train without pre-loading their card first. If they have not left enough time and the IT system is not coping, the ticket will not have loaded on to the key card in time, and they will not be able to get through the barrier. It is a cumbersome, clumsy ticketless system, and it is part of the reason why people cannot claim their refunds.

We were promised flexible season tickets for people who travel, as I do, two or three times a week. With more people working at home, the traditional season ticket is rapidly becoming outdated. Southern is still consulting on the flexible season ticket that we were promised and has not delivered on it. I would be interested to hear an update on that from the Minister.

Another key issue that I want to outline is the experience of disabled passengers. Particularly in the towns of Seaford and Newhaven, an appalling bus replacement service has been provided, using buses that are not wheelchair accessible. Many disabled passengers have been turned away over the last few months, because they have been unable to get on to those buses. Taxis have been ordered, but disabled passengers have experienced long waits. That is unacceptable, in my belief. Even when the rail service is working, disabled passengers have to pre-book and hope that their booking will result
in station staff being there to help them. Many disabled passengers have contacted me to say that the assistance that they have booked has not been available at the station and they have been unable to get on to their train.

A final point on the experience of disabled passengers concerns toilets. There are no “Changing Places” toilets in my constituency. Haywards Heath, which is a big junction for my constituents, has had a huge upgrade. It has a new car park and a fantastic system that allows wheelchair users to take a lift directly to the platform, but there are no suitable toilet facilities. That led to one of my young constituents, who goes to Chailey Heritage School, having to be changed on the platform because there was nowhere among the new all-singing, all-dancing facilities for her to be changed. In this day and age, that is completely unacceptable.

I welcome this week’s announcement, and it is a huge relief to us all that the dispute seems to be coming to an end. For us, it is the first step in getting an improved rail service. The experience over the last 18 months has been absolutely dreadful. We dread returning to a normal Southern timetable. We want a good Southern timetable accessible for all passengers. If that does not happen, we want the reassurance that Southern will be taken to task and dealt with by means of financial penalties or, if it comes to it, a change in the franchise.

2.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) on securing the debate. I know that this subject is close to her and her constituents’ hearts, and we have had much ministerial correspondence on the matter. She has, as ever, spoken up for her area with a strong voice, whether it has been about services for Lewes’s famous bonfire night celebrations or about replacement bus services.

I understand the frustration that my hon. Friend and her constituents have experienced with the service that they have had. I expect Govia Thameslink Railway to be able to run a reliable and predictable service for passengers—that is an entirely reasonable expectation—so I can only imagine what it must be like to be dependent on such an unpredictable service not just as a commuter, but as someone who needs to travel regularly. There are two elements to improving the service: the industrial relations issues; and the long-standing, underlying service problem areas. I will go through each in turn.

As hon. Members will be aware, trade unions and Southern rail have been in dispute since mid-April last year. The dispute has centred on driver-operated doors, and it has caused significant disruption to passengers. However, moving to a way of working in which the driver controls the train doors and the second person on the train focuses on customer service will be much more passenger-friendly and will allow a higher performing and more resilient rail service. The unjust industrial action arising from the dispute has held back GTR from delivering a modern, safe and passenger-focused railway. We want a railway that is fit for the future, but the dispute is getting in the way.

Although the dispute is a matter for the union and the train operator to resolve, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), have been doing everything they can to limit the impact of the strikes on passengers. On strike days and to cope with the overtime ban, additional measures have been put in place to help people to get to work.

A huge amount of work is taking place behind the scenes to try to get a resolution to the dispute. That is why I welcome ASLEF’s offer to suspend industrial action, allowing for a new round of intensive talks towards the end of this week. Indeed, those talks might be happening right now. I hope the talks end in success, which would allow us to get on with improving services and, most importantly, ending the misery that industrial action has inflicted on hundreds of thousands of passengers.

The travelling public are still subject to strikes by the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, however. I assure hon. Members that the train operator has contingency plans in place. On RMT strike days—such as next Monday, on 23 January—tickets are accepted on alternative GTR routes and other operator’s services, while bus replacement services are in place where there is no alternative rail option. In the meantime, GTR has trained a large number of office staff as contingency conductors to provide cover on non-driver-only operation Southern routes, and additional GTR and agency staff have been deployed to stations to help passengers.

Let me turn to the issue on which the dispute centres: the driver-controlled operation of the doors. Essentially, DCO involves someone driving and also controlling the doors without the need for a guard. Drivers on Southern have been striking against what others in GTR have been doing for years. This way of working is perfectly safe. DCO services have been operating effectively at very busy stations on a third of the UK network for more than 30 years. In fact, more than half the trains running in Britain, including all trains on London Underground, operate with drivers in full control of the doors. Indeed, more than 60% of GTR’s current services operate without conductors.

We are investing about £2 billion of public money in providing longer modern trains across the GTR network, which is all about delivering extra capacity for the travelling public and coping with increased demand for services. These trains are fully equipped with the latest technology that allows the driver fully to operate the train from the cab, in line with modern practice. When Ian Prosser, Her Majesty’s chief inspector of railways, published his GTR DCO inspection report recently, he confirmed that driver-controlled operation on Southern is safe. The Office of Rail and Road has concluded that the proposal fully meets legal requirements for safe operation.

Given that such a significant voice has assessed the practice as safe, as well as the safe record of operating such services, I hope that the unions will now acknowledge that they have no credible argument for saying that DCO is an unsafe method of operation. GTR has publicly stated that there will be no compulsory job losses until the end of its franchise in 2021 as a result of this modernisation, and affected conductor staff will have their pay protected.
Our railways are a success. Passenger numbers are growing. In fact, they have more than doubled since privatisation—from 735 million journeys a year in 1994-95 to 1.7 billion in 2015-16. That is a fantastic record. We will obviously need more people, not fewer, to help passengers in the future. The changes are about freeing up staff time so that they can focus on providing customer service and helping the travelling public on board the trains. If the unions insist on retaining outdated ways of working, it will be impossible to deliver the benefits, including improved reliability, that the new technologies can bring.

GTR has always been clear that there will be more staff on board trains in the future than there are today. They will be there to help passengers, including by giving customer assistance to individuals at unstaffed stations. Some 99% of on-board supervisor contracts have now been signed, and more than 80% of the additional 100 on-board supervisors who have been recruited have started their role. We hope that the new talks will end the months of misery and hardship faced by the travelling public, and the problems that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes articulated so powerfully today.

I turn to some of the underlying service problems. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is acutely aware that performance has not been good enough in the past and has deteriorated again in recent weeks. We need to be clear about what is causing that, because some of it has been more about the failure of infrastructure operated by Network Rail than failures by GTR. The instruction to drivers not to work non-contractual overtime on rest days has also had a significant impact on services.

None the less, I assure the House that the Department is determined to resolve the issues that exist as quickly as possible. Some of them should be addressed by the work that Chris Gibb has done as head of a new project board, working with GTR, the Department for Transport and Network Rail to explore how to achieve a rapid improvement in services. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes asked specifically about the timing of improvements. I will check on that work and write to her with further information.

It is appropriate that GTR is held to account for the quality of its product, and the Government continue to do that. GTR must work with Network Rail to deliver better passenger services as soon as possible. We monitor closely the performance of all rail franchises, and the franchise agreement contains clear penalties and incentives so that operators are penalised for repeated poor performance in the areas for which they take direct responsibility.

Helen Hayes: It is straightforwardly the case that the measures in the franchise agreement covering Southern rail have not provided sufficiently significant incentives or deterrents to improve performance—they have not worked. Will the Minister comment further on that?

Andrew Jones: We know that there have been significant problems on the line, but the biggest single blockage to progress is the gun that is being held to everybody’s head by the industrial action. The huge investment in new rolling stock will deliver a vastly improved service, with improved capacity and comfort on the trains. All we need is for that £2 billion investment to reach customers as fast as possible.

Helen Hayes: I agree that the industrial dispute needs to be resolved, but the fact remains that Southern rail was failing long before that dispute even began.

Andrew Jones: I agree that there have been operational challenges which, as I said, have resulted in poor performance and predate the strike. That is clearly correct, but the strike has taken those challenges much further and compounded the underlying problems.

As I said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has brought in a team to head a new project board, bringing together all the different parties to explore how we can make a rapid improvement in services. However, it is hard to do that when such huge day-to-day operational challenges are caused by the strike action. I am happy to agree with the hon. Lady’s point about the underlying problems that predate the strike—that is without any doubt. Under the regime of performance monitoring for the franchise, penalties have been levied against GTR for cancellations and short formations, and they will continue to be so levied.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes mentioned compensation, which is important, given the cost of rail travel and the level of disruption. Last month, the Government announced a multimillion pound compensation package for season ticket passengers in recognition of the hardship experienced by those who have suffered long delays, cancellations and disruption in recent months. She said that no one in her constituency had heard about the scheme, but they should have been hearing about it this week, so I am grateful for her feedback, which I will take back to the Department. I ask her to make sure that such practical, on-the-ground experience is continually fed back to me and my ministerial colleagues. The Delay Repay 15 scheme has been introduced to make it easier for Southern passengers to claim compensation.

It was appalling to hear my hon. Friend’s points about disabled services. We are dealing with Victorian infrastructure and trying retrospectively to install accessible and friendly services. This urgent work has been undertaken by successive Governments of all parties. Progress has been made, but there is a long way to go, and the experience she mentioned of someone having to be changed on a platform is obviously utterly unacceptable. The task of improving our public transport system for people with disabilities is important to the Department and one of my personal priorities. We will shortly be publishing an action plan for how to improve accessibility for people with disabilities on all our public transport, and for the first time we will include cognitive impairment and dementia in that.

This stretch of the network is one of the most intensively used in our country, having seen a dramatic increase in journey numbers over the past few years. I mentioned the dramatic passenger growth across the network as a whole, but the growth on this stretch is right at the top end of that spectrum. We need to increase capacity and update and modernise the service.

I fully recognise that strikes have caused disruption for passengers and that the current performance is far from satisfactory. It is utterly not good enough. ASLEF’s
offer to suspend industrial action is a step in the right
direction, and I hope that with these latest talks we can
get on with improving services and, most importantly,
ending the misery that this industrial action has inflicted
on hundreds of thousands of passengers. We need to
resolve this matter so that we can get back to the
important task of improving the line and delivering the
service that my hon. Friend and others across the House
are rightly demanding for their constituents.

Rail is a critical and successful industry. It has been a
success by all measures—growing passenger numbers,
its safety record, and levels of investment from the
public and private sectors—but when it fails, it highlights
just how critical it is and how much people depend
upon it. We need to work together to make the
improvements that my hon. Friend is right to demand
for her constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

2.58 pm
House adjourned.
Children’s Wellbeing and Mental Health: Schools

9.30 am

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I beg to move, That this House has considered the matter of supporting children’s wellbeing and mental health in a school environment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall, I think for the first time. It is timely to be discussing the incredibly important issue of children’s mental health and wellbeing, particularly in the context of schools, given what the Prime Minister said yesterday. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister of this country chose to make a speech that was significantly about mental health. That in itself is quite a novelty and should be acknowledged as such. She spoke powerfully about the “burning injustices” in society and focused particularly on those who suffer mental ill health.

My problem is that the response must match the scale of the injustice, and I think that the response has ultimately fallen short, but as a society we are on a journey and it is an important step that the Government are now saying the right things. I suspect that it is acknowledged by many Conservative Members that there is still a gap between the rhetoric and the reality for many people throughout the country, particularly families experiencing mental ill health, who sometimes have to wait horribly long for any access to treatment.

I will briefly describe my own family experience. This goes back to the last decade, which makes the point that the situation we are discussing is not the fault of any individual party or Government. When our oldest son required treatment and as a family we were fairly desperate, we were told that he would have to wait six months to start treatment, so we did what I guess any family would do and paid for treatment. Of course, very many people cannot do that. I do not want to live in a country in which people who have money can access great care, but those who do not are left waiting. That for me is the injustice that we must confront, but I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has raised this incredibly important issue.

One in 10 children are estimated to have a diagnosable mental illness, and 75% of mental health problems in adulthood started before the age of 18, so there is both a moral and an economic case for dealing with mental ill health among children and teenagers, because by neglecting it we store up enormous problems for people later in life, at enormous cost to the state—that is the key point that we must recognise. However, despite the prevalence of illness among children and teenagers, three in four children and young people with a clinically significant mental illness are not in touch with appropriate mental health services, and sometimes it can take up to 10 years before the first symptoms are diagnosed and addressed.

I stress that I do not want to over-medicalise this problem; we do not want to drive everyone into treatment. What we want to do, of course, is prevent the need for that, so we must shift the system so that it focuses much more on preventing ill health and deterioration in health, and schools are necessarily central to that.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will agree, in relation to mental health and schools, that it is important that young teachers are trained to recognise the difficulties that some children have, so that there can be early intervention to try to prevent the need for all the children to go into treatment.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I totally agree. As I will explain later, giving professionals the tools to manage the issues in front of them seems to me to be fundamental to a sensible approach.

There appears to be growing evidence of increasing mental health problems among young girls. In August 2016 a survey for the Department for Education found that rates of depression and anxiety have risen among teenage girls in England, although the rates appear to be more stable among boys. The survey found that 37% of girls reported feeling unhappy, worthless or unable to concentrate; that was more than twice the percentage for boys. According to the Children’s Society’s latest “Good Childhood” report, a gender gap has opened up between girls and boys in relation to both happiness with life as a whole and appearance. One in seven girls aged 10 to 15 felt unhappy with their lives as a whole, and the figure had gone up over a five-year period. We need to seek to understand that situation better in order to make the right response. I pay tribute to the Children’s Society, which has supported me in bringing this debate to Parliament. I also thank, as I should have done at the start, the MPs who joined me in applying for the debate.

There also appear to be problems among women between the ages of 16 and 24, according to a major report by NHS Digital. Reports of self-harm in that group trebled between 2007 and 2014, so something very serious is going on. Research is urgently needed to understand the causes of the trend. Social media appear to be part of the picture—there are concerns about sexting, cyber-bullying and so on.

We must also remember the issues that relate to boys and young men. Horribly, suicide remains the biggest killer of men under the age of 45 in the UK, and the rate has been increasing in recent years. In 2014 the male suicide rate was three times higher than the female rate. I am pleased that the Government focused on suicide in yesterday’s announcements. Ultimately, there is nothing more serious or important than seeking to prevent lives from being lost in that horribly tragic way, with the impact that it has on families—my family, along with many others in this country, have gone through that experience—so we need to give it the greatest possible attention.

The overall lifetime costs associated with a moderate behavioural problem amount to £85,000 per child, and with a severe behavioural problem they are £260,000 per child. That is why it is so important to deal with these issues early, rather than allowing them to become entrenched.
The Children's Society has highlighted school-based counselling, which can be highly effective for children experiencing emotional difficulties. It can be used as a preventive measure, an early intervention measure, a parallel support alongside specialist mental health services, and a tapering intervention when a case is closed by the specialist services to help a child or teenager through to recovery. Research shows that children perceive it as a highly accessible, non-stigmatising and effective form of early intervention.

Studies have also shown that attending school-based counselling services has a positive impact on studying and learning. In 2009 Professor Mick Cooper assessed the experiences of and outcomes for 10,000 children who had received counselling in UK secondary schools. More than 90% reported an improvement, which they attributed to counselling, and 90% of teachers reported that counselling had a positive impact on concentration, motivation and participation. So we end up achieving better academic attainment if we make the investment for those children who need it. It can be cost-effective, given the long-term cost to the economy of problems that continue into adulthood; some studies have indicated that the long-term savings can be in the region of £3 saved for every £1 invested, and data from Wales indicate that the average cost of school-based counselling is significantly lower than the specialist treatment children get if that is the only alternative. So we save money by giving children access to school-based counselling rather than delaying intervention and referring the child to a distant service, probably with a long waiting time, which is also far more stigmatising.

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy has estimated that the overall cost of statutory provision of school-based counselling across all of England's state-funded secondary schools would be in the region of £90 million per year. On the basis that 60% of schools are already delivering it, the additional delivery would cost around £56 million. I suggest that investment is well worth making given the improved preventive measure. An early intervention measure.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and apologising for being a few minutes late for the start of his important speech. I am sure that he, like me, will have had the privilege of visiting a number of schools, not only in his own constituency but across the country, that are really committed to their students' mental health and have invested in school-based counselling. Does he share my concern that in this past year we have already seen cuts to those services within schools because they have seen their budgets reduced and they are having to incur the additional costs of pensions, for example? The prospect for the years ahead is to see some schools that fund counsellors five days a week going down to three, or three days down to one, and some having to scrap the provision altogether because they simply do not have the resources to make this very important service available in their schools.

Norman Lamb: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention and pay tribute to the tremendous campaigning work that she does on mental health. Her point highlights the gap between the rhetoric, which is often well intentioned, and the reality. There is now a much greater focus on prevention in the Government's argument, but what too often happens with a system under impossible strain is that the preventive services are cut first because there is a desperate need to prop up acute services within the system. She makes an important point.

Let me address the issue of stigma in schools. Stigma can exacerbate mental health conditions and prevent people from speaking out and seeking help. In October 2016 the YMCA launched a nationwide campaign aimed at tackling the stigma associated with mental health difficulties and to help to encourage young people to speak out. It found that more than one in three young people with mental health difficulties had felt the negative impact of stigma. School is where most young people experience stigma, and more than half of those who have experienced stigma said it came from their own friends. There is often a lack of understanding among young people—teenagers—about what mental health really is. That is why it is so important that we get this on the curriculum so that every teenager learns about their mental, as well as physical, health and wellbeing, and about how they can become more robust in coping with the challenges they face.

The impact of stigma is profound and pervasive, affecting many areas of a young person's life. Young people reported that the stigma affected their confidence and made them less likely to talk about their experiences or to seek professional help. I can remember the moment when our eldest son said to me, "Why am I the only person who is going mad?" I just thought that here is a teenager feeling that and having stored it up inside himself, having not been able to talk about it for a long time. We can just imagine the strain of trying to cope with that on top of all the normal pressures of being a teenager. We have to do far more to combat stigma if we are to improve young people's experiences.

I want to mention "Future in mind", which is the blueprint we published in March 2015 just before the coalition Government came to an end. It was widely welcomed across the sector. We involved educationalists, academics, practitioners and young people, in particular, in the work we did. Central to the recommendations was the role of schools, and among the recommendations was the proposal that there should be a specific individual responsible for mental health in every school to provide a link to the expertise and support available, to discuss concerns with an individual child or young person and to identify issues and make effective referrals.

There should be someone taking responsibility but also a named contact point in specialist mental health services—too often we find that schools do not have the faintest idea who to contact when a child needs support—and also joint training. The hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) made the point about the training of teachers. If we can get teachers working alongside specialist mental health workers in schools, everybody will benefit.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman also pay tribute to the work of the Samaritans? It has a scheme called DEAL—developing emotional awareness and listening—which it is rolling out across Wales in particular. There is a resource pack available for teachers if they want to take it into schools,
or the Samaritans will send volunteers into schools to undertake, separate from the school system, talks and raise awareness for young people. That is the sort of low-hanging fruit—short-term, cheap, with lots of money to be involved—involved in the Samaritans, with their specialist knowledge and awareness, that is extremely helpful in reaching young people.

Norman Lamb: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the incredibly valuable work that she has done, particularly on suicide. I join her in paying tribute to the work of the Samaritans and the army of volunteers who give up their own time to save people’s lives. The sort of initiative that she described is incredibly important. Do the Government remain committed to implementing “Future in mind”? There is a danger in Government that we just replace one initiative with another. There is a very good plan there, which has all the right principles, and the important thing is just to do it and make sure that the money—I will come to that in a moment—actually gets through to where it is required.

Luciana Berger: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for kindly giving way again. May I echo his very important points? “Future in mind”, the report for which he was responsible, was released in March 2015. We are nearly two years down the line and, despite the fact that the “Five Year Forward View” explicitly stated that it accepted the recommendations of the “Future in mind” report, we are yet to see the vast majority of them implemented. I echo what he said and urge the Government to address that very important point in their response.

Norman Lamb: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. Given that I was responsible for that report, I feel very strongly about its absolute importance. I chaired a commission for the Education Policy Institute that reported last November, and we were pleased that the Secretary of State for Health came to speak at the launch, which I thought was important in itself. We looked at what has happened since “Future in mind” and in some parts of the country they are doing great work, but in others very little is happening. Very little has changed, with the bulk of the money still going to the acute end of the spectrum and not being reinvested in preventive care.

Critically, in many areas of the country, as the YoungMinds survey showed, 50% of clinical commissioning groups are not spending all the money—the additional investment secured in the coalition Government’s last Budget. They are not spending the full allocation on children’s mental health. I think that is scandalous. It amounts to theft of money solemnly pledged by the Government for children’s mental health, yet in many areas it is being diverted to prop up local acute hospitals. We cannot tolerate that. The Government have to find ways of ensuring that all that money is spent as intended.

I know that the Government plan to have greater transparency, with Ofsted-style ratings for CCGs, but frankly there needs to be more than that. When a CCG is under financial stress, it is just too easy to shove a bit off children’s mental health to spend it where the public are clamouring for action, because ambulances are stacked up outside the A&E department.

In the first year after “Future in mind”, the system that we designed meant that local areas would get the money only if they produced a transformation plan to show how the money would be spent on changing the system to focus more on prevention. My proposition to the Government—the EPI commission report said this—is that every year the money should be tied to a commitment from the CCG that every penny of it is spent on children’s mental health. The CCG must also demonstrate that it has stuck with the plan from the previous year and that it has a plan to continue the change in the subsequent year. Unless we use the money to drive change in local areas, it will not happen because the system is under so much strain.

The other point argued for by the Education Policy Institute commission was that the Prime Minister should launch her own Prime Minister’s challenge on children’s mental health, as the former Prime Minister did on dementia, because that sort of prime ministerial stamp of importance for this subject would be incredibly valuable. Yesterday was a start, but I challenge the Prime Minister to go further and launch a formal challenge of that sort.

My final point—I am conscious that other Members wish to contribute to the debate—relates to the importance of ensuring that when a child needs specialist treatment, they get it on time. This goes to what I regard as a discrimination within the NHS, because anyone who has a physical health problem benefits from a maximum waiting time. Whatever their issue is, they know that a standard maximum waiting time applies nationally. It is accepted that those standards are under strain, but at least they exist, and I know that they drive the system, from the Secretary of State’s office downwards, in looking at every individual hospital’s performance across the country.

On mental health, however, apart from the two maximum waiting time standards that we introduced in the last two years, there are no other maximum waiting time standards. There is no standard for children. Families across the country can be left waiting, sometimes for months, to get any treatment at all, and when they get referred too often they have to clear high thresholds. In other words, someone has to prove that they are really sick before they get any help at all. That dysfunctional and irrational approach completely contradicts the principle of early intervention.

When you have a child aged 15—as I did, a girl—who had an eating disorder and was turned away from treatment because her body mass index was not low enough, and who then got admitted as a crisis case two months later because the problem had been neglected, you are left in a state of despair. We need to ensure that children with mental health problems have the same right to timely, evidence-based treatment as anyone with a physical health problems does, and that they should be treated close to home rather than being shunted sometimes hundreds of miles away.

These are the burning injustices that exist for many families across the country who cannot pay to opt out of the system. We have a duty and a responsibility—the Government, in particular, have a duty—to ensure that those children get the treatment they need on a timely basis.

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Five Members wish to speak in the debate and I intend to call the Front-Bench spokesmen at 10.30 am, so if Members could keep their
remarks, including interventions, to about seven minutes each, I calculate that we should get everyone in and share the time equally.

9.54 am

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing this debate, which is so important and timely, and I am pleased to be able to speak in it. I noticed last week that the debate was going to take place and I started to prepare my comments then, but of course, in the light of the Prime Minister’s excellent and welcome speech yesterday, I have had to change them somewhat.

I think it is pretty much agreed across the House that we need to put more emphasis on mental health, putting it on a par with physical health, as we have heard. We also need to do much more work on removing the stigma that seems to be attached to mental ill health, especially among young people. Another universally agreed principle is that prevention, or at least early intervention, is much better than cure. Obviously, that is where the school environment can really come into its own, and where I truly believe we need to focus a lot more effort.

To be positive for a moment, many Members from across the House have worked on bringing to the Government’s attention the fact that we needed a fairer funding formula for our schools. I am delighted that that is happening, and particularly that rural areas, such as mine in Somerset, will receive a much fairer share of funding per student. Although that will not solve mental health problems, it will alleviate the situation for many schools. They will have slightly more money to go around, which may mean that they have money to pay for consultants, advisers and specialist services, should they need them, for mental health. That is just one small thing, but if there is better education across the board, that has to be better for children growing up.

We know that a vast amount of mental health problems begin at school age, with 50% of lifetime diagnosable illnesses beginning at the age of 14, so it makes perfect sense to start dealing with those at that young age. I want to point out some positive initiatives that we could learn from and that perhaps should be copied on a wider scale. One is community engagement and involving young people in activities so that they really feel part of something. To give an example, I was very proud to go to the recent Somerset elections to the Youth Parliament in my constituency, where I was really taken by the assuredness of the students. Not only were they having great fun, but how well they conducted themselves, and how interested they were in life! I got talking to the chap who runs that—Jeff Brown from Somerset County Council—who said, “You should see the state that some of these children come to me in, when they are quite young—about age 11—and how this involvement, engagement and working together has really changed and helped them.” He also said that many of them had mental health issues, so if we could encourage children to get involved in such areas, it would be very helpful. Obviously, that means that we have to keep giving funding to organisations such as the Youth Parliament.

Another area that I am especially interested in, given my gardening and environmental background, is schools that are running gardening and outdoor projects to involve children in activities out of the classroom. I recently went to North Town Primary School in Taunton Deane; it has an excellent, innovative gardening set-up for a primary school. It is really involving children and giving them an outside interest—especially those who, perhaps, are not so academic—in growing and in watching the seasons change, watching nature and watching wildlife. The Royal Horticultural Society has many statistics to prove that that has a really beneficial impact on people’s mental health, and anything that any schools can do to get involved in such projects is worth while and to be encouraged.

Similarly, the Somerset Wildlife Trust, of which I am a vice-president— I am very proud to work with it—does an awful lot of work with local primary and secondary schools, enabling children to connect more with nature and the outside. According to national wildlife trusts’ statistics, 93% of schools said that outdoor learning improves people’s social skills, and 90% of children said that they feel happier and healthier when they are doing these activities outside. Interestingly, 79% of teachers in the surveys that they did said that outdoor learning had a real impact on their teaching practice, so I think there are real lessons to be learned there. Those are all excellent examples of what has already been done.

When I met the people from YoungMinds, they stressed the importance of placing wellbeing and all the activities that I have mentioned alongside academic learning. Again, I welcome what the Prime Minister said, and I was especially pleased to see that a review will be done of child and adolescent mental health services; I hope that it will begin swiftly.

Now for my negative bit: in the south-west, young people’s mental health is a significant issue. I am sure that all Members could give examples; I have many from my casework. People come to me with heart-rending stories exactly like the one that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk told about his daughter. I could list handfuls of people who are affected, including my children’s school friends, my son’s sports mates—guys with aspirations—and neighbours’ children. It is absolutely shocking how many people we can think of offhand. It is not only awful for the child; it puts so much pressure on families, especially if they must go long distances for treatment. It is awful for the child and awful for the parents, but it is also difficult for other siblings to carry on a normal life, and for parents to bring up all their children. I do not know if the right hon. Member for North Norfolk has other children, but I know that the impact makes things difficult for siblings. This is a serious issue, and this House and the Minister need to deal with it.

I welcome the introduction of mental health first aid training in schools, but will the Minister liaise with the Department for Education on an issue relating to the budget cuts for sixth-form colleges? In Taunton Deane, we have an outstanding sixth-form college called Richard Huish College, which has just been shortlisted to be the year’s sixth-form college of the year. I wish the college well in that, but when I spoke to its principal, he told me that the school had had to cut all its enrichment courses: sport, drama, music. He was at pains to stress that we need to send the message
that we should not expect children to excel only at academic things such as maths and English. Obviously, those are important, but there are other ways for children to show that they are good at something, and for us to celebrate what they do. He pointed out that it is often the children who do not get such opportunities, or who think that they are not good at anything, who fall into a trap and start on a downward spiral. That is how we end up with a spike in mental illness. I urge the Minister to go along to the Department for Education and see whether we can have a bit of joined-up thinking.

I am delighted by the renewed focus on children’s mental health, especially as children spend a third of their time in school. Much good is already being done, as I have pointed out, and I would like to see some of those models copied, especially the ones relating to outdoor activities, the environment and even sport. Some schools run a daily mile; I believe that started in Scotland. Pupils go outside at a set time every day with their schoolteachers, in whatever they are wearing, and run a mile. They might get a bit sweaty, which I believe the girls do not like terribly—

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): My daughter does.

Rebecca Pow—although my hon. Friend’s daughter does. What a terrific idea. If everybody does it, nobody worries about what they look like. It is simple and cheap; it does not cost a penny. I will also throw in that on Radio 4 this morning, we heard about shared family meals. There is so much benefit in things like that.

To conclude, I stress that the long-term benefits of addressing mental health issues at an early age will be to everybody’s advantage. I applaud the Government for what they are doing, but it is just the start—the building blocks or foundations on which I hope we will build a better future, in which we do not have to debate this issue.

10.4 am

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for the opportunity to have this debate. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on suicide and self-harm prevention, one thing of which I am very aware is that change only comes when there are champions, at the local and national levels. He has certainly been a champion in this House for mental health. When he was a Minister, it was always a delight to speak to him, because I knew I was talking to somebody who understood the problem, and I pay tribute to that.

I welcome the publication of the latest national suicide prevention strategy—I am particularly pleased by its recognition of the work of the all-party group—but one of the big problems is that there is no new money for local action plans. If we do not start in a local basis, we will not get the change that all of us want.

The all-party group works only with academics; on the whole, the people who come to speak to us come from an academic background. Their work is fully researched, and the way forward is understood. Just before Christmas, two researchers from the National Centre for Social Research, Sally McManus and Caroline Turley, addressed the all-party group. They discussed the findings of the recently published adult psychiatric morbidity survey, which examined trends in mental health and well-being since 2000.

It was extremely depressing. One of the first things that they mentioned was self-harm. The all-party group considers both suicide and self-harm prevention, because self-harm is often an early indicator that someone is suffering from mental health problems. If we ignore it, we just build up problems for the future. Self-harm among 16 to 24-year-olds has doubled since 2000. One in four women and girls aged 16 to 24 have self-harmed, rising to one in three among over-18s. In 2000, one in 15 young women between 16 and 24 reported having self-harmed. By 2015, that figure was one in five.

Young women are twice as likely as young men to self-harm. They do so for a number of reasons, but it is often to relieve tension, anxiety and depression. For them, it is a coping mechanism. Triggers vary from one individual to the next, but bullying via social media, low self-esteem and anxiety are often cited. Some care must be taken in considering those figures, as the rise might be due to increased willingness to report, but the increase is borne out by other studies. Clearly, that level of distress cannot be ignored.

Of the 16 to 35-year-olds surveyed, one in 10 asked for help but did not receive it. Someone aged 16 to 18 with anxiety and depression has only a one-in-five chance of accessing help. The older someone is, the more likely they are to receive help. Some 37% of those who reported having self-harmed had received medical or psychological help, leaving two thirds who had no help. If an individual presents at hospital after an incident of self-harm, they will not necessarily receive the help that they need.

The highest rate of access to help was among 35 to 54-year-old white British women. If young people come from a black or ethnic minority background, their access to mental health support decreases. That is incredibly unfair and totally unacceptable. Findings published recently in The BMJ, drawn from the multi-centre study of self-harm, 2000 to 2012, considered hospital admissions for self-harm and concluded that despite NICE guidelines, only a little over half were offered a psychosocial assessment.

Sadly, another issue that we must consider is that all too often the criminal justice system picks up the failures of the mental health services. Too many young people are sidelined into youth offending teams and ultimately into young offenders prisons. Staff at those young offenders prisons have told me that some of the most tragic cases that they deal with are of young people with mental health problems who are being criminalised at an early age. That has to stop.

The Department of Health is diverting its failures to the Home Office and to the Ministry of Justice. I cite as an example a young girl in my constituency who, very sadly, has quite severe mental health problems. Over the years, she has appeared in front of the police and the courts more than 140 times. She has served numerous prison sentences; she is in and out of prison all the time. The police and the probation service recognise that her problems are linked to mental health. She has been involved in the mental health system since she was a very young child, but now that she is a young adult, she is being sent back and forth in the criminal justice system and is not receiving the mental health support that she needs. She is now out again; she has already
[Mrs Madeleine Moon]

tried to take her own life by jumping from a bridge and has broken her ankles. The likelihood is that she will be back in prison before we know what we are doing.

I agree that we need to start early. The work in schools is essential. Young people need to know what is normal—“I’m going through adolescence, my hormones are all over the place; what is normal and what is actually a problem that needs dealing with?” We need to look at NICE guidelines on psychosocial assessments, which need to be in place more often. The Department of Health informed me in response to a parliamentary question that it does not keep records on where a psychosocial assessment has been offered, but that would give us an idea of how often we are failing.

Another important thing that needs to happen is a triage system. For a GP’s letter to a consultant asking for an appointment to just sit on a secretary’s desk until the secretary has done that assessment is nonsense. Dr Robert Colgate has set up a triage system for mental health that allows direct access to a consultant, so that help and support are available to GPs, mental health nurses and psychiatric social workers straight away and medication, help and appointments can be given straight away.

This has gone on too long. We know what the problem is, and it needs money and investment. Let us make sure that we start from today.

10.12 am

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under you chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), with whom I share a mental health trust, which we are both glad to see is out of special measures. I congratulate the staff on that, but there is much more work to do. I concur with other Members who have said that prevention is better than cure. There could be no more opportune time for this debate, which comes a day after the Prime Minister highlighted mental health, and particularly children’s mental health, as a problem. We have been talking the talk, not walking the walk, for quite long enough.

Why have I chosen to speak today? Mental health is one of my top three surgery priorities. Week after week, in surgery after surgery, I see families whose lives are breaking down because of waiting times. Very often, it is not only the child at the centre. Often Mum has given up work, so there is an economic impact; Dad has stopped doing overtime, so there is a further economic impact; and the siblings do not quite get the activities that they used to, because everybody is focused on the child who has the problem at that time.

I have four children; the last left school last year. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), I have been somewhat horrified over the past 10 years, as they have travelled through their teenage years, to see how their contemporaries have struggled with mental health and to see the help that has been available for them. As a governor some 10 years ago, the fact that some of my children would be sent hundreds of miles away, when we know that closeness to the family gives better outcomes in the long term, filled me with horror. We really need to drill down into the issue of tier 4 beds and the local availability of child and adolescent mental health services.

As governors and teachers, we instigated sessions with parents on eating disorders and resilience. The World Health Organisation’s whole-school approach is the right one, but we actually need a whole-system approach of teacher training, actual connectivity and knowing where the services are. School-based counselling is excellent, but as the right hon. Member for North Norfolk said, we need to ensure that the funds are there at the right time. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane, I welcome fairer funding, but the fairer funding formula for Suffolk still leaves us short of the national average, so for us it will make a slight difference but not enough. Suffolk’s population is rural, and delivering issues rurally causes problems. It is much harder for us, with a sparse population in which more than 40% are scattered around, to deliver those scattered services.

Why do only 25% to 40% of children and young people currently receive input? Some 50% of lifelong mental health illnesses develop before the age of 14, and 75% before the age of 25. Young people with mental health problems use other coping strategies: self-harm is one that is familiar to me, unfortunately, and they are four times more likely to turn to alcohol. All these are destructive. They are 20 times more likely to go to prison, as we have heard. Tragically, they are six times more likely to die before the age of 30.

One in seven adults has a common mental disorder. If we capture these problems earlier on, we will be doing ourselves and the country a great service, saving people’s lives and building resilience within their families. I was very glad to hear the Prime Minister placing importance on mental health, but at the schools and colleges I go to, particularly my sixth-form college, the pastoral care teams reckon they spend up to 70% of their time on mental health issues. I have talked to teachers in the primary sector, who are seeing issues earlier and earlier. We need that teacher training and we need that funding.

How do we improve? We must build resilience, both personally and emotionally. We must focus on young women, who are three times more likely to experience common mental disorders than young men. However, our young men have less ability to express themselves and we see greater suicide numbers in young men, so we need a comprehensive approach. I encourage schools to reach out. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane, I support volunteering and using green spaces. The Green Light Trust does a great deal locally; Westgate Community Primary School does the daily mile. Exercise and sport improve outcomes, because children are within a team—research backs that up. Reducing the hours children spend in front of a screen, ensuring they eat together—all these things are part of resilience building.

When things go wrong, we do not want to medicalise, but we do not want to wait. People need services locally, and we need our children not to be sent all over the country. We have to look at the provision of funding and the allocation of resources. The lack of the family unit locally undermines short and long-term recovery.

I pay tribute to the fantastic work of the Prince’s Trust, of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Heads Together, which aims to destigmatise and shine a light on the area. That is to be welcomed. I will not give the statistics about body image and coping with work
for young people, because we have already heard them, but we need to understand where the money goes. When I spoke to my local mental health trust recently, I discovered that some £363,000 went to treating disorders, but that there was no more money for any additional services. That worries me.

I ask the Minister the following questions. Young people’s mental health needs prioritising. How do we scrutinise those who commission those services? I welcome the £67 million investment in digital connectivity, but many of my constituents do not have access, and there is a broader issue with telecare and prescriptions. How are we looking into the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Communities and Local Government to ensure that the fourth utility is there? Will she assure me that rural areas will be fairly treated? As in everything, we sit in the lower quartile both for education and for health, and that is not a good combination. How can we ensure that cuts in community care and local government support, which often give support services the money they are looking for, are considered effectively? Many trained professionals have moved out from children’s services into adult services. We need to capture that skill and bring it back.

It was my birthday when “Future in mind” was announced. I want to understand how we will properly evaluate whether the money that was announced yesterday—most welcome—and the money announced in “Future in mind” is being spent where we need it to be spent, so that we can understand what is working. I was also glad to hear the Secretary of State for Health announce that sustainability and transformation plans will not be passed without mental health being high on the agenda.

Many have said that the journey to better mental health starts with a conversation, so I hope that this is our conversation and that by 2020 there will be shorter waiting times and talking therapies in every region, and particularly for my young people.

10.20 am

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is an honour to serve under you as Chair, Mr Nuttall, and I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for securing this timely debate, which he opened excellently.

Mental health in schools is devolved to Wales and provision there is often used as an example of good practice. Today I would like to draw Members’ attention to certain areas of good performance in supporting children’s mental health services in Welsh schools, particularly in Gwynedd, the county in which my constituency is located and that I served as portfolio leader for education between 2008 and 2012. There is always room for improvement and there are still areas of concern, some of which infringe upon non-devolved competencies and impact heavily on the wellbeing of children and young people.

I will just point out that student union presidents at Grwp Llandrillo Menai, the three-college further education institution for north-west Wales, are so troubled by the mental health issues among 16 to 19-year-olds that they have chosen Mind as this year’s cross-college union charity. The Children’s Society’s “Good Childhood” report for 2016 highlights the issues affecting children’s wellbeing, as well as the connections between wellbeing and mental health. It calls for the introduction of statutory provision of emotional wellbeing and mental health support within schools in England, to act as a point of early help and to provide referral to specialist services if necessary.

Although they were conveniently timed during a row surrounding the “humanitarian crisis” in health, I am sure that we all welcome yesterday’s announcements about reform of mental healthcare, particularly the pledge to offer mental health first aid training in schools. The Government are making the right noises, but the detail is yet to be communicated. The real-terms increase in health spending is unlikely to meet the requirements created by health inflation over the coming years, so it is by no means a silver bullet solution, and of course it has implications for the Barnett consequentials that Wales receives.

As I have said, counselling provision in schools is already on a statutory footing in Wales. During the Plaid Cymru and Labour “One Wales” Government of 2008, the goal was set of ensuring that every secondary school child could access counselling as needed. In addition, in our first few months as an Opposition party last year we secured a landmark budget deal with the Welsh Government, whereby we realised a manifesto pledge to increase spending on mental health services by £20 million a year, and to improve access to trained counsellors and therapists in the community.

An example of a successful school counselling scheme is being implemented by Plaid-run Gwynedd and is operating in both Gwynedd and Ynys Môn. Since its instigation in 2008, 500 children a year have received counselling, and I am glad to say that very few of them have gone on to be referred to child and adolescent mental health services. In fact, in 2014-15 more than 11,500 children and young people across Wales received counselling, and 89% of those seen did not require onward referral after the completion of their counselling.

However, despite significant progress in that field in Wales, there are still areas of concern. A number of issues remain about the provision and delivery of CAMHS, including the transition from child to adult services and the support offered to children and young people who do not meet the clinical threshold for CAMHS but who still need support. In Wales, the comparable waiting times for child and adult mental health services are such that four of every 1,000 children and young people are waiting for treatment, which is eight times greater than the equivalent number of adults.

A particular point to which my attention was drawn came from my surgeries, as I am sure is the case for many Members here today. It seems that those children and young people who cannot attend school because of mental health issues fall between the cracks. Olivia Hitchen is 15, and I am glad to say that she was happy for me to mention her name—of course I asked her first. She lives in Corris in Dwyfor Meirionnydd and has explained how better support needs to be provided for young people who suffer extreme anxiety when they are placed in the crowded environment of a school classroom. It struck me as interesting that we expect children to operate in social groups for the purpose of education in a way that is strikingly different from the operation of most working environments; we do not usually put people in large groups with one person...
addressing them. If individual children do not fit into the conventional classroom, there seem to be precious few alternatives for them, particularly if they have mental health issues as well.

Olivia is highly intelligent and articulate. Her issues with anxiety appear to be reduced when she does not attend formal education, but she now needs to achieve formal qualifications, such as GCSEs, through examinations. Surely our education system should match the needs of the child and not expect our children to be moulded to the needs of the education system.

My final point today relates to the non-devolved ways in which children’s wellbeing may be improved. Of course, poverty increases the risk of mental health problems; it can be both a causal factor and a consequence of mental ill health. My constituency of Dwyfor Meirionnydd has one of the highest poverty rates in the United Kingdom. Of the 11,312 children living there, it is estimated that 2,510 live in poverty. Increasingly, those children who are in poverty live in a household where at least one adult is in work—there are 1,958 children in that situation in my constituency. A move into work where at least one adult is in work—there are 1,958 children there—those children who are in poverty live in a household where at least one adult is in work. The impact of this Government’s punitive universal credit moves is significantly evident in that situation in my constituency.

Every child must be given a chance of achieving robust health and happiness. Despite the gains created by the examples I have cited from Gwynedd and from Wales overall, more must be done at both Welsh Government level and UK Government level to ensure that the best opportunities exist for all our children.

10.26 am

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall; it is the first time I have done so. I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing the debate. During his time in office he really helped to highlight the challenges in mental health and he continues, quite rightly, to put the spotlight on mental health now. We are all grateful to him for the work that he has done in this area.

It is clear—obviously partly because of the Prime Minister’s speech—to all of us who have tried to make some efforts on young people’s mental health over the last year that it has become a major issue. For me, it became absolutely clear that it was a critical issue around 18 months ago, when I had a group of about 10 young people come to Parliament for an induction day. In a gap in the Q and A session, I decided to ask them what they thought was the most pressing challenge that their generation faced. In unison, those 10 young people, who were studying for their A-levels and had great prospects ahead of them, did not talk about tuition fees or debt; they talked about mental health. They said that mental health is the challenge we need to deal with.

As I started to explore this area in more detail, I went to an event at a school—it was a Christmas party, I think—and spoke to one of the parents who happened to be involved in dealing with pupils with pastoral issues in another neighbourhood. She talked about the increased incidence of self-harm, particularly among young women, which the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) mentioned. I then had the chance to speak to a number of children who were not actually dealing with mental health challenges in their own life but who were really worried about how they could help their friends who were. They were coming home and asking, “How do you deal with a friend who is involved with self-harm, or who is considering it?” Trying to come up with those solutions is a heavy burden for a 12 or 13-year-old, so these issues need to be tackled urgently.

I am grateful to YoungMinds for the work it is doing. As I have spoken with its chief executive, Sarah Brennan, and her team, it has become clear that mental health is now not just a challenge for the one in 10 children who we have heard about, or the one in 12 to one in 15 children who are dealing with self-harm; the latter figure could even be higher, according to the hon. Member for Bridgend. It is clear that young people’s mental health is a growing challenge. It is not just static; it is growing. Therefore, because of the increase in the number of referrals and because of the challenges that exist—from talking to my local mental health service in northern Wales through with the Cheshire and Wirral Partnership, I know that they exist—we must tackle the issue. As I have said in previous debates, the issue is amplified by social media. Feelings of low self-esteem and low self-worth need to be tackled and we need to help build resilience.

Although, obviously, not everything has been done yet, the Government took an important step forward with the “Future in mind” report, and credit needs to be given to the Prime Minister for her efforts and for the initiatives she put forward yesterday: mental health first aid training for teachers and staff; a thematic review by the Care Quality Commission, with Ofsted support; a new Green Paper on children and young people’s mental health; and the absolutely key aim—it has not been mentioned in this debate but we must ensure that it is delivered—that by 2021 no child will be sent away from their local area to be treated for general mental health disorders. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) highlighted that concern. The Prime Minister was honest enough to highlight that treatment is only part of the answer. What we need to do now is prevent mental health challenges and build resilience.

Something else that has not been mentioned today is the important investment of nearly £68 million in digital mental health services to provide online therapies. It is absolutely critical that we can multiply the expertise out to as many people as possible, making it easily accessible through digital technology.

In the couple of minutes I have remaining, I want to highlight what else we need to do next. We need to learn from best practice. Peer-to-peer support does not cost a huge amount and we need to ensure that we do it. The Emotionally Healthy Schools programme in Cheshire East has been particularly helpful. We must also ensure that there is counselling support and space available at school.

I know that you are keen for me to wind up, Mr Nuttall, but let me just say one thing in conclusion. We need to ensure that the digital funding that is available pushes forward recognition for greater support from social
media themselves. Often social media are a cause or an amplifier of mental health challenges. We must ensure that easily accessible apps are in place to support these young children.

Finally, given what the Prime Minister has said, it is time for our various third sector charities to come together with a clear set of asks for the Government and a clear plan of action that they would like to see us take forward; YoungMinds, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Barnardo’s and all organisations that have clear expertise bringing to bear a clear plan of action that will deliver for those young people who are suffering and those we do not want to see suffer in the years ahead.

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): I ask the Front-Bench spokespersons to restrict their comments to nine minutes, so that we can leave a couple of minutes for the mover of the motion to wind up at the end.

10.32 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. As a former secondary school teacher with more than 23 years’ experience, I am pleased to be speaking in the debate, and I am grateful to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for bringing it forward. He has direct personal experience of the issue and has spoken movingly about it. I think that we would all agree that he has moved the debate forward, certainly in England, where much more focus has been placed on the matter.

There is no doubt that over the past 20 years we have all started to become more aware of mental health, and of how widespread its challenges are in our society. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk articulated the importance of continuing to move the agenda forward, and that is a very good thing, because the greater our awareness of different mental health issues, the forms they can take and the challenges they pose to our society, the better equipped and educated we are as we try to deal with them, and that is never more true than in a school setting.

We know that the teenage years can be challenging in and of themselves, as young people grow, discover who they are and try to find their own path in life, and mental health issues that are not addressed in those formative years can scar a young life forever. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) pointed out, the whole family unit is scarred and caused real pain and anxiety.

We often hear Governments talking about attainment, teaching and learning, nurturing and citizenship, and inclusion, but none of those things are possible in their truest sense unless our children and young people enjoy good health, including good mental health. The statistics outlined by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) are truly shocking. Apart from the human cost, we of course need to consider the huge economic cost.

All those who have contact with young people are charged with creating a supportive, positive and fostering environment. Of course parents have a role to play, but things might manifest themselves in school and not at home, so all those who have contact with children must be vigilant. Schools have a privileged and important role in child protection. I can think of examples from my time in education when it was through the vigilance of a teacher that a young person who was struggling had been identified and offered vital support, shielding the young person from falling into a downward spiral of problems and despair.

In Scotland, child and adolescent mental health services are linked to schools, and they work with young people referred to them by schools. The number of mental health professionals in those services has more than doubled under the current Scottish Administration. We all of course welcome the extra £15 million announced by the UK Government to help tackle mental health issues in young people, because we know that it is important in achieving positive outcomes.

I want to say a word or two, if you will permit me. Mr Nuttall, about some of the work that has been ongoing in Scotland for a number of years. In Scotland we have already built up support networks at the early intervention level to ensure that young people, parents and health professionals, as well as schools, are much more aware of how to help young people who begin to show signs of mental distress. In addition, we have already seen good examples of staff in schools being upskilled in areas such as mental health first aid, and some schools have involved young people themselves in the training programmes, so that they can support their peers. That might go some way towards tackling the stigma, which the right hon. Member for North Norfolk outlined.

In Scotland we are getting better at this work. The demand for child and adolescent mental health services has increased year on year, with 10% to 20% more young people starting treatment every year. That is being driven in part by the unmet need that we know has always existed across the entire UK, which is now being picked up by GPs, staff in schools and other children’s services. We are getting better, but we are not there yet, and there can be no room for complacency on such a serious, widespread and important issue. I will point out, however, that for a number of years now Scotland has had a dedicated Minister for mental health, which is a symbol of the kind of commitment required by the enormous social issue with which we are confronted.

The new measures announced by the UK Government are good—of course they are, as far as they go—but let us not forget that, as the fierce advocate for mental health, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk, has already pointed out, mental health funding has not always made it to the frontline services where it is desperately needed, and that must be addressed. I note the comments about waiting times, and I say to the Minister that Scotland was the first nation in the world to introduce, in 2010, waiting time targets for child and adolescent mental health services. That is a good path that the UK Government should think about going down. Unfortunately, in 2015 people in England were told that it was not feasible to have such targets. Why is it not feasible? If it can be done in Scotland, there is absolutely no reason why it should not be done in England.

Every constituent part of the UK needs a coherent, ambitious and bold mental health strategy to address the scourge of poor mental health, which has a huge effect on society. The Scottish National party Government is in the process of setting out their vision for mental
health for the next 10 years, to transform mental healthcare in Scotland—including for children and young people—funded to the tune of £5 billion over this parliamentary term, funding that has been prioritised despite enormous budgetary pressure.

It is that kind of big thinking—that joined-up thinking—that is needed by those living with poor mental health wherever they live in the United Kingdom. I am interested in the plans that the Minister will set out today. Will she look at some of the excellent work being done in Scotland to see what lessons can be learnt to improve the situation in England?

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Nuttall. I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing this debate.

We have heard from Members of all parties: my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), who was here for a short while; my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon); and the hon. Members for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), for Macclesfield (David Rutley), and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). We have heard much today much about the state of mental health services for children and young people, which was the focus yesterday, and about some of the causes and challenges I, too, welcomed the Prime Minister's intervention on children’s mental health yesterday. It was a step in the right direction, but inadequate without work on existing resources, which I will come on to. If mental health treatment is a burning injustice, it needs more than what I have seen summarised as teacher training, a review and a Green Paper.

Providing mental health first aid training in secondary schools will help some young people, but given that 50% of mental health problems start by the age of 14, why is that training not being extended to primary schools? A further commitment could fund a counsellor in every school, as we have heard in this debate when it was discussed by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk. We have also heard about the excellent results of school counselling in Wales.

The Children’s Society has stated that school-based counselling is seen as accessible, non-stigmatising and effective by children and pastoral care staff. As we have heard, it estimates that the additional cost of ensuring a counsellor in every school would be around £36 million; that is an overall £90 million cost when we include the current use of counselling by schools. That is not a great sum and it could make a great difference.

Personal, social, health and economic education should be statutory in our schools. That already has the support of the House. The Chairs of four Select Committees, including the Health and Education Committees, supported that as a “crucial part of preparing young people for life.”

Importantly, the most recent Ofsted report on PSHE provision found that in two fifths of schools where learning was weak, pupils have gaps in their knowledge “in the serious safeguarding areas of personal safety in relation to sex and relationships, mental health, and alcohol misuse.”

Does the Minister agree that if the Government are serious about tackling the stigma around mental health, making high-quality PSHE lessons statutory would be a good place to start?

Clearly, schools can play an important role in identifying vulnerable young people who may be living with mental ill health, such as those in care or those who have experienced abuse and neglect. Schools need to be supported to identify and respond to the safeguarding and emotional needs of young people affected by abuse and neglect, yet according to the Children’s Society, less than half of mental health trusts have clear pathways set up for referrals of children who have experienced sexual exploitation. If we think of the number of places in this country where that has been an issue, that is a serious gap.

Given the emphasis on the role of schools, it is deeply worrying that the National Union of Teachers’ analysis of Government figures for the national funding formula consultation found that funding would be cut from a very large percentage—98%—of England’s schools. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree, referred to the impact of cuts on schools’ budgets and their ability to fund counsellors. Some Conservative Members feel that their budgets will improve, but for many schools, they will not. Does the Minister agree that putting greater financial pressure on schools will, as we have heard, damage their ability to employ counsellors and take on other vital work to link schools with mental health services?

If schools and teachers take on a role in mental health, they need to be able to make a referral to mental health services quickly. On average, nearly one in four young people are turned away due to high thresholds for accessing services. It is unacceptable that vulnerable young people are turned away from the services they need. When young people do get access to services, they can still experience wide variations in waiting times across the country; average waiting times for treatment range from two weeks in Cheshire to 19 weeks in north Staffordshire. Such disparities must be addressed.

I turn briefly to the issue of young people in crisis waiting long periods for a bed, or being admitted to units hundreds of miles from home; as we know, that includes young people with eating disorders being sent to Scotland for treatment. It is clear that the stress and sense of isolation that that causes can damage a young person’s chances of recovery.

The Prime Minister said yesterday: “By 2021, no child will be sent away from their local area to be treated for a general mental health condition.” That is simply not soon enough. Will the Minister tell us whether that target of 2021 for out-of-area bed placements can be brought forward?

I turn now to CAMHS funding and the £1.4 billion of extra funding promised from 2015 to 2020. YoungMinds found, through freedom of information requests, that in 2015-16, only just over a third of clinical commissioning groups had increased their CAMHS spending by the full amount allocated to them, and this year only 50% of the CCGs had increased their spending to reflect the additional funds. As we have heard in this debate, it is totally wrong for such funding to be used for other
NHS priorities. We have also heard that it is important that we know what commissioners are spending the 
CAMHS funding on. The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds was right to talk about Members of Parliament 
being able to drill down into CAMHS spending.

There has been an issue with the way that CCGs have reported their CAMHS spending to NHS England. The 
Royal College of Psychiatrists reported that CAMHS funding ranges from £2 per child per year in NHS Luton 
to more than £135 per child per year in NHS Birmingham South and Central. When pressed, the CCGs with the 
lowest expenditure levels said that they had reported only the figure for the additional spending allocated to 
them, rather than their total CAMHS spending.

In our debate on children’s mental health in October, the Minister talked about delivering “accountability 
through transparency” on spending. I wrote to her on 7 December about the confusion among CCGs on the 
figures that they should be reporting on their CAMHS spending. I asked her to investigate and, if necessary, 
issue guidance so that we have the accurate figures on CAMHS spending that we need if we are to monitor 
that important area. I have yet to receive a response, so perhaps the Minister will respond on that issue.

Given that one in four young people are being turned away from services, we should be prioritising practical 
and measurable solutions to make sure that young people who need to access mental health services can do 
so. The Government can start the improvements, as a springboard from what the Prime Minister covered 
yesterday, by ensuring that the entire £250 million that was promised in each year of this Parliament is spent as 
intended. This spending should be ring-fenced for CAMHS and not used elsewhere in the NHS. If the social care 
precept can be ring-fenced, why not funding for children’s mental health?

Some schools in some parts of the country are doing excellent work on the “Future in mind” programme. In 
Salford, we have an emotionally friendly schools programme. Some schools in some parts of the country are doing 
excellent work on the “Future in mind” programme. In Salford, we have an emotionally friendly schools programme. 
We have established school champions and young ambassadors for peer support. We are doing a review of transitions from primary to 
secondary school. We have developed an emotional health directory of services for children and young 
people, which sets out the services available and resources on websites. We are establishing a rapid response advice 
line for frontline professionals in schools to give them advice and guidance in times of crisis or if they lack 
understanding.

So much is going on, but as the right hon. Member for North Norfolk said, things are not even across the 
country. The Government should make it a priority to ensure that young people have timely access to clinically 
effective mental health support when they need it. “Future in mind” set out “A five year programme to develop a comprehensive set of 
access and waiting times standards” to bring rigour to mental health. I feel that a five-year programme is too long. It does not seem fair to spend so 
long developing access and waiting time standards when young people are not receiving the treatment that they 
need. Does the Minister agree?

Yesterday’s announcement could have been of a counsellor in every school, statutory PSHE and the 
ring-fencing of funding for children’s mental health. The things that we have discussed in this debate and to 
which I have just referred would have more impact on the burning injustice of mental health treatment than what 
has been summarised as teacher training, a review and a Green Paper.

10.49 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): It is a pleasure to serve under your 
chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), his colleagues and 
the Children’s Society for initiating this debate. As ever, I pay tribute to his continuing personal commitment to 
improving mental health services, not only as my predecessor but also through chairing the commission on 
children and young people’s mental health for the Education Policy Institute. That work has been extremely 
valuable to us.

The right hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that today’s debate is both timely and hugely important. As 
many colleagues have demonstrated in their comments, we know the distress that mental health problems cause 
to individuals and those who care for them. Some 10% of children have a diagnosable disorder—700,000 
in the UK—and they are twice as likely to leave school with no qualifications, four times more likely to become 
drug dependent and 20 times more likely to end up in prison. He could not have put it better. There is a 
compelling moral, as well as social and economic, case for change. We know that if we can get our children and 
young people the help and support they need early on, when problems first arise, we can make sure that the 
problems do not become entrenched. That is why the Prime Minister was clear in her determination to improve 
mental health services and tackle the burning injustice of those with mental ill health having a shorter life 
expectancy.

As has been discussed, the measures announced by the Prime Minister particularly tackle children and 
young people’s mental wellbeing and build on the substantial work already in train to implement “Future in mind”. 
We will continue that work, so that we can go further and faster in intervening earlier more often. In driving 
those reforms forward, one of the challenges we still face—the right hon. Member for North Norfolk identified 
this when he was a Minister—is the “fog” when trying to identify and pinpoint the best treatment and support 
for those with mental health problems. We need to base policies on the most robust evidence possible, so that we 
can be sure that we are providing the care that people need at the right time and in the right way.

That is why the Department for Education is conducting a large-scale school survey on the activities and approaches 
used in schools to support children and young people’s mental health in order to find out what works best, and 
why the Prime Minister requested that the Care Quality Commission undertake an in-depth thematic review—the 
first of its kind. That is also why we are carrying out a prevalence survey on children and young people’s mental 
health—the first since 2004, which was before YouTube, Twitter or Snapchat. The survey will look at issues such 
as cyber-bullying and the impact of social media for the first time, and it is on course to report in 2018. It will fill 
an important gap in our understanding.

As the right hon. Member for North Norfolk knows, I believe very strongly that transparency in mental 
health services has lagged behind that in acute services.
At a national level, data on children and young people’s mental health services were included in the new mental health services data set for the first time in January. It is still early days, but as collection improves, new metrics to monitor delivery are becoming available. We know from experience in acute services that that does improve accountability, standards and safety for patients. I will respond in detail to the comments of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) about her letter—I do not have time to do that properly right now—but we are looking at how we can drive accountability, eradicate all shadow of confusion from clinical commissioning groups about how they should be reporting, and make sure that we get that data set exactly right. As recommended by the taskforce, we will publish a 10-year research strategy to ensure that the evidence-gathering is sustained. A new policy research unit for mental health will be established in 2017 to make sure that the research continues to become a reality.

While all the evidence-gathering is going on, we cannot stand still. That is why we will press ahead with the implementation of “Future in mind”. As the right hon. Member for North Norfolk said, some areas are performing well and improving, some need to get the message about why this is important, and others are coming from such a low base that they are still working on capacity building, so we are not seeing evidence of improvement yet, but we are clear that we are ambitious not only to deliver “Future in mind” but to go further upstream and intervene earlier to prevent problems. The evidence base that we are building will come together to support the publication of the Green Paper, with increasing focus on preventive activity across all delivery partners. The Prime Minister committed initially to a new focus on schools, colleges and local NHS services working more closely together to provide dedicated children and young people’s mental health services. We are supporting schools and the NHS to develop work programmes across the country. As the hon. Lady also mentioned, the refreshed suicide strategy has a particular focus on self-harm, which is causing so many problems in schools.

To make the measures work and to see the progress that we so desperately need, we have to work closely with colleagues across Government. As colleagues have said, schools and colleges have an important role to play in supporting children and young people’s mental health. That role is not only laid out in statutory safeguarding guidance but is one of the four areas of Ofsted judgment in the new common inspection framework.

Colleagues are right: if we are to expect schools to play this role, we must give them the right training and resources. In 22 pilot areas, which include 255 schools across the country, NHS England has been trialling a single point of contact in schools. That programme has tested improvements in joint working between school settings and specialist mental health services—particularly improvements in local knowledge and identification of mental health issues—and it aims to develop and maintain effective local referral routes to specialist services to ensure that children and young people have timely access to specialist support where required. It is also testing the idea of a lead contact in schools and specialist mental health services and examining how different areas choose to put that into practice. The work is being independently evaluated by Ecorys, and the final report will be available in the spring. The question is whether that system is more effective than having an individual counsellor in every school. We are looking at that.

Other support available includes Government-funded PSHE Association guidance, and lesson plans on how to teach mental health across all four key stages. A range of training on how to recognise specific mental health issues is available to all professionals who work with young people through the MindEd website; our analytics have shown that teachers are the largest single group of registered users on the MindEd tool. As the shadow Minister said, mental health and wellbeing is an evolving and vital area of education, and we need to make sure that it is fit for children growing up in modern Britain, so the DFE is looking again at the case for further action on PSHE and sex education provision, with particular regard to improving quality and accessibility. I am sure that it will keep the House updated on that.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk is absolutely right that school counselling can turn around a child’s whole life trajectory, so schools are encouraged to provide counselling services, and the DFE has produced guidance on good school-based counselling as part of a whole-school approach to wellbeing. It has also published advice on behaviour and mental health, which provides teachers with information, and with tools to help them identify pupils who need help and to give effective early support in understanding when a referral to a specialist mental health service may be necessary. An advisory group, including sector experts and young people, looked at what good peer support for mental health and wellbeing looks like and considered how to encourage good practice in schools, community groups and online. There is much greater recognition that the earlier we pick up these things, the better it is for young people and their mental health.

The “Children and Young People’s Mental Health: Time to Deliver” report from the right hon. Member for North Norfolk found that we are making progress in
many areas of the country, but not nearly enough to be complacent. I agree completely with that. We are restless in our ambition not only to drive delivery of “Future in mind” in all areas, but to go further and deliver upstream interventions to prevent problems, rather than waiting until the need for treatment. I hope that I have convinced the right hon. Gentleman that this is an area to which we are fully committed, and that we will continue to drive forward with his agenda.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved,**

That this House has considered the matter of supporting children’s wellbeing and mental health in a school environment.

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**Leaving the EU: European Social Funding in Scotland and the UK**

11 am

**Natalie McGarry** (Glasgow East) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the UK leaving the EU on European Social Funding in Scotland and the UK.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. During the EU referendum campaign last year, great importance was attributed, and a lot of time was given, to the debate about how much money the UK contributes to the EU. One spurious and now debunked claim was plastered on the side of a now infamous bus. However, seldom spoken of before, during or after the referendum campaign were the funds that come back from the EU to the UK, where they go and the difference they make. We live now in post-vote, pre-Brexit uncertainty, in which the vacuous slogan “Brexit means Brexit” is accepted as satisfactory political discourse, although it has little meaning. Indeed, Scotland’s First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, stated last week that even after high-level talks with the UK Government she is no further forward in understanding the UK Government’s negotiating plan.

The debate during the run-up to the referendum became so shrill and engulfed in dog-whistle politics that the many benefits of EU membership were ignored in favour of focusing on borders and migrants, even though those benefits make a huge difference to many communities in many constituencies, including mine. I am, of course, referring to European structural investment funds, which bolster and boost economic development across the EU’s member states and regions. Since their inception in the 1970s, European structural funds have enabled great progress to be made in reducing economic and social inequalities among the EU’s member states and regions.

My remarks, and indeed my concerns, focus predominantly, but not exclusively, on the European Social Fund. Like other nations across Europe, Scotland has benefited enormously from European social funding. That great investment in our people has created invaluable opportunities in employment and education in the city of Glasgow and across Scotland and the UK. In the current period—2014 to 2020—Scotland will benefit from the European Social Fund to the tune of £464 million. Those funds, matched by the Scottish Government, will see millions of pounds invested across the country to improve sustainable and quality employment, to promote social inclusion and combat poverty, to create opportunities in education and employment, and to fight youth unemployment.

It is easy to distil facts and figures into rhetoric while missing the impact on the lives of real people in our communities, for whom European social funding helps to bridge a gap. In communities in my constituency, partnership working with local housing associations, such as that between Parkhead Housing Association and Glasgow Kelvin College, uses outreach to teach computing skills to people in their own communities and community centres, which lowers digital exclusion and helps people to attain the confidence and skills they need to achieve their potential. The system would otherwise leave behind many of those people.
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[Natalie McGarry]

The last round of European social funding—2007 to 2013—supported fantastic and worthwhile projects across Scotland. Glasgow City Council helped people out of gangs and into work. Coatbridge College provided employability services to school leavers. Glasgow Met worked with ethnic minorities to improve employability skills. The Wise Group helped people find routes out of prison. Fife Council tackled worklessness. Glasgow Clyde College provided community-based training. The Scottish Chambers of Commerce offered business mentoring. Dundee College helped people not in education, employment or training. ENABLE Scotland supported people with learning difficulties into work. The Glasgow Centre for Inclusive Living helped people with disabilities to secure work.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a compelling case about the impact of the loss of European social funding on Glasgow and the surrounding area. Does she agree that the loss of ESF funding will have serious consequences right across urban and rural Scotland, including on my constituency, whose fragile economy benefits greatly from ESF funding and whose people voted overwhelmingly to remain within the European Union?

Natalie McGarry: The hon. Member makes a very compelling case. He is a doughty fighter for his constituents in Argyll and Bute.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Before coming to this place, I worked at South Lanarkshire College, and I saw for myself the immense difference to people’s lives that ESF funding can make. Does my hon. Friend agree that there are many people in our local communities, including mine, whose lives are on a very different and more positive trajectory because of the benefits of colleges such as South Lanarkshire and the work they do with European funds?

Natalie McGarry: The hon. Member makes a very important point. The post-Brexit discourse has focused on higher education and other sectors, but not much on further education and the invaluable work that is done in local communities—at the very coalface, in the sense that people in colleges and community groups go into the very hearts of communities, where people are hardest to reach. That work is invaluable, and the hon. Member’s point is well made.

The projects that I mentioned are only a few of the many supported through European funding that make a tangible and real difference to the lives of people in Scotland and across the rest of the UK. This year alone, Glasgow Kelvin College, a further education institution that serves my constituents and has a campus in the Easterhouse area of my constituency, secured £1.5 million—worth of European social funds, on top of £1.9 million last year, which enabled it to continue its fantastic work on employability and vocational skills across Glasgow. That European social funding directly supports real jobs—more than 10 of them—and helps to create opportunities for many more.

In the past few months, I have met the principals of colleges in Glasgow with groups and organisations whose work relies on European social funding. They are worried about the future. They should currently be considering future bids for funding, but little or no information has been forthcoming about where they stand. The Government can provide certainty to Nissan and talk about guaranteeing research and technology funding to appease the higher education sector, but European social funding is the Kevin McAllister of the Brexit rush—drowned out by louder voices, trampled on in the rush to get out the door and left home alone.

The elephant in the room is, of course, the fact that the UK is leaving the EU, and that no non-EU country has ever received European social funding. Brexit is not the circumstance of Scotland’s or Glasgow’s choosing. Organisations across our city and throughout our country stand to lose hundreds of millions of pounds. Our people the length and breadth of Scotland and the UK stand to lose invaluable services and support, which will be to the detriment of their lives and our economy.

My constituency—indeed, our entire city and our country—voted to remain, yet our further education and communities face Brexit’s damaging consequences unless the Government stand up now and guarantee that they will protect the funding for projects at an equitable and comparable level. The true and full impact that the projects financed by the European Social Fund have may not be fully realised during one round of funding, but it will be undoubtedly real and lasting. That cannot be said of the impact that taking it away will have—it will be immediate and painful. EU funding has been an integral feature of Scotland’s educational, employment and economic landscape for so long that the removal of those key resources cannot be easily done—at least, not without substantial damage.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that much of that damage will be done to the deprived communities in cities such as Glasgow, which use such funding to engage young people in education, employment and training?

Natalie McGarry: The hon. Member has pre-empted almost my next sentence.

Worse still, because structural funds are targeted at poorer regions and areas of higher socioeconomic disadvantage, the impact will be disproportionate if such gargantuan funding gaps cannot be filled. Of course, the UK Government have announced that they will underwrite all EU structural and investment fund projects signed before the autumn statement last year, and that they will assess whether to underwrite funding for certain other projects that are signed after the autumn statement. The UK Government have announced that they will underwrite all EU structural and investment fund projects signed before the autumn statement last year, and that they will assess whether to underwrite funding for certain other projects that are signed after the autumn statement but before the UK leaves the EU. The Chancellor of the Exchequer said that the UK Government were “determined to ensure that people have stability and certainty in the period leading up to our departure from the EU”.

That statement, however, is at odds with the Government’s position, and their rhetoric is far from reconciling with the reality facing organisations in Glasgow, across Scotland and, indeed, throughout the UK. The Government’s position falls far short of what is needed. It is a limited guarantee for a narrow number of schemes for a restricted number of years, and it will leave Glasgow and Scotland hundreds of millions of pounds worse off than if we were still members of the EU. Organisations throughout Scotland that provide invaluable services do not have the certainty or security that the Chancellor has promised them.
In December, at Education questions in the House, I expressed those specific concerns. After I asked my question, the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), who had campaigned to leave, asked:

"Given that EU spending in Britain is simply returning part of our gross contribution to the EU budget, would it not be sensible for the Government simply to commit now to replacing EU funding with UK Exchequer funding, thereby keeping everyone happy?"

The Minister for Schools replied that the
"the United Kingdom Government will decide how best to spend the money that was previously going to the European Union."

That was certainly more substantive than "Brexit means Brexit", but no more enlightening.

With an eye to the future, what assessment have the Government made of the impact of losing EU structural funding on economic growth, output, productivity and employment in Scotland and throughout the UK? Does the UK intend to adopt a similar social and regional development programme to that of the European social fund and the European regional development fund? If so, would the UK Government match the existing allocated structural fund budget in absolute terms? Would any new programme have the same priority areas of focus as EU structural funds? The EU structural funding programmes allow for long-term planning over a seven-year period. Would the UK Government commit to a similar seven-year funding structure, or would it be different?

In the here and now, will the Government confirm that European social funding will not be frozen during the negotiations for the UK to leave the EU? Will the Government confirm what discussions they have had with the EU to ensure that structural funding that has been allocated to Scotland for 2014 to 2020 will not be clawed back? Finally, will the Government commit to undertake an evaluation of the European regional aid lost to Scotland during 1975 to 1995 because of the Government's deployment of a subtractionality funding model?

The UK can, should and must do more. Ignorance, or indeed arrogance, will simply not suffice. It would be unforgivable for Scotland to be punished for a situation not of its own making; to suffer for an ill-judged Westminster gamble to appease Eurosceptic Back Benchers. Now is not the time for uncertainty for the future education sector or invaluable community projects. The Government can end that uncertainty now.

Guaranteeing existing levels of support and match funding is not subject to treaty negotiations with EU partners; we are talking about the here and now, and about what the Government choose to prioritise. The Government cannot hide behind empty slogans because this is about the Exchequer and the Government's spending priorities. The Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and said that she wanted a Government who would work for all. Prove it. She should not disregard Scotland and not ignore our interests, and she should show us her plan and that she is serious about protecting Scotland.

11.14 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): It is a great pleasure again to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) on securing the debate and on her thoughtful contribution. I also thank the hon. Members for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) and for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for their additions to the debate, which has been useful and interesting.

The European social fund was set up with the objective of creating a more cohesive society, as well as a more prosperous economy throughout the EU. Projects throughout the UK, including in Scotland, have received funding from the fund. Under the ESF programmes for 2014 to 2020, a total of £466 million was allocated to Scotland. Funding for some 123 projects has already been agreed. The previous ESF programme in Scotland saw more than 430 projects funded and completed, and more than 390,000 people supported. In England, 86% of participants said that they had, for example, developed skills required in work.

Leaving the EU means that we will want to take our own decisions about how to spend our own money, which will continue to deliver the policy objectives previously targeted by EU funding. That is the context in which we have gathered for this debate. I would like to start by saying that I recognise the concerns of the hon. Member for Glasgow East and others who have spoken so passionately in the debate. She asked for certainty, I agree that it is essential that we provide certainty for recipients of ESF funding. That is why in October my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced certain guarantees.

All European structural and investment funds projects signed before last year's autumn statement will be guaranteed, including those funded by the ESF. That also includes those projects that will continue beyond the UK's departure from the EU. Moreover, funding for projects signed after the autumn statement, but before we leave the EU, will also be guaranteed—that is, providing that the responsible Department is content that the projects provide strong value for money and are in line with domestic strategic priorities, which are both reasonable points.

Carol Monaghan: All those assurances were very welcome when they were made, but the problem remains that we have an issue beyond that. We need to look to the future. We need a guarantee of funding—a pot of funding that will still be available for further and higher education way into the next decade.

Simon Kirby: I recognise the hon. Lady's point, which I will cover. It is important that we have a long-term objective, that we spend money wisely and that we get the best possible solution.

The Government will ensure that the devolved Administrations are funded to meet the commitments they have made under current EU budget allocations. Given that the administration of EU funding is devolved, it will be for the devolved Administrations to decide the criteria used to assess projects.

I would like to respond to some of the specific points made. I want to reassure the hon. Member for Glasgow East about the guarantees, to which I referred, announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor—specifically, to ensure that recipients of funding throughout the UK, including Scotland, will have payments guaranteed. After Brexit, they will continue to be guaranteed. They will
not be frozen or clawed back during the negotiations. That is an important point. The Government have committed to consulting stakeholders to review all EU funding schemes in the round. In the meantime, the Chancellor has made two guarantees, which I have mentioned. The hon. Lady’s questions are the very types of question that we hope and anticipate stakeholders will raise in the consultation, and the Government will listen carefully to everyone’s contributions.

It is also worth putting it on record that the UK Government’s decision to focus on investment, which was announced in the recent autumn statement, will result in the Scottish Government’s capital budget being increased by some £800 million by 2021—money that can be used to boost productivity and promote growth in Scotland. Significantly, the Scotland Act 2016 also enables the Scottish Government to raise more than half of its own funding.

In conclusion, as we are all very aware, the UK will leave the EU. The Government are determined to make a success of that for all of the UK, including Scotland. We have been clear about the contribution of funding secured through the ESF, but leaving the EU means that we will want to take our own decisions about how to spend UK money. Brexit will allow us to do that. The Government will work closely with the Scottish Government to get the best possible deal for all parts of our United Kingdom. We will give the Scottish Government every opportunity to have their say as we form our negotiating strategy, and the Government will continue in the coming months to consult stakeholders to review all EU funding schemes in the round. We are very much in listening mode.

Our aim will be to ensure that any ongoing funding commitments best serve the UK’s national interest while ensuring appropriate certainty. The Scottish Government and other devolved Administrations will be fully involved. In the meantime, it remains important that recipients of ESF funding continue to implement good value projects. The coming years will present a number of opportunities, and other devolved Administrations will be fully involved. In the meantime, it remains important that recipients of ESF funding continue to implement good value projects. The coming years will present a number of opportunities, which we must grasp and maximise. I am encouraged by the commitment of those who have spoken in support of vital schemes in their constituencies, and we will continue to work closely with all partners to ensure that every part of the UK prospers.

Question put and agreed to.

11.23 am

Sitting suspended.

### Soft Drinks Industry Levy: Funding for Sport in Schools

2.30 pm

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): The clocks on either side of the Chamber are not working, but frankly we are not overwhelmed with people wishing to speak so there will be no time limit on speeches.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the allocation of funding from the soft drinks industry levy for sport in schools.

May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David? This is a subject that I am passionate about. Since becoming an MP, I have spoken in a number of debates on the power of sport to influence good behaviour, create opportunities and provide enjoyment. I must stress that the purpose of the debate is to focus on whether we are right or wrong to have a sugar tax, but on how we should spend the levy, now that the decision has been taken. With a £500 million pot, that is a significant amount of money that can make a genuine difference.

I must thank all the organisations that have contacted me in recent days ahead of the debate, including: the Sports and Recreation Alliance, which is understandably keen to see sporting opportunities increase; Sustrans, which wants to see more funding for walking and cycling programmes to and from school; Youth Sport Trust, which has also focused on the sports element and the link between greater physical activity and greater academic performance, which I know the Minister for School Standards will welcome; and ukactive, which has done a huge amount of research, highlighting in particular the cliff edge fall in activity during school holidays, which I will come back to. I was also contacted by health organisations such as: Diabetes UK, which is obviously in favour of reducing the amount of sugar being used; Cancer Research UK, on the same principle; and the Royal College of Surgeons, on behalf of dental surgeons, obviously to reduce tooth decay.

This is an important subject, because one third of children are obese or overweight by the time they leave primary school. To me, that was a staggering statistic to read. When I was growing up, it seemed that all of us were active and charging around, so I was staggered by the figure of one third—one in three. That is not only an alarming figure; social norms start to be created. If an increasing number of children are overweight or obese, that becomes acceptable and therefore it starts to increase. On a topical level, through the NHS we currently spend £6 billion a year helping people with illnesses linked to being either overweight or obese. How could we better spend that money if there were fewer obese people. And an obese child is five times more likely to be an obese adult than an adult who was not obese as a child.

The Youth Sport Trust highlights that only 21% of boys and 16% of girls meet the recommended guidelines for physical activity. I recognise that we are competing with video games, shrinking gardens—back gardens are
now one third smaller than they were in the 1960s—and cautious parents. When I was growing up, parents did not think anything of children disappearing on long bike rides, playing in distant parks and going to their friends’ houses far afield, whereas nowadays parents are understandably worried if their children are out of sight. Again, that limits the opportunity to be active.

The Government recognise that we have to do something. In August 2016 they published “Childhood obesity: a plan for action” with the aim of reducing significantly the rate of childhood obesity. The plan included the soft drinks levy, which is worth £520 million a year, and clearer food labelling—something I pushed for in the previous Parliament through my work with the British Heart Foundation—because we have a duty to allow consumers to make informed decisions. Another fact that surprised me—I say this as someone who does enjoy drinking sugar-laced fizzy drinks but who wishes to be informed—was that a five-year-old should take in no more than 19 grams of sugar a day, yet one can of Coke contains 35 grams. How many consumers actually know that? If they did, would they change their habits?

Crucially, the plan was announced as part of a nudging policy, where we gave the industry two years to make changes. I recognise that many of the leading manufacturers and retailers are already making changes—as I said, I am not focusing on whether the levy was right or wrong, but clearly part of the strategy is to influence behaviour—but, as we have recognised that physical activity is good for health and good for improving academic performance, I welcomed that the money would be ring-fenced to spend on activities connected to schools. If we are to have a tax and get extra money, let us ensure that that money is spent in the right way. The best way to do that for children is through schools.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this important subject to the Chamber. Given his enthusiasm for sport in schools, which I share, would he like to comment on the coalition Government’s decision to scrap the school sport partnerships in 2010, which has had a really detrimental effect on sport in our schools? I do not see the sugar tax as going all the way to replacing the excellent school sport partnership scheme that we had.

Justin Tomlinson: Actually, that was the very first time I rebelled—I was rewarded by sitting on some obscure European committees thing for five years to think carefully about my actions. The funding was not scrapped. There was a change and initially a proposal to remove the ring-fencing, but the money was then once again ring-fenced, though schools were allowed to choose how to spend it on sports-related programmes. I supported that because we have got some fantastic school sport partnerships that are still thriving today—including my local one—but there were also some pretty poor ones, which have gone by the wayside, and those schools have now spent that money on individual sports coaches, sports clubs and things like that. We got there in the end, and funding has increased in this area since 2010.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Before the hon. Gentleman leaves the issue of sport, no one is against using some of the sugar tax revenue for encouraging greater sporting activities, but does he not accept that in his constituency, in mine and in everyone else’s, during the school holidays large numbers of children who would have free school dinners during term time do not get any food from the school or free school dinners? Might not one of the ways of making the sugar tax progressive be to earmark part of the revenue to ensure that schools could at least lay on the facilities for voluntary bodies to provide school dinners during the holidays?

Justin Tomlinson: That is a powerful point, and I agree with the sentiment of it. I would not necessarily use the sugar tax money, but that is something that the Government could consider as a wider point. It is a fair point, and actually some of the head teachers in some of the more deprived parts of my constituency have raised similar concerns about what happens to the children not just with regard to eating, but on wider issues throughout the holidays.

As it stands, there will be £285 million to extend the school day in secondary schools in relation to sport, £160 million to double the primary school physical education budget, and £10 million to expand breakfast clubs. That was welcomed by Emma Boggis, the chief executive of the Sport and Recreation Alliance, who said it will “deliver more opportunities to get children of a young age active” and “to stay active in later life.”

That is an important point. We must recognise that the opportunities we create must be regular and sustainable, because we also recognise that if the Government’s intention for the sugar tax works out and all the manufacturers reformulate their products and customers switch from full-sugar versions to zero-sugar versions, the amount of money will diminish. We must therefore ensure that the money is spent to seed regular sustainable activities. This is where I bring forward my rather reasonable—in my unbiased opinion—asks.

This has all come about from a visit to Oakhurst Community Primary School, which hosts the Draycott sports camp, run by Mark Draycott, a PE teacher at the school. The school runs after-school clubs, weekend clubs and school holiday clubs. There are lots of sports camps and I am sure that all of us as MPs have visited them at some point, but this one sets itself apart by a country mile. More than 200 primary schoolchildren were being active each and every single day in the last summer holidays, of whom slightly more were girls than boys—that is something for Sport England and the Sport Minister to recognise and celebrate, because that is a particular area of challenge—and they were engaging in all sorts of different sports.

A summary of how the camps work is that they run during every school holiday from 9 am to 6 pm, costing £12.50 a day, which is probably the cheapest childcare that a parent will find. They create an active environment that is inclusive and engaging for all abilities. That is vital, because a particularly sports-minded child probably has sports-minded parents and will already be signed up to a football, rugby or netball club. The camps are for the vast majority of children who are not necessarily sports-minded and who are the most likely to become obese.
The camps focus on helping children to be more active and introducing them to new sports—not only football and netball, but cricket, athletics, golf, lacrosse and so on—so that they can replicate what inspires them on the television. I visited a camp during the Olympics and saw them recreate the things that were inspiring them on the TV—it was amazing. Because Mark Draycott is a teacher, and because the majority of his support staff have connections to the school or are teachers themselves, they have the expertise to identify and support those children who are starting to fall by the wayside, and who are not naturally gifted or naturally enthusiastic about sports, to make sure that they remain engaged. They concentrate on killing the fear factor that some children have when playing sports and ensuring that they enjoy the activity. They are increasing participation among girls and bucking those national trends.

I highlight that because we have an opportunity to replicate this. As Mark Draycott said when he was interviewed on “BBC Points West” this morning, the camps should be not only at Oakhurst in Swindon, but all over the country; there should be hundreds and hundreds of them. They are sustainable, because the taxpayer is not paying him to do this—he is running the camps as his own organisation. However, the Government can help. First, anybody who wishes to set up one of these camps will need to build up numbers. We could therefore look to incentivise other people to do the same sort of thing as Mark by reducing the charge for hiring the school facilities at the beginning, until they build up the numbers and become sustainable in their own right and can keep going.

We also need to attract more good quality physical education teachers into the profession. We had a chronic shortage of PE teachers, although more are beginning to come in now. The beauty of this situation is that Mark Draycott came from a sporting background—he was a non-league sports player. The coalition Government tried to attract troops to become teachers, but it turned out that there were not millions of troops who wished to become teachers. However, there are many non-league sports stars who are minded and who, with the right incentives and the right instructions, could go on to become very good PE teachers in schools. I urge the Minister to look at that potential wealth of talent from whom, if we advertise to them, we could potentially recruit some very good people.

There could be lots of Draycott sports camps all over the country, which would be fantastic for those who wish to pay and can afford to do so—as I have seen, for 200 children every single day. That is something that we can replicate. However, I wish to go even further. I would also like to see all school facilities made available for free between 4 pm and 6 pm to any voluntary organisation that wishes to use them. For example, if some parents get together and wish to put on a netball, football or basketball club—I do not mind which, so long as it is a constructive activity for young people—between the hours of 4 pm and 6 pm, we should not charge them. Some of the sugar tax money can then be used to compensate the loss of the taxpayer who is not a peak time for school hire fees, because school sporting facilities are generally used when offices and factories shut at 6 pm, which is when schools would expect to make their income. I therefore suspect that compensation would be only a modest part of that income, but it would remove the barrier that many enthusiastic parents find.

I know that, because I spent 10 years as a borough councillor in Swindon representing a new build area with private finance initiative schools. There were limited leisure facilities, yet there were fantastic sporting facilities that the taxpayer was paying for but which we could not afford to access at a time when they were simply not being used. That does not make sense. We can find people willing to give up their time; there are hundreds of sports clubs across all of our constituencies that would seize the opportunity to provide constructive opportunities that will make our children active, that will remain in place once the money starts to diminish and, crucially, that will help busy parents.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that many teachers across the UK are already running voluntary after-school clubs and taking their own time to offer the sorts of activities he is talking about?

Justin Tomlinson: I absolutely pay tribute to teachers, parents and people in the local community who are prepared to give up their own time to provide constructive activities for young people. I want the Government to encourage the entrepreneurial spirit that Mark Draycott showed so that others can set up their own holiday camps and there are regular, good and exciting opportunities for young people.

In conclusion, I urge the Government to seize this opportunity. It is not often that a Department is given a significant increase in funding. I know from my time as a Minister that it is normally a case of wondering how on earth we can find money to do all of the worthy things we would like to do. However, this is an opportunity to benefit children by making them more active and therefore less obese, and to improve their academic achievement, because there is a direct link between those who are active and their ability to progress academically. It will also be a welcome blessing for hard-working, busy parents, whose biggest challenge is often what to do with children after school, during the long school holidays and at weekends. This offers the opportunity to deliver those long-term, sustainable solutions. I want every child to have as much fun as those children who go to the Draycott sports camp, and now is the time we can make that a reality.

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Along with the Health Committee, I came to the conclusion that we must do whatever we can to combat this epidemic. Even though I am against taxes, this is part of a whole raft of measures that we need to take on board to protect the future health of our nation. We should not see the sugary drinks industry levy as a tax and as money that will always be there; we need to use it as part of a method of helping families to change the way they live and their current habits. As part of the plan is to encourage the industry to reduce the amount of sugar in drinks, the levy will decrease year on year, so we need to look at ways of ensuring that whatever uses for that money are set up now are sustainable, and that the young people do not fall off the cliff edge once the money is no longer there.

I am delighted that the money is going to be spent mainly in schools. Let us face it: children spend most of their time in the school environment. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon alluded to, they could spend even more time there and undertake some of the activities we have talked about. The school environment is perfect for creating new habits and for helping those habits to go to the home environment as well. We need to tackle obesity at every age. It is a huge problem in the adult population as well as in children. If we can change those habits in the children now, we will be changing those habits for life. That is really important.

There are two sides to how the levy can be spent. Today we are focusing on exercise, but it is also about nutritional education as well. That is why I am delighted that some of the money will be spent on extending breakfast clubs. I would like to see that not only for breakfast clubs, but for after-school clubs that can help children learn more about how to cook, and then return them. There could be a range of bikes children are familiar with the Boris bike, so why not use that concept and book bikes, go out for a 5-mile or 10-mile cycle with little investment. Once again, we could look at cycling is another activity that allows parents to lead their children by example and helps to form lifelong habits. My hon. Friend talked about barriers. The cost is perfect for creating new habits and for helping those habits in the children now, we will be changing those habits for life. That is really important.

It is important we are able to measure the outcomes of anything we put in place, because we need to know what works and what is cost-effective. As I said, the levy will reduce over time, so we need to know what is and is not worth investing more money in. Whatever we do should have a tick box for sustainability.

I have come up with some ideas. We have heard in the past about the daily mile, whereby children run or walk a mile every day within school time. However, some schools do not have the right environment for that. Some have playing fields, but at this time of year they can be very muddy. Investment in all-weather paths would be useful for the future, so that children are not discouraged by getting very muddy; sometimes children do not like to get dirty, and at other times they do. If they had a good environment, they could get out there and be active. Once that surface is in place, the activity becomes free and sustainable, and it could be used after school and in the school holidays, not just during school time.

Only last week I visited one of my schools in Ilkeston, Hallam Fields Junior School, which is a very fortunate school. It is built on the hillside and its playing fields and grounds have fantastic views, so the kids love going out to play. Not far away is another school that is enclosed by houses. Its outdoor facilities are just not as good. We need to encourage kids in schools where facilities do not lend themselves as easily to exercise and help those schools. Perhaps we can look at schools joining together in some way.

We need to extend this debate to what children do outside school. They can form habits within the school environment, but if those habits are not continued once they get home, it is not good for the children, for the parents or—for us face it—for the taxpayer. A number of family activities can be done at very low cost and with little investment. Once again, we could look at using some of the levy from the sugary drinks tax for that. As I said, schools need to provide at least 30 minutes of exercise per day, but that means parents need to provide more exercise as well every day.

Improving some of our parks could be one answer. I know that parkruns are very popular. In fact, Long Eaton parkrun has just received an award for being a good community group for the whole of Derbyshire, which is really encouraging. It does not cost anything, and it caters for all abilities and ages. If we could encourage more voluntary groups such as that to provide activities, that would be really good and in keeping with what my hon. Friend is talking about.

We have seen some great successes within the senior school environment through the “This Girl Can” campaign. One of my other schools, Kirk Hallam Community Academy, has been very successful in encouraging more girls to get involved in exercise. That has now filtered down from the secondary school to the local primary school, which is really good. Local authorities have responsibility for maintaining parks, but they also have responsibility for public health. If they were encouraged to invest more in outdoor activities that helped the public health side of things, it would be a win-win situation. It is important that there is joined-up government to ensure that we tackle the problem of obesity head-on. If we just leave it to one Department or another, I am sure it will fall through the net.

Cycling is another activity that allows parents to lead their children by example and helps to form lifetime habits. My hon. Friend talked about barriers. The cost of a bike could be a barrier to many families. We are all familiar with the Boris bike, so why not use that concept and have community bikes? Schools could play their part by providing a hub for community bikes. Families could book bikes, go out for a 5-mile or 10-mile cycle and then return them. There could be a range of bikes for all abilities and ages, and children could get some exercise and continue a habit formed in the school environment. That would benefit children and adults as well. It has been estimated that in the first year the sugary drinks levy will raise £520 million. In this context,
that is not a lot of money, so it must be invested wisely and effectively. We must also be able to measure the impact.

I want to finish by painting a picture, which hopefully will help people to understand just how important it is to do whatever we can to tackle the obesity crisis. The sugary drinks levy is just one way to tackle this. Cancer Research UK recently revealed that teenagers drink almost a bathtub full of sugary drinks on average every year. That is shocking, and it needs to be changed. The sugary drinks levy must be just one part of a whole raft of measures, to ensure that our young people stop drinking that bathtub full of sugary drinks annually. Whatever we think about the sugary drinks tax, the money must be spent wisely and in a sustainable and measurable way.

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Order. Before calling the next speaker, I remind Members that there is a firm rule now that if they intervene, they must remain for the winding-up speeches, so they cannot just intervene and then depart. I call Mr Tom Mc Nally.

2.58 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is Mr John Mc Nally. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David.

I thank the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) for securing this debate and congratulate him on his rebellious nature. We are probably all very grateful for that. He might be welcome in our party in the not-too-distant future.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): He’s from North Swindon, not Scotland.

John Mc Nally: Well, you never know. We are growing as we go.

I welcome the introduction of the sugar tax with open arms. I was glad that the Chancellor looked at this issue and introduced this possibility, so that today we can look at how we best use this money. It is one of the biggest changes to benefit our communities in general.

I have to declare an interest. In the first instance, my three great-nieces, Liv, Honor and Celi, were all under the scholarship and tuition of Elaine Wyllie at St Ninians Primary School. I have seen that initiative working at first hand. I have also taken on board what Maggie, MP for Erewash (Maggie Throup) managed to get representatives of the drinks industry coming along to the meeting, and it was fantastic to hear the exchanges between the audience and the drinks industry. There was a bit of honesty, which was great to hear.

I want now to move on to the second thing that is very close to my heart. One of the most striking things about the various meetings hosted by the APPG on adult and childhood obesity is that there are, I believe, only 12 health visitors in the whole United Kingdom who have any in-depth professional knowledge of how to give advice to a mother and child on childhood obesity and how to deal with it. My wife, who is a recently retired health visitor and master of public health, has become extremely interested in pursuing that.

Liz McInnes: Does the hon. Gentleman know whether there are any health visitors who are capable of giving advice to a father and child, as opposed to a mother and child?

John Mc Nally: That is a great intervention. Being a man, I sometimes miss these things, but my wife has pointed out to me very often that there are—[Laughter]. She is never shy and, being a good husband, I always listen to what she has to tell me—I learned early that that saves an awful lot of grief.

The serious point is that there are not enough health visitors across the UK who are sufficiently well trained and educated on this matter. My wife is now preparing for a correspondence course. To reiterate the point, we need to look seriously at this: could we take some of the money from the sugar tax and apportion it towards school to see the benefits in how they act. They are eating better and looking better, and their attention to school matters is better. Everything from that initiative is a plus.

We have also had the benefit—again, through Maggie—of the drinks industry coming along to the APPG. It was interesting to hear from a vast company such as Coca-Cola what it was trying to do and the effect that the measure would have in terms of how it reformulates not only its cans of drink, but its whole way of thinking. This is not just a simple step from one thing to another; it is a huge investment that these companies have made, and we must be mindful of that.

There is another thing that Maggie has understated. I know for a fact that she got—

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Order. I feel that the point has been reached at which I must say that the hon. Gentleman should refer to other Members by their constituency rather than their first name. I do not wish to be pompous, but I think we have to be firm.

John Mc Nally: I am probably the opposite of pompous, and “Maggie” is easier to say than “Erewash”. Anyway, to be serious, the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) managed to get representatives of the drinks industry and the British retail industry along to the meeting, and it was fantastic to hear the exchanges between the audience and the drinks industry. There was a bit of honesty, which was great to hear.

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training health visitors to a better level and to have a better understanding? That is really the point that I came here to make today.

3.3 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) and my fellow Health Committee member, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) for bringing this very important debate to the House.

I realise that this is not a debate about the sugar levy per se, but I would like to state at the outset that I fully support the levy. In fact, if anything, I would like it to be extended to include milk-based sugary drinks. It addresses a very important issue, and it is worth reminding ourselves of the data on health inequality from obesity. Now, in the most disadvantaged areas, 26% of the most deprived children are leaving year 6 not just overweight but obese, with extraordinary long-term consequences for both their mental and physical health, so we should remain focused on what the purpose of the measure is.

Let me also stress that we should not think about tackling obesity as just about sport; it is also about nutrition. We should not lose sight of that in the debate. Reducing calories has to be the mainstay of addressing childhood obesity. That said, we should also have a message that exercise and physical activity matters, whatever one’s age and weight, and has extraordinary benefits. I fully support the words of my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon about how we can incorporate sport as part of the anti-obesity strategy and about the importance of hypothesising the money raised by the sugary drinks levy so that it goes to these types of project and is focused on the most disadvantaged groups.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that the 26% in the most deprived areas are probably children from the families who are least able to afford some of the things that have been mentioned, such as the £12.50 a day for sports activities, and that the cost of things should not rule out children who probably need that activity more than others?

Dr Wollaston: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I absolutely agree. It is essential, if we are to address some of the accusations that this is a regressive tax, that we ensure that it becomes progressive in the way the money and the resources are allocated. I think there has been a commitment to that. We can look at how the Government have stated they will spend the money—providing up to £285 million a year to give 25% of secondary schools in the most disadvantaged areas the opportunity to extend their school day, and £10 million of funding to expand breakfast clubs in the most disadvantaged areas. I absolutely agree with the hon. Members who have already commented that that could be extended into holiday periods. I am talking about how we look at nutrition, and expanding nutritional education and, in particular, targeting that on the most disadvantaged areas. We know that Mexico’s experience is that those on the lowest incomes end up spending more of their income on products such as sugary drinks, so we must be absolutely clear that the benefit returns primarily to the most disadvantaged, and of course it is the most disadvantaged areas that have the highest levels of childhood obesity, so I absolutely agree with what the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) has said.

This is primarily about school sport and how we hypothesise the money for activities in the most disadvantaged areas, although not just in the most disadvantaged areas. We have already heard the hon. Member for Falkirk pay tribute to Elaine Wylie, and I add my tribute to her extraordinary achievements. She told me when I met her recently that if directors of public health take this initiative on board, that gives it much a greater impetus. She has looked at where it has been most successfully rolled out, and it is where directors of public health work together with education to push for it and see the benefits. Of course, the benefits are not just for children. The initiative is now being rolled out to families and staff in schools, so there is a whole-community approach to changing attitudes to mobility.

I would also like to make a point about active travel. The all-party parliamentary group on cycling, of which I am a member, held an inquiry in the last Parliament, “Get Britain Cycling”. One issue that was very clear from that was that active travel is one of the forms of activity that people are most likely to engage in over the long term. I therefore urge my hon. Friend the Minister to consider how schools can engage with the programme and get children cycling to school and college. My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash pointed out that the cost of a bike can sometimes be a deterrent, but there are many things we can do about rolling out Bikeability to all ages across schools and ensuring that we focus on active travel, because that is the form of activity that people are most likely to sustain throughout their life.

I would also like to pick out the importance of play. I pay tribute to Play Torbay, in my constituency, and the work it is doing. That has been pointed out by the all-party parliamentary group on a fit and healthy childhood. I do not know whether the Minister has had the chance to read its excellent report, which considered how we can use the money effectively. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash that evaluation is critical. We need to see what delivers results in the long term, particularly because, if the tax is effective in the way we hope it will be, the revenues raised from it will decrease as a result of behavioural change. We need to ensure that the money available is targeted in the most effective ways.

We should also look at the difference in activity rates between girls and boys. Girls are not as physically active; particularly as they go through the school years, activity levels decline. I urge the Minister to continue to support Sport England’s “This Girl Can” programme, which has already been referred to. We need to look across the piece and make sure we engage children at every level in a way that they are most likely to continue to keep active. I have a concern that if we just talk about sport, we risk taking our eye off the ball. Tackling obesity first and foremost has to involve calorie reduction. We must take empty, wasted calories out of children’s diets. There are other harms; obesity is not just about sugar levels. The biggest single cause of admission to hospital for primary school children is to remove their rotten teeth. The benefits of reducing sugar in children’s diets go beyond tackling obesity.
Will the Minister liaise with his colleagues on the rest of the money from the sugary drinks levy that we are raising? As it stands, the Government have indicated that a significant proportion will go towards the academisation programme, but now that there has been a change to the policy objective of forced academisation, I think the sugary drinks levy would command far greater public support if every penny of it was hypothecated to support children, particularly at a time when public health grants are being cut and measures to support children who are already obese are being cut back in local authorities. I hope to see even more of the sugary drinks levy being hypothecated to progressive measures to target children who are already obese and to prevent children from becoming obese in the first place. I support my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon in saying that sport is a key part of that, and that matters whatever a child’s weight and whatever a child’s age.

3.12 pm

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and it is an honour to follow my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), given her experience in these matters. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). He is not from Scotland, I hasten to add, so I doubt he will be joining the Scottish National party any time soon. He is a champion of many causes, and I know he feels particularly strongly about helping young people in many different ways. I am delighted that he secured this debate, which I welcome.

As co-chairman of the all-party group on mountaineering, I have been doing a lot of work over the past few years to try to encourage outdoor recreation. It is vital to encourage more people to get involved in it, so that we improve participation in sports-related activity and help rural tourism. Most importantly, as I have been working on these issues, it has become clear that outdoor recreation is a vital tool to help tackle obesity and physical inactivity, which we have talked about at length today. That is important for adults and, particularly, in relation to this debate, young people. Given the powerful debate, we had this morning on young people’s mental health, it is important to add that outdoor recreation and sports more widely can help with young people’s mental wellbeing, which is absolutely key.

Before I go into my suggestions for how the money could be spent, it is worth looking at lessons from other countries. I will focus on Finland for a minute. The Finns feel so strongly about physical activity that it is now deemed, as of 1999, a basic cultural right. I am not sure exactly what that means, but it sounds incredibly important. Their Government have focused on this, as an area for improvement across the board, in a strategy called “On the Move”, which has four guidelines. I will not go through all of them, but the first one is interesting: reducing sitting in daily life, across the course of life. Perhaps we should have more debates standing up. The second one is increasing physical activity across the course of life. They have rolled this down to different age groups. The Finnish National Board of Education has got funding and support available to ensure that many schools have clubs, 85% of which are related to physical activity and sports.

We want to improve participation in sports and physical activity, and the Finns have made huge strides in that arena. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes said, the issue is also about activity level and being active in the workplace and the classroom.

I welcome the soft drinks levy; it is an opportunity. Some have said the funds are not significant, but hundreds of millions is significant and can make a difference in the lives of young people. Some may dispute how much of the funding will be put in place, but if it is of the order of hundreds of millions, we need to make sure we use it purposefully and invest it wisely on behalf of young people. I am pleased that it will be focused on primary and secondary schools, particularly in areas that are disadvantaged. It will help secondary schools to have more activities and sports available after school.

I am a big supporter of the daily mile, sometimes called the active mile. I have been working with ukactive to promote this further. It has been referred to several times. It is a simple, basic initiative that encourages and inspires children to take 15 minutes out of the day to run, walk or jog. It is as basic as that. It is fun, non-competitive and inclusive. I support competitive sport, but this initiative is something that everybody can engage with, and it helps to encourage more children to get more of their 60 minutes of physical activity a day done in school. Various initiatives are being taken forward by different providers. The daily mile is promoted by the Daily Mile Foundation and the golden mile by Premier Sport. Of course, it is up to each provider to be able to do my first park run with my 10-year-old daughter at the end of last year. There is also Marathon Kids, supported by Nike and Kids Run Free.

The daily mile has demonstrated that children who participate are healthier, less overweight and more alert. As the Minister for School Standards will be pleased to hear, they are also more focused on their lessons, so it is a win all round. My daughter is benefiting from her daily mile at Upton Priory School in Macclesfield. I look forward to promoting the initiative much more actively in March when I work with Active Cheshire to encourage more schools in Macclesfield and across east Cheshire to benefit from the initiative.

I would warmly welcome the Minister or one of his colleagues setting up a meeting with ukactive and the providers of the different schemes to work out how we can encourage more schools to get involved and to adopt daily mile or active mile initiatives during 2017. It is a low-cost programme. If we want to leverage the funds that come out of the soft drinks levy efficiently, I cannot think of a better initiative. It would be incredibly easy to leverage and would help hundreds of thousands of children from a wide range of backgrounds. It would be easy to do. My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) raised concerns about some schools not having sufficient space, but let us consider the walking bus or other activities that we can do to encourage kids to walk to school; that is easy to do, and I hope that the Minister takes that on board.

I cannot keep away from active outdoor recreation too long, so I will spend a few moments on that. So often when we talk about sport, it is traditional sport: rugby, football, hockey, netball. If we put a premium, I think, on the widest possible group of kids, we must remember that not every child will be interested in those traditional sports. We have to find other ways of engaging those
Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) in the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) on obtaining an important debate which is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield said, timely, given the subject matter.

My views on the sugary drinks levy are well documented, and this is not the right debate in which to go over them. If anyone wants to, there is an article online, entitled “Ten reasons why the sugar tax is a terrible idea”, setting them out. Today, however, is about the allocation of the money. I have concerns that can be wholly set aside from the debate. Both sides, whether in favour of the tax or against it, are well meaning; the issue is whether it will work, how much money we will get, and what we shall spend it on. I have an issue with dedicated or hypothecated taxes in principle, because we do not really have an idea, apart from some presumptions and assumptions, about how much money will come in.

I accept all the points made by hon. Members about obesity. I know, from just one Christmas when I have come back to Parliament feeling that my suits have shrunk considerably—that is the excuse I am using—that we have an issue with obesity, and childhood obesity in particular. We must take measures to tackle that, without question. My worry is that this is an instance of “Something must be done. This is something, so let’s do it.” Parking that worry, however, and accepting that we must address the problem of childhood obesity, I agree with all the points that have been made about sport, including sport in schools, and fantastic initiatives such as the activity camps that my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon mentioned, as well as the use of school premises out of school hours. They are fantastic ideas. Driving past secondary schools in the evening or at the weekends, one can see that many are being used. However, primary schools are less used. They have beautiful fields, and in some cases astro pitches or multi-use games activity centres, which would be perfect. They sit unused when members of society, and in particular young people, would desperately love to go and kick a ball around or play basketball. There is a huge public health gain to be made from the principle of using the money to fund measures that will reduce obesity and get more children active.

However, if we accept that there can be such a massive public health gain, and that the right thing to do for the health of the nation is to invest the money as I have described, we should be funding it through general taxation. The Chancellor of the Exchequer said when the policy was announced:

“We are going to use the money from this new levy to double the amount of funding we dedicate to sport in every primary school. For secondary schools, we are going to fund longer school days for those that want to offer their pupils a wider range of activities, including extra sport.”—[Official Report, 16 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 964.]

The figure mooted at the time was some £520 million. I want, as does, I believe, every Member of the House, £520 million or thereabouts to be spent on school sports; but we have no way of saying how much of that money will be raised from the sugary drinks levy. That is my fundamental concern. If we are saying that the issue is important and that we should invest in it, and that it will have a massive impact on childhood obesity and public health, we should invest in it. We should not be giving schools and other organisations, such as those mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon, funding that is not sustainable.

We should treat the issue as important, and commit the money to it. I am worried because, on my calculation, reformulation, portion size, illicit sales and such things as cross-border shopping will mean that the figure raised will be more like £200 million to £300 million. That is a considerable shortfall on the amount quoted in the Budget last year. We must ask questions about hypothecated taxes and direct taxes. I would love to ask the Minister what the budget is; what is the expectation, and how much money do we think will come from the sugary drinks levy?

I have two concerns. One is that we shall have to top the levy up from general taxation—and if that is the case I support doing it. It is a worthwhile thing to do, and we should finance it. I am also concerned, as are many people in the food and drink manufacturing industry, that we have just set a figure of £520 million. That is what we need to fund the initiative, and that is what we are going to raise. If we cannot raise it through sugary drinks we shall start looking at other products.

Perhaps there is an argument for doing that, and for applying the levy to sugar across the board. I discussed this with the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), has strong views on this; I look forward to hearing from her.
It is good to see the Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), here. Some of the Health Committee’s other recommendations were tougher controls on the marketing and advertising of unhealthy food and drink. I believe that would make a big difference to what young people want, or think they want, to eat. Another recommendation was early intervention to offer help to families of children affected by obesity and further research into the most effective interventions. The hon. Lady talked about the importance of nutrition, active travel and active play and how all of those play a role in tackling obesity. The hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) also shared her expertise from the Health Committee and explained that she was usually against taxes but, in this case, supports the levy because its purpose is to change habits that have been formed. I was pleased to hear her mention the “This Girl Can” campaign. I was a sports coach, as well as a teacher, for many years and was very positive about the benefits for young girls, and teenage girls in particular, of participating in sport.

My hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) talked about the excellent work of the APPG on adult and childhood obesity, and about using the levy to train health visitors and health professionals in educating parents, both male and female, about the importance of nutrition. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) raised Finland’s approach to physical activity. It is possible that his suggestion that we spend more time on our feet in this place would greatly shorten proceedings. I know that there is a vote coming up, so I will try to speed up and will come back to the hon. Member for Macclesfield.

Although I have said that I welcome the creation of a soft drinks levy, in isolation it cannot address the levels of obesity that we see. I am disappointed that further restrictions on junk food, as recommended by the Health Committee, have not been developed further. I would like to see that happen—possibly we will see it during this parliament. Banning those adverts would make a big difference.

In Scotland, the obesity crisis is no different. We are committed to addressing Scotland’s excess weight—personally, and generally as a nation—and the Scottish Government have undertaken to consult on the development of Scotland’s new diet and obesity strategy in 2017. Scotland is already investing in sports facilities and ensuring that PE is provided in schools and that active schools programmes continue. Proposals to increase physical activity using the revenue are indeed welcome, and we welcome any ideas that will help to boost physical activity in schools. In Scotland, we have seen a massive investment in PE and school sports. In 2005 10% of children were doing two hours of physical activity a week; we now have 98% of children in Scotland doing two hours of PE a week, which is a massive improvement.

For me personally the most exciting development, which has been mentioned by almost everybody who has stood up, is the daily mile. It was first developed by St Ninians Primary School in Stirling because the children were too tired after the warm up in PE to do the actual lesson. It takes only 15 minutes and does not require any specialised equipment. In fact, they do not even change into their gym gear—out they go and they do their daily mile. The hon. Member for Erewash talked...
about the difficulties with some of the facilities available in schools. My own children do the daily mile and they just do it up and down the tarmac playground. I have said to them, “Is that not particularly boring?” They love it and they talk about being energised and feeling refreshed when they go back into school. Coming back to the points made by the hon. Member for Macclesfield, Member for Middlesbrough. I am a keen hill walker and love the outdoors, but my children do not always share that enthusiasm and would sometimes rather sit in front of the television. They have been doing the daily mile since August, and it was really interesting over Christmas when we went hill walking—suddenly they were chasing up the hill ahead of me. I could not keep up with them. What a difference a few months of the daily mile has made to their fitness.

The Scottish Government have made a commitment that Scotland will be the first daily mile nation with a roll-out to schools, nurseries, colleges, universities and workplaces. Every school will be offered help and we already have more than 800 primary schools doing the daily mile programme, which is a massive step forward. As to the impact that that has had, St Ninians primary—\textit{the instigators—talks about the children thriving on being outdoors and of its national success in cross-country running. It says that the children are sleeping and eating better—parents know straightaway that with a bit of exercise during the day children will go down no problem at night. Children are more focused and ready to learn when they return to classroom, but most important of all, there are no overweight children in primary 1 at St Ninians, which is a massive step forward.}

To finish, and not to leave the hon. Member for North Swindon said, using civil society as best as I can to tackle them. With the British Heart Foundation’s work on hypertension, Diabetes UK’s diabetes groups and the British Lung Foundation’s Breathe Easy campaign, we know that we can keep people out of our A&Es, which is a huge issue this week, whichever side of the political fence hon. Members are on. People can self-help and self-medicate, which is important because by the time they go to A&E or to their doctor or health professional, it is almost too late.

I concur with what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) and by the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), who chairs the Health Committee: some areas do not have such a strong civil society and they need a leg-up from Government through the hypothecation of taxes. We have seen a link between the scale of poverty and obesity in children, in particular. The Government recognise that but have taken away the targets along with the unit that looks at child poverty, which is rocketing, and not just under this Government—it was going up previously because of the economic and financial crisis.

In 2016 the Government introduced a new levy on soft drinks through the sugar tax. In England the new levy revenue will be invested in programmes to support physical activity and balanced diets in school-aged children. I want to talk for a moment from my personal experience as a primary school teacher for 10 years. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who is not currently in his place, pointed out that children go to school for only 40 weeks a year. It is important for politicians to remember that because I was frustrated at this place when I was a teacher in the classroom. We all think that we can change society by changing our schools, but it is only a small, if important, bit of how we change society.

I used to eat with the children before and after the Jamie Oliver meals came in. I patrolled the free school meals kids in particular, not because I was the sugar
police—although, we did had very firm policies in my 500-place primary school about what they could have in those packages—but because I knew what the afternoon would be like if they had had a can of Coke, a load of chocolate and a packet of crisps. It is almost impossible to get really extraordinary teaching and learning going on with poor diets. Everybody in the Chamber has made the link between good food and good mental health in children.

There is a clear link between sugar intake and childhood obesity, as illustrated by the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition’s 2015 report on carbohydrates and health. With 30% of the sugar in children’s diets coming from sugary drinks—the point has been made that children are consuming a bathtub of these drinks annually—action is clearly needed. The levy is expected to raise more than £500 million in the first year. It is a good policy. I will come back to why I disagree with the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) in a second, but I thought that the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally) articulated well why it is a good policy and why we should support it. The amount raised is likely to fall over time as manufacturers remove sugar from their products and the consumption of sugary drinks falls.

I disagree with the hon. Member for Colchester because he has stated that this is a nanny state-type tax, but what we now have, particularly with school budgets, which I shall come to later, is a postcode lottery. For example, look at what Britvic is already doing to avoid the sugar tax. It is changing its behaviour and remodelling the formula so that it does not pay the tax. Surely that is a good thing. Surely that is how Governments should intervene to make the world a better place, particularly for children.

**Mike Kane:** I will, because I have attacked the hon. Gentleman twice now in this speech.

**Will Quince:** Not at all. I accept that point, but I think that the hon. Gentleman has reiterated what I was saying. We all accept that if the industry reacts and reformulates products, that will be a great thing. However, if it does so and takes the action we know it is taking over a shorter period of time, rather than a longer period, that will mean we have less money ultimately to spend on this programme.

**Mike Kane:** But over the longer term people will hopefully be consuming less sugar, which I think is the key objective. However, the hon. Gentleman is right; reformulation not only will reduce the tax take and therefore be a measure of the success of Government policy—we need measures relating to public policy—but will have an impact on reducing consumption, which is just as important. He also pointed out that it is important that the impact is comprehensively evaluated, so that it can be refined and adjusted continually to keep getting public health gains.

Let us move on to schools and sport, where I have a few things to say to the Minister. Doubling the PE and sport premium fund to £320 million a year from 2017 is good news and shows a commitment from the Government that this is important. The premium has shown that it can enhance the quality of PE teaching and increase pupil engagement and participation in sport. Continued investment in sport was also highlighted by school leaders as the most important factor in maintaining quality PE provision in a Youth Sport Trust survey published last year.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) on what she said about teachers. This is not just about civil society. Tens of thousands of selfless teachers give up their time after work to run such clubs—during a decade of primary school teaching, I ran the football club and the cross-country club—and all the other clubs that are part of what is expected of schools but are not in the job description. It is right that we praise the teachers up and down the land who do that.

However, as essential as all these things are, a legacy for school sport is about looking beyond primary-age provision and competitive sport initiatives. Everyone has talked about the daily mile, outdoor recreation, walking to school and our physical environment. Increasing the number of pupils of all ages who are participating in school sport—competitive or not—across all phases of education and the amount of time that they spend doing so should be fundamental to a comprehensive strategy, yet the Government have gone backwards on the issue.

Take, for example, what my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) said about the previous coalition Government’s decision to remove £162 million of funding from school sport partnerships. Those partnerships were terrific—there is no doubt about it. The Government are embarking on breaking up our estate by privatising and nationalising it, and there are a spread of school campuses across the country. What the partnerships did was link combinations of local primaries to their secondary school, which usually had the expertise, resource and field capacity to do really joined-up work and get a system going where those clusters could really begin to make a difference.

When the money went, there was a negative impact, as opportunities for young people to participate in more school sport decreased, as the Education Committee noted. As I said to the hon. Member for Colchester, that decision has created a postcode lottery relating to good provision, because we had a national system but we now have local systems in which local schools are trying to do their best to keep up good practice. It has been particularly evident in secondary schools that do not have ring-fenced budgets for sport.

We also know that, unsurprisingly, since this Government removed in 2010 the requirement for pupils to have at least two hours of sport a week, the number of pupils taking part in sport has collapsed. From personal experience, there is an over-expectation of sport in schools. A teacher who is timetabling two hours, as I used to have to do, must think about their relevance as a classroom teacher. Sometimes we in this place do not think about that. It can take 10 minutes to get the children changed and five minutes to get them to the playground or field—if the school is lucky enough to have one—or to the hall. The curriculum focuses mainly not on physical activity but on skills, and then the children need to be warmed down, get changed and go back. I saw teachers selflessly giving up their play times and breaks so that the children could get the best hour possible.
The situation will be exacerbated by school budgets, which will be cut by £3 billion between now and 2020—an 8% cut in real terms. Schools are not the panacea for the policy. Despite the fairer funding formula, they will be reducing staff in all areas of our country in the months and years to come. I have had the indication that I should leave it there.

3.51 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) on securing this important debate.

Childhood obesity is a national problem. Data from Public Health England’s national child measurement programme shows that, in England, a third of children are obese or overweight by the time they leave primary school. As my hon. Friend so ably said, we run the risk of creating new social norms in which obesity is the new normal. Sugar consumption is a major factor in childhood obesity, and sugar-sweetened soft drinks are now one of the biggest sources of dietary sugar for children and teenagers. A single 330 ml can of cola can contain nine teaspoons of sugar—more than a child’s daily recommended intake of added sugar—often without any other intrinsic nutritional value. The introduction of the soft drinks industry levy is a clear indication of this Government’s commitment to addressing this vital issue.

Reducing sugar consumption alone, though, is not enough. It is also important that all children have the opportunity to engage in sport and physical activity. This debate is therefore timely, as it allows me the opportunity to set out our plan further to improve opportunities for primary-age children of all abilities to participate in sport and physical activity during curricular time and in participation in extracurricular activities. We want all pupils to be healthy and active, and we know that many schools are already using their sport premium funding to target disadvantaged pupils, who are traditionally the least active. In many schools, that will include providing additional support to children to assist schools in developing PE and extracurricular sport activities and to make long-term improvements that will benefit pupils joining the school in future years. I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) that that funding is committed to 2020 and will help drive up the quality and breadth of PE and sport provision.

The increased funding will allow schools to build on the progress made through the existing premium. It will enable them to hire qualified sports coaches to work with teachers, provide existing staff with training or resources and introduce new sports and activities that encourage more pupils to be healthy and active. My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon told us about the PE teacher Mark Draycott and his excellent initiative, Draycott sports camp, established in 2013, which operates out of Oakhurst primary school, where Mr Draycott is also a teacher.

The idea behind the camp was to create more opportunities for primary-age children of all abilities to participate in sport and physical activity during the school holidays. The programme offers extracurricular clubs after school and during the holidays. I commend my hon. Friend on championing that great work and taking the time to visit the camp last year, where I am reliably informed that he acquitted himself creditably in a netball shoot-out and a game of lacrosse. My hon. Friend pointed to the importance to schools of recruiting qualified PE teachers such as Mark Draycott. The Department continues to recruit well in physical education. In 2015-16, we recruited 1,235 new teacher trainers, against a target of 1,227.

My hon. Friends the Members for Erewash (Maggie Throup), for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) and for Macclesfield (David Rutley), as well as the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally) and others, praised the daily mile initiative and its success in ensuring that children exercise every day. It is the brainchild of Elaine Wylie, whom I look forward to meeting in February. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes emphasised the importance of active travel and encouraging children to cycle to school where it is safe to do so, and I agree.

My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield pointed to the importance of being active in the workplace. Perhaps we as MPs should sit less and stand more. We run for office, stand for election and take our seats, but of the three, the most important is obviously running for office. He asked for a Minister to meet ukactive. The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson) or I would be delighted to do so.

A positive experience of sport at a young age can create a lifelong love of sport and physical participation. That is why we are focusing on primary-age children, as we want to help them develop healthy habits and a love of sport at an early age, as my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash emphasised. Secondary schools have specialist PE teachers already on the staff and can access programmes such as Sportivate and satellite clubs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes raised a concern about children from disadvantaged backgrounds. We want all pupils to be healthy and active, and we know that many schools are already using their sport premium funding to target disadvantaged pupils, who are traditionally the least active. In many schools, that will include providing additional support to children.
who might not be able to attend after-school clubs and activities, but we know that there is more to be done, which is why we are doubling the funding from September 2017.

We have also announced that £10 million a year in revenue from the soft drinks levy will fund the expansion of healthy breakfast clubs in up to 1,600 schools from September 2017 to 2020. The programme will ensure that more children benefit from a healthy start to their school day and is a fitting accompaniment to the primary PE and sport premium.

We are anxious to ensure that schools continue to use the funding wisely and have a number of accountability measures in place, as has been mentioned in this debate. Schools are held accountable for how they spend their funding through Ofsted whole-school inspections and a requirement to report their spending plans and the impact of that spending online. Furthermore, we have updated grant conditions and guidance and continue to work with our partners to disseminate best practice and examples of innovative uses of funding to schools, ensuring that they are best placed when the doubling of the premium comes into effect.

The Government aim to reduce England’s rate of childhood obesity significantly within the next 10 years. I firmly believe that a cross-governmental approach is key to success. In addition to the soft drinks industry levy, two landmark strategies have been published in the last 12 months: the Government’s sports strategy and the childhood obesity plan. We continue to work closely with a range of other Departments to deliver those strategies.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
so they will not be evicted—and four vacant properties. The unscrupulous landlord is evicting private tenants in order to turn some of the properties into bedsits. It tried to residential units. But of course it owns them, having purchased them, so it is not doing it out of the goodness of its heart for benign, charitable reasons; it is doing it to support its own investment in its particularly dubious business model.

As I say, the company has sought to subdivide the properties. It has created a situation in which, out of the families living in the 74 units, 17 have already presented as homeless, 12 have been placed in the position of declaring themselves formally homeless and nine have been accepted as homeless by Peterborough City Council. Those were the figures on 4 December; they may be different now.

The situation is not unique. Stef & Philips recently tried the same modus operandi in Luton. Thanks to “Look East”, which was able to look into the company’s activities, Luton Borough Council said that it was not interested. The council said that it was not willing to see the taxpayer’s pound gouged and the taxpayer fleeced, and it sent Stef & Philips away with a flea in its ear. Unfortunately, Stef & Philips re-let those units, which are in Milliners Court in Luton, to Barnet Council. So it is not as if Stef & Philips has stepped in to assist Peterborough City Council out of the goodness of its heart; it has seen a niche business model, unethical as it is, and has taken action accordingly.

At this stage, it is appropriate to step back and try to understand why we have been placed in this position. The Minister may wish to dwell on that in his reply; his heart; it has seen a niche business model, unethical as it is, and has taken action accordingly.

The reason why that is important is that it would have needed the sign-off—the sanction—of the housing regulator at the time, whether that was the Housing Corporation or the Homes and Communities Agency. We are not talking about a couple of bedsits or flats; we are talking about a significantly large housing estate. Why that change was allowed to happen is an important issue, and the Minister might want to ponder it.

There was also a failure of intelligence by Peterborough City Council, in that it allowed this set of very good quality social housing units to pass into private hands. I know for a fact that, quite rightly, the council is actively pursuing the option of establishing a joint venture housing company with the largest residential social landlord in the area, which is Cross Keys Homes, a stock transfer company of some 13 years’ standing in Peterborough.

The council has £13.6 million of right-to-buy capital receipts. Why was it not possible for it to use some of that money to purchase or lease the property at St Michael’s Gate, so as to discharge its homelessness obligations under the appropriate legislation? That did not happen, but it is only fair to observe also that the council, in response to the uproar caused by the St Michael’s Gate debacle, is now accessing Government money, as a result of bids to the homelessness prevention strategy and migration funding, to deal with homelessness specifically.

The other issue is the increase in homelessness. Despite what I think are sometimes the ill-judged comments of the city council, which blames the Government’s welfare reforms and specifically universal credit for the spike in homelessness, there is no evidence to suggest that those reforms are the reason why we have suddenly been overwhelmed by an upsurge in the numbers of homeless people in the Peterborough area. There are other reasons for that increase.

One is the large scale of immigration. Incidentally, that is an issue that the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), is discussing in my constituency, at Paston Farm Centre in Peterborough, as we speak. That large scale of immigration has had the effect of saturating the private rental market in Peterborough and it has caused some difficulty. Also, the introduction of a selective licensing scheme in the city has meant that many of the more dubious landlords have opted out of the private rented market, which has obviously put pressure on the number of properties that are available. Of course, we have also seen a national phenomenon, which is that people are finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet, and therefore they do not pay their rent and are being evicted. All these things have come together, but neither the benefit cap nor universal credit have been an issue.

There has been a failure of intelligence and a failure of governance, and I regret that I was given erroneous information by the leader of the council, Councillor John Holdich. He is an honourable man, and I believe that he genuinely made an error, but he told me that if Peterborough had not signed this three-year contract then Luton would most assuredly have done so. As I say, that proved to be an erroneous statement, because Luton subsequently denied that it was true. Nevertheless,
it is certainly the case that, given the modus operandi of Stef & Philips, the company would have touted round these properties to other local authorities that needed to discharge their homelessness duties, whether that was Stevenage, Harlow, Milton Keynes, etc.

There was a call-in of this case on 19 October last year. However, the councillors present at that call-in meeting were placed in a very difficult position, because this deal was a fait accompli. It had been made and the council had no option but to accept it, because if the council had pulled out of the scheme with Stef & Philips, it would not have been able to house its homeless people in the Traveldodes, and the company would have touted the properties around and taken other people from outside Peterborough.

I will finish by asking the Minister to examine the loophole in the housing benefit regulations, because effectively it means that instead of 74 families having assured shorthold tenancies that generated an income of £659,000 a year, Stef & Philips—by treating each unit as a temporary overnight homelessness unit, with the £60 per week management fee, inflated rents and the local housing allowance subsidy level—is able to bring in £966,000 of taxpayers’ money a year. In short, the key issue is the disparity in the housing benefit levels that are paid between rented accommodation in the private sector and what is achievable when the accommodation is utilised by the local authority for temporary accommodation.

As I say, I ask the Minister to review those regulations and particularly the management fee, because this site is not a foyor for young people or a housing association property for people with special educational needs or mental health problems. To all intents and purposes, it is de facto mainstream normal housing, albeit that it is temporary and is now being used to accommodate homeless people.

I would also like the Minister to work with the Local Government Association to tackle the issue that is growing across our country of local authorities shuttling round the most vulnerable homeless people to different local authority areas, because they are unwilling or unable to house those people themselves. I know that Lord Porter of Spalding, who is the chairman of the LGA, takes this issue very seriously.

There is also a lack of accountability. It should not be the case that we have to pursue freedom of information requests to obtain information from Stef & Philips, which is in receipt of large amounts of public money, and local authorities need to work together to make sure that they develop and put in place protocols to prevent this situation from happening again.

Peterborough City Council is between a rock and a hard place. It is not solely at fault and in fairness—although I hate to say it—neither is Stef & Philips. I feel very bad about what has happened. I apologise to my constituents that I could not do more to help them and to a certain extent I feel that the system and I have let them down. The current situation is unfair and morally repugnant, and I hope that this debate and the Minister’s response to it will ensure that, to all intents and purposes, decent people are not treated like this again and this situation will not be repeated in the future.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, for what I believe is the first time.

I would like to start my response by praising my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) for raising this issue in Westminster Hall today. It is not the first time that he has raised it with me or with my Department; I believe he presented a petition to the House and I have just signed off our response to that petition. As all Members of the House will know, he is a highly diligent constituency MP, and it does him great credit that he has raised this particular issue today. I also join him in congratulating his local newspaper, the Peterborough Telegraph, on the interest that it has taken in this issue.

As my hon. Friend said, and as I understand it, nearly all the current tenants at St Michael’s Gate hold assured shorthold tenancies under the Housing Act 1988. That gives them the right to live in the property as their home and to get repairs done, and they cannot be made to leave within the first six months of the tenancy. However, the legislation also enables a landlord to regain possession at or beyond the end of that six-month term, with two months’ notice.

Before assured shorthold tenancies were introduced by the Housing Act 1988, the private rental market in this country was in decline. Regulated rents and lifetime tenancies meant that being a landlord was simply not commercially viable for many property owners. Since the law was changed in 1988, the private rented sector in this country has grown steadily, from just over 9% of the market at that time to 19% today. It now fulfils a major role in providing housing to people in Britain. The sector is not without its problems, but it is worth saying that both the quality of accommodation in the private rented sector and the satisfaction of the people living in that accommodation have increased over time.

There are certainly problems, with which my Department continues to grapple, but overall that story of deregulation has been a success and has allowed more people to access accommodation in the private rented sector. The difficulty here is that although we know people want the stability of a secure home, the Government’s view is that more restrictive legislation of the kind that would have prevented this company from doing what it did would mean fewer homes available to rent, which would not help tenants.

My hon. Friend posed the right question in his speech. What happened may well be legal, and we may well have to accept that if we want a thriving rental sector we must allow landlords to ask people to leave a tenancy, with notice. The question my hon. Friend posed is whether the behaviour of the company in this situation is moral or right. I very much share his concern, and I think that anyone listening to this debate or reading the transcript will ask that same question about what has happened, which has, as my hon. Friend said, a sort of Alice in Wonderland quality to it: a group of people essentially being told that they need to leave their homes, resulting in many of them being made homeless, to provide housing for the homeless. That seems to be a highly irrational way for a company and a city council to behave.
Accepting that if we want a thriving rental market in this country we must accept the ability of landlords to regain possession of their property, what can the Government do to try to make the situation—

4.21 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

4.43 pm

On resuming—

Gavin Barwell: Before I was so rudely interrupted, I was trying to address the concern my hon. Friend raised. If we accept that to have a thriving rental market in this country, we need to allow landlords to regain possession of their properties, what can we do to make the kind of situation that his constituents have experienced far less likely? The key answer is to increase the supply of housing. Many of the issues that he referred to—I will answer some of the detailed questions in a second—come back to the point that for probably 30 or 40 years, we in England have not been building enough homes, so the demand for housing far exceeds the supply.

Those constituents who had to approach the council and seek protection under homelessness legislation are an example of a wider problem. Historically, the main causes of statutory homelessness—when people go to their council and ask for help with rehousing—have tended to be relationship breakdown and those kinds of issues. The most common cause of statutory homelessness in this country now is the ending of a private rental sector tenancy. My hon. Friend describes a particularly strange and indefensible situation, because of the role that the company played in provoking it, but it is a fairly common one in a general sense. People lose a private rental sector tenancy and find themselves unable to find alternative accommodation in their area, and therefore have to present themselves to their local authority.

To try to alleviate that problem, the Government are doing two things. In addition to supporting the largest affordable housing programme by any Government since the 1970s, we are investing very large sums of public money in trying to help local authorities prevent homelessness and support those affected by it; we are investing £149 million in central Government programmes and giving £315 million over the course of this Parliament to local authorities.

The House is also playing a part, and we should put that on the record. The private Member’s Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), which is currently before the House, does two critical things. First, it looks to widen the safety net. My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough did not touch on this, but it is possible that some of his constituents find themselves outside the safety net; single people who are not vulnerable in any way are not currently covered. The private Member’s Bill would widen that safety net. It would also get councils to intervene much earlier to prevent people becoming homeless, rather than just dealing with the problem when it occurs.

The second main thing the Government are trying to do is increase the supply of housing. The fundamental solution to so many of the housing problems we face in this country is to build more homes—in this particular instance, more homes for rent—to offer people greater security than is often the case currently, without forcing landlords to offer that security. In the forthcoming housing White Paper, my hon. Friend will see a lot of measures on that. I will mention two briefly.

First, the Government are very keen on build to rent. In this country, most of our private rental sector properties are owned by individual landlords, many of whom are responsible for only one property. We are keen to see institutional investment in building new private rental sector homes. That brings not only a degree of professional management and a very welcome new supply, but the potential to offer longer assured shorthold tenancies, because we are not talking about individuals who may need to access their assets six, 12 or 18 months down the line, but major pension funds and the like who are interested in a long-term, secure return on their investment. That would address some of the concerns of his constituents. Secondly, the Department is also promoting a model tenancy agreement, which encourages landlords to offer longer tenancies and therefore greater protection to people.

I want to address three questions that my hon. Friend asked on behalf of his constituents. He told us that the properties in question had at some point been what we would call social housing; they had been owned by a registered provider. He asked why that housing had been allowed to pass into the private sector. I cannot answer that question for him today—my briefing was unclear about the history. My officials believe that, if it was owned by a housing association, that was some time in the past. He is right to say that if that was the case, the transfer would have to have been authorised by the housing regulator. I am very happy to see if we can find out, without disproportionate effort, when that occurred and what the rationale was for approving that decision. That is clearly something that his constituents would want to know the answer to. It is a highly relevant question.

My hon. Friend raised two other questions to which I think he deserves an answer. He talked about the management fee, and the distortion whereby somebody can earn more money renting out accommodation to local authorities looking to place homeless families than renting it out as normal, general-purpose, private rented accommodation. The management fee is not paid directly to the landlord—it is paid to the local authority—but my hon. Friend is right that, because many local authorities are so short of emergency accommodation to place homeless households in, the rates that landlords charge them are often of that kind.

The long-term solution to that is to get more housing in our country, so that local authorities are in a much stronger position in the market when trying to secure accommodation and do not have to pay such high fees.

Given the way that the management fee, which is managed by the Department for Work and Pensions, works at the moment, it may reassure my hon. Friend somewhat to hear that the Government are replacing it, and will move to a grant to local authorities, which will be administered by my Department. The overall pot of funding for that grant will be £617 million. That will give local authorities much more flexibility in how the money can be used, and may prevent the appalling situation that he has reported today from recurring.

My hon. Friend’s final point is very difficult. It is an issue that many of my predecessors have had to grapple with: local authorities are placing families that they
have accepted as statutorily homeless outside their area. Many hon. Members have raised that concern with me in the nearly six months that I have been Minister with responsibility for housing. Let me reassure him at least partially. Local authorities have to secure accommodation within their own borough as far as is reasonably practicable. We have changed the law so that councils have to take into account the impact that a change in location would have on a household, including possible disruption to things such as employment and schooling.

In some circumstances, accommodation in another borough may be more suitable for a household. I cannot say to my hon. Friend that that can never happen, but I can assure him that we have made it more difficult. Again—this is probably the right moment to draw my remarks to a close—the long-term solution to the problem of councils placing families in different boroughs is to end the housing crisis in this country. We must ensure that we build more homes and build up our housing supply, so that each local authority has the ability to place the families it accepts within the area in which they live. Clearly, in most cases, that is the right thing for those families, because most people have friends, families and personal relations, whom they risk losing if they are placed at a distance. I thank my hon. Friend for raising this very disturbing case.

Question put and agreed to.
In addition, and beyond the terms of the agreement, in September 2000 the then Secretary of State, Peter Mandelson, announced that the Government would no longer seek the extradition of Provisional IRA prisoners who had escaped from prison, including several who escaped from the Maze prison in my constituency in 1983. They were allowed to return home; they were no longer sought to be brought back and put in prison, where frankly they belonged. They included convicted terrorist Dermot Finucane—the brother of the late Pat Finucane, about whom we have heard a lot in the past—who was the former head of intelligence and the head of southern command of the Provisional IRA. He was a very senior figure in the Provisional IRA, and he escaped from prison and was allowed to return home. Kevin Barry Artt, who was convicted of the murder of the deputy governor of the Maze prison, escaped and yet was allowed to return home without having to go back to prison. I could go on with the list of the concessions that have been made to Sinn Féin and the IRA over the years in relation to those who were convicted of, or are alleged to have committed, very serious crimes.

In 2001, the then Labour Government sought to extend that further to introduce an amnesty for all members of terrorist organisations on ceasefire. On 4 May 2001, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Dr John Reid, wrote to the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and said:

“In the Hillsborough statement of 8 March we accepted publicly for the first time that it would be a natural development of the Early Release Scheme to discontinue the prosecution of pre-Good Friday Agreement offences allegedly committed by supporters of organisations now on ceasefire.”

Crucially, Dr Reid went on to say that the proposals, which would be enacted into legislation, “should exclude members of the security forces from the amnesty arrangements”.

In other words, a terrorist who had committed crimes, including murder, before the 1998 agreement would be granted an amnesty, but a soldier or a police officer alleged to have committed an offence would not be the beneficiary of such an amnesty. Thankfully, through parliamentary opposition, that reprehensible scheme was defeated and the secret deal that had been done was thwarted.

But it did not stop there. Having been frustrated in that attempt to bring in an amnesty for terrorists, the Government of the day did another secret deal, issuing letters to paramilitary prisoners and suspects wanted for questioning about terrorist offences to say, “You may now return home. The police will no longer question or arrest you in connection with offences committed before 1998.” We did not know of the existence of that scheme, and it was only finally exposed when John Downey was brought before the courts here in London on charges linked to the murder of four soldiers in the Hyde Park bombings of 1982. What happened? Downey produced his letter—that “get out of jail free” card—and the courts threw out the case against him. He was allowed to walk free, without being prosecuted for the offences he is alleged to have committed.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): When I was serving in Northern Ireland, my regimental band was blown up in the Regent’s Park bombing on the same day. A few hours later, I took a patrol out in the New Lodge area of Belfast, as the news of the bombing was coming through. The soldiers under my command showed unbelievable restraint in the face of taunts about that terrorist incident. Does the right hon. Gentleman understand the feelings of the people who showed that restraint, day in, day out, only to see now a one-sided judicial process that could take people of that era—people of my age and older—into court for alleged crimes committed during that period?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Yes, I do understand entirely the strength of feelings. I have many comrades with whom I served in the Ulster Defence Regiment in Northern Ireland, and they are daily subjected to headlines in our local newspapers such as “Off the hook” over pictures of convicted terrorists. The hon. Gentleman can imagine how my comrades feel too, having put their lives on the line to bring some of those people to justice. Similarly, members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, who went out to investigate the crimes, now find that the people they put behind bars can walk free, some of them as the result of the use of the royal prerogative of mercy.

As the result of a report prepared by Lady Justice Hallett into the on-the-runs issue, the Secretary of State of the day, the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers), told the House of Commons in a statement in 2014:

“The Government...will take whatever steps are necessary, acting on the basis of legal advice and in conjunction with the police and prosecutors, to do everything possible to remove barriers to future prosecutions.”—[Official Report, 17 July 2014, Vol. 584, c. 1041.]

She was referring to the future prosecution of terrorists. Since that statement was made, I am not aware of a single terrorist suspect being brought before the courts in Northern Ireland in relation to those matters. The Secretary of State also identified 36 priority cases highlighted in the Hallett report. Those were to be the subject of a review by the legacy investigation branch of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Will the Minister tell us in his response what has happened to those 36 priority cases that were to be reviewed? Are the suspects still wanted for questioning, or have they been told, “No, you’re okay, we don’t need to talk to you”?

I want to highlight a case that I find particularly appalling. Kieran Conway is a self-proclaimed member of the Provisional IRA from Dublin. He claims that he was a senior intelligence officer at the time of the 1974 Birmingham pub bombings, in which 21 innocent people lost their lives. Conway asserts that he is aware of the identity of some of the IRA members involved in that mass murder, but he has refused to disclose that information. In addition, Conway admitted that he had been involved in a number of shooting incidents, perhaps as many as 100. He claims that a number of British soldiers were killed in some of those shooting incidents that he witnessed.

Kieran Conway is so confident that the UK authorities will not pursue him that he has written and published a book setting all that out and putting it in the public domain. Not only that, but he has appeared on the BBC “HARDtalk” programme, openly boasting of his involvement in those crimes. Has Kieran Conway been arrested and questioned about the claims he makes in
his book and has broadcast on other media? No, he has not—far from it. Today, Kieran Conway is a solicitor in Dublin, who acts on behalf of so-called dissident republican suspects in the Special Criminal Court. Imagine the conversations that Mr Conway has with his clients—“Don’t worry, boys. One of these days the Brits will cut a deal with you too. Just keep on doing what you’re doing, just like I did, and I’m walking the streets and advising clients how to evade justice.”

Soldiers and veterans look at all of that and they think, “What is going on?” We know it is going on: veterans of our armed forces are getting the knock on the door early in the morning. They find a large number of police officers outside their homes; their homes are invaded and searched. The veterans, sometimes just out of bed, are marched off to a police station, subjected to cross-examination and interrogation about crimes that occurred sometimes 20 or 30 years ago. Those are the men and women who served our country, who put themselves on the frontline and who were prepared to go out and face the terrorists; today, they are waiting again for the knock at the door.

Dr Andrew Morrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I hesitate to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, because he is making a powerful speech, and I congratulate him on it. Given the number of years that he has cited—20, 30 or 40 years—does he agree that if we accept this principle about harrying and pursuing members of the armed forces, then there is no reason to stop there? Some of my constituents who served in Cyprus and Korea, or even further back, are saying, “In the fullness of time, perhaps we will be questioned about what we got up to, under the rules and norms of today rather than those that applied at the time.”

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: As a former Minister in the Northern Ireland Office, the hon. Gentleman worked with me and others on such legacy issues, so he is well aware of the background to the situation. He is absolutely right. Earlier in the main Chamber, some of our colleagues made the point about what impact this might have on our ability to recruit men and women into our armed forces today. Would not a young 18-year-old looking at our ability to recruit men and women into our armed forces today think twice about serving a career in our armed forces today? Would not a young 18-year-old looking at our ability to recruit men and women into our armed forces think twice about serving a career in our armed forces today?

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on bringing the debate forward again for the knock at the door.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Gentleman, himself a veteran, for his intervention.

Let me remind hon. Members of the price that our security forces paid in Northern Ireland for the service that they provided to our country: 520 Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force regulars, reserves and veterans murdered by terrorists; 243 from the Ulster Defence Regiment and Royal Irish Regiment, or their veterans murdered by terrorists; 325 from the Royal Ulster Constabulary or other constabularies throughout the United Kingdom and retired police murdered by terrorists; and 26 prison officers and former prison officers murdered by terrorists. That is more than 1,100 men and women in the service of the Crown who were murdered by terrorists, alongside countless others seriously injured and left to bear the mental and physical scars of that reign of terror. That is the legacy of the service provided by the men and women of our armed forces and police services in Northern Ireland.

Evidently, little effort has been made to bring to justice those responsible for those heinous crimes. I repeat, because it bears repeating: 90% of the deaths in the Northern Ireland were not caused by the Army, the police or anyone connected with the Crown; they were carried out by illegal terrorist organisations. Yet where is the pursuit of those people? The victims of these crimes cry out for justice. Where is the justice for them?

The Chief Constable, in fairness to him, established the Historical Enquiries Team, which was tasked with re-examining all the unsolved murders connected with the troubles in Northern Ireland. To a certain extent, that was a paper exercise. The team’s only remit was to review the previous police investigations; it did not have police powers to pursue investigations. When that team was wound up, its role passed to the legacy investigation branch of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, which is where it currently sits. The reality today is that 90% of the resources of the legacy investigation branch—I stand open to challenge on this—are devoted to investigating 10% of the deaths during the troubles, and 10% of its resources are devoted to investigating 90% of the deaths.

Where is the equity in that? Where is the fairness in a system that produces such a result?

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this very timely debate. Does he agree that there is no comparison between former service personnel who served in Northern Ireland, who may in the vastly distant past have been engaged on patrol when whatever happened—whether it was an oversight, a misjudgment or a split-second decision—resulted in injury or death, and whose actions account for many of those 10% of deaths, and the deliberate, premeditated murders of the terrorists? That is what annoys and angers many personnel who served in the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank my hon. Friend for that well-made intervention. Two former members of the Parachute Regiment have recently been charged in connection with the shooting of an IRA commander in Belfast in 1972—one Joseph McCann from the Markets area of Belfast. Those two veterans are aged 67 and 65. A 75-year-old veteran, who previously served in the Life Guards, has also been charged with the attempted murder of a man in County Tyrone in 1974. Those cases will soon appear before the courts, yet people do...
not, when they open their newspapers every day, see the terrorists who are responsible for the vast majority of the murders coming before the courts.

Claire Perry (Devizes) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman knows why I was not here at the start of the debate, and I am grateful to him for his courtesy. Does he agree that exactly the sorts of cases that he cites are having a chilling effect on men and women serving in the Army, who look at that opportunity for a career and say, “Why on earth would I do this?” Can he also tell us why this is happening now? My understanding is that these cases were properly identified and investigated at the time. Why is there partisan pressure now to reopen what was dealt with quite properly in the past?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady is an experienced former Minister. She has only just arrived. The debate is very over-subscribed; we will probably be down to two minutes for the six or seven Members who wish to speak.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I will move to my final point, Mr Pritchard, which I feel is important, but I will first address why this is happening now. I think it is because we have had a number of inquiries, which resulted in the creation of the legacy investigation branch. For example, cases linked to the Saville inquiry have been re-examined, cases have been referred by the coroner in Northern Ireland that were previously referred by the Attorney General, and cases have also been referred by the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland to the legacy investigation branch. A combination of all those things in recent years has resulted in what we are now seeing. I agree entirely with the hon. Lady’s point.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does my right hon. Friend accept that despite the imbalance that he has well documented, Sinn Féin are still not happy? Indeed, the crisis in Northern Ireland is driven by their desire to get even more soldiers in the dock and even more security documents in the open, so that they can rewrite history. The Government ought to resist the blackmail that the people of Northern Ireland and the Government here at Westminster are being subjected to by Sinn Féin.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, to which I need not add.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that many people who died in the troubles—all murders and killings were wrong—who were not members of the armed forces were innocent civilians? I can think of many of my own constituents. Will he relate that to the Stormont House agreement, which this debate is supposed to be about?

Danny Kinahan rose—

 Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I will take one final intervention.
on with it. Let’s do the right thing. Let’s investigate these murders. Let’s give the people the opportunity for justice.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Some housekeeping points: the debate will end at 17.52 because of Divisions. The Minister might like to give the mover of the motion, Sir Jeffrey, a minute at the end to wind up. The Front-Bench speeches will start at 17.32, with five minutes for the Labour Front-Bencher, five minutes for the Scottish National party and, of course, 10 minutes for the Minister.

A final point: Members will be aware that the screens are not working, so you cannot keep track of time, but the good news is that we can do it for you. There is a now a time limit of three minutes for each speaker, I am afraid, and when the time is up, you will hear the bell.

5.20 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on securing the debate. However, I do have to say that, as someone who participated in many of the negotiations in the process—some of which he discussed—and in particular has always been pushing to ensure that we keep the promise that was made in the Good Friday agreement about properly addressing legacy issues and tending to the needs of victims, I do not accept a lot of his recounting of the history of the process. Indeed, I would have to say that he has disremembered a number of key points.

In relation to dealing with the past, in a number of the negotiations that took place after the Good Friday agreement the Social Democratic and Labour party, at times the Alliance party and the Women’s Coalition were all saying that the question of victims and the past needed to be dealt with, but it was quite clear from the two Governments that the parties that did not want the past dealt with were the main Unionist party at the time and Sinn Féin.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the negotiations in Hillsborough in 2003. It was then clear. Three parties suggested that a victims’ forum be established to move forward on issues of the past because the Governments and their parties were failing. Again, that did not happen because of Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionist party, but of course the Governments continued to proceed on what they said was their commitment from Weston Park in relation to the so-called on-the-runs. That led to the legislation to which the right hon. Gentleman referred—the Northern Ireland (Offences) Bill in 2005. Contrary to what he said, that Bill was providing opportunities for certificates of amnesty to be given to members of the security forces or anyone else. Anyone could get certificates. In fact, anyone could turn up and get a certificate for anyone else—that is how wide open the scheme was—and it could all happen in secret, with victims not knowing or being told. If anyone found out, the Secretary of State could put on an additional seal of secrecy. I am proud of the fact that the SDLP led opposition to that. Did the Democratic Unionist party make that a deal breaker at the time in the negotiations for the restoration of devolution? It did not. It was the SDLP that fought on that, because the DUP was happy to go along with some aspects of the amnesty scheme, provided that it extended to members of the security forces as well.

The right hon. Gentleman also referred to the establishment of the Historical Enquiries Team. Paul Murphy was Secretary of State at that time, and he told me very clearly that I, as the SDLP leader, was the only party leader who was pressing for anything to be done in relation to historical enquiries. I was the only person who lobbied for that team to be established and the only person who lobbied for funding. Of course, it could not be provided for in statute because there was not agreement from the other parties. So we have the DUP complaining about the very things that it opposed and helped to prevent. Similarly, in terms of the Stormont House agreement and the prior discussions on Haass and everything else related to dealing with the past, the DUP stood in the way of getting an agreement as well.

5.23 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure as ever to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on securing the debate. I had wanted to speak at length about the perception of amnesty, but there is not time to do that, so, as an ex-soldier who served in Northern Ireland twice and in Iraq and Afghanistan twice, I will focus on what I believe is the impact of these inquiries on those who are serving or may serve in the future in our armed forces.

Retrospective investigation over actions taken in battles in Iraq, Afghanistan and Northern Ireland breaks the covenant that the Government, Parliament and the nation has with our armed forces. Those who have served feel betrayed, those who now serve are concerned, and those who might have served now might not. However necessary the Government might insist that these inquiries in and however fair and proportionate the investigatory process is designed to be, merely the prospect of it is enough to make those serving now hesitate before pulling the trigger. In battle, that hesitation costs lives.

Those who serve now do so inspired by this nation’s relationship with its armed forces over the centuries. To defile that relationship is to diminish our military capability now and in the years to come.

5.24 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I shall deal with three aspects of this issue in the short time we have. The first is what the British Government should do. My right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) clearly, fairly and comprehensively set down what we believe as a party that we as a society should strive for in terms of fairness and justice.

When I think of the Government, I also think of our head of state. Her Majesty the Queen has done more than anyone else historically and symbolically to bring people in these islands together. Her son, the Prince of Wales, made a historic visit two years ago to the place in Ireland where his cherished uncle, Lord Mountbatten, was murdered.

There was a conviction for an attempted bombing of the Prince of Wales last year, and three Members of the Dáil—MPs like us in the Republic of Ireland—wrote to
court in support of a dissident republican. Mick Wallace TD, Clare Daly TD and Maureen O’Sullivan TD all wrote in support of a dissident republican who attempted to kill the son of our head of state. There is a huge onus on the Irish Government and on parliamentarians in Dublin when we consider Kingsmill and the promises that the Taoiseach made to the families of the Kingsmill massacre. They said that they would make full disclosure to the coroner’s inquiry. Have they done it? No, they have not. Therefore, while there is an onus on the British Government to ensure that we are serving our armed forces personnel and veterans in this country, there is a huge onus on those co-guarantors in the Irish Government to step up to the plate as well.

From a Northern Ireland perspective, what can we do? In my constituency last year, prison officer Adrian Ismay was murdered by dissident republicans. Despite five breaches of bail, the chief suspect in his murder was not challenged by police—police sent an order to officers not to bother him with bail checks—and only this week we discovered that Damien McLaughlin, who was charged with aiding and abetting the murder of David Black, a prison officer in 2012, absconded on 18 November. He has not signed on bail even though he was required to do so five days in the week, and the police did not raid his house for six weeks. They did not tell court or seek a warrant for his arrest until this January.

Whether it is historic, a legacy case or very much in the here and now today, we are failing innocent victims. I do hope that the Minister takes the opportunity to respond.

5.27 pm

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I welcome the opportunity to have the debate and thank the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) for initiating it. I think the starting point is the inequality in the current process and system, which was highlighted by the Minister just a few weeks ago in this Chamber. He accepted that the approach to the past had not been proportionate. That is a good starting point, and we have to realise that.

I am not going to go over all the issues, but may I say that unless we get a system that delivers for the victims in our society, Northern Ireland will never progress as a society that builds together and works together.

We have heard instances of some former soldiers. Like the right hon. Gentleman, I served in the Ulster Defence Regiment. I remember being on duty when Sergeant Hugh McCormick, a Roman Catholic police officer, was murdered coming out of mass on a Sunday morning—I remember going to that. I remember being flown out to an incident in which a good friend of mine, Jimmy Graham, was killed—the third of the Graham brothers to be murdered. He was driving a school bus to pick up a load of young kids to bring them to swimming.

The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) mentioned the innocent victims. How much more innocent can you get than workmen coming home from serving and working, doing a building job? Their van was blown up at Tennent’s. How much more innocent can you get than those standing around a war memorial to remember the dead of the two world wars? An IRA bomb went off and murdered 11 of those people. How much more innocent can you get than those Kingsmill people going home from their work? This is absolutely disproportionate. I remember speaking to Ronnie Funston at the Enniskillen cattle mart where we were selling cattle. Two days later, he was murdered on his tractor. He was an innocent man and not a member of any security forces.

I have to say that, unless we stop this process whereby the majority of the focus is on former security forces, we will never move forward. If terrorists and former terrorists can get their royal prerogative, why can soldiers not? There has to be some equality in this system; we do not have any at present.

5.30 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): First, I hold soldiers to a far higher standard of service than I do terrorists—that needs to be understood. However, I have to say that what is happening at the moment is the worst possible recruiting sergeant imaginable. Having 70-year-old veterans being hauled out of their beds at 3 o’clock in the morning to answer for things that may or may not have happened 40 years ago is remarkable. I can scarcely remember what I was doing last year; I certainly cannot remember what happened 40 years ago.

I am really worried about the quality of available evidence for investigations of this sort. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has talked, and is worried, about a “twisted narrative”. He needs to say in clear terms what he will do to unpick that narrative, because the message at the moment is that the awful things that happened during the troubles were predominantly caused by members of the armed forces, which is truly remarkable, given the statistics shared by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). That must be dealt with now. It needs to be nipped in the bud, otherwise our colleagues at the Ministry of Defence will find it ever more difficult to recruit the young men and women needed to serve the forces of the Crown.

5.31 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Pritchard. It is undoubtedly safe to say that the political landscape across the Irish sea today is not as it was when the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) secured the debate. The stalemate around the implementation of the agreement remains, but there is now more to consider.

Some would suggest that politics in Northern Ireland has just entered election mode, and that there is little to be said by politicians such as myself on this side of the water. There may be some encouragement for the parties to get back around the table, but the chances of that happening currently seem sadly distant, to say the least. The renewable heat incentive seems to have become all-consuming, and the fallout from it will clearly continue to be an issue for some time; there may yet be an inquiry, and we will wait to see what that brings. The implementation of the Stormont House agreement will be waiting for whoever assumes responsibility for the Northern Ireland Executive in the months to come.

I do not think it is for me to tell Northern Ireland, its people, elected representatives or institutions what they should do, but it seems that the process of implementation
is more than stuck and needs a hard push to get it moving. It will need some hard-headed negotiation and a great deal of good faith on all sides. The supply of good faith may be experiencing some issues at the moment, but I have no doubt that the fine men and women who sustain politics in Northern Ireland will not be shy in providing the hard-headed negotiation; we have seen that reflected in the passionate contributions from every single Member who has contributed today.

There has been plenty of movement in Stormont since the re-establishment of the devolved Government, and the individuals and parties who have served in the Assembly deserve great credit for the advances there and for the establishment of peace as an expected part of life. The attitudes shown at Stormont over the past decade will be needed now as much as they ever were, and I urge all parties in Northern Ireland to take a bit of time to focus on a strategy for the future that establishes what needs to be done to advance the interests of the people they represent, rather than allowing those interests to remain stuck.

It will be almost entirely the responsibility of Assembly members to sort out the problems that have resulted in the stalemate, and they will have to be the pivot on which the future turns and the implementation of the agreement depends. That said, it will need the support of the UK Government—especially in providing the resources needed for addressing the legacy issues and moving on from them. It would be good to have some assurances from the Minister that that will be forthcoming.

The next wee while will not be a walk in the park. The Scottish National party recognises that responsibility for forward movement rests in Belfast, but we offer whatever small help we can.

5.34 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I join those who have paid tribute to your chairing of the debate, Mr Pritchard. I also join those who have paid tribute to the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). I have known him for many years. He is a man who always speaks with utter—sometimes painful—honesty, but with the deepest sincerity. Anyone who has any doubt at all about the rawness of these issues should listen to the right hon. Gentleman’s speech, because that rawness still smart today. We, as parliamentarians, and as co-guarantors of the Good Friday agreement in this country, have an absolute bounden duty to seek to achieve that which we all want: a peaceful, settled and secure Northern Ireland.

I also associate myself with the comments of the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott). I joined him in what I have to say was a slightly unlikely occasion for me: the 12 July parades in Maguiresbridge. I talked to people for whom the border conflict is not a footnote in history but a bloodstained page in their own family lives and their own family bibles—people who actually lived through that horror.

I do not look at this from one particular perspective or another, and I certainly do not look at it with blinkered eyes. However, as the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Morrison) quite rightly said, we expect higher standards from our armed forces. I see no comparison between terrorism and military action, but there have been occasions in the past when people in our armed forces have not acted in the best traditions of our armed forces. I do not think that any of us should pretend that there have not been occasions when matters have occurred that need to be investigated.

I do not believe that every single person in any single organisation can be completely exonerated. That might seem offensive to some people, and I apologise, but on behalf of the many who have served in the armed forces, there is no time or respect for people who act outside the law. Yes, it was a horrendous time, but there is still no excuse for anyone breaching their code of honour—and it is a code of honour that one subscribes to when one wears the Queen’s uniform.

However, the Stormont House agreement and the subsequent Fresh Start were about much more than that particular aspect. Hon. Members should not forget that it was welfare reform that ran the whole business into the sand. It is hard to think that it was agreed only in December 2014. At that time the issues were overwhelmingly ones of welfare reform, and also about the size of the Assembly. There were a huge number of other issues, including the winding up of the historical enquiries team and the introduction of another two or three bodies.

At that time, flags and parades was extremely important, as was the past. I pay credit to the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) and all of those involved in winding down the Twaddell Avenue circumstances, which showed that, on occasion, we can actually achieve things. What seemed insoluble a few years ago has been solved, and I pay undiluted credit to all the people involved, at least two of whom are sitting in this room today. However, implementation of the Stormont House agreement is the subject we are talking about today; we are not talking solely about the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Richard Benyon: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is something of great interest for Britain’s perception in the world. How we treat our veterans. This comes down to a matter of great interest for Britain’s perception in the world. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is something the Government would be well advised to consider?

Stephen Pound: I do not think that anyone would possibly cavil at the thought of respect for our military, our veterans and the military covenant. Equally, however, I do not think that anyone would say that without exception there has never been an incident in which a person wearing the Queen’s uniform acted outside that code of honour and those rules. That might be uncomfortable to say, but I think that we do our armed forces and our veterans a disservice if we say that they can do no wrong. After all, they are human beings.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. My problem with it is that one side in the conflict constantly referred to it as a war—it still does—so on one side there are people
acting as they would in a war, where they can do terrible things, whereas the security forces are bound by very strict rules. I think that is the unfairness of it.

Stephen Pound: What we call something is less important than what actually happens. When someone is dying, when someone has been shot in the back, when someone has been bombed, when someone has been a victim on either side, whether it is called a war or murder is less important to their relatives back home who receive the message of the death of a loved one. I entirely understand that some people will seek to justify it on one side or the other, but we are talking here about the implementation of the Stormont House agreement and Fresh Start.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), who speaks for the Scottish National party, is absolutely right. One reason why the Fresh Start agreement was successful was that at that time the PSNI accepted and admitted that there was still dissident republican activity on the streets of Northern Ireland. That was one reason why the Democratic Unionist party went back into the Executive. I think that we should be concentrating on those issues. We have to look at the murders that are taking place today. We have to move forward. Yes, the past is a mighty weight on our shoulders and it cannot be denied, but we cannot allow it to crush us. We have to move forward.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I remind the Minister that the debate will end at 5.52 pm. If he wishes to allow time for Sir Jeffrey Donaldson to respond, he might wish to resume his seat at 5.50.

5.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Kris Hopkins): First, let me say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on not only the content of his speech, but the honesty and the power with which he communicated his feelings on this very important matter. I also congratulate colleagues on both sides of the Chamber who either intervened or made speeches. I will mention a couple of those briefly before commenting on the Government’s position.

Let me recognise my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) and the passion with which he speaks, as a former soldier—I speak as a former soldier as well. When I look at the hon. Members who made contributions, I see that it is a mix of people; some have served, and some represent communities that suffered terrible violence over a long period. Some people represent areas with soldiers. Some people serve on Committees. There is huge interest in, and a huge commitment to, trying to find resolutions to some of the challenges that we still have in Northern Ireland. The House should be very proud that it can bring together people with knowledge and a determination to resolve some of these issues.

There are difficult issues to address. I compliment my opposite number, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), because we can just be sucked into a narrative that says that soldiers are always right. I served in Northern Ireland, and I was extremely proud of the professionalism with which my colleagues served. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers served very bravely. However, to answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) about the way the world is looking at how we treat our veterans, one reason why our services are regarded as such a professional body of people is the high standards that politicians, our military and the public expect from soldiers. It only takes one person to commit an act that undermines that reputation, so it is important, regardless of whether someone is a soldier or a terrorist, that if they have committed a wrong or there is a thing to be answered, it should be answerable.

James Heappey: A number of people have said that the military are held to a higher standard, and rightly so, but they are held to that higher standard at the time of the engagement and in the immediate aftermath. They are investigated by the Royal Military Police and the Special Investigation Branch there, in theatre. What does not need to happen is the investigation 40 years later of people who have done their duty and long since stood down.

Kris Hopkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I will just say that I sat and listened to the former Prime Minister’s contribution on the Bloody Sunday investigation. I have to say that I refused to accept a narrative that I had heard for many decades about what had happened, and there was clear wrongdoing, so there are moments when we have failed and we should hold our hands up and not just capitulate to a romantic message that we are always right in the military.

I want now to focus on what we are proposing, because the key message that I got from today’s debate was the passion with which the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley wanted to get that proportionality and balance back into what is happening at the moment. The Stormont House agreement addressed many things relating to legacy and the shape of the Assembly, but for us in this debate it was about the formation of the historical investigations unit and addressing some of the issues that people have talked about: the care of our veterans; reform of the Northern Ireland inquest function; ensuring that victims and survivors have access to high-quality services; implementing the comprehensive mental trauma service; seeking an acceptable way in which victims can gain a pension; and giving victims and survivors access to advocate-counsellor assistance. It is vital that progress is made on all of that to address the legacy of the troubled past, and we need political stability to be able to drive that forward. The Government want to put £150 million on the table. We want to create a period of five years in which we will work our way through and address the 90% of murders that were carried out by terrorists, and balance and proportionality will be brought back into the system.

There are huge numbers of former soldiers who were murdered and whose cases are not being investigated at this time. Nearly 200 soldiers were murdered, and those cases are not being investigated at the moment because there is no mechanism in place. When people talk about injustices against soldiers at this time, that is because of the present system. I think that there is now an idea, an understanding of what we want to actually do in putting that proportionality in place and ensuring that those 3,500 people who were murdered and the families of those people get some justice.
One conversation that has come about has been about an amnesty—an end to this whereby we just draw a line. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley read out a long list of people and of events that had occurred—terrible events in which people were traumatised and damaged and will be for a long time. They want justice. There is not a line to be drawn. Whether an act was perpetrated by a terrorist or whether a soldier was involved, people want their moment in court, when they can get an understanding of what happened.

Dr Murrison: Will the Minister not accept, though, that because terrorists do not keep records and are not going to respond to letters from the Ministry of Defence inviting them to unburden themselves, there will be a mismatch in the information available to the courts? That means that successful prosecutions may be brought against servicemen—a small number, I suspect—but there is no chance, realistically, of a commensurate number of prosecutions being brought against terrorists.

Kris Hopkins: What is important is that we create the space, give the resource and set a framework in which those investigations can be explored. We are suggesting a five-year period in which chronologically we work through the evidence that is available, the evidence that we can now discover through new means and techniques that are available, so that there is an understanding of what happened at that moment and we can best explore that. It is right that we put that proportionality back in and ensure that that is addressed.

I want to give the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley the opportunity to respond, so I will briefly touch on some of the issues and questions raised. First, the PSNI is still considering the 36 priority cases and actively reviewing the incidents involved. So there is not an end to that; it will pursue that. I have mentioned to the hon. Lady from the SNP, the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), that the Government have made clear their commitment to provide £150 million over five years to help support the establishment of the new institutions that are addressing the past.

We need to create a political space in which we can deliver this. The Secretary of State wants to consult the public on how we do this, but people will again raise the issues that have been put on the table today. However, as the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley said, it is important that justice is provided and that proportionality is brought back into this system. I hope that when these proposals come forward they are robustly challenged, people make contributions to them and we understand that this is about bringing justice to the people of Northern Ireland.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I will be very brief. I thank the Minister for his response and thank other right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate this afternoon. Let me be clear, Mr Pritchard. As a former soldier, like a number of colleagues who have spoken, I am not prepared to stand back and see my former comrades vilified and hounded for serving their country and standing in the gap between democracy and tyranny. They defended us, and we must defend them. Peace is a noble cause, but when peace means the denial of justice and becomes the oppressor of the innocent, it is less noble.

I can do no better than quote the words from a tribute poem written by Shane Laverty, who was 10 years old when his 18-year-old brother, RUC Constable Robert David Laverty, was murdered by the Provisional IRA on the Antrim Road in Belfast on 16 July 1972. He was sitting in a patrol car, travelling down the road. I finish with this:

“Remember me. For I cannot pass this way again and memories are all you can have. Unlike those who put me here. Was it I who broke the law or they? Yet they live to fight another day.”

We owe it to Constable Robert David Laverty, his family and all those who served our country as police officers and soldiers to stand by them, to stand with them and to ensure that there is proper, proportionate justice.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered implementation of the Stormont House Agreement.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 11 January 2017

[Mr Adrian Bailey in the Chair]

Pharmacies and Integrated Healthcare: England

9.30 am

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered pharmacies and integrated healthcare in England.

It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. In the light of the extreme pressures on our health services, particularly in the winter months—much has been made of this recently in the media, although it is not dissimilar to many other years—with our overburdened frontline services, clogged up A&E departments and congested GP services, I believe it is vital that we explore new models of delivering patient care, particularly an integrated model of patient care.

In 2016, there was an average of 2,500 more attendances at major A&Es a day compared with 2015, which is a 6% increase. People aged 80-plus have the highest rates of A&E attendance. As a country, compared with only a few decades ago, we are now fortunate enough to benefit from innovative drug treatments, greater survival rates from complex surgery, better nutrition and better education; but, as a population, many of our residents are living longer. For example, in my constituency of St Albans, the average life expectancy for a pensioner is over 89 years—it is nearly 89 and a half years. However, for far too many of our constituents, the latter part of their lives brings a prolonged period of frail health, with dementia and diabetes on the rise and an increased incidence of ill health linked to lifestyle choices such as lack of exercise, alcohol, obesity and smoking. That period at the end of our lives is often not characterised as a period of good health.

We need to come up with a seamless, flexible model that makes the best use of precious resources and benefits patients. It is therefore timely to explore in this debate the role that local pharmacies play in local health services and the potential role that they might play to ease the strain on more congested frontline services. I also want to make the Government aware of the continuing importance of pharmacies in communities and their potential to do so much more.

In an ever-changing world, we have a duty continuously to challenge the old models of health delivery systems. In October, the Government proposed to reallocate money to NHS frontline services. We all accept that the NHS is labouring under huge financial pressures, so any areas in which precious resources are dissipated due to inefficiencies or duplications ought to be considered. It is important to integrate community pharmacies into the NHS urgent care system and GP services. We need to promote a pharmacy-first culture for minor ailments to take pressure off frontline services.

Community pharmacies currently see some 1.6 million people a day in the UK. It is worth noting that the recent standard patient experience report for the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust in 2016 showed that 0% of respondents in my county of Hertfordshire had contacted a walk-in service, an out-of-hours GP service or a pharmacy service before contacting the ambulance service. I think we can agree that a lot more can be done to take the pressure off emergency frontline services.

Pharmacies are the most accessible health services in most communities: they are found on high streets, in supermarkets and in shopping centres. In St Albans, we have some great independent local pharmacists who want to get more involved and we even have the headquarters of the National Pharmacy Association, which supports independent pharmacies and helps them grow their businesses. We need to look at the current pharmacy model. In St Albans, patients can choose from five dispensing pharmacies within a half-mile area of the high street. Some pharmacies are just over the road from each other, and some have only yards between them. Given the Government’s financial support of £25,000 for those dispensing 2,500 prescriptions per annum, which comes directly out of our NHS budget, it is easy to see why we need to look at the model of provision and ask how we can get a better bang for the NHS buck.

I accept the Government’s assertion that a balance must be struck to ensure that pharmacies remain accessible but are not excessive in number and, importantly, that we have a range of offering. All the local pharmacies on the high street in St Albans are closed on Sunday, whereas the big supermarket pharmacies are open, in line with their shopping experience. It is worth noting that Sunday is the busiest day for most A&E services. However, a recent survey showed that 50% of people prefer, for a variety of reasons, not to use a pharmacy in a supermarket, particularly the retired, the elderly and other frequent pharmacy users. We therefore need to examine the model of opening hours, as well as location and the type of provision on offer. Given that many supermarkets are located outside the town centre, their pharmacies are not accessible to everyone, particularly the most vulnerable in society. Diversity and accessibility of provision are key to integrating pharmacy and health services.

Let us explore what pharmacies could do. Pharmacies should be capable of providing general health services. They could increasingly work beyond the traditional role and offer services to promote sexual health, increase physical wellbeing and give advice on flu immunisations and drug-harm prevention, for example. However, if we expect pharmacies to do more, we need the funding formula to reflect the quality of service they provide. That is what the pharmacies want. Local pharmacists in St Albans believe that they should be the first point of contact for advice on medicines, minor illnesses, healthy living and wellbeing. To facilitate that, the Quadrant pharmacy in St Albans has undertaken a major refit, with a brand new consulting room, and invested heavily in technology, including an expensive automated robot for dispensing medicine.

I visited the Quadrant—I am sure that many hon. Members made similar visits after the Government’s pronouncements in October—in November last year to discuss the opportunities and challenges facing small independent pharmacies. The pharmacy is a friendly, attractive place to pop into and is well regarded by local
people. It has the potential to do so much more, but that extra service does not come without a cost. If people spend time talking to their local pharmacist, the pharmacy gains nothing if they then walk out of the door and go off to see their GP. It is important that we recognise the role pharmacies are being asked to play in giving advice, holding consultations and, potentially, dispensing services. There must be some reflection of the cost involved in the staff time that it takes to do those things.

Rachel Solanki, the director of the Quadrant pharmacy, told me:

“General Practice will need to continue to be the gate keeper of referral to secondary care.”

However, she helpfully suggested

“a whole raft of services and support for self-limiting and long-term conditions”,

such as dealing with uncomplicated urinary tract infections in women, impetigo and bacterial skin infections; managing non-complex patients with high blood pressure; performing healthy heart and cholesterol checks; and supporting patients diagnosed with diabetes. The list was quite exhaustive. She proposed that pharmacies could and should act as wellbeing hubs for the communities they serve. She went on to say:

“The community pharmacist, a highly-skilled and trained individual, is the most accessible healthcare professional and is available without an appointment. If a mechanism could be found to incentivise and remunerate, we are confident the mutual agendas would be achieved.”

That is her view, and that of many other local pharmacists. There is a mutual agenda for providing good healthcare for patients that could be achieved if pharmacies were brought into play.

The Government’s proposals in October last year were a step in the right direction, but we need more detail. I want to ask the Minister a series of questions, and hopefully he will be able to answer some of them. How can the Government make smaller and local pharmacies more attractive and accessible for everyone? How can the Government encourage GPs to offload services such as flu jabs on to pharmacies? In saying “offload”, I recognise that where there is a cost to the pharmacy and the GP is in receipt of payment for that flu jab service, that needs to be considered, but I would like to hear the Minister’s views on that. How can the Government promote the pharmacy as an alternative local health provider that can be trusted and deliver a quality service? This is not just about having a shop that you take your prescription to and maybe pick up a few aspirin; it is about the pharmacy being a health provider. How can the Government increase pharmacy capacity to provide a broader range of health services and ensure the correct remuneration for the service provided?

Responding to an oral question on 2 March 2016, the then Health Minister, Lord Prior, stated:

“The big driving force going through healthcare and community pharmacy today is one of integration, which means that community pharmacies must in future work more closely with their local hospitals and GPs.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 2 March 2016, Vol. 769, c. 817.]

That is the point of today’s debate. The Government have pursued several policies that are intended to lead to better integration of community pharmacies, including the introduction of a pharmacy integration fund as part of the 2016-17 community pharmacy settlement.

Last month, Richard Murray of the King’s Fund published a paper looking into the role of community pharmacies in the NHS. In December 2016, the Minister described that review as

“an essential road map that sets out how we are going to move the community pharmacy network away from a remuneration model based just on dispensing and on to services as well.”—[Official Report, 20 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 1301.]

When can we expect a response to that incisive review?

The NHS “Five Year Forward View”, which was published in 2014, recognised that GPs are “under severe strain”, and many of us will have met GPs locally who have restated that view to us. It also states that steps will be taken to:

“Build the public’s understanding that pharmacies and on-line resources can help them deal with coughs, colds and other minor ailments without the need for a GP appointment or A&E visit.”

I urge the Government to listen to pharmacists when considering how to take that integration forward, as we do not want to lose what is good in the system, especially where it works well for our local patients. For example, I know that the Government are piloting an urgent medicine supply service. Rachel Solanki, the director of the Quadrant pharmacy, tells me that in Hertfordshire there is a local scheme that is so well regarded that it has now been rolled out again. Her concern is that the proposed national service does not necessarily promote a pharmacy-first culture. The Minister may wish to clarify that that is not the case, but that was the view she expressed to me. She was worried that there might be a perverse incentive to encourage patients to phone NHS 111 in order to get a referral to the pharmacy service.

In an email Rachel wrote to me recently, her view was that the change could have the unintended consequence

“of actually increasing NHS 111 calls for emergency medicines when they should be directed to community pharmacies first. Our local service offers both the facility to help the patients get their medicine but, more importantly; also offers incentivisation of the community pharmacy to promote ordering medicines in a timely way to reduce medicines waste, and hopefully therefore preventing a further incident of need.”

She thinks it unlikely that the proposed 111 service will operate both the services that we have locally and the new model, and she worries about losing the existing local scheme. Will the Minister reassure me by saying whether schemes such as the one operating in my county of Hertfordshire could still operate in tandem, or will they be mutually exclusive?

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. Does she agree that although we must encourage clinical commissioning groups to work closely with community pharmacies—she has highlighted some good examples of that—the practice is patchy across the country? There is reluctance in some areas for clinical commissioning groups to engage with their local pharmacies. We have had that problem in York, where the CCG has been very reluctant to talk to local pharmacies. Local MPs, across parties, have written to it and finally got it to engage but it has been very slow, and we have to speed that up. We have great examples in some parts of the country, but poor examples in others.
Mrs Main: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and completely backs up the point I was making. There is evidence of good practice but other areas could do much better. Without bringing pharmacies to the table and into the ongoing dialogue about this issue, we risk not having the new model that we would all like to see—one that operates consistently wherever people go.

There must be a consistent model in the drop-in pharmacy service that we are envisaging. Of course, people often use pharmacies away from where they live, such as where they work or when they are on holiday or visiting friends. If the model is patchy, as my hon. Friend says, the system will not improve and we will end up with a situation like the one that is found in many holiday towns. A few years ago, the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government looked into the fact that many seaside and holiday towns have enormous pressures on their frontline services. If something goes wrong when people are on holiday, although what happens is not necessarily catastrophic, they all end up at the local A&E services in hospitals. That huge problem was recognised. I think, in the 2006 seaside towns report by the CLG Committee. This is all part of evening out the stresses and strains on the system, which for many seaside holiday and tourist destinations are often huge.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that that was largely the point of the Murray review, which she alluded to earlier? Integration throughout the whole of the NHS is vital, so that everybody knows what everybody else is doing and so that there are seamless pathways that everybody knows how to follow. That will ultimately give us benefits not only in pharmacies, but right across the NHS.

Mrs Main: Absolutely. Rachel Solanki and her colleagues are not necessarily critical of change—that is important. Pharmacies are nervous about some of the things that may be coming along, but they are not critical of change. Indeed, they would welcome a debate on the innovative services that other pharmacies are operating around the country. The fact that we do not all know about these services in other places shows that there is not an integrated approach. The services include anticoagulation monitoring in Knowsley; medicines optimisation work for respiratory diseases in South Central; sexual health screening, including for hepatitis, syphilis and HIV, on the Isle of Wight; oral contraceptive supply in Manchester and other contraceptive provision in Newcastle; alcohol screening and brief intervention on the Wirral; healthy lung screening in Essex; pneumococcal immunisation in Sheffield; a reablement service on the Isle of Wight; and phlebotomy services in Coventry and Manchester. That is a long, diverse list of services that are provided by pharmacies in those areas.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Will my hon. Friend recognise that some innovative things are taking place in the west country, especially in my constituency?

Mrs Main: I am happy to acknowledge that some fabulous things are happening in the west country. That list was given to me. I make no excuse for the fact that I thought it seemed fairly long already, but I am certain that there are a lot more services that hon. Members do not realise are out there—perhaps even in pharmacies in their own constituency or the one next-door that they go shopping in or visit with their families. The fact that we do not know about them shows that there is no integration in the system. We should be aware of it if these services are being rolled out. Perhaps there should be a directory that we could consult to find out what is going on in certain areas.

That list shows hon. Members the exciting possibilities that could be open to pharmacies, including those in the west country that were just referred to, if we just gave them the chance to embrace them. Rachel, the director of the Quadrant pharmacy, ended her observations with a positive endorsement of the “Community Pharmacy Forward View”. She told me that it has “been developed and signed up to by all national community pharmacy organisations about the types of services that either need to be commissioned at a national level or pressure put on Sustainable Transformation Plans (STP) leaders locally to commission a service package to patients”.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) said that there is reluctance in some areas to embrace this. We need a strong steer from the Government that this is where we are going and that they had better wise up, get around the table and come up with a suitable model.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point and I congratulate her on securing this debate. I have discovered the same thing as my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) in Suffolk. It is about trying to get the CCG to talk to the pharmacists. The interest of the NHS is our interest—it is a national interest—and not that of acute hospitals, the primary care sector or any particular sector. The NHS must operate in the national interest, and if that means involving pharmacists much more heavily and that we have to be the ones pushing for innovation, it is our job to do that.

Mrs Main: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I shall conclude my remarks soon, because I know that other hon. Members want to take part in this debate. If there is no resistance in the system, I ask the Minister to find out what can be done to sort that out. How aware is he of resistance in the system? How much input have pharmacies had into highlighting what they would be prepared to do and their concerns about the fact that they are sometimes not being listened to in this debate? There seems to be broad agreement in the NHS “Five Year Forward View”, the “Community Pharmacy Forward View” and at the King’s Fund that the integration of pharmacies into NHS healthcare is the direction of travel.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a really interesting speech. I have had such a big postbag on this issue because of the threats to pharmacies in my constituency. The fact that local community pharmacies are facing cuts is threatening the level of healthcare that people receive, particularly elderly people who cannot drive, people with children who need to be able to pop in with them after school and people with mobility issues. The cuts imposed by the Government are threatening the quality of the service that is being delivered. They need to address that before they look at further integration.
Mrs Main: I agree that there are concerns. As I mentioned earlier, there are five dispensing pharmacies within half a mile in St Albans. Some are literally over the road from each other, although I know that model is not repeated everywhere. None of them is open on a Sunday and the only pharmacy that is open is in a big out-of-town superstore. We need to look at a model that addresses their proximity to the populations that need to use them and the hours that people are looking for pharmacies to be open. It is no good if people can access the seven-day-a-week pharmacy service only by getting in their car and driving two or three miles out of town. It is all part of the same thing.

That is why I support the point made in the Government’s proposals in October about models such as the one in St Albans, although this is not the case everywhere, where there are the big boys and smaller independents all in the same area. If the hon. Lady were to walk into Boots in my constituency—I have nothing against Boots, which is one of the pharmacies on my high street, as on many others—she could pick up sandwiches for her lunch, as well as a variety of health and beauty products, perfumes and so on. It is a one-stop shop for many things, a bit like a supermarket.

My concern is that we must not lose community pharmacies such as the Quadrant, which is a single pharmacy in a small shopping precinct that many people walk to and use locally. We have to have a balance of availability and opening hours. If we are truly to embrace an integrated system, some pharmacies may need to consider their opening hours and sign up to being open when they would not normally be. They will have to be remunerated for that as well. We need to look at the whole model. I understand that there are concerns, but our current model cannot continue. I want integration, and I want more money and more services directed towards pharmacies to make them viable and to make them the first hub for the community.

There is broad agreement that the direction of travel we need is towards getting people to use the most accessible health provider, which is the local pharmacy. That would keep many smaller pharmacies going. They cannot compete with all the other offerings from supermarkets such as Sainsbury’s, which has a pharmacy in its out-of-town store in London Colney, so we need to ensure that they compete as health hubs.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about these issues. I am sure that many other Members will make contributions about their local models, because the provision and the pharmacies on offer vary throughout the country. I accept that, in areas such as mine, the current model cannot continue, particularly if it asks for NHS funding, but we must not throw out the baby with the bathwater. I ask the Minister to say what more the Government will do to ensure that pharmacies have a real role in the integrated health service.

9.51 am

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): May I say what a pleasure and a delight it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey? I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing the debate. I should warn the House that I am the Government’s pharmacy champion. I have been following this issue quite closely for about the last 20 years—not that I have been in the House of Commons for the last 20 years, but I have followed it consistently since being involved in the community pharmacy group action campaign, which was to do with resale price maintenance on non-prescription medicines in the 1990s, when I was doing a commercial job. I became a vice-chairman of the all-party pharmacy group when I was elected to the House, so this is an issue I feel quite strongly about and have been very involved in.

To put things in context, Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport is, uniquely for a Conservative constituency, an inner-city seat. Indeed, I am one of very few Members of Parliament outside London to represent a totally inner-city seat. The only countryside I have in my constituency is the Ponderosa pony sanctuary, which is a rather muddy field. How we can integrate pharmacies is a really important issue. There is an 11-year life expectancy difference between the north-east of my patch—I could probably walk from one end to the other in a couple of hours or so—down to the south-west in Devonport, which is a very deprived community that has real issues with homelessness, drug taking and smoking. People certainly need to be referred to pharmacies for smoking cessation too.

There are several areas of the debate that I am particularly interested in exploring, and I hope the Minister will respond on them. The first is summary care records. A lot of pharmacies want to be able to access the care records for their patients. They also want to be able to populate those records, so that they can review the medicines given to patients. We need to make sure that happens throughout the whole of England. I was very concerned by something I discovered over the Christmas recess. I did not take masses of time off over Christmas, but I did speak to a number of GPs; needless to say, I also did a surgery, with one of my local GPs in the Devonport ward. He told me that GPs—and, I suspect, pharmacies too—cannot access the medical records at Derriford hospital, because it uses a completely different system from the GPs and the pharmacies. The Minister needs to look at that.

The second issue we should look at is using pharmacies much more for minor ailments—a point that my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans made very clearly—so that people are signposted to the pharmacy rather than unnecessarily going to the GP. I was watching breakfast television this morning while I was getting ready to come and speak in this debate—I think it was Sky television, so I should declare an interest, because my brother is the cricket correspondent for Sky television—and I do not want to be accused of doing anything wrong. I was interested to hear the person reviewing the newspapers say that she was doing a programme tomorrow evening on Radio 4 at 9 o’clock—I am giving her a plug—on how, rather than having lots of patients come to see them, some GPs in Plymouth have ended up talking to patients on the phone. Patients do not necessarily always need physically to go to a GP to seek help, which is a useful way of taking some of the pressure off GPs.

I should also make a point about the decriminalisation of prescription errors. At the moment, GPs can get a slap on the wrist or be struck off, whereas pharmacists who fail to give prescriptions properly can face criminal charges. I had thought that the Government were very keen to address that. I was led to understand by the
Minister that the matter might have been sorted out before Christmas, but that there were problems to do with the devolved Administrations needing to deal with it first. However, it seems very odd: here we are, at the beginning of the year, and we still have not dealt with it. I must warn my hon. Friend that I have tabled a parliamentary question about it.

My final point is that a great deal of pressure has been placed on the Government and the national health service, especially during the winter. There has been a great deal of discussion about how pharmacies need funding and so on, but in my opinion this is not just about money; it is about ensuring that we use the systems properly, so that we can deliver a better quality of care. We could get pharmacists to go into residential care homes for the elderly, too. It is not just about money; it is about the structure, too. We need to take that into account, because we need to ensure that budgets sweat.

9.58 am

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate on what I believe is a very important issue.

There is no doubt that our health service is currently under great pressure, and we have heard already. People are living longer and we are able to treat far more conditions than we could in the past, which adds to the demand on our health services. Although more money is always welcome, I am sure that many of us would agree that simply throwing more money at the health service is not the solution. We need to find better, smarter, more efficient and more effective ways of working to provide the healthcare that our growing population so desperately needs.

I have no doubt that pharmacies, particularly community pharmacies, can play an important role in finding better and smarter ways of providing healthcare to the people of this country. Community pharmacies continue to be an undervalued and underutilised section of our health service. As a country, we really need to embrace the role that community pharmacies can play in delivering health services. They have much more to offer than they are currently seen to be offering.

The Government have started to recognise that, with the current pilot scheme, started in 2015, to increase the presence of clinical pharmacists in general practice. That is clearly a step in the right direction, but I propose that we should also look the other way. We should not only look at integrating pharmacies into GPs’ surgeries; we should be looking to integrate GP services into our community pharmacies. It is quite clear that many of the routine services that people typically go to their local GP for could be provided by their local pharmacists in a much more cost-effective way.

Oliver Colvile rose—

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con) rose—

Steve Double: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) first.

Oliver Colvile: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. He makes a very powerful point. I have thought for some while that we should be trying to put GP surgeries into pharmacies, so that when someone goes to their GP and says, “I have got this ailment and I need some help,” he can say, “Don’t come and talk to me; go and talk to the pharmacist, because he or she can manage the thing properly.” To my mind, that seems a very clever way in which we could take some of the pressure off the finances of GPs, as they would not necessarily have their own lease, but could get the likes of Boots or others to provide facilities.

Steve Double: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and I agree with him. Clearly, part of the answer is getting GPs and pharmacies working much more closely together, and co-locating can often be one way to help with that.

Jake Berry: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he accept that the demand for prescribing pharmacies can be demonstrated by the recent proliferation of adverts we have seen on television for “pay to see your GP” services, which I was very surprised to see so many of on TV over Christmas? For £20, someone can pay to have a Skype consultation with a GP, who will then email or contact the local pharmacy to issue them with a prescription. An NHS that is free at the point of use should be absolutely fundamental to us in this country, but the fact that people are now paying to see GPs rather than waiting to see them shows that there is huge demand for people to have minor ailments prescribed for by a pharmacist.

Steve Double: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; he clearly watches far more TV than I do, because I was not aware of that. However, he makes the point well that there has been a huge increase in the demand being placed on our GP services, and people are therefore looking for other ways to meet that demand when it cannot be met in the usual ways.

I applaud and support the Government in their desire to create a truly seven-day-a-week health service. Part of the way to achieve that is by making far better use of our community pharmacies. Many are already open for longer hours than GP surgeries, typically on a Saturday, and my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans made the point that maybe some need to consider opening for longer still. That is something the Government could certainly help with. If we are to achieve a truly seven-day-a-week health service, we need to make more effective use of our pharmacy services.

Margaret Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is making a strong case for the importance of community pharmacies. Pharmacies in my constituency of Wirral West that will be unable to receive money under the planning access scheme have written to me to say they are very concerned that they face closure. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would make sense for the Government to pull back from those cuts while they consider the whole issue of integrating services?

Steve Double: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, and in many ways I share her concerns. While I respect the desire of Department of Health’s to ensure that money is well spent and delivers value for money, there
are cases of over-duplication, as we have already heard. Some changes need to be made to the funding models. I agree that we need to do all we can to protect our community pharmacies, particularly in more rural areas such as my constituency in Cornwall, where they play such a vital role for rural communities. I was pleased that the Department was able to do something to help—certainly many pharmacies in my area benefited from the changes to the funding—but I respect the fact that that may not have been the case in her constituency, and I will be urging the Minister to do all we can to ensure that these vital services in our rural areas are protected as much as possible.

With the right support, and indeed the right funding streams, our pharmacies could play a role that would take pressure off the parts of our health service that are clearly under severe pressure, in particular primary care and acute and urgent care. We are all aware of the pressure that our A&E departments are under at the moment. I believe that many times, when people go to A&E—perhaps because they cannot get to see their GP as quickly as they would like or feel they need to—they could actually get what they need from their local pharmacy.

Part of this is about increasing people’s awareness of what our pharmacies can offer. Part of the learning curve that I have been on since becoming an MP has involved going to see our local community pharmacies and getting a better understanding of exactly what services they provide, which I was not aware of before. More could be done to promote the role that pharmacies can play and the services that they can offer by making the public more aware of those services. That in itself would take pressure off our GPs.

Mrs Main: I did not make this point in my speech, but my hon. Friend is almost making it for me—it is that our pharmacists are hugely qualified, but too often they are the most under-utilised highly qualified local health professional. It is nonsense that their expertise is not being used routinely, challenged or made available, because people do not seek to use it and are not even necessarily aware that it is there for them to utilise.

Steve Double: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, which I completely agree with. There is much more we could do to increase the general public’s awareness of exactly how highly qualified our pharmacies’ staff are and of the excellent services that pharmacies can provide.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport talked about the need to integrate IT systems better, which I believe is part of the solution we seek. My understanding is that community pharmacies can access summary care records, but on a read-only basis. Many pharmacists I talk to say that if they had read-write access to that information, so that they could input data about treatments they have given to patients, that would be better. For example, if they could take a patient’s blood pressure and input that reading into the patient’s care record, that would save the patient time as they would not then have to go their GP to have the same reading taken and put into their record. I urge the Government to consider carefully whether read-write access could be granted to pharmacies, because I believe it would save a huge amount of time and reduce what I believe is often duplication of work within our health system.

An interesting fact that I discovered in my discussions on this subject is that the average time that someone waits when they go to see their pharmacist—that is, the time between entering the pharmacy and actually getting to see the pharmacist—is eight minutes. Many people in this country would be absolutely delighted if they could see a health professional within eight minutes of asking to see one. I am sure that many hon. Members here today have in-boxes full of people’s complaints about how long it takes them to see their GP. If people were aware that if they went to see their local pharmacist they would only have to wait eight minutes on average to see a very well qualified health professional who has a good chance of providing them with what they are looking for, I believe they would be delighted. That is another example of how we can promote the work of pharmacists, which would provide a far better service to the people of this country and take pressure off the other parts of our health system.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and I apologise, Mr Bailey, for missing the start of the debate.

The excellent pharmacies in my constituency do much of the fine work that the hon. Gentleman says. I believe the funding model for pharmacies needs to be looked at because there is a great deal of duplication. The money spent could be better utilised, so the funding model needs to be reviewed. Some of the recent changes are a step in the right direction, but I will always make the case that, particularly in our rural communities, we need to be careful how those changes are applied so that our local pharmacies continue to be viable and able to provide the services that are needed.

Steve Double: Although I agree with some of what the hon. Gentleman says, I believe the funding model for pharmacies needs to be looked at because there is a great deal of duplication. The money spent could be better utilised, so the funding model needs to be reviewed. Some of the recent changes are a step in the right direction, but I will always make the case that, particularly in our rural communities, we need to be careful how those changes are applied so that our local pharmacies continue to be viable and able to provide the services that are needed.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I understand why Labour Members want to focus on the potential savings that once again the Government are having to make, but I point out that the two pharmacies that I visited in Clare and Hadleigh in my constituency accept the changes, provided they are balanced by their having a more positive role in the healthcare system and doing more for our communities. That is what they want.

Steve Double: I agree absolutely. This is not only about money; it is about reviewing the way we provide our healthcare services, embracing a greater role for our pharmacies, and understanding and promoting the role that they can play.
I hope the Minister can tell us how we are capturing that innovative thinking and how it is being spread throughout the system.

The “Five Year Forward View” identified that the British public need to be made more aware of what pharmacies can do and how they can help people keep healthy. However, the Government need to give a steer and ensure that people with minor ailments understand that the pharmacist should be their first port of call.

When I visited my pharmacist there was concern about the 111 service, which was my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans mentioned. We need to keep an eye on that so that we do not unintentionally put pressure on different parts of the service. We need to look at it in the round and incorporate all key roles into pharmacies in order to provide additional services. I had my flu jab at a pharmacy this year, which is a useful use of resources within the system and within the community. We could make that more available and perhaps incentivise individual pharmacists to go out into care homes, which have a proliferation of need because of age and comorbidities, and give flu jabs and so on. Moving our workforce around, rather than driving ever-greater demand into smaller places such as hospitals, must be a consideration.

The Murray review, which has been mentioned, found that poor integration with other parts of the NHS was a significant barrier, and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society agreed. I like to think that the Government are taking a good look at what was said in the review and taking the issues on board.

I love the term “pharmacy-first culture”, which is a good motto for everybody to live by. I want to concentrate on my Bury St Edmunds constituency for a couple of minutes. We have 21 pharmacies and a cluster of Superdrug and Boots shops, which are volume providers that have other things such as make-up and lunches; they have optical services and Boots has audiology services. They provide everything needed from the cradle to the grave and they have considerably greater footfall than my excellent independent pharmacist, who puts more effort into care and inter-agency working. We could make that more available and use of resources within the system.

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The pharmacy role is a vital one in the round. We need to keep an eye on the 111 service, which was my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans mentioned. We need to keep an eye on that so that we do not unintentionally put pressure on different parts of the service. We need to look at it in the round and incorporate all key roles into pharmacies in order to provide additional services. I had my flu jab at a pharmacy this year, which is a useful use of resources within the system and within the community. We could make that more available and perhaps incentivise individual pharmacists to go out into care homes, which have a proliferation of need because of age and comorbidities, and give flu jabs and so on. Moving our workforce around, rather than driving ever-greater demand into smaller places such as hospitals, must be a consideration.

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Bill Esterson: I do not think I disagree with anything the hon. Lady has said. She is making a very good case for the excellent practice in her constituency and for pharmacists more generally. Does she agree that the logic of her argument is that money is saved by investing in pharmacies? That is a strong argument. She is arguing that cuts should not be made and that the Government should invest in pharmacies to support the whole health system, which is what this debate is about.

Jo Churchill: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and agree with his final point. This is about the whole system and making efficiencies. We are talking about evolution. We are no longer looking at the service as it was perceived in 1948. There was a private element to it even back then, because that is what GPs wanted. We need a 2017 solution to the challenges of a larger population, an ageing population and so on. Pharmacists must play their part in that. They are really keen to step up and deliver more for the Government and more for the patients and people in their communities.

There are issues in the town, but there is an interesting rural situation, where there are rural payments for Elmswell and Thurston, but the GP surgery in Woolpit, which dispenses more scripts, does not get one. There seems to be a bit of discrepancy. I echo the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double): looking at rural constituencies is a very different thing from looking at the whole ecosystem.

There is a Day Lewis pharmacy in my town. An exceptional local resident, Ernie Broom, is keen to note that that pharmacy, because of its location, cannot offer a lot of peripheral things. The local residents are largely mature or on lower incomes, which means that the pharmacy is vital to the community. We also have really poor bus services into town—it would take a young mum or an elderly person nearly an hour and a half to cross town. I want the Government to look at a weighting system, which takes into account what local pharmacies can deliver. They would get points for being in certain areas, or incentives for delivering more. I know that is something that is being looked at.

My questions are similar to those posed by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans. What more can pharmacies be incentivised to do? How much more capacity can they provide? With people living longer and with comorbidities, how can we remunerate for services? How can we ensure that that is included as part of sustainable transformation plans? It is not something that should be added at the end as an afterthought, but is a hugely integral part of how we make our NHS better and more able to look after the health of us all.

10.22 am

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) for securing the debate. I found much that I agreed with in her contribution, and I echo her call for a pharmacy-first culture.

It is a pleasure to take part in the debate, although I must admit to feeling a bit of an observer, as the debate is about pharmacies and integrated healthcare in England. We have heard from a number of speakers about the different practices that affect their parts of England; I hope that my observations from Scotland may also be of interest to Members. I have commented in a few debates that there are often lessons that we can learn from one another and good practices that can be shared. This issue provides an excellent case in point.

Community pharmacies were developed in Scotland 10 years ago and are there for minor ailments, acute medication and public health services. The Scottish Pharmacy Board has stated that more than one in 10 GP consultations and more than 1 in 20 accident and emergency attendances could be managed by community pharmacists using the minor ailments service; that represents huge potential for the future. Although we await the full evaluation of the minor ailments service in March, it estimates suggest that as much as £110 million could be saved. Further expansion of the MAS is planned.

Mrs Main: I do not often agree with what is said by Scottish National party Members, but I looked at the Scottish service, and one of the key things, which I think other hon. Members have raised, is the software functionality that in Scottish pharmacies are obliged to have. That is something we do not have in England—I do not know about Wales—and I wonder if the hon. Gentleman could let the Minister know about this. The ability to input into scripts and the remuneration that comes through that software functionality in Scotland is something that I found very interesting.

Martyn Day: The hon. Lady has emphasised the point very well. There is a considerable degree of integration in the Scottish service. It has been around for 10 years and is a fairly mature service.

The Scottish Government work side by side with the medical professions in Scotland and recognise just how important community pharmacies are. They are interested in exploring new ways for pharmacies to offer primary care services to help deliver care across our communities. There are some 1,200 pharmacies throughout Scotland, providing a range of services on behalf of the NHS. As well as dispensing prescriptions, they offer four NHS pharmaceutical care services, which have been gradually introduced since 2006. These are the minor ailments service, which I have mentioned, the public health service, the acute medication service and the chronic medication service. Those new services involve pharmacists more in the community in the provision of direct, patient-centred care, with every community pharmacy in Scotland having patients registered for the minor ailments service by March 2015.

 Patients register with a pharmacist in the same way as they register with a GP. The aim is for all people to be registered with their local pharmacist, wherever they consider that to be, by 2020, and for all our pharmacists to be independent prescribers by 2023. Approximately 18% of the population of Scotland are registered for the minor ailments service—a total of 913,483 people. More than 2.1 million items have been dispensed under the service, which is some 2.2% of all items dispensed by community pharmacies in Scotland. Almost 500,000 patients are registered under the chronic medication service.
It is important that retail and dispensing pharmacies in England be encouraged to go in a similar direction to Scotland, because that would bring great benefit for the NHS. In Scotland, we recognise just how important community pharmacies are. We are committed to supporting and developing local GP and primary care services and have recently announced a three-year, £85 million primary care fund to help develop new ways of delivering healthcare in the community, which will involve pharmacists delivering aspects of patient care.

Looking at pharmaceutical services across the two nations, one of the significant differences appears to be how the services have developed, partly as a result of the funding structures. In Scotland, pharmacists do not get a large payment merely for existing, such as the £25,000 in England. Instead, they receive a modest establishment payment of £1,730. However, payments are based on needs that reflect a population's age, vulnerability and deprivation. That model will see funding in Scotland rise by approximately 1.2%, while it looks likely to decrease by around 4% in England.

Another difference is the almost random way in which pharmacies in England appear to have opened, as a result of anyone being allowed to do so if they open 100 hours a week. A concern must be that there could equally be unplanned random closures, if they are allowed to shut down simply because they can no longer afford to survive. In Scotland we have a system of controlled entry for those who want to open a community pharmacy. Need must be demonstrated and applications approved by health boards. Consequently, we find community pharmacies in areas of deprivation, serving those most in need. Often health boards refuse applications because demand is already met.

Pharmacists are located throughout communities in Scotland, from rural areas to deprived inner-city areas, providing pharmaceutical care on behalf of NHS Scotland. The Scottish Government policy remains that, wherever possible, people across Scotland should have local access to NHS pharmaceutical care. There is much in the Scottish model that is working well and may provide a useful example for study on this side of the border. It is imperative that this successful model of community pharmacies across Scotland should not be put under threat by UK Government health budget cuts, which would impact on the Scottish Barnett formula.

10.28 am

**Julie Cooper** (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) for securing this debate on a very important subject. It is pleasing to hear so much agreement around the room; I hope that the Minister is listening. I agree with most of what hon. Members have said.

This subject is very dear to my heart. My husband is a community pharmacist, and I worked with him for 24 years in our own community pharmacy in my constituency of Burnley: I have to add that we no longer have any financial interest in community pharmacy, but what I retain is a very deep understanding of the value of community pharmacy to patients, the community and the wider NHS, so I appreciate the hon. Member for St Albans securing this important debate.

I cannot think of a better way to demonstrate the value of community pharmacies than to talk about my own experience. Coopers chemist in Burnley—a deprived constituency in many ways, where life expectancy is closer to 80 than 90—serves a community along with four other pharmacies in very close proximity, all of which are really busy and serve a big demand. On a typical day, we dealt with 600 prescriptions and 100 minor ailments, and ran many other services—forgive me if I forget some, because there were so many—including medication use reviews designed to maximise our use of medication, make sure patients understood it, encourage compliance and save money on wastage; smoking cessation programmes; dietary advice; emergency hormonal contraception; methadone programmes; and support for diabetics and asthmatics. It was an ever-increasing list. Those are the kinds of services that are at risk if the Government pursue their plans.

I appreciate the value of community pharmacies. I am also a former private business owner. Let us not forget that that is what community pharmacies are; they are not provided for and paid for by the NHS.

**Oliver Colville**: That is a very good example of how the private sector, working in the national health service, can deliver good-quality services.

**Julie Cooper**: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman's point.

It is important that we recognise that community pharmacies provide their own premises and train their own staff. As a former business person, I totally get the point about value for money, but this is not just about money; it is about the efficient use of money. We all understand the pressures that our NHS face, and we have to look at that. There are a lot of myths floating around, so it is important that we clarify that.

There has been a lot of talk about the clusters. Again, because pharmacies are private businesses, they respond to demand in the community.

**Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): The hon. Lady brings her expertise to the debate. Does she agree that we need more innovative approaches? The Grove surgery in Solihull has a symbiotic relationship with its local GP services, but in parts of the UK we seem to have run into the sand. We need greater public awareness and encouragement to take such innovative approaches forward.

**Julie Cooper**: I will come on to that very point in a moment.

To return to value for money, it is important that the Government take a responsible attitude and review funding for pharmacies, and I think that professional community pharmacists across the country accept that. Much has been made of the clusters. Pharmacies are independent businesses that arise and stay in business where there is demand. I do not know whether this is widely understood—hon. Members will have to forgive me if they already know this—but the global sum allocated to pharmacies is what pharmacies cost the Government. The Government know what community pharmacies are going to cost. If a new one opens, it will cost the Government. The Government pursue their plans.

**Julie Cooper**: That is a bit of a red herring. We can be sure that the same amount of money is shared out more thinly. That is a bit of a red herring. We can be sure that if there is no demand for the services that a pharmacy provides, it will close.
Much has been made of the £25,000 payment, but that does not cover the cost of putting a van on the road and paying for a driver to deliver and administer a prescription delivery service. Those services are absolutely invaluable to communities with many elderly people. I had a conversation with practice managers and general practitioners in my constituency recently, and they were absolutely horrified because they use that service—there is a lot of repeat ordering—and if it were lost, they could not cope.

The Government are suggesting that in-surgery pharmacists are a substitute, but that is another red herring. I welcome the use of well-qualified pharmacists in GP surgeries, but that is a totally separate issue. It is like comparing hospital doctors with GPs. Community pharmacists are at the heart of the community and are accessible for many hours. The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) made the point very well earlier when he said that eight minutes is the average wait to see a qualified professional who can help with most things. We have got to embrace that and use what is already there.

I have had conversations with the National Pharmacy Association and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, and just last night the chair of the English Pharmacy Board said, “We want to work with the Government. We want to sit down and look at how we can do more.” There is the idea that integration is a new thing waiting to happen, but we were proud as community pharmacists to be at the heart of the primary care team, working with GP surgeries, hospital discharge teams, community nurses and district nurses. They often came to us. GPs came and went—that is even more the case now, given the problems with retention in GP practices—so we provided the only continuity in healthcare for many chronically ill people. Particularly for the elderly, that was a vital part of the service, and we were really proud to provide it.

Many community pharmacies are proactive. When this business of moving towards a clinical approach was suggested, community pharmacies accepted it without it needing to be mandated. We invested in a purpose-built consulting room to provide a more clinical environment. That is the way forward, and most community pharmacies accept that.

What is the alternative to what the Government are proposing? For a start, we need a proper assessment of what the cuts will mean. There has been no impact assessment of which pharmacies will close. I agree with the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) that it will not be the multiples that will close; it will be the independent pharmacies that rely on the £25,000 to provide their core services. That is an absolute fact. Not a single pharmacy in my constituency qualifies for a single pharmacy in my constituency, which is not perfect—the Murray review made some points about IT integration in Scotland, which is not yet working as well as it might—but as I have said in the past, I think we have things to learn from Scotland.

I ask the Government not to reconsider the funding, but to look at the way he works with pharmacies in the NHS. I ask him to look at their role, as many Conservative Members have said, and at how they can work with the Government to support other areas of the NHS, thereby saving money. Let us avoid a knee-jerk reaction with no proper assessment of the impact. Let us deliver a better integrated service. The way to do that is not to make blind cuts with no proper assessment.
The third thing we all agree on—this must apply to the Opposition as well—is that we need to get value for money for the £2.8 billion that we spend on dispensing around £8 billion-worth of drugs. It is right to look at doing that as efficiently and effectively as possible. For example, the existing funding model encourages clusters to develop. I note that the establishment payment in Scotland is £1,700 per annum—I think I heard that right—while ours is £25,000, which has encouraged clustering, so that NHS money is not being spent on frontline services.

It is worth reminding the House that none of the efficiency changes that we announced before Christmas represents a cut of money going back to Treasury; the money is being reallocated to other areas of the NHS. The impact analysis talks in some detail about how money can potentially be spent more efficiently. In parallel with that, we need to make progress on services. I completely agree with that, and I will talk about the pharmacy integration fund and the Murray report, an important piece of work which my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans talked about and which will inform our policy.

We all agree not only on those three things, but on others. For example, there is a big benefit in diverting activity away from GPs. Various reports have been produced by the sector itself, and the Government accept that up to 30% or 40% of GP appointments could possibly be handled by pharmacists. That is a massive number. If we can achieve that, it will be of great benefit to us all. More can be done in pharmacies, such as medicine reviews and medicine optimisation, let alone how they can help us with the public health agenda, which we have not covered in particular today. A lot could be done with smoking cessation, obesity and sexual health programmes.

Julie Cooper: The Minister is contradicting himself. Pharmacists are already planning to reduce the hours that they are available to provide these services—the very services that he tells us he values and wants to see more of. Does he accept that if he persists with the cuts, there will be less of them? Some pharmacies will close, while others will reduce services, and are already planning to cut opening hours and reduce staff.

David Mowat: What we are not reducing is the amount of money available for services, as opposed to dispensing. Some pharmacies use part of their dispensing money to provide services on a discretionary and ad hoc basis, but I make this point again: overpaying for dispensing is not a good vehicle for getting more and better services.

I want to talk about some of what is already happening. We have heard about flu jabs this morning—I, too, had a flu jab at a pharmacy—and at the end of last year, we had had more flu jabs in pharmacies by October than we had in all of the previous year. The money available for that and similar service-based allocations has not been affected by the changes we announced. The community pharmacy sector has received £10 million for flu jabs up to the end of October. We want to see more of that happening, and that direction of travel is important.

A number of hon. Members made the point, which I agree with, that the public need to understand that pharmacies represent an important first port of call—it should not always be GPs. The Government can do more to make that clear. When I was preparing for this debate last night, I saw a television advert from NHS England for its “Stay well this winter” campaign. The campaign is running TV and newspaper adverts, and its theme is for people to visit their pharmacy as soon as they feel unwell. The people running the campaign have told us they think the advertising campaign has generated about 1.2 million additional pharmacy visits that would not have happened otherwise. That was a good challenge and we need to do more of that.

We also need to go further with services. There are two approaches. I recommend that anyone interested in this subject—as everyone present clearly is—reads the Murray review, which was produced by the King’s Fund. NHS England commissioned the review to inform it and us on how to spend the integration fund, the budget available to drive services more deeply into the system. I will talk about some aspects of that and about some announcements that I made in October as part of the package we are discussing.

One of the announcements was about urgent or repeat prescriptions. At the moment, NHS 111 gets about 200,000 phone calls a year asking for a further prescription, and those callers are told to see an out-of-hours GP to issue a prescription, which in due course goes to the pharmacy. We are changing that so that people will be directed to a pharmacy immediately. That is a stream of revenue for the pharmacy, which will provide both a consultation, for which it will be paid, and then the drug or prescription, as necessary.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans asked whether that scheme would somehow affect a good local scheme in her area. There is no reason why that should be the case. The new scheme is supplementary to anything that might have been commissioned already. It sounds as if her scheme was commissioned by the CCG, and that is good, although it takes us to the fact that things are patchy—different CCGs do different things and it need not be. It is true that different CCGs and indeed different GPs have different attitudes to such schemes, but NHS England has made a commitment that by March 2018 it will have encouraged all CCGs to be commissioning minor ailment schemes in pharmacies across their patch.

Oliver Colvile: Is the Minister aware that in Devon about £5 million a year is apparently being wasted on unused medicines? Something needs to happen with that to ensure that the NHS has enough money with which to do things.

David Mowat: Yes. Throughout the country, the number is far more than £5 million—

Julie Cooper: Will the Minister give way?

David Mowat: If I may answer the previous intervention, I will certainly give way again. I have talked about medicine optimisation and pharmacies doing reviews,
in particular in people’s homes, for example, and they are part of that solution. Pharmacists in GP surgeries are part of the solution too, and a way of achieving that—as I said earlier, I do not agree that that is an irrelevancy.

Julie Cooper: I thank the Minister for giving way. A highly trained pharmacist, who often has a trusted relationship with his patients in the community, is better placed than any other health professional to lead on saving money on wasted drugs. Patients often quite say in a close conversation when they collect their prescription, “Actually, I’ve not been taking that,” but they quite often do not say that to their GP. The pharmacist will then take it upon themselves to say either, “Actually, do you realise you should be taking this?” or, “Let’s speak to your GP and, effectively, avoid waste.” The pharmacist is best placed to do that.

David Mowat: I completely agree. Pharmacists have a big role to play in saving money, and medicines optimisation is very important in that. NHS England has established an integration fund, which will provide £42 million—a significant amount, even in the context of the rebalancing that has occurred—of seed money between now and the end of the next financial year to address just those sorts of things and take that work further.

The Murray review, which was commissioned by Dr Ridge, the chief pharmaceutical officer at NHS England, and published in December, sets out in some detail what we believe the direction of travel should be. Someone asked earlier when the Government will respond to that review. I expect NHS England to respond this month—if I may put that on the record in that way. NHS England will respond, not me, but there is not a lot in the review that is controversial. There are a lot of very good points, many of them about IT integration and the care record. I agree completely that some of the progress we need to make with services involves the ability to both read and write to the summary care record. That will be part of where we have to get to. Frankly, technology is an area in which the NHS could improve. That is true in Scotland and—it is true everywhere. I will not spend a lot of time talking about what we need to do, but we could facilitate an awful lot of progress on integration between pharmacy and primary care, and primary care and secondary care, if we had stronger technological and IT solutions.

Colleagues have talked about the need to have more pharmacy involvement in medicines optimisation, and care homes are part of that. Pharmacists could do an awful lot with a more structured approach to care homes. One strand of work that has come out of the integration fund is a care homes taskforce, which is chaired jointly by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and NHS England and is setting out a direction of travel for doing the sorts of things we have talked about, such as medicines optimisation, in a more structured way in care homes right across the country. There are more than 50,000 qualified pharmacists across our country. There are also 23,000 qualified pharmacy technicians, who are part of this too. The pharmacist profession is not as short as some, and it can and needs to do more to make progress in this area.

One part of the Government’s approach to this whole area that has been mentioned and I do not think enough is made of is the GP forward view. Everyone understands how much pressure GPs are under. There are something like 400 clinical pharmacists working in GP practices. We have committed and budgeted £112 million to increase that to 2,000 clinical pharmacists, many of them dispensing pharmacists. Parts of the community pharmacy network, which we have heard a little about, regard that as potentially in conflict with what they do. I think that is wrong. It is not in conflict; it is a way of breaking down the barriers that I accept there have occasionally been between CCGs and GPs and the pharmacy profession. Those are not in anyone’s interests, and we need to get over them.

Mrs Main: The only concern I have about too much of a drift towards putting pharmacists in GP surgeries is that GP surgeries have limited opening hours. Many pharmacies have a drop-in service. My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) mentioned the average waiting time of eight minutes. Having a link between booking a GP appointment and going to the pharmacy would start to bring people back into GP services rather than keeping them outside those services. That is the only concern I have about that matter.

David Mowat: That is of course a valid concern. We are trying to make progress on having GP services open for much longer than they have been historically, including weekend opening. Several colleagues have made the point—the Murray review also addressed this—that there is occasionally a barrier between the attitudes of some GPs and what can be done by pharmacists. That is true. We must be conscious that it behoves us to try to encourage the breaking down of that barrier, and misplaced professional pride must not prevent us from doing things to the best extent. Putting some pharmacists in GP practices—particularly with new models of working in which more disciplines tend to work together and a GP does not just work on his own—is an important part of that.

Jo Churchill: There is a barrier, but again, those services are used in different ways. My independent community pharmacist in Bury St Edmunds dispenses around 18,000 or 19,000 prescriptions in the town and provides all these ancillary services. He also has a dispensing practice in a GP surgery, which he is looking to automate, to make it more streamlined and cost-effective. Those services are two slightly different things, and I would worry if there were too much of an idea that they service the same thing.

David Mowat: They are different, but my point was somewhat different: optimising the use of the pharmacist profession could facilitate the breaking down of barriers and some of the care home activities that have to happen.

I will leave a couple of minutes for my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans to respond, so I will not talk in detail about the value for money aspect, other than to repeat the point—Opposition Members made a couple of interventions about this—that overpaying for a dispensing service is not the way to facilitate a much more clinically-based and service-based approach. The way to facilitate that is to get the appropriate remuneration models and revenue streams in place, and that is what
we are determined to do. In the end, that is what we expect to be judged on, and I hope that we will be judged on it. With that, I will let my hon. Friend summarise.

10.57 am

Mrs Main: This has been an excellent debate. I echo the Minister’s sadness about the fact that the two Opposition Members who made interventions did not stay for the whole debate. Unfortunately, some did not even arrive for the beginning of the debate, let alone stay for it all. That is disappointing, because this issue has filled my postbag and this debate is timely. There has been a lot of news about whether the NHS is under massive strain now more than ever. The reality is that we need a new model of working. Many hon. Members have put forward positive suggestions and have obviously been engaging with their local pharmacists. I am pleased that so many Government Members have made that effort and are so knowledgeable about their pharmacies.

The very fact that many private independent pharmacies like Quadrant have put money into their businesses—the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper), who leads for the Opposition, stressed her role in that—shows that there is a private model that can work with the NHS. It shows that those two models can be mutually beneficial and can learn from and give to each other. I am delighted that the Minister said that the emergency prescription system would not necessarily rule out the excellent system that Quadrant pharmacy operates, and I am delighted that we will soon hear the response to the Murray review, which contains many positive aspects about the way forward for pharmacies.

I am glad that there is so much consensus that keeping the model in which small, private independent pharmacies support the public NHS is an excellent way forward, and long may it reign. I am just concerned that we must ensure that small independent pharmacies in rural areas like the one that my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) represents are supported, perhaps with a weighting system. It is hard for them to compete with the big boys on the high street and the concessions in out-of-town supermarkets with parking and Sunday opening. I am glad that the Minister has been so frank with us, I am glad that there is so much consensus, and I am really looking forward to a great future for the NHS.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Asylum Seekers: Right to Work

11 am

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Before I call Alison Thewliss to move the motion, I have had a request from Stuart McDonald to participate in the debate. May I confirm that both the mover of the motion and the Minister are happy for him to do so?

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) indicated assent.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton) indicated assent.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered asylum seekers and the right to work.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Bailey. I have taken an interest in the rights of asylum seekers for some years now. One of the very first events I attended as a councillor in Glasgow in 2007 was the opening of Refugee Week, the inspirational and ever-growing festival co-ordinated by the Scottish Refugee Council. That was the first time I heard directly the testimonies, experiences and views of those who had fled violence and persecution. They told their stories through music and dance as well as in words, because the trauma they were expressing was often beyond description.

The right to seek asylum is set out in the universal declaration on human rights, and it is one of the most important obligations in international law. However, it has become clear to me over the past few years that sadly in the UK we are not fulfilling our duties to asylum seekers. We often keep them in a situation of destitution and danger, with little acknowledgement of the difficulties that led them to flee. Worse still, we are devaluing these precious human beings. Asylum seekers have skills they could bring and talents they could share. These are people who have overcome everything and lost so much. The very least we should do as a nation is give them a means of living in dignity, and I believe, as I will lay out, that there are circumstances in which they should have the right to work. That is consistent with the position that the Scottish National party took, along with Labour Members, in proposing amendments to the Immigration Act 2016 to enable asylum seekers to work if they had been waiting more than six months for a decision. The UK Government sadly rejected the amendments.

With no permission to work, asylum seekers survive—it is barely survival in many cases—on £5 a day. That affects more than 8,000 asylum seekers in the UK. The right to work was withdrawn by the Labour Government in 2002. At present, asylum seekers can work only if they have been waiting for a decision for longer than one year and they have skills relevant to the occupations on the shortage occupation list, which covers only jobs that few or no UK nationals are able to perform. These are often very specific jobs, such as various types of scientists and engineers, as well as trades such as professional dancer or musician, which require specific qualifications
and experience, as well as an employer who is willing to take a person on when they do not know how long they may be in the UK.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. I know she does a great deal of work in this area. I want to focus briefly on volunteering. In Solihull, many volunteers provide an outstanding service to our communities. Solihull Welcome, for example, supports new asylum seekers with great information, food and clothes. Does she agree that to integrate asylum seekers further into society, we must promote voluntary work?

Alison Thewliss: I agree, and I congratulate the organisation in Solihull on doing that. However, I have found in some of my casework that there are barriers even to volunteering. The Home Office has held that against one of my constituents, whom I had intended to mention later, who was volunteering for the British Red Cross. When he applied for naturalisation as a British citizen, that was held against him as a means of demonstrating bad character. It is bizarre, but his volunteering and his good work in an attempt to integrate into the community in Glasgow was held against him.

It can also be difficult for asylum seekers to prove that they have professional qualifications and so should have access to the shortage occupation list. Depending on the circumstances in which they fled, they may not have documentation, and it may cost to transfer or update their qualifications. That approach prohibits asylum seekers from offering their skills while they are still waiting on decisions. Many asylum seekers have been waiting for longer than six months. The latest figures that I can find suggest that more than 20% of asylum seekers wait longer than six months to have a decision made. During that time, they cannot bring in any money, and they find it difficult to support their family.

The recent working paper, “Restricting the economic rights of asylum seekers: cost implications,” published by Dr Lucy Mayblin and Poppy James at the University of Warwick, outlines the significant savings there would be to the public purse should asylum seekers be given the right to work. There would be a benefit to the UK if they were allowed to do so. Dr Mayblin’s research indicates that significant savings could be made on asylum support payments—both section 95 and section 4—if asylum seekers were given the right to work. If just 25% of all asylum seekers currently receiving asylum support participated in the labour market, that would reduce the overall asylum support bill, both in cash and for accommodation, under sections 94 and 4, excluding staffing and admin costs, from more than £173.5 million to just over £130 million. That would save about—I rounded the figures up, because some of them are lengthy—£43 million in asylum support payments, without making asylum seekers destitute. If 25% of all asylum seekers were able to obtain employment, section 95 payments would decrease from about £47 million to £47 million, and section 4 cash payments would decrease from more than £9 million to just less than £7 million, based on 2014-15 figures.

Even with increases in the asylum support rate to 70% of the jobseeker’s allowance rate, if we enabled 25% labour market participation, savings could be made to the asylum support bill. Estimates suggest that the total asylum support bill—again in cash and for accommodation, under sections 94 and 4, and excluding staffing and admin costs—could decrease from £173.5 million to £152 million, a saving of about £21 million. The Government are always looking to make savings, so I offer helpful suggestions for where those might be made.

Those figures, however, represent more than just money. Case studies available on a host of websites, such as that of the Scottish Refugee Council and the Regional Refugee Forum North East, speak of dignity, and of the impact on family life of not being able to work. I quote from one of the testimonies on the RRF website:

“It’s a degrading situation. You feel useless in a place that sings democracy. Not being able to work is degrading to me. It is something that has been taken away from me, something that I believe is a right that nobody should lose. It’s depressing because my background is feeding my own family. We have very strong family values. I have a big duty of care that has been stripped away. And not being able to do that for myself I feel a failure in life. I feel very much a failure in life. The kids, I would have loved to do anything that the children would ask me for. But this position is a crippled life.

As a volunteer with the refugee service and as a leader for my own community, which is the Zimbabwean Community in the North East, I have witnessed people who are so depressed, who I can say they are now mentally disturbed, people who had skills but cannot use them anymore. It’s like somebody taking a certain measure of power away from you. If you lose that something, it won’t just go, it will go with a part of yourself that makes the You inside you.”

That is a powerful statement. There is appalling waste of human potential during that time; people can wait for years without working and contributing as they would dearly like to do.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining the debate. Is there not another problem, in that the shortage occupation list does not recognise degrees from countries such as Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, which many asylum seekers have come from? The Government should have a look at that situation so that they can allow asylum seekers to work.

Alison Thewliss: I agree. There are many ways in which verification becomes quite difficult when countries have been in a state of chaos.

I have one of the largest immigration case loads in Scotland in my constituency of Glasgow Central, and I regularly have asylum seekers at my surgery who are in dire straits as a direct result of Home Office policy. One constituent who came to me had fled political persecution in Sri Lanka in 2013. On claiming asylum in 2014, she was detained in Dungavel detention centre, where she was sexually assaulted by another detainee. She is now destitute and relies on charities for support. That bright young woman could be using the qualifications in business, which she gained, as it happens, from a UK further education college, to get a job and support herself. Instead, she has been so emotionally ground down by her experience of the system that she is deeply fearful for the future. Her heartbreaking case is part of a pattern of behaviour by the Home Office that in many cases treats those fleeing persecution with contempt.
Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): The hon. Lady is making a good and important speech. There are far too many asylum seekers in Rochdale—more than 1,000—which is unfair in terms of how they are shared out across the country, but I completely agree with the point that she makes about work. Does she agree that if more were allowed to work, it would help with community cohesion in places such as Rochdale?

Alison Thewliss: I agree. People often do not understand that asylum seekers are not allowed to work. Media perceptions can be hugely damaging, including, as I mentioned earlier, to asylum seekers’ mental health. Many are keen to contribute but also scared, as I described in the example of my constituent whose volunteering was held against him. That puts fear into organisations that might take volunteers: they do not want to be caught out by the Home Office and get into trouble. Some of them employ people via the visa process. However, volunteers also do not want to come forward; they say, “If it is going to count against me, I am not going to volunteer. I am not going to help with interpreting.” If an organisation such as the Red Cross is seen as giving someone a bad character, that is difficult, and it definitely puts people off.

Another of my constituents has endeavoured to learn English to a high standard, and has taken up volunteering, supporting elderly people at a community centre. She has a clear aptitude for community work, but is unable to develop it because of the ban on work for asylum seekers. My constituent has two children, who go to a local school, but she is held back. She would love to do that work but cannot.

I am lucky to have the organisation Radiant and Brighter, founded by Pheona and Micheal Matovu, in my constituency. They came from Uganda to the UK and were unable to work for years, because of immigration controls. They were a couple with a family, used to working for a living, and found it very hard to be dependent on help from churches, family and friends. Pheona once told me how determined the two of them were not to let their children know they did not have a job, even when they were not permitted to work. Their experiences led them to find others in similar situations, and to discover the support that some asylum seekers and refugees required to transfer the skills they brought from their home countries and take up UK opportunities when they could. Radiant and Brighter provides practical day-to-day support and assistance, including personal coaching, advice on legal and financial matters and help with CVs—something that people might not be familiar with in their own countries—and job applications.

Crucially, Radiant and Brighter recognises the skills, talents and potential of asylum seekers and refugees beyond the narrow bounds of the shortage occupation list, appreciating the fact that asylum seekers can be a bonus to the UK, not a burden; the Minister would do well to speak to Pheona and Micheal and see for herself the work that they do in Glasgow to integrate and support asylum seekers. They have a good model for allowing people to make the jump to being productive members of Scottish and British society, as they want to be, and for supporting them in that.

Allowing asylum seekers to work would enable them to integrate better into society, develop their English and make friends in what can be a lonely environment—and a strange one, depending on where they have come from. Many are professionals, with skills that they would love to put to use and which would benefit our economy. By making a modest change to the immigration rules, so that they are similar to those of other European countries, and by relaxing the restrictions on working, we can give asylum seekers back a sense of dignity and self-confidence, while saving money for the public purse in the long run.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) is sponsoring an exhibition by the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants in the Upper Waiting Hall this week. That organisation has campaigned for fair asylum and immigration law since 1967. I urge the Minister and other hon. Members to see the exhibition, if they have not already. It clearly demonstrates the contribution of people who have sought asylum in the UK over the years. Examples include the co-founder of Marks & Spencer, Michael Marks. There is nothing more British than Marks & Spencer. Michael Marks was born in 1859 in Slonim in what is now Belarus, which was then part of the Russian empire, and fled to England in 1882. It cannot be argued that he did not make a lasting contribution to the UK.

The children’s author and illustrator Judith Kerr fled Germany with her family in 1933 aged nine, just days before the Nazi party came to power. It cannot be argued that she is not a beloved part of British society. The supermodel, designer and refugee campaigner Alek Wek was born in 1977 in what is now South Sudan. The singer and actress Rita Ora arrived in the UK in 1991 aboard the last plane to accept Kosovan refugees. There are so many people who have come to our shores seeking safety. We should take pride in that and treat them with the dignity and respect they so greatly deserve. I appeal to the Minister to see the human potential in those whom we have made a commitment to protect.

11.14 am

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on bringing this important debate to the Chamber and on her fantastic speech, and I thank you, Mr Bailey, my hon. Friend and the Minister for allowing me to make a short speech. I was keen to take up the opportunity, because the matter is important to the Scottish National party. We have campaigned for change for a long time, and that is why we divided the House on the issue during the ping-pong stage of the Immigration Act 2016.

The Government’s position is to deny asylum seekers the right to work. The idea that after one year, an asylum seeker can apply for a shortage occupation job is just a small footnote, for a series of reasons, including the one pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). It would be interesting if the Government would tell us how many asylum seekers have enjoyed that right. I understand that they have previously failed to answer written questions on that point.

Sadly, and typically for UK Government policy on asylum and migration issues in general, the position has little to do with principle and nothing to do with
evidence, but everything to do with political posturing. Excluding people from the right to work is a lose-lose situation. It is bad for the individual, for the family, for the UK citizens who could benefit from the people in question using their skills, for community cohesion, as the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) pointed out, and for the public purse, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central pointed out.

We are warned by the Government of the danger of creating a pull factor, but are we really to believe that people will decide to up sticks and come to the UK on the off-chance of claiming asylum, becoming one of the minority of people who must wait longer than six months—outside the Government target—and then having the possibility of working? If so, where is the evidence for that? There is no evidence for it. Also, why do those asylum seekers not go to other European countries where there is such a right to work, and a more generous one? Yet again, we are the EU outlier. The whole proposition is nonsense, and I think that the Government know that.

Another argument that the Government sometimes use is that there would be a danger of asylum seekers deliberately frustrating the process, so that their claims would take longer than six months. However, that argument does not stack up. The Government have the power to refuse asylum claims on the basis of non-compliance. The argument does not make any sense.

We are dealing with human beings who have asked for international protection. That is an important right, whatever the outcome of the claim. Whether or not the claims are found to be sound in law, the applicants deserve dignity and fair treatment, so we ask the Government to think again.

I am sure to have said the name of his constituency, Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for his speech. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for raising such an important issue, and I commend her speech. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) pointed out, and for the public purse, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central pointed out.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for raising such an important issue, and I commend her passionate speech. She is clearly pursuing the issue in the House with great vigour and determination. I also thank the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for his speech. I am sure to have said the name of his constituency wrongly, so I apologise. I noted also the remarks of the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk). It is disappointing that the shadow Minister did not bother to come to the debate. I see that the hon. Gentleman agrees with me that that is a sad reflection.

It is right to say that, as a general rule, we do not believe it is appropriate to allow asylum seekers to work in the UK. However, we will grant an asylum seeker permission to work in one of the jobs on the shortage occupation list if their claim has not been decided after 12 months, through no fault of their own. We believe that that is fair and reasonable; it protects the resident labour market and ensures that access to jobs is prioritised for British citizens and those with leave to remain, including refugees.

The immigration rules for non-EEA nationals wishing to work in the UK are designed to meet our needs for skilled labour and to benefit our economy. That approach would be undermined if non-EEA nationals could bypass the rules by lodging unfounded asylum claims. It is an unfortunate reality that some individuals make such claims in an attempt to stay in the UK. It is reasonable to assume that some do that because of the benefits—real or perceived—that they think they will gain.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Newton: I will not; I have been generous in allowing the hon. Gentleman to make his speech. So that I have the opportunity to answer the serious points that have been raised, I will need to make my whole speech. If he feels that I do not address his concerns, I ask him to write to me.

Allowing asylum seekers earlier access to work risks undermining our asylum system by encouraging unfounded claims from those seeking employment opportunities for which they would not otherwise be eligible. We also must not create further incentives for asylum seekers to risk their lives attempting to travel here illegally. We instead want to encourage genuine refugees to claim asylum in the first safe country they reach.

I know there are those who say, as has been said today, that there is little evidence of a pull factor. I do not agree. We have seen the effect that policies in Europe have had in driving migrant behaviour. In 2015, following a shift in policy, Germany saw its asylum intake increase by 155%. More than 20% of those claims were from countries in the Balkans, which, mercifully and thankfully, have not seen conflict for more than 20 years.

There has been much debate, as has been referred to, about past delays in decision making by the Home Office, but that has been brought under control. In most cases, asylum seekers receive a decision within six months. While they are awaiting that decision, asylum seekers, who would otherwise be destitute, are entitled to free, furnished accommodation that is safe and of a good standard. In preparation for the debate, I met a Home Office official who personally inspects that accommodation in the constituency of the hon. Member for Glasgow Central and was assured of its quality and safety.

A cash allowance is given to asylum seekers to cover essential living needs. It is worth noting that in October, the High Court agreed that the methodology used by the Home Office for assessing the adequacy of payment rates is rational and lawful. The judgment also rightly rejected the argument that the rate should be the same or similar to that paid to benefit recipients by the Department for Work and Pensions. I do not accept that we are in some way treating people in an appalling or degrading way by providing that accommodation.

Alison Thewliss: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Sarah Newton: I will not, because I want to address the points that the hon. Lady has raised.

It is worth noting that we encourage asylum seekers to undertake volunteering activities, so that they can benefit the community. That supports integration if they are granted protection, and addresses some of the self-esteem and respect issues that the hon. Lady rightly referred to. Opportunities will be provided in communities
for people who are used to being providers for their families or community leaders in the countries from which they fled.

I was pleased to hear the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), who made an excellent point about the role the voluntary sector is playing in his community in supporting asylum seekers. For clarity, it is important to understand that those volunteering activities must not amount to unpaid work or job substitution. The Home Office recently published revised guidance to help clarify that issue, in case there is any uncertainty.

The current policy strikes the right balance. It is fair and reasonable towards genuine asylum seekers, it is consistent with our international obligations, and it takes into account the rights and needs of asylum seekers and our whole society.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.

Access to Justice

[Geraint Davies in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to justice.

It is a pleasure to appear in front of you, Mr Davies. I thank all those who sent in briefings and background information, which have been most helpful. I especially thank the law firm where I was a partner for several years, Thompsons. In fact, two other Members who are Thompsons alumni are with us today. Thompsons supported my campaign for re-election 18 months ago financially. I also thank the Law Society of England and Wales, of which I have been a member for three decades or more, and the Association of British Insurers.

Access to justice is a pillar of the welfare state. To me, it is no coincidence that in 1948, the legal aid system in England and Wales was introduced—the same year as the introduction of national insurance and the national health service. It is one leg of a three-legged stool called the welfare state. This afternoon, I will not have time to cover as much information and as many matters as I would like. I hope to run around the block on the small claims limit for personal injuries, soft tissue injuries and whiplash claims, and to touch on employment tribunal fees, legal aid deserts and court closures.

I will start with the small claims limit. In recent years, other jurisdictions with similar systems to ours have looked at raising their small claims limit. In Scotland, the small claims limit was raised in 2007, but all personal injury claims were specifically excluded from that, as colleagues from the Scottish National party who are here today will know. They were excluded principally on the grounds of complexity, because of the need for those claiming for a personal injury to instruct solicitors to obtain expert medical evidence and, quite often, other expert evidence—for example, from an engineer.

When the Scottish system was reformed in 2014, personal injury was still treated differently. In 2014, a new procedure was introduced in Scotland called, simply, the simple procedure, to replace small claims and summary causes for cases with a value of less than £5,000. However, most personal injury claims, while proceeding under simple procedure, have special rules. Employers’ liability claims, where someone is injured at work, are entirely excluded from simple procedure.

Whether to raise the small claims limit has been looked at repeatedly in England and Wales. For example, in 2009 Lord Justice Jackson recommended in his report that the limit be retained at £1,000 for small claims relating to personal injury, with a fast-track system. Looking back on that in 2016, he said:

“The fixed costs regime for fast track personal injury cases is working reasonably well.”

I appreciate that people could say he is biased: he suggested one course of action, which was followed, and then seven years later said it was working well.

However, in July 2016, less than a year ago, Lord Justice Briggs in the final report of his civil courts structure review concluded that

“a fixed or budgeted recoverable costs regime, backed by Qualified One-way Costs Shifting...plus uplifted damages has, in the sphere of personal injury (including clinical negligence) litigation been a
powerful promoter of access to justice, in an area where the playing field is at first sight sharply tilted against the individual claimant, facing a sophisticated insurance company as the real (even if not nominal) defendant.

That sets the scene, because there is an asymmetry between many victims who are claiming that they were injured as a result of someone else’s negligence and the effective body against whom they are claiming. For example, following a car accident between two individual drivers, the victim will be claiming against the other driver. That is often an individual, but behind that driver sits the insurance company, which will run the claim and has to do so under the compulsory policy of insurance that all drivers have to take out.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is doing a great service to the House of Commons by bringing this issue before it. He is beginning to make the case that access to justice is fundamental to the welfare state. In one sense, he underestimates its importance. Does he agree that it is fundamental to democracy? A democracy relies on freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to vote and access to justice. If there is not the money for access to justice, we do not have the rule of law.

Rob Marris: I entirely agree. It is little use having rights if one cannot afford to enforce them. That entrenches inequality.

The consultation came out under the rubric of whiplash. I have to say to the Minister that the consultation somewhat sneakily was announced on 17 November and closed on 6 January. That is a short consultation period over Christmas, which is not helpful.

The Government’s own figures on the whiplash proposals, which may well be a gross underestimate, suggest that if implemented, they will see the NHS lose at least £9 million a year and the Treasury lose £135 million a year. But here is the stinger: insurance companies will get at least £200 million more per year. That is likely to be an underestimate. That figure is due to a methodology that is biased towards insurance companies and has been severely questioned by the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers, of which I think I used to be a member.

The methodology for who gains and who loses under the proposals counts as a gain the extra moneys that insurance companies will get but does not take into account the loss to solicitors. We can all weep crocodile tears about solicitors, but when talking about commercial arrangements, if we are looking at them dispassionately, we have to weigh in the balance where one commercial sector gains and another loses.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman join me in welcoming the UK’s largest insurance company’s commitment to pass on in full any savings realised to consumers? That means, I hope, that the transfer of value, if it occurs, is from the personal injury law community to everyday consumers.

Rob Marris: I will get on to that. It is interesting and a great declaration, but of course other changes in the past five years or so have led to an increase in insurance company savings of £8 billion in claims costs. That has not been passed on in terms of reduced premiums, which have continued to go up, so I will believe it when I see it. The Government’s own calculations suggest that at least 90% of the money has to be passed through—the term for returning money to policy holders—for there to be any benefit at all.

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): As the hon. Gentleman will know, the small claims limit is being put up in all the other jurisdictions, apart from this one, to £10,000. Is it really right that motorists should each pay £40 a year extra, simply so that the sort of solicitors firms he referred to can continue to do work on these very small claims?

Rob Marris: The limit has not gone up in Scotland for personal injury claims. I will get on to the figure of £40 a year and whether it is accurate or not.

So much of this information comes from the insurance companies, which are making huge profits. Premiums have gone up 17.2% in the past year, which I regard as unacceptable. I asked the Association of British Insurers about that on 3 January, and it kindly replied a week later. I am not a statistician, but I have knocked around statistics a lot, and its approach is strange, to say the least. It says:

“Given there is no objective medical evidence for whiplash, type injuries, with diagnosis often being made on the basis of the claimant’s word, the ability to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that the claimant has not sustained an injury is both incredibly challenging and expensive.”

That is typically misleading of the Association of British Insurers. The Minister will know, as a distinguished lawyer, that if the insurers refuse to pay out on a claim and the policy holder says the insurers are wrong, the policy holder makes a claim in the civil courts against his insurers, where the test is not about proving something beyond reasonable doubt, but based on the balance of probabilities, which is a much easier test to pass. So that is a straw man, but it is true in terms of criminal actions.

The ABI also states that “actual criminal convictions clearly only represent the tip of the iceberg, and are not in any way a true reflection of the level of fraud that insurers and wider society face on a daily basis...” While some of those cases may have an innocent explanation, many more cases of successful fraud go undetected, especially for whiplash.”

The ABI is assuming what it is trying to prove. It is assuming that there is fraud, but it admits that if there are such cases, they are going undetected. We do not know whether there are undetected cases of fraud or there never was a case of fraud. If it assumes what it is trying to prove, I certainly hope my insurance premiums are not set by insurance company actuaries who take such an approach.

Sir Oliver Heald: That is all very well and good, but the hon. Gentleman must know that the number of road claims has gone up from 460,000 in 2005-06 to 770,000 in 2015-16, and that 90% of them are for whiplash at a time when our roads are getting safer and our cars have seen huge road safety improvements in their manufacture. How can this be?

Rob Marris: It cannot be because the Minister has the figures wrong. The Government’s compensation recovery unit indeed talks of 771,000 claims in round terms, of which 441,000 are for whiplash. That figure has come down by 14% since 2011-12. The overall figure is already coming down, so it is not going in the direction the Minister thinks it is and perhaps he will rethink the proposals.
The ABI says that its statistics “are therefore intended to provide an indication of the volume and value of fraud detected by the industry. These statistics do not include claims which involve exaggerated personal injury, particularly for whiplash, where the claim has been paid.”

However, it also says that insurers pay out on 99% of claims, so apparently we are talking about the 1% and that is what all these assumptions are based on. That is not a good basis for creating public policy.

Chris Philp: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the qualified, one-way costs-shifting arrangements that were introduced three or four years ago, whereby the defendant bears their own costs, even if they are successful, creates a perverse incentive for insurance companies to settle claims even when they have a very good prospect of defending them?

Rob Marris: That regime was introduced as part of other changes which have led to £8 billion more for the insurance companies. One must look at the matter in the round.

The ABI says: “Previous reforms aimed at tackling the compensation culture have not had the desired effect because claims frequency has not been addressed. As such, the removal of general damages for minor soft tissue injuries is by far the most effective way to address claims frequency.”

What sort of minor injuries are we talking about? The Law Society helpfully provided me with some examples from a public briefing: “A fractured rib (up to £3,300)” — that is well below the £5,000 — “Food poisoning symptoms continuing for weeks (up to £3,300)” —

Chris Philp: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Rob Marris: No, I will not. The Law Society continued: “Neck injuries lasting” for up to “12 months (Maximum £3,630)… Back injury lasting up to 3 months (up to £2,050)… Minor wrist fracture (£3,960 maximum)”.

I would venture that such injuries would not seem minor to most of our constituents. Most of them would not say a broken wrist was minor. [Interjection.] Well, they certainly would not in a Labour constituency; perhaps they would in Conservative constituencies. [Interjection.] The Minister is chuntering, “It’s not… Minor to most of our constituents. Most of them would

It talks about “A reform which denies the injured justice, and sends a message to motorised road users that vulnerable road users’ injuries are a trifling matter”.

The Government have said in their propaganda that most road users have legal expenses insurance as part of their car insurance policy—I do not—so they will be able to get legal representation under that policy. That may be true for many if not most car drivers, but most of us cyclists do not have such insurance, nor do most pedestrians. That is why Cycling UK and its partners—RoadPeace, a national charity for victims, and Living Streets, a national charity for everyday walking—have come out against these changes.

Chris Philp: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Rob Marris: No, I will not. I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman. I was going to talk about employment tribunal fees, but I have taken up quite some time, and some of my colleagues wish to talk about that. Of course, employment tribunal fees have dissuaded huge numbers of people from bringing employment claims. If the Government really think that 67% of previous claims were frivolous—that is how much the figure has dropped by—they are living in a different world from me. Again, the Law Society, which of course has a vested interest, is against those fees. It said: “In our members’ experience the remission system”— for remission of fees for those who cannot afford to pay tribunal fees— “is confusing, uses complicated language, and is hard to navigate”, and that is for Law Society members, who are solicitors, let alone the lay person who may have just lost their job and perforce be broke. Only 21% of claimants—far fewer than the Ministry of Justice predicted—have benefited from any fee remission at all. Early conciliation was put forward as another approach, but ACAS says that 70% of claimants who entered into early conciliation did not reach a formal settlement.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing forward this debate. There is another dimension to tribunals and legal aid in general. Many people come to us, although we are not allowed to give legal advice, because they cannot afford to pay for it. Secondly, citizens advice bureaux and bodies such as the Coventry Law Centre are overloaded with work, because the Government have cut the grants to those organisations, and as a result, they have had to reduce staff. There is an endless vicious circle when people try to get justice in this country.

Rob Marris: My hon. Friend is quite right. It is a matter of playing catch-up following the changes to legal aid. There are now legal aid deserts. Recent figures from the Legal Aid Agency show that large areas of England and Wales have little or no provision for legal aid services for housing. That is rather ironic on a day when the Homelessness Reduction Bill, introduced by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), is being debated. In the south-west, over half of areas have only one provider of legal aid for housing advice. In Wales, half of areas have only one provider. In the west midlands, where my hon. Friend the Member for
Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), who just intervened, and I come from, over half of areas have one or no provider. Shropshire, which is not far from my constituency, has no provider. When there is one provider, families on low incomes often cannot afford to travel to see them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South adverted to the fact that we have a catch-up system, because there are cuts in the number of courts. In Shropshire, people cannot get to Shrewsbury Crown court for a hearing at 9.30 in the morning by public transport from Ludlow, another major population centre. Cases are collapsing as a result; witnesses will not travel, and people are pleading guilty because they do not want to take even more time off work. That is not justice.

Mr Cunningham: Solicitors in Coventry and Warwickshire are looking at the possibility of getting local law students at the University of Warwick to assist with some cases.

Rob Marris: Indeed—that is, when they can get to a court, because there are plans to close 86 courts and tribunal centres and to cut Ministry of Justice staff by between 5,000 and 6,000. That has led to the courts getting clogged up with litigants in person who cannot afford to pay for legal representation. Judges, quite properly, try to assist litigants in person and to be flexible, so cases take longer. The Government end up with a false saving, because we spend more on the remaining courts to deal with litigants in person, and we have a worse justice system with less access to justice.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Is that not particularly acute in family law cases, and difficult cases relating to children and finance, when litigants in person appear before district judges, who have problems resolving the cases?

Rob Marris: My hon. Friend is entirely right and anticipates what I am going to say. There is, as he will know as a distinguished lawyer, an exceptional case fund, which was established to help people such as survivors of domestic violence to get free legal assistance. The Independent, which admittedly is a newspaper and not the Ministry of Justice, reported in 2015 that from April to June 2015, five out of 125 applications were successful. The people applying are some of the most disadvantaged in society and face some of the most grievous personal circumstances.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Legal aid has been eroded particularly, perhaps, for victims of domestic abuse, and many now have to present their cases in the family court. Regardless of recently announced Government proposals in relation to abuse of process, surely domestic abuse victims must have their own lawyers in family courts to avoid abuse by proxy.

Rob Marris: The hon. Lady is right.

Sir Oliver Heald: I was just going to ask whether the hon. Gentleman agrees that domestic violence cases are within scope, and that a victim would have legal aid in the way that I outline. As for the exceptional cases fund, which the hon. Gentleman has challenged me to say something about, 1,200 cases a year is the current rate, and 53% are being granted; that is the latest.

Rob Marris: That is helpful, but it kind of makes my point for me. The right hon. and learned Gentleman’s own Ministry—before he was there, I have to say—anticipated between 5,000 and 6,000 such applications. A 53% success rate seems to me, on the face of it, to mean very stringent criteria, given how long a solicitor will spend preparing the application—and they will not get paid for that preparation, which suggests that the solicitor making the application on behalf of the vulnerable individual thinks that there is a very good chance of success. But what do they find? It is about half.

In time-honoured tradition, I will ask the Minister some questions, which I hope he will be able to answer. I did give him some notice of them, but only at noon today, so although he is a hard-working Minister, he may not have had the chance to get on top of them all. On small claims, does the Minister accept that there will not be a level playing field if the proposed changes are introduced, because they will remove funding currently available for injured people to instruct lawyers, leaving them having to act as litigants in person on personal injury small claims?

Does the Minister seriously contend that there is a fraud crisis in relation to workplace injury claims, which the proposed changes would cover, and if he does, which he may, what independent evidence, not from the insurance industry, does he have of such a crisis?

The impact assessment for the proposals says that there will be a cost to the NHS of at least £13 million a year and to the Treasury of at least £135 million a year, and an increase in insurance company profits of £200 million a year. Does the Minister accept that that means that the Treasury will lose out while the insurance industry gains? If he does not accept that, perhaps he could explain why.

Can the Minister say by what date the Department will publish its review of the impact of employment tribunal fees, and what data the Department has on how such fees have affected the use of alternative dispute resolution services? What steps will the Government take to try to ensure that all children and vulnerable young people can get legal aid? The Minister has already mentioned some changes in that regard. Following on
from that, will he give a commitment to review the exceptional cases funding system to make it much more accessible, and if he will not, can he explain why not?

Several hon. Members rose—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. I think that we have five Back-Bench speakers, as well as the Front Benchers, so I will impose an immediate time limit of six minutes on speeches.

2.55 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, particularly given your previous association with Croydon.

I would like to talk specifically about the Government’s consultation on whiplash claims, and the reason for that is an experience that I had two or three years ago. After a very minor road traffic accident in which no one was injured, I was bombarded with phone calls to my personal mobile every week for about a year from a claims management company. It explicitly asked me to pretend to have an injury that did not exist in order to claim compensation.

I have no issue with the more general points that the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) makes about access to justice and the court system. I am talking specifically about whiplash. It is as a result of practices such as the one that I have described that this country has more than twice more whiplash claims than the rest of Europe, and the total number of claims for soft tissue injuries—whiplash and neck and back—has been static, at about 800,000, for the last few years.

One reason for that is the perverse incentives in the system. As I mentioned in an intervention, under qualified one-way costs shifting, when a claim is made, even if the defendant—the insurance company—is successful in defending the claim, it must bear its own costs, which are quite often up to £10,000, so it is easier for the insurance company to stump up £3,000 in insurance and pay some costs to the prosecuting or claiming solicitors firms—some of those costs go to the claims management company—than to dispute the claim. That is why claims here have grown to proportions that are vastly higher than obtain in the rest of Europe and why, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister said, at a time when accidents have declined by 30%, claims have gone up by 50%.

In The Sunday Times a year or so ago, there was a shocking report about a company called Complete Claim Solutions—one of the most notorious CMCs, which makes 7 million outbound cold calls a year. Its trainers were covertly recorded by The Sunday Times encouraging or telling—instructing—its staff to get the public basically to lie and make fraudulent claims. I have myself been on the receiving end of those phone calls.

On the point made by the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West about broken bones, I have looked at the consultation document, and it specifically refers to soft tissue claims. I fully accept that where a cyclist or motorist has broken a rib, wrist or leg, their claim is perfectly valid and verifiable and should be allowed to proceed. We are talking about soft tissue injuries, where there is no objective medical evidence other than the claimant’s own claim. Those claims add, I believe, about £40 to everyone’s motor insurance policy, but more worryingly in my view, they are morally corrosive because large numbers of the public are being incited to commit fraud. That is a bad thing for the fabric of our society.

Rob Marris: The Government’s press release announcing the consultation on 17 November said that measures include “raising the limit for cases in the small claims court for all personal injury claims from £1,000 to £5,000”. It said nothing about soft tissue injuries.

Chris Philp: Well, certainly the consultation document refers on its front page to soft tissue injuries. I am sure that the Minister will consider how that might apply to broken bones, but the title of the consultation refers to soft tissue injuries only.

In my response to the Ministry of Justice consultation, I made a number of proposals, several of which I would like to elaborate on here. I believe that there should be a blanket ban on outbound cold calls in relation to soft tissue injuries. There should be a ban on pre-medical offers. Insurance companies should be required to conduct face-to-face medical examinations, and those examinations should produce independently verifiable evidence. That should be more than just someone saying, “My neck hurts.” The injury should be capable of verification by a third party, so in the case of a broken bone, that would clearly involve an X-ray.

I believe that there should be a ban on general damages for minor soft tissue injuries—not broken bones, but minor soft tissue injuries, where there is no evidence of the kind to which I have just referred. For those injuries, I fully support a threshold of £5,000.

There should also be a duty on claims management companies and solicitors to explain explicitly to prospective claimants that fabricating evidence is an unlawful act. They currently do the reverse; they actually encourage false claims. The Ministry should look again at qualified one-way costs shifting, because it creates a very perverse incentive for insurance companies to settle even when they could win a case in court.

On the point raised by the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West about where the money ends up, I think that the saving could be more like a billion pounds a year, not £200 million. I would expect that to be passed on to ordinary members of the public and not pocketed by insurance companies. Aviva has committed to do that, but if, after a year, it turns out that the insurance companies have simply pocketed the extra money and not passed it on, I would expect the Competition and Markets Authority to be encouraged by the Government—or even required, if the Government have that power—to conduct an investigation to make sure that those savings are passed on to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and mine. I do not expect these savings to end up in the back pockets of the insurance industry.

I would also like to see another practice ended. Again, this is a point for the insurance industry. A few years ago, there was a ban on referral fees, which is money that a claims management company would pay an insurance company to hand over the details of
In summary, I very strongly support the measures proposed in relation to soft tissue injuries. They will end effective gets paid via the equity stake as a means of circumventing the referral fee ban. That is clearly an abuse and we should take steps to end it.

Finally, there are many examples of insurance companies procuring services such as car hire, legal services or vehicle repair services very cheaply, and they get recharged to the at-fault party’s insurance company at a significantly marked-up price. That is profiteering and, again, steps should be taken to prevent it happening.

In summary, I very strongly support the measures proposed in relation to soft tissue injuries. They will end a whole cottage industry that is morally corrosive because it is encouraging huge numbers of people to commit fraud, and costing our constituents £40 each per year, per car insurance policy. I welcome these proposals. I hope to see them brought on to the statute book at the earliest opportunity, and look forward to supporting them on the Floor of the House when that happens.

3.2 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) on calling this incredibly important debate. Although it is a broad debate, I will focus on an area that I have spoken about many times before and sadly find myself having to speak about again—one that, as a former employment lawyer, I know well: the devastating impact that the introduction of employment tribunal fees has had on access to justice.

I will not repeat the entire history of this issue—the Minister knows the landscape well—but I will summarise. In July 2013, for the first time a person had to pay a fee before they could proceed with an employment tribunal claim—two fees, in fact: one for the commencement of the claim and one before the final hearing. Following the introduction of fees, the number of single employment tribunal claims plummeted by 67%, from an average of 13,500 per quarter to just 4,400 per quarter. One of the oft-cited reasons for the introduction of fees was that it would deter vexatious and weak claims, yet the proportion of unsuccessful claims has remained stable. It is therefore clear that all that the fees system has done is deter people who have valid claims from upholding their rights. That conclusion is shared by the cross-party Select Committee on Justice and a range of specialist organisations that submitted evidence to it, including Citizens Advice, Maternity Action and the Bar Council.

The Justice Committee reported that many judges say that they now hear no money claims at all. The report says: “Prior to the introduction of fees money claims were often brought by low paid workers in sectors such as care, security, hospitality or cleaning and the sums at stake were small in litigation terms but significant to the individual involved. There are few defences to such claims and they often succeeded.”

Have all those employers suddenly changed their behaviour and is everyone now getting paid correctly? No. What is far more likely is that those whose wages are being docked are simply saying, “Well, it will cost me more to go to a tribunal to recover this money than the amount I have lost, so I can’t afford to take that risk.” That, to quote the Prime Minister from just a few days ago, is an example of the “everyday injustices that ordinary working class families feel are too often overlooked.”

Sir Oliver Heald: Is the hon. Gentleman not forgetting the other measure that was taken, which was to require claimants to go to ACAS? Is he not aware that the number of cases going to ACAS has gone up from 23,000 a year to 92,000 a year, and that the effect has been that about half of the cases have been resolved or dealt with in a way that meant they no longer need to go to the tribunal—so 45,000 cases are dealt with for free?

Justin Madders: The Minister presents those statistics but forgets to mention that the arbitration system with ACAS was actually introduced some time after employment tribunal fees were introduced, so it does not explain the initial drop-off. The Justice Committee said the claim that this has diverted more people to mediation was “even on the most favourable construction, superficial.”

It is true that there has been an increase in the number of cases going to conciliation, but just 16% have been formally settled by ACAS, 19% proceeded to a tribunal case and 65% were neither settled nor proceeded to a tribunal. What has happened to all those cases?

Despite the overwhelming evidence, the Government refuse to acknowledge the problem, as we have just heard. Last month, I challenged the Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities over the outrageous fact that only 1% of women discriminated against at work brought a claim to tribunal. I asked whether she would make representations to the Ministry of Justice about the raft of evidence suggesting that tribunal fees deter genuine complaints. The reply I got was:

“There is no doubt that the number of tribunals has gone down, but in actual fact there is good news here.”—[Official Report, 8 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 363.]

I fail to see what that good news is.

Perhaps the Government’s own internal review will tell us what has happened to the many complaints that have disappeared through ACAS, if they ever decide to release it. It was commissioned in July 2015; the review was completed within a few months, and it has been gathering dust for over a year now.

Sir Oliver Heald: On a point of order, Mr Davies. The hon. Gentleman is putting forward as an assertion of fact something that is completely incorrect. Is that in order?

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): It is in order, because it is a matter of debate. Back to you, Justin Madders.

Justin Madders: I am only referring to what the previous Minister for Justice said in evidence to the Select Committee about the report being completed, but if I am wrong about that, that is fine. What we are more interested in is the Government actually releasing it. I hope that when the Minister responds he will confirm a final date for when we will see the Government’s own internal review.
Mr Davies, your rights are only as good as your ability to exercise them. Be in no doubt that every year now, thousands of people are unable to do this. Employment rights are not just about dignity and respect in the workplace. They bring important social and economic benefits to this country. They ensure that more people can participate in the labour market without facing unfair discrimination. They give vulnerable workers more job security and stability of income. They help to encourage a committed and engaged workforce and the retention of skilled workers. They allow people to plan their life, plan for a future, knowing that if they do a good job, if their employer runs its business well, they are likely to stay in work.

What we have instead is a hire-and-fire culture where workers are seen as disposable commodities—figures on a spreadsheet—rather than real people with real lives who matter. For most people in the UK, the concept of secure employment no longer exists. Even for those who are lucky enough to avoid the pervasive traps of zero-hours contracts, agency work, bogus self-employment and the gig economy, workplace protections are now so watered down they are virtually worthless. During the referendum campaign, we saw that telling someone on a zero-hours contract or in agency work that there is a risk to their job from Brexit was futile. Until we begin to address these issues and reinstate the concept of secure employment, we will stand no chance of rebuilding our fractured society.

At the moment, we have a system where justice exists only for those who can afford it. A banker on a six-figure salary who is unfairly dismissed can still take their employer to a tribunal, while a factory worker on the minimum wage is much less likely to have the option and ability to uphold their rights. This situation is an embarrassment; it is an injustice and it must come to an end.

I will conclude with another quote from the Prime Minister, who said only three days ago: “when you try to raise your concerns but they fall on deaf ears; when you feel locked out of the political and social discourse and feel no one is on your side, resentments grow”.

She also said that “it is the job of government...to correct the injustice and unfairness that divides us wherever it is found.”

I say that it is time that those words were put into action.

3.9 pm

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I will speak about reforming the soft tissue claims process. I have a special interest in the subject: I am chairman of the all-party group on insurance and financial services, and I spent 25 years as an insurance broker, 20 of those running my own business, so it is fair to say I have seen the evolution of these claims. When I first started in the industry, whiplash or soft tissue injury claims were non-existent, but over time they have grown to be a significant industry which, as we have heard, costs motorists anywhere between £40 and £90 extra on their policy. Critically, it is an industry where in many instances the claimant is not the main beneficiary.

Although the amounts of compensation paid out in soft tissue claims are relatively small, the associated claims handling costs, including the costs of investigation, processing, lawyers’ fees and medical reports, are disproportionately large. For example, a claimant claiming about £1,000 may ultimately cost the insurer two or three times that amount. As such claims are pretty common—there are about 800,000 a year—the effect on motor insurance premiums is significant.

I will focus on two key areas of the reform proposals, the first of which is general damages. It is clear that the reforms in the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 have not had the desired effect of tackling the compensation culture. They went some way to tackling issues such as referral fees, but frequency of claims has not been tackled as claimants can still enter into a no win, no fee agreement and a substantial portion of their claim is taken by the lawyer or claims management company to cover legal fees, so claimants sometimes get only half of the amount awarded to them. Is it access to justice when somebody else benefits more than the person who was injured in the first place?

To highlight the scale, although it is fair to say that the number of claims described as whiplash registered with the DWP’s compensation recovery unit has decreased, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris), that is coupled with a corresponding dramatic increase in the number of soft tissue injury claims for neck and back injuries. In 2015-16, the number of road traffic accident soft tissue injury claims rose by 5.8% from the pre-LASPO level of 2012-13. However, in the period before LASPO was introduced, there was a particularly high volume of claims as claimant lawyers rushed to submit claims to avoid the reforms. This can be seen when looking at the total number of soft tissue injury claims in 2013-14, with the total number of claims in 2015-16 decreasing by only 0.3% over the previous two years, and in fact increasing by 1.2% from the previous year.

The claims portal, which is used to process low value personal injury claims in road traffic accidents, demonstrates even more clearly the rising number of claims following the LASPO reforms. On the portal, although the number of claims notified decreased by 3% from the pre-LASPO high in 2012-13 to 2015-16, the number of claims notified actually increased by 11% in the two-year period of 2013-14 and 2015-16. It highlights how the number of people claiming whiplash injuries in 2011-12 was 543,899 and the number of people who had neck, back and soft tissue injuries in the same period was 285,000. The number of people claiming neck, back and soft tissue injuries increased to 441,000 in the period 2015-16, so we can see it has been displaced.

My second point relates to the small claims track. The threshold needs to increase for whiplash, as the current limit has not been increased for 25 years. Figures from the ABI show that in 1991 50% of claims would have been valued within the SCT limit. That dropped to 9% in 2012, which highlights that an increase is well overdue as 91% of pain, suffering and loss of amenity claims now fall outside its remit, which cannot be in the best interests of the consumer.

From my discussions with the insurance industry, it is clear to me that it supports the principle that full compensation should be given for more serious injuries, and it is committed to simplifying and streamlining the process so that savings will be passed on to the consumer and the policyholder. Critically, there will be access to justice for everyone. Claimants with more minor injuries
will still get their vehicle repaired, there will still be access to loss of earnings compensation and, rightly, there will be a focus on rehabilitation. Having dealt with such injuries for many years, that is what most people want. They want to be back in the position they were in before the claim. It is right to ask why there should be a link to a cash settlement on top of this when many of the minor injuries that we are talking about are similar to those sustained on sports pitches around the country day in, day out, where no one would give a second thought to making a claim against an opponent.

The UK is still one of the safest places to drive in the EU and vehicles are safer, so it is important that we go ahead with the proposals made in the former Chancellor’s autumn statement.

3.16 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) on securing this debate and giving us the opportunity to take stock of the human impact of the reforms to access to justice. Every time I think about the way in which this Government have ensured that ordinary people are denied even the opportunity to try to get justice, I cannot help but think of the words my parents used to dread: it’s not fair—and it really isn’t, Mr Davies.

One of the four objectives of the reforms was apparently to “discourage unnecessary and adversarial litigation at the public expense”.

I cannot disagree with that sentiment, but I have been working with a constituent who some people would argue falls into that category. Indeed, some have written him off as vexatious. There is a Scots word we use when someone has not had access to justice and is like a dog with a bone: the word is “thrawn”, and my constituent has had to be. He is a whistleblower: someone who tried to do the right thing—and trust me, he was doing the right thing. He is someone who believes in justice.

Sir Oliver Heald: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne McLaughlin: If the right hon. and learned Gentleman does not mind, I will struggle to get to the end of my speech without fainting. I am not well today. Unless he wants a medical emergency, I will carry on and try to get to the end—do not worry, I am not actually going to faint.

As I was saying, my constituent is a whistleblower trying to do the right thing. In trying to help others find their voice and hold power to account, he appears to have become a victim of it. He told me of repeated bullying in the workplace as a result of the whistleblowing, which continued when he was on statutory sick leave, undermining his already deteriorating mental health. Access to an employment tribunal, secured by legal aid, has been a lifeline, but it has taken long, thrawn years to get to a position where the might of an institution can be questioned. He will have his day in court, but had he lived in England or Wales he simply would not be able to afford it. That is not me saying, “Scotland good, England and Wales bad”; what I am saying is that it is not fair.

It is not fair on the people who in 2015 found themselves unable to access justice. Statistics provided by the TUC and Unison comparing cases brought in the first three months of 2013 with cases brought in the first three months of 2015 showed the following reductions—I think some have been mentioned already—in the number of cases for the most common types of claims: working time directive, down 78%; unauthorised deductions from wages, down 56%; unfair dismissal, down 72%; equal pay, down 58%; breach of contract, down 75%; and sex discrimination, down 68%.

Maternity Action said that since the fees were introduced there has been a 40% drop in claims for pregnancy-related detriment or dismissal. Is the Minister proud of that record? Does he truly believe that all those additional people in previous years were bringing vexatious—or frivolous, as the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West said—claims?

Another area of law removed from legal aid was housing. My constituent, Maisie, is an elderly woman with a range of health issues that have negatively impacted on her ability to care for herself and sustain her tenancy. After a small house fire, her son moved in to support her. John balanced his own parenting responsibilities to his son from a past marriage with his commitment to his studies and his mother. They lived in cramped and totally unsuitable conditions and found themselves more or less ignored by their housing association, which refused to put in the disability adaptations they so badly needed because they had asked three years previously to be moved. For the housing association, it was simply not worth the money because they were going to move, anyway.

Offers of accommodation were not forthcoming and this 80-year-old woman and her carer son were trapped. They have now been rehoused in far superior accommodation and are very happy, but the housing association did what they could have done three years previously for two reasons. First, my team and the Legal Services Agency, a wonderful Glasgow charitable law centre, quoted the relevant provisions of the Human Rights Act to remind it of its responsibilities; and, secondly, there was a threat of legal action. That was possible because my constituents could claim legal aid, as they lived in Scotland. As it happens, the housing association saw sense and things did not get that far, but if a similar thing were to happen to a constituent of the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West, the threat of legal action would be taken with a pinch of salt. That is not right. I thank the Legal Services Agency and my team, because now the 80-year-old woman in question can live out her days with her son in comfort and dignity.

On Sunday, the Prime Minister promised to introduce wide-ranging reforms to correct what she called the “burning injustices” in modern society. She proposed a “shared society”; she also proposed to lead a “one-nation” Government, working for all and not the “privileged few”. She said that the Government’s role is to “encourage and nurture these relationships and institutions where it can, and to correct the injustice and unfairness that divides us wherever it is found.”

How on earth can she square that with taking away the means to correct those burning injustices from all but those who can afford to pay high legal fees? There are many people relying on us in Parliament and willing us to make the right decisions. I want to be able to tell...
them confidently that when something is unfair, it will be condemned by us in this place and changed. The situation I have outlined needs to be changed.

3.20 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) on obtaining the debate. I was going to go quite thoroughly into the subject of employment tribunals, but I feel that there is no need to do that. As an employment lawyer, my hon. Friend dealt with it comprehensively. However, I want to say that I managed a citizens advice bureau where we saw many people who were very reluctant to take action against their employers; any barriers put in the way will deter people from getting what is rightfully theirs. In fact, Citizens Advice recently revealed that 82% of people say the fee increase will deter them from taking a case against their employer.

The statistics bear that out. Why would someone pay £390 for a £200 wage claim when they know that only 49% of claims are paid in full? It is appalling to put another barrier in the way and impose such fees, which appear horrendous. There has been a decrease in claims. I warned when the change was first debated that a decrease would not mean success, but merely that the individuals concerned had given up, and had not gained what they were entitled to. I would be interested to know why people have not pursued ACAS claims. According to evidence from Citizens Advice, 90% of people would consider a reduced fee limit of £50 reasonable and thought that they could perhaps afford that when making a claim. I wonder whether the Minister has looked at the question of reducing the fee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West and other hon. Members dealt extremely well with the issue of whiplash. However, I am concerned about the raising of the small claim limits—and that, not whiplash, is what the consultation specifies. Why were workplace injuries included in that? What evidence is there of fraudulent claims against employers? In my experience, it is difficult to encourage people to make a claim even when the employer has been negligent, because they are extremely worried about the possible consequences. When that is coupled with the fact that if someone is unfairly sacked, there is a tribunal fee, I feel that people are beginning to lose faith in the justice system.

I want to mention the advice deserts, particularly in housing law, which my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West also covered. Many small providers—including not-for-profit providers—are giving up their contracts as unviable. That has recently happened in one case in my area. Where are people to go about housing issues, such as severe disrepair, that they cannot get dealt with and that are giving them health problems? People can only have a housing claim if their case is at the severe end. How are people to get justice and avoid further illness, which will put more strain on our already overstretched health system, if they cannot get advice at a place they want to go to and can afford to travel to?

There is a risk that the civil legal aid system is becoming unsustainable. Will the Minister commission an independent review into the system’s sustainability? It is at risk of falling over. Even with sufficient providers, the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 reduced the possibility of obtaining early advice on housing and family law. Having been the manager of a citizens advice bureau, I cannot stress enough that early advice relieves the pressure on families, who will probably go to other services if they don’t get it, which means they will put pressure on local authorities, housing associations and medical professionals. That is why it saves money. In the case of welfare benefits, £8.80 is saved for every case of early advice; in the case of housing advice, more than £5 is saved. Leaving everything to the last minute is simply the wrong way to deal with people’s problems, not only for them and their families, but for the state.

We must ensure that ordinary people are given an even chance in the justice system. Where is the equality of arms that solicitors always talk about? We need to ensure that people can receive the compensation they are entitled to, and timely advice—the right advice as to whether their claim is viable. I have often found that telling someone at an early stage that they did not have a case prevented them from going as a litigant in person. If they cannot get such early advice, they will be clogging up the court system. Many of the most recent reforms have had the opposite effect and deterred people from getting what they are entitled to. I agree with the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) that we need to stop the cold calling. If the proposed changes to the small claims limit are included with the range of proposals, in addition to what has already happened to take access to justice away from ordinary people, I do not believe that people will any longer have faith that ours is a fair and just society.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): We are making good time. I invite Stuart McDonald to speak from the Front Bench on behalf of the SNP.

3.26 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) on securing an important and timely debate. We have enjoyed some thoughtful, passionate and wide-ranging speeches, not least of which was his own tour de force.

As hon. Members have stated, access to justice is fundamental to our society, a key principle of the rule of law and an important component of the right to a fair hearing under article 6 of the wonderful European convention on human rights. It is almost exactly a year ago that we had a debate here, introduced by the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), on the same subject. Many of the points raised then still apply every bit as much now, because I do not think there is much doubt that under the present Government and their coalition predecessor, access to justice has become significantly more difficult.

Much of that debate focused, as did the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) today, on legal aid restrictions imposed under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 and the subsequent cuts to the legal aid budget. I continue to find the thinking behind some of those cuts hard to comprehend. They are indeed counterproductive. The drastic fall in the number of legal aid-funded cases has once again been highlighted today, including even for victims of domestic violence,
who in theory should not be excluded. Amnesty International’s recent report, “Cuts that Hurt”, highlighted the particularly poor situation of children and vulnerable people in fields such as social welfare law, immigration law and family law.

As we have heard, the Justice Committee, the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have all been critical of some of the reforms. One of the most powerful points made by the Justice Committee was:

“The Ministry’s efforts to target legal aid at those who most need it have suffered from the weakness that they have often been aimed at the point after a crisis has already developed, such as in housing repossession cases, rather than being preventive.”

I suspect the Chamber is largely filled with lawyers at the moment, and I am sure that most of us get the point. Surely a better way to reduce legal aid spending is to invest in avoiding expensive crises in the first place.

Ministers argue that it is better to encourage mediation than to provide legal aid for adversarial proceedings. I am all for encouraging mediation. However, legal aid spending should fall as a result of successful voluntary mediation, and it cannot be said that mediation is successful or voluntary if someone is forced into an agreement because they cannot afford to go to court, and perhaps do not even have a proper understanding of their legal rights at that stage.

The other key Government contention in such debates is that the legal aid system in England and Wales has been one of the most expensive in the world. Of course I accept that all Governments have to look carefully at ways to ensure that the budget remains affordable. However, in making that claim, the Government are to an extent comparing apples and oranges. As hon. Members are fully aware, continental legal systems are inquisitorial systems in which less input from legal representatives is generally required but significantly more resources are spent on prosecution services and the courts. Taking all those factors into account, although we can say that England and Wales has one of the more expensive legal aid bills in Europe, the court system overall comes about a third of the way down the European league table.

Equally, there are other ways to keep the legal aid budget under control without having to slice and dice the scope and slash availability. I point to Scotland as an example, because as I understand it, legal aid spending per capita there is less than in England and Wales, but at the same time, the coverage and scope of the legal aid system is more generous. There are numerous reasons for that. For example, England and Wales have far more very expensive fraud trials, and so on. However, a key point is that the focus in Scotland has been on simplifying procedures so that the cost of court proceedings is much less than it was, so there are different ways to go about doing things.

Hon. Members have all rightly pointed out that access to justice goes beyond questions of legal aid. On fees, we shared opposition to criminal court fees and their predictable consequences and we welcome their withdrawal. We also welcome cancellation of the ludicrous 500% increase in fees for the asylum and immigration tribunal, although who knows how many people have had to leave the country as a result in the meantime? Employment tribunal fees have had a drastic effect on access to justice, as other hon. Members have pointed out, and they too should be withdrawn. I am pleased that the Scottish Government propose to do just that when the powers are devolved.

However, the fact that the Government have to make and consider those U-turns suggests that they need a much more fundamental rethink of their approach. Other speeches have covered the changes to personal injury rules and the small claims limit—I should have predicted that and looked into the issue in more detail. The hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West kindly pointed out the different system that exists in Scotland.

I share hon. Members’ general scepticism and concern about what exactly the proposed changes will achieve. I say that, having had to confess to colleagues who have worked for Thompsons, that I previously trained with an insurance-financed defenders firm—I do apologise. None of that is to say that the problem does not need to be addressed. The hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) highlighted the issue of horrendous cold-calling. I had a similar issue when I managed to reverse into my garage wall—quite how I was supposed to sue the garage wall I am not sure. All I would say to him is that some of what the Government propose to solve the problem would surely mean throwing the baby out with the bathwater. There must be other ways of tackling that without having to go as far as the Government suggest.

Sir Oliver Heald: In Scotland there are significantly fewer personal injury claims, and there has never been the problem of the industrialisation of such claims as has happened in England and Wales. Scotland has therefore not had the same sort of problem of a claims culture that we are trying to address.

Stuart C. McDonald: That is an interesting point. I suppose we have to examine why that is the case, because we have not managed to get rid of that in Scotland by excluding all sorts of cases from courts, so it would be interesting to look into that further.

There are a lot of access to justice issues that we could speak about, but before finishing, I will focus on something that has not been spoken about yet: the particular barriers to justice that the Government are putting in place for those who are seeking asylum or who are migrants. Last year Opposition MPs highlighted that the Immigration Bill, which was then making its way through the House, would make people have to leave their families and jobs in order to conduct appeals against Home Office decisions from abroad, would cut back on appeal rights against refusal of asylum support, leaving vulnerable, destitute people without any legal recourse, and would introduce procedures allowing families with children to be summarily evicted without so much as a court order, never mind a court hearing.

I know that MPs here today have disparate views on immigration and the rights that migrants should have, but I cannot understand how anyone can say that migrants should be deprived of proper access to a court in order to vindicate the rights that they do enjoy. Denying access to justice should not be a means of trying to control immigration. Various other significant concerns arise right across the sphere of immigration and asylum law, and I will mention three or four before concluding.
Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Just so you are aware, Mr McDonald, I have allowed up to 10 minutes for Front Benchers, so you have a reasonable amount of time left.

Stuart C. McDonald: Thank you, Mr Davies. The first concern is about the massive restrictions on appeal rights, previously introduced by the coalition Government and now replaced by an administrative review scheme that the chief inspector of borders and immigration said was operating very poorly. The second concern is about the difficulties in accessing legal-aid-funded solicitors. As an important example, that includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are transferred under the national transfer scheme, who may find themselves moved to a part of the country where there is simply no face-to-face advice available. A third challenge is the lack of legal aid—in contrast to Scotland—for too many immigration and asylum issues, including for too many children, detainees, mentally ill and other vulnerable persons. All that is exacerbated by a difficult fee remission scheme. Finally, I highlight the slow speed of justice, with huge waiting times for a hearing at the asylum and immigration tribunal.

The scale of the problems caused by all these cuts and changes is hard to be precise about, even if the anecdotal evidence is very worrying. The Government have so far refused to measure the number of people appearing as party litigants at the asylum and immigration tribunal. That prevents us from properly assessing what is going on as a result of Government policy. The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice is receiving representations from the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants on this matter, and I hope that she will listen.

In conclusion, the Government can talk about sustainably funding the justice system, but if funding decisions are preventing access to justice, then justice itself is not being sustained.

3.36 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) for securing the debate and for his typically persuasive speech. Such speeches are what earned him his reputation as a fantastic lawyer and then a fantastic MP. I certainly agree with his description of access to justice as a pillar of the welfare state—how right he is.

I pay tribute to all hon. Members who have spoken today from all parties, not only for their contributions, but for the work they do in their constituencies. Each and every Member of Parliament in Westminster Hall today—and of course, in the main Chamber earlier—has experience of attending advice surgeries, to which constituents come who are unable to get the legal representation they so desperately need. That is often why they end up at our advice surgeries. Sadly, much of that is because of the Conservative Government’s cuts to legal aid since 2010.

My hon. Friend gave a comprehensive analysis of the problems with the Government’s proposals for the small claims limit. I will not reiterate the ground that he covered, but to pick up on a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), this is not just about so-called soft tissue claims, I recommend that all Members on both sides of the House, including the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), read the full title of the consultation, which is: “Reforming the Soft Tissue Injury (‘whiplash’) Claims Process: A consultation on arrangements concerning personal injury claims in England and Wales”. It is not just about whiplash claims and includes injuries in the workplace, as other hon. Members have said.

I am concerned that the proposals will affect the lower-paid most adversely. In assessing claims, their value includes the lost wages arising from any injury, so those who are paid higher wages might more easily surpass the £5,000 limit, leaving the lower-paid less likely to be able to cover their costs. To borrow a phrase used by the hon. Member for Croydon South, I consider that to be morally corrosive.

It is almost a year to the day since the publication of the annual report to Parliament from the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Thomas, in which he said:

“Our system of justice has become unaffordable to most.”

That is as clear and authoritative a judgment on the state of access to justice as could be hoped for. The reasons for that assessment are clear: employment tribunal fees, LASPO—the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012—and “Transforming Legal Aid”.

It was the coalition Government who introduced employment tribunal fees. As I have said before, I will never forget the first time I lodged an employment tribunal case after they introduced those fees, when I was an employment tribunal lawyer at Thompsons. The message flashed up on the employment tribunals service website: “Customer, please enter your credit card details”. It says a lot about the Government’s view of workers seeking justice that citizens attempting to assert their workplace rights are viewed as consumers or customers. Employment tribunal fees have resulted in a 70% reduction in the number of cases.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman makes a passionate and persuasive argument. Does he agree that if the purpose of hiking employment tribunal fees was to get rid of vexatious claims in the system, it has failed entirely? The win-loss ratio is exactly the same as it was before the fees were hiked. That is the evidence that the Justice Committee heard, and it makes the policy redundant.

Richard Burgon: The hon. Gentleman is correct. I put it to him. Members that the real purpose of introducing employment tribunal fees was not to reduce vexatious claims, but to reduce claims full stop. Employment tribunals received about 60,000 cases in the year before fees were introduced, but that fell to below 20,000 the year after. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) indicated, that is not because of a reduction in illegal or unfair treatment by employers in that time—if only!

In June 2016, the Justice Committee released its report on court and tribunal fees, which complained that it was “unacceptable that the Government has not reported the results of its review one year after it began and six months after the Government said it would be completed.”

Unbelievably, seven months later, the Government continue to sit on a review of the fees. We can only suppose what the reason for that is, but perhaps the Minister will enlighten us.
LASPO, which was enacted by the coalition Government, removed most social welfare law cases from eligibility for legal aid assistance. Those seeking assistance for debt advice, housing—apart from in homelessness cases—and welfare benefits advice were left with few places to turn, as my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield knows from her experience running a citizens advice bureau. The barrier that has been put up in such cases has hurt some of the most vulnerable people in our society. The lack of benefits advice is of particular concern because many appeals against the Department for Work and Pensions succeed. Between December 2014 and June 2015, 53% of those who appealed “fit to work” decisions had them reversed. Removing advice on such cases risks people missing out on benefits to which they are eligible.

Last year, the Law Society launched its campaign to end legal aid deserts—areas of the country in which legal aid advice for housing cases is disappearing. In a Westminster Hall debate on 30 November 2016, the Minister denied that such legal aid deserts exist. I wonder whether he has told the Law Society that its research is wrong. In July last year, Young Legal Aid Lawyers, the Legal Action Group and the Legal Aid Practitioners Group wrote to the Prime Minister, highlighting the huge drop in civil legal aid cases since LASPO. In 2012-13, before LASPO, 724,243 civil law cases were publicly funded, but in 2015-16 there were just 258,460. They described that, correctly in my view, as “a picture of justice denied”.

Last week, the Justice Secretary’s own actions confirmed the need for a review. LASPO removed most private family law matters from the scope of legal aid, which naturally led to an increase in people representing themselves, as has been described. The increased number led to an increase in people representing family law matters from the scope of legal aid, which the need for a review. LASPO removed most private social welfare law cases from eligibility for legal aid assistance. Those seeking assistance for debt advice, housing—apart from in homelessness cases—and welfare benefits advice were left with few places to turn, as my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield knows from her experience running a citizens advice bureau. The barrier that has been put up in such cases has hurt some of the most vulnerable people in our society. The lack of benefits advice is of particular concern because many appeals against the Department for Work and Pensions succeed. Between December 2014 and June 2015, 53% of those who appealed “fit to work” decisions had them reversed. Removing advice on such cases risks people missing out on benefits to which they are eligible.

In 2013, the then Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), introduced other reforms. In summary, they involved restrictions on the availability of judicial review; restrictions on the ability of foreign nationals to receive publicly funded legal assistance; removing publicly funded legal assistance for nearly every area of prison law; further cuts to immigration law and family law; and cuts to fees for litigation in criminal cases. However, plans to tender criminal defence representation to competition were abandoned.

The right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) then became Justice Secretary and, thankfully, reversed some of his immediate predecessor’s worst policy blunders. He also postponed a planned further cut of 8.75% to the fees of criminal solicitors until April 2017, which is now just around the corner. I am sure it would be welcomed, both in the House and outside, if the Minister confirmed today that that 8.75% cut will not happen.

When the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell was in post as Justice Secretary, he wrongly asserted that the legal aid bill was spiralling. He claimed that the public had lost confidence in the legal aid system and that they had dismissed many who rely on judicial review to hold the state to account as “left-wing campaigners” using the courts as a “promotional tool”. He provided no objective evidence or serious substance for those claims. He, too, holds responsibility for the crisis in access to justice that we face.

When my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) became Leader of the Opposition in 2015, he promoted and set up an independent review, the Bach review, into access to justice. He has long understood the place of legal aid and access to justice in a civilised society, as we all do in the Opposition. The Bach review is considering how the justice system should operate in the 21st century; it should harness new technology without compromising fairness or due process. The Government need to act now to reverse their most botched reforms, so that access to justice is no longer “unaffordable to most”.

Richard Burgon: I agree that this is a matter of the utmost urgency; I also agree that such a detrimental impact on some of the most vulnerable people and minorities in our society is never a price worth paying.

In 2013, the then Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), introduced other reforms. In summary, they involved restrictions on the availability of judicial review; restrictions on the ability of foreign nationals to receive publicly funded legal assistance; removing publicly funded legal assistance for nearly every area of prison law; further cuts to immigration law and family law; and cuts to fees for litigation in criminal cases. However, plans to tender criminal defence representation to competition were abandoned.

The right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) then became Justice Secretary and, thankfully, reversed some of his immediate predecessor’s worst policy blunders. He also postponed a planned further cut of 8.75% to the fees of criminal solicitors until April 2017, which is now just around the corner. I am sure it would be welcomed, both in the House and outside, if the Minister confirmed today that that 8.75% cut will not happen.

When the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell was in post as Justice Secretary, he wrongly asserted that the legal aid bill was spiralling. He claimed that the public had lost confidence in the legal aid system and that they had dismissed many who rely on judicial review to hold the state to account as “left-wing campaigners” using the courts as a “promotional tool”. He provided no objective evidence or serious substance for those claims. He, too, holds responsibility for the crisis in access to justice that we face.

When my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) became Leader of the Opposition in 2015, he promoted and set up an independent review, the Bach review, into access to justice. He has long understood the place of legal aid and access to justice in a civilised society, as we all do in the Opposition. The Bach review is considering how the justice system should operate in the 21st century; it should harness new technology without compromising fairness or due process. The Government need to act now to reverse their most botched reforms, so that access to justice is no longer “unaffordable to most”.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): You have 10 minutes, Minister, if you are to allow a minute for Mr Marrs at the end.

3.49 pm

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marrs) on securing this debate, and I thank Members who have contributed to it. Some important points were made. However, regarding the hon. Gentleman’s criticism that the impact assessment on the whiplash changes does not show a saving, I must say that it makes it very clear that the saving is £1 billion, which, of course, accounts for the £40 cut in premiums for every motorist in the land that I mentioned. Are we to sacrifice that simply to uphold a threshold that has been in place for so many years, since 1991, and in the interests of solicitors?
The hon. Gentleman very fairly made the point that he was from Thompsons Solicitors. I think that the Labour party spokesman, the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), is also from Thompsons. There was one other who did not reveal himself, but I suspect that it is the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). They are the three musketeers of the Thompsons world. Anyway, it is a very fine firm, and I have to confess that I have been instructed by it on one occasion in the past, and it prepared the brief very well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) made a very important speech, explaining the industrial nature of the problem we face with these whiplash claims and the dubious practices that go with it. For those from Scotland, such as the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), the Scottish National party spokesman, it will be hard to understand this claims culture; Scotland does not have it. It is hard for people to understand it if it has not developed in their part of the UK. It has got to the point at which it is a massive problem. I will cover the point made about employment fees in a moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) made a very knowledgeable speech. He pointed out that we have to consider not just the pure whiplash claims, but those that are whiplash-related—those described as a back or neck injury, but that are, in effect, whiplash cases. That, of course, explains the figures that I outlined earlier.

It has been a good debate, and I wanted to make the point at the start that the Government are committed to ensuring that the justice system works for everyone. I will describe some of the actions that we are taking. The SNP spokesman made the good point that this is not just about legal aid; it is also about simplifying procedures and changing the way that the legal system works. Of course, that is what we are doing. The Lord Chancellor, the Lord Chief Justice and the Senior President of Tribunals jointly announced plans that are about renewing and transforming our justice system. Of course, we are putting in a massive investment of £1 billion to reform and digitise our courts, to make sure that this vital public service reflects modern needs and expectations.

The reforms will deliver swifter justice and, I hope, a less stressful experience for those involved. We will get cases out of court that do not need to be there, whether by using online procedures or through more alternative dispute resolution. We will apply the full force of judge and courtroom only in those cases that require it, and will strip away unnecessary hearings, redundant paper forms and all the duplication in the system, because we have the best legal system in the world but it also needs to be the most modern. That is what we aim to achieve. The guiding principle is to have a system that is proportionate and accessible, and is there for the vulnerable, victims of crime, members of the public, legal professionals, witnesses and litigants. We want a system that is a statement of our values as a country and leads the world.

Our legal aid system is important. The coalition Government faced unprecedented financial challenges; it is all very well people talking as though there were no pressures, but there were huge financial pressures at the time, and the Government had to reform. They concentrated legal aid on the most important areas—on cases where an individual’s liberty or home is at stake; where children might be taken into care; or where there is domestic violence. Although the reforms were substantial, it is right to follow through on our intention, which we set out at the beginning, which is that there should be a proper review. We have said that it will take place by April 2018 at the latest. We are well within the period during which we could start the review, and we will announce our intentions on it in the coming period.

I want to emphasise that we have made sure that litigants in person get help and support. Since 2015, we have provided £3.5 million to the litigants in person support strategy, through which we are working closely with the advice sector, volunteer partners and the pro bono sector; they are enhancing the local signposting of local and national legal support services and co-ordinating their work. We have seen a fast-expanding number of personal support units. The citizens advice bureaux do a fantastic job, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) for mentioning them. We also have many pro bono providers and local law clinics. This strategy has momentum, and it is wrong for the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West to say that the result of having litigants in person is longer cases. That is not what the evidence shows; in fact, the average length of a civil case is becoming shorter, year by year.

I want to make family court processes safer for victims of domestic abuse, and our recent announcement contributes to that. It is right to have a system in which the victims of domestic abuse do not face cross-examination by their abusers. That sort of cross-examination is illegal in criminal courts, and we would like to see it outlawed in family courts. I have mentioned alternative dispute resolution.

Both the hon. Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston, and for Wolverhampton South West, mentioned employment tribunal fees. The Government are reviewing the impact of the introduction of fees in those tribunals. There is not a report gathering dust on my desk or anything like that; we are completing the work. I explained all this when I appeared before the Justice Committee recently. The work that we are completing is about the categories in the discrimination field; we are looking at the implications for each of those groups. We are getting to the point at which we will soon be able to produce a report; it will not take much longer. I said that I would produce it as soon as possible in the new year and I meant it.

Since it has been mandatory to go to ACAS, it has been resolving far more cases. The effect is that there are now 92,000 cases going to ACAS, whereas previously there were only 23,000. There used to be about 17,000 cases that did not then go on to the tribunal; now, it is something like 45,000 cases, so ACAS is having a big effect in this area. I understand the frustrations of those who say that the review has taken too long, but it will be comprehensive and it is not far away.

We face whiplash cases on an industrial scale. The number and cost of those cases, and their adverse impact on the price of motor insurance, is a concern for Government. There have been huge improvements in car safety, so how can it be that 770,000 road traffic accident claims were made in 2015-16, compared with only 460,000 in 2005-06, with around 90% of the claims in 2015-16 being whiplash-related? That figure is too
The previous Prime Minister held a Downing Street summit on this issue and we have recently made changes, such as introducing the new MedCo system, which improves the medical expert side of things. There was also a recent consultation on raising the small claims limit for personal injury claims to £5,000, and on damages for road traffic cases involving whiplash—soft tissue injury. If we can save £40 per head on motor insurance policies, clearly those are issues that we should be consulting on and considering very seriously. Also, it is worth bearing in mind that the £1,000 limit for these cases was set in 1991, more than 25 years ago. Since then, the small claims limit for everything else has gone up to £10,000, so the review is very much needed.

Finally, to provide reassurance to Members, people can still employ a lawyer to help them with a case that is in front of the small claims court, and they can try to reach an agreement with their lawyer about how their case is funded. Of course, the point is that they cannot recover costs, but there is no ban on taking legal advice, though clearly people would need to look at the economics of that. The other point to make is that if someone has a complex case that should perhaps be dealt with by the county court in its full setting, that is possible; they can make an application to that court, which can transfer—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order.
Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
much Circle intends to take out of the £73 million for its profits, but she will be aware that it is required to be paid the national tariff. If that is the case, will Circle be treating the same volume of patients as are currently being treated under the MSK process? If not, where are the savings and the profit for Circle going to come from?

I asked the Minister some questions to satisfy myself that the Government were happy with the procedure that had been followed. Were NHS England or the Minister informed of how Greenwich CCG achieved its quorum and the fact that the required number of GPs were not present? It was the GPs who were part of the consortium that was bidding who were required to leave the room. When the White Paper was launched by Andrew Lansley, he made it clear that local clinicians should be at the heart of decision making. In this case, we see that local clinicians were anything but at the heart of decision making.

I asked whether the local healthcare trust had been consulted at all in the process, and the Minister told me in an answer that it had been discussed at a meeting in March 2016 and as part of an assurance procurement process in August. That did not happen. Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust managers have no recollection of a meeting in August where the matter was discussed. Who told the Minister that the meeting had taken place when it clearly had not? It was not possible for anyone to give that assertion to the Government when the meeting simply had not taken place.

The Minister was also told that Circle was engaging with Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust, but the trust says there is no clarity around the clinical model and no commercial offer. That was still the case in November at the council’s scrutiny meeting, with the contract then due to begin on 1 December. The trust had no idea of the money or business that would come its way as a result of the Circle contract.

The Circle contract is a prime contractor model. That means that all patients will be directed to Circle, which will triage them and direct them to whichever services. Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust receives something in the region of £10 million for MSK services. It has nothing in its future budget for that service, because it is simply unaware of what it can expect from the contract that will be managed by Circle. How is that acceptable? The trust has to plan ahead for other services, and it is finding that impossible.

The trust has been through a couple of scenarios of what would happen if it was forced to cut its services as a result of losing elements of the MSK contract. It currently has a team of surgeons and some 45% of their surgical workload comes through the MSK contract. Those surgeons are vital to the support of other services, such as A&E. If those surgeons are lost, it will have an impact on other services in the trust. Activity could be reduced in consultant trauma services at Queen Elizabeth hospital which support the A&E. There would be an impact on doctors’ training and rotas; on the quality of training provided to junior doctors and other staff; on related professional services and posts such as nursing and physiotherapy; and, in the longer term, on recruitment at Queen Elizabeth hospital and specifically to its trauma service, including the emergency department, which is a designated trauma unit. It is disgraceful that no impact assessment was carried out to assess these impacts on other services.

The new Eltham community hospital was very much welcomed by my local community. Lots of lobbying has gone on. The local community watched the much loved and admired local building, the Eltham and Mottingham community hospital, being knocked down because they had been told they were going to get a walk-in GP service and a new hospital in the heart of their community, which they could attend for blood transfusions, X-rays and other diagnostics; more importantly, there were to be 40 rehabilitation beds for people leaving hospital and returning to the community. The community were very supportive of that scheme, which started in 2007. I and others in the local community lobbied very hard to make sure that the project stayed on track, and it finally opened in 2014.

Within 18 months of the opening, 20 beds were closed temporarily, to save money during the summer period when there was allegedly a low level of demand, but they were due to open again when winter came along. Now we are told that the beds are not opening. Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust is lobbying very hard because it desperately needs the beds back—it is now running at more than 100% occupancy for beds in its hospitals. We are now told that the space available for those 20 beds is part of the MSK project. That is not what my local community signed up for. It is not acceptable that the whole business plan for that hospital and the services to be provided there has been completely changed without any consideration of the local community.

I accept that there is a need for change in the NHS. I do not accept that we need the private sector to do it. If we continue to privatise services like this on the pretext of saving money, we will see a lot of money that should be being spent on patients going out in private profit. It is time to call a halt to the drip, drip of privatisation in our national health service.

If we want to modernise the NHS we need to find ways of doing that, but I wonder how someone could come to the conclusion that Circle is the organisation to take us forward. We know what happened at Hinchingbrooke hospital—Circle walked away the day before the Care Quality Commission was to put the hospital in special measures. At the Nottingham NHS treatment centre, a dermatological national centre of excellence, the consultants walked out. Chris Clough, who was appointed to investigate what was going on there, described it as “an unmitigated disaster”. To keep that service going, Circle brought in locums from overseas costing £300,000 a year. Today, the centre is no longer a centre of excellence.

The Government and NHS England did not learn a single lesson from what happened with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough social care contract, where the private provider handed the contract back after eight months, saying that it was not viable. They ignored warnings from the National Audit Office about that in July 2016. It seems that the Government are happy to see any process go forward as long as the services are being privatised.

The process is completely and utterly flawed and is completely unsafe. The meeting in June last year was inquorate. It let a £73 million contract without any consideration of the knock-on effects on other vital
health services, particularly A&E. The illegality of the process was disregarded and Ministers were given false assurances about the process and the consultation with Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust. There was no proper assessment of the suitability of Circle as a health provider. It provides not one clinician in the process—it is purely a management operation and another tier of bureaucracy. We hear endlessly from the Government about the need to cut back bureaucracy, but Circle is simply a signpost in the process, and for the pleasure of doing that it will take private profit out. It contracts with existing private services. In Bedford, there has been a 30% reduction in its contracting with the local Bedford hospital for MSK services and the private services in that area are brimming with profitable elective MSK surgery.

The process for awarding the contract is unsafe and has put patients at risk. Worse still, it has put at risk patients who are not in need of MSK services, due to the knock-on effect on other services. It cannot be that patients will unwittingly attend their local hospital and find that services have been cut because another service in the local health economy has been privatised. It is time to call a halt to this process. I hope that the Minister will step in, stop the process and stop the contract being let to Circle plc, because it is clearly flawed and not in the interests of patients in Greenwich.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) on securing this debate. I know that the subject is extremely important to him and his constituents. He has very eloquently raised the different concerns, which is no less than I am sure he welcomes the fact that there was some consultation prior to procurement. He questioned why I will be able to answer every single one of his questions in detail. I will endeavour to get through the best I can and then reply with further detail in writing.

First, I would like to pay tribute to the many staff who work exceptionally hard every day for our NHS and deliver high-quality care for patients. As the daughter of an NHS doctor and nurse, who are now retired, I have been told that the draft specification was misdiagnosed for more than a decade, I understand how dispiriting it is to wait in pain only to endure the disappointment of inappropriate or unnecessary appointments or tests and to end up on a new waiting list still in pain, just more frustrated. I know that because I lived it. We have to do better to get the right care to the right patients in the first place.

Taking such steps not only improves patient care and their experience of the NHS, but cuts out wasted appointments and tests, and frees up hugely valuable consultant and technician time, saving money that can be spent on appropriate care instead. That is why the CCG identified the musculoskeletal hub model, which has been successfully implemented using a range of different kinds of providers, private and public—I am agnostic on that point—across the country. It concluded that it would secure better value for money from that more streamlined service model, especially at the point of referral.

Given the hon. Gentleman’s description, I think he knows this, but I will say it anyway: the hub model means identifying one healthcare provider to act as a single point of access for all Greenwich musculoskeletal patients. That healthcare provider then offers patients who need an in-patient operation a choice of where the operation takes place. It is also able to triage patients more effectively into physio and other non-surgical treatments sooner, which means that surgery can often be prevented because it is possible to intervene quicker, which is better for patients.

The hon. Gentleman expressed concern in his parliamentary questions about the procurement process. However, I am sure he welcomes the fact that there was some consultation prior to procurement. He questioned the information that has come to me, and I will double-check it, but I have been told that the draft specification was shared with the CCG patient reference group and the pensioners forum for their comments prior to procurement. He questioned whether I will be able to answer every single one of his questions in detail. I will endeavour to get through the best I can and then reply with further detail in writing.

It is important to say at the outset—I know the hon. Gentleman is aware of this—that procurement of local health services by means of competitive tendering is a matter for the local NHS, Greenwich clinical commissioning group, which is the deciding body in this case, is a clinically-led independent statutory organisation. We believe it is right that local NHS systems are best placed to understand the health needs of their local populations and to use that knowledge to commission services for local people, to ensure the best clinical outcomes for all patients at the highest quality and best value to the taxpayer.

I know the hon. Gentleman knows that musculoskeletal services are currently provided to about 9,500 Greenwich patients by the four NHS trusts and one private provider, but despite the hard work of local health workers, the latest data show that Greenwich CCG’s referral rate to treatment trauma and orthopaedics performance is only 80.8%, against a target of 92%. It also shows a high number of out-patient appointments—more than 50% higher than the national average—with many seeing a consultant surgeon and then not having surgery. That paints a clear picture of too many patients waiting for too long. Even when they do get an appointment, they do not always see the right health professional, which means another wait for physio or other interventions.

As someone who has a chronic, complex illness and was misdiagnosed for more than a decade, I understand how dispiriting it is to wait in pain only to endure the disappointment of inappropriate or unnecessary appointments or tests and to end up on a new waiting list still in pain, just more frustrated. I know that because I lived it. We have to do better to get the right care to the right patients in the first place.

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In the end, two bids were received. They were anonymised and evaluated by a panel that included clinicians. According to the information I have received, the CCG had at least four GP members in attendance at the governing body meeting of 29 June, as well as three other voting members. The musculoskeletal specialist was from another area, specifically so that the panel could benefit from his experience without risk of conflict. Following the evaluation section of the meeting, all members with a conflict of interest were asked to leave the room, as the hon. Gentleman said. Those members’ votes were transferred to other governing body members, in line with the CCG’s constitution. I am not sure where the hon. Gentleman’s information about the numbers in the meeting comes from. According to the information I have received—which I will check—the remaining members of the CCG governing body then voted, and the meeting was quorate, in line with the actual numbers in the room. They voted on the still anonymised bids. Following that process, the five-year contract was awarded to Circle Health. The bid was assessed by NHS England to be according to the NHS standard procurement process, which is obviously legal.

As the hon. Gentleman said, under the proposed model, Circle will triage all patients registered with a Greenwich GP who require physiotherapy or planned orthopaedic surgery to ensure they receive the most appropriate medical professional support the first time to avoid inappropriate patient experiences. The aim is to reduce the number of first out-patient appointments, because many have been found clinically unnecessary. Further, if the trust experiences fewer unnecessary out-patient appointments, surgeons will have more time to carry out elective surgery, which will reduce waiting times for those who really need it. Over the lifetime of the contract, the CCG expects the average waiting time at Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust to reduce from 7.8 weeks to below 7 weeks.

As I said, regardless of the details of the procurement, which we will check, ensuring that patients are better served with the right care at the right time must be something that colleagues from across the House support. I heard the hon. Gentleman’s concerns about the impact on existing services and his view that the assessment should have been carried out further. At any rate, I am pleased it is being carried out now. As I understand it, Greenwich CCG discussed the procurement with Greenwich Council’s healthier communities and adult social care scrutiny panel—which is very snappily named—at a meeting on 3 November. The panel accepted that the process had been correct, but due to the level of public concern it requested that the CCG and the trust co-commission an independent assessment of the likely impact on orthopaedic activity at Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust and also that the outcome of that assessment be shared with the HCASC prior to the CCG’s signing the contract. That is what is happening, and it is clearly the right thing to do.

The main concern raised by the HCASC is that the trust may see a reduction in elective orthopaedic activity, as the hon. Gentleman said, which would affect trauma services. The impact assessment will review the likelihood of a range of impacts—from a minus 40% shift in elective orthopaedic surgery to a plus 40% shift—and the resulting effect on local trauma services, emergency department services and other interdependent services at Queen Elizabeth hospital, as well as the risk to the clinical and financial viability of the trust. It will also consider the potential impact, should there be such a shift in orthopaedic surgery, on sustaining undergraduate and postgraduate training, capacity plans and backlogs, interdependent clinical services, the delivery of the national constitution standards for referral to treatment, and the implications on future recruitment of orthopaedic clinicians and support staff. Those are the parameters that were requested by the trust and others, so I think we can be confident that it will achieve its purpose.

The impact assessment is due to be presented to the Greenwich CCG board on 22 February. The report will be shared with the healthier communities and adult social care scrutiny panel the following day and published on the CCG website. The outcome of the assessment remains to be seen, but I am sure the hon. Gentleman agrees that it is essential that the CCG proceeds with what has clearly become a highly politicised decision with the best interests of patients as its core priority. As I said, the data show that we need to work to improve care for musculoskeletal patients in Greenwich, to ensure that all patients are getting the right care at the right time.

Question put and agreed to.
Crown Prosecution Service: Funding

4.27 pm

Mr David Hanson (in the Chair): The previous debate finished a couple of minutes early, but as the proposer of the next debate and the Minister are both present, if Members are content, we will commence the debate.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the funding of the Crown Prosecution Service.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. Before I begin, I must declare my interests. I am a member of Wilberforce barristers’ chambers in Hull, but am not currently practising. My wife is a criminal duty solicitor with Williamsons Solicitors in Hull, and she is also a part-time judge. I thank the Criminal Law Solicitors Association, the London Criminal Courts Solicitors Association, the Bar Council and the Law Society for contacting me regarding this debate, and for very helpfully providing me with information, which I think will benefit this House.

Expenditure on the Crown Prosecution Service has been reduced significantly from £672 million per annum in 2009-10 to £487 million in 2015. That is a reduction of a massive £185 million per year. At the same time, the number of cases brought to magistrates courts is down from approximately 641,000 to 539,000. On the finances of the CPS, I understand that since 2010, some £83 million has been spent on redundancies, with £20 million of that spent on only 153 staff, or upwards of £131,000 per senior. I suspect —member of staff.

What has been the effect on cases? The effect has been significant: there is a staggering 23% increase in vacated trials —cases that are due to go to trial but, probably on the day of trial at Crown court, are vacated for whatever reason. In my submission, the reason is often that the CPS is not prepared or ready. In my area of Humber, 55% of cases are vacated, according to the Public Accounts Committee inquiry of May 2016: the lowest proportion of vacated trials was 11%, in Cleveland.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. I refer the House to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Is it not right that whether the CPS is ready at trial is down to several factors, and not only funding? In fact, the CPS’s ability to be ready at trial and to perform well has improved over recent years, in spite of funding not having gone up, as he rightly pointed out.

Karl Turner: I will read out a whole load of stats and talk about what is happening in the profession in the real world—about what lawyers and solicitors from the defence, and barristers who prosecute and defend, are saying is really happening. The hon. Gentleman wants to pretend that everything in the garden is rosy. Good luck to him, but I have to disagree. I know what is happening, not least because my wife is a defence solicitor in Hull and experiences the pressure on CPS lawyers day in, day out—although at the moment she is on maternity leave. Only today I was contacted by members of the profession, and they described a scenario in which a caseworker burst into tears when sitting in the Crown court behind counsel. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that things are rosy, he is mistaken.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Similarly, I declare an interest: I am still a defence solicitor, and if I catch your eye later, Mr Hanson, I will speak about my experiences. I will probably share similar experiences to those of the hon. Gentleman. He does angry well and quickly, but he was actually asked a genuine question on clarifying the stats. There are lots of reasons to vacate trials, and they can involve issues beyond funding-related prosecution preparedness; that was what the question was about.

Karl Turner: The hon. Gentleman is of course right, but I was less than two minutes into my remarks when the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) intervened. If I am allowed to, I will come on to clarify the points being made by the Government Back Benches.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I refer the Chamber to my entry in the register. The statistic is this: in 2014-15, the Crown Prosecution Service spent £21.5 million preparing cases not heard in court; of that, only £5.5 million can be attributed to factors not within CPS control.

Karl Turner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will make that point myself. Excluding guilty pleas, conviction rates in magistrates courts and Crown courts are significantly down, despite the headline figure of an 80% conviction rate. I think the conviction rate in magistrates courts is about 50%, and in Crown courts it is about 25%, excluding guilty pleas. Since 2010, CPS staff numbers have fallen by a whopping 2,400. The CPS is suffering a brain drain and haemorrhaging experienced in-house lawyers, who leave for independent practice, or simply take the money and run.

On a serious note, I mentioned a caseworker bursting into tears in open court, clearly because of the pressure. I am told that the stress levels at the CPS are seriously high. Interestingly, a 2012 LawCare survey of the law profession revealed that more than 50% of the legal profession generally felt stressed, and that 19% were suffering from clinical depression, with more than one fifth of the profession suffering from mostly avoidable and preventable mental ill health. Stress at the CPS must be off the scale, particularly considering a recent Law Society survey in which 95% of respondents said that they were stressed at work.

Furthermore, in May 2016 the Public Accounts Committee inquiry found that

“The criminal justice system is close to breaking point.”

According to the National Audit Office report of March 2016, “Efficiency in the criminal justice system”, the number of cases outstanding in Crown courts had increased by 34% since 2013, and the waiting time for a Crown court case to be heard had increased from an average of 99 days to 134 days—an increase of about 35%.

In 2014-15, the Crown Prosecution Service spent £21.5 million preparing cases that were not heard, as the shadow Solicitor General, my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), helpfully said. What has happened to those cases and the £21.5 million? If memory serves, it costs just shy of £1,000 to prepare a case for Crown court—the CPS says that being trial-ready costs it about £1,000—and £21.5 million has been spent on preparing cases that got nowhere. One must assume that the evidential test had been passed, and that the CPS reviewing lawyer had determined that there was
enough evidence—that is, on balance, more evidence than
not, and a more than 50% chance of a successful
prosecution—and that it was in the public interest to
prosecute that case. Twenty-five million quid was spent
on preparing cases that went nowhere. The Solicitor
General might be able to correct me and clear the
matter up, but I assume that that is down to cases
coming to nothing. In the magistrates court or, worse
still, the Crown court, perhaps the CPS lawyer just gives
in for whatever reason. I do not know; I am guessing. I
have no idea.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I am
anxious to answer as many questions as possible. In the
Crown court, cracked and ineffective trials that have
going on for a long time. In some cases, legal advice
and services were not available, and the caseworkers
and the CPS had to make decisions. They had to
make decisions in moments of crisis, often without
time to consider all the evidence. The decisions
that I referred to should have been
reviewed before the charge was
made. The fact that 38% of cases are not
reviewed means that when a prosecuting
lawyer goes in
ready, they have
interviewed them individually, they
have checked that what the police say in their
statement is what they are about to give as evidence and is correct,
and they are ready to crack on. But then they find
that things are not quite right. The charge is probably not
correct, in truth. Whoever has reviewed it has probably
done so very well, or things have been kept from the
reviewing lawyer that are particularly important to their
cracking. The fact that 38% of cases are not
reviewed means that when a prosecuting lawyer goes in
to prepare cases for trial, nearly half of them will not
be reviewed. Things are much worse now
than when I was on my feet in magistrates courts before
I left Wilberforce chambers in April 2010.

Some 38.4% of cases are not reviewed before they
first come before the magistrates court. In reality, that
means that if the prosecuting lawyer has been really
lucky, they open their file and they have their witnesses
ready, they have interviewed them individually, they
have checked that what the police say in their statement
is what they are about to give as evidence and is correct,
and they are ready to crack on. But then they find
that things are not quite right. The charge is probably not
correct, in truth. Whoever has reviewed it has probably
done so very well, or things have been kept from the
reviewing lawyer that are particularly important to their
cracking. The fact that 38% of cases are not
reviewed means that when a prosecuting lawyer goes in
to prepare cases for trial, nearly half of them will not
even have been reviewed by a CPS lawyer. They have
one arm very definitely tied behind their back.

I have kept Members long enough, but given that
Government Members will say that everything is great,
I want to talk about what the profession says—what
individuals at the Bar say about their experience in the
CPS. It would not be right for me to name people, but
this is from an experienced CPS prosecutor of 30 years’
call:

“CPS hesitate to instruct QCs to prosecute even murders. Very
serious, high publicity, or multiple murders will get a Silk
prosecuting; otherwise not. The decision tree is on the CPS website.”

which I helpfully have in front of me. He continues:

“As a fairly senior junior barrister...I have over the last 5 years
prosecuted some 12 murder cases. I have done this as single
charged. About 8 of those have been prosecuting against QC and
a junior. One was of two defendants both with QC—
and their respective juniors. The CPS provided him with a
CPS lawyer—a higher court advocate—in that case. He was against two silks, effectively—two Queen’s counsel
—-with their own juniors. I am talking about a junior
not of the level I was at prior to coming into this place.
but of probably 20 years’ call, who has prosecuted and defended for an awfully long time and has a great deal of experience of being junior to leading counsel, and of prosecuting a murder on his own without leading counsel.

That CPS prosecutor says that, in contrast, judges “have some influence on Defence getting a QC, and will say in open court ‘This being a murder case the Defendant should’”—the judge of course is right—“have leading counsel and the legal aid is then likely to be extended to cover that.”

In that scenario of a double-handed case with two defendants, why should the victim, whose loved one has allegedly been murdered, have counsel bringing the case for the prosecution against two leading counsel and two junior counsel? How does the victim feel in that scenario?

I hope it will not annoy you too much, Mr Hanson, if I talk briefly about some other cases that have been mentioned to me.

Mr David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman continues, I remind the House that the debate will finish at 5.30 pm. The hon. Gentleman has the floor, but other Members have indicated that they wish to speak.

Karl Turner: I will be as quick as I possibly can be, but it is crucial that I mention what the junior members are saying. This person says:

“I often work in the magistrates court, where matters are unfortunately often in chaos so far as prosecutions are concerned. The CPS are dealing with hundreds of cases, often of a domestic violence nature and many of which are doomed from the start because Complainants had told the police in terms either that they won’t be coming or for which no statement has even been taken.”

He or she goes on to say:

“They do not appear to have such resources, either for these sorts of cases or indeed others.”

It is chaotic in the magistrates court. Another lawyer emailed me to say:

“The problem is not just money”—the point made by the hon. Member for Cheltenham—“it is doctrine, dogma and management double speak. I get six cases to prosecute in the magistrates at 4pm the afternoon before” the case is due to be aired in court. He or she continues:

“Each of those cases will be defended by a separate lawyer who only has that one case to deal with. The hearing record sheets are not there, and all sorts of things are missing from the files. It is utterly chaotic.

I have got a huge number of cases that I could read out, Mr Hanson, but I will not annoy you by doing that. I want to give other Members an opportunity to tell us, if indeed they want to, that everything is rosy in the garden, despite the fact that £185 million per annum has been cut from the CPS budget.”

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate. I declare an interest as a criminal defence solicitor. I have an interest in defence, but primarily an interest in the criminal justice system, which we all share. We need a good, efficient and effective CPS as part of the criminal justice system. That is good for all: for defendants, for witnesses, for victims and for public confidence. It is a collaborative effort, so in many ways it is important not to see this issue in isolation.

There are funding challenges—we could have another debate about the funding challenges for the criminal defence service and the challenges for the police and others—but there is a collaborative effort, which is why I welcomed the inspection by the Crown Prosecution Service inspectorate and Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary in 2015, which helped us to home in on some of the issues. Yes, one can look at the statistics on cracked trials, but when one looks deeper one sees, as the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) said, the issue of the police’s charging decisions and the impact that has down the line. Getting it right first time was very much the NAO’s mantra in relation to getting value for money for taxpayers.

I will try not to take up too much time but I want to draw attention to the statistics. First, it is important to recognise that there has been criticism for some time. There is also the challenge of cuts. Back in 2014, the independent inspectorate’s report on the CPS looking at the period 2013-14 said:

“The background of continuing resource reductions is now having an impact on the ability of the service to deliver effectively across the whole range of its activity.”

That was then; now, we are looking at what the challenges have been to that. If one brings in the NAO report and other inspectorate reports, one sees that there is a serious challenge from cuts, but if one delves deeper, one sees other issues, including a large variation in performance across the country in the service provided to victims and witnesses. One cannot therefore look just at the money; one has to ask, “Why are there variations? How can we have a more uniform approach that provides a good service to all?”

There has been some progress. I will not seek in any way to cover over the cracks—there are serious challenges and serious problems. I go to courts and I see and hear them and the way they affect morale and confidence in the system. That is a collective challenge that is affecting the criminal justice system. Nevertheless, given some of the statistics, it is worth saying for balance that the proportion of effective trials in magistrates courts has increased from 34% in the year ending September 2011 to 39%. There has been an increase, although it is not enough.

On the issue that the NAO and inspectors have looked at time and again, yes, mistakes are happening, but they are happening through the currency of cases. Early decisions should have been made and what had gone wrong identified. No doubt, the anecdotal evidence provided by the hon. Gentleman can be repeated by the prosecutors. The fact that two thirds of cases still do not progress as planned shows that that needs urgent attention.
The reality, and what I have experienced myself, is that the most frustrating thing about funding challenges and staffing is that, when it comes to the need for an early decision, at court—or preferably beforehand—there needs to be an appropriate review. A review can take place before the door of court so that appropriate decisions can be made for the benefit of the whole criminal justice system. That is something that I think is not happening enough, and down the line, whether in the magistrates court or the Crown court, it leads to vacated trials.

More needs to be done, but during my 20 or so years of practising, there has been a sea change, not least in terms of the recognition of the need for reforms—that the present situation cannot continue. The only way we will get better value for money and better public confidence is by grasping the fact that, in particular, the legal system has been one of the last to come up to date regarding paper and the need for a digitised criminal justice service. That is not the only answer, but we know that when we are struggling to find where that advance information or that disclosure is, we ring up and try to find the duty officer, who then tries to get someone. Thankfully, those things are now part of the past. The future is proper digitisation, which can help in getting prompt disclosure and appropriate decisions made and should lead to early decisions. We are still not getting those appropriate early decisions. The report of the last joint inspection in 2015 made the point that too many police charging decisions were incorrect and picked up too late by the CPS in court. The fact that 38.4% of cases were not reviewed before court must be seriously challenged for the sake of the system and for the benefit of all.

I want to make some brief points on what could be done. I remain concerned about transparency and accountability in the criminal justice system. The decisions made, such as those made by magistrates on the mode of trial—whether the case goes to Crown court—are still not clear enough for everyone.

There is variation between areas. There have now been improvements to crime mapping for victims, but we should look much better at justice mapping and the accessibility of justice in a given area. The challenge of less localised magistrates courts and less reporting and less public awareness of what is happening in local courts means that we need the digital service to map better what is happening in our areas to see the impact of decisions, going back to charging decisions and particularly to decisions made in court and their impact. That will help to build confidence and public perception that is not based just on anecdote or the latest scandalous headline in a tabloid.

Transparency is needed, but we also need accountability. One of the frustrations I feel on behalf of the defence is that I am directly accountable if I make a bad decision—if I have not got my act together and got my witnesses together, or if I have mucked up in court, I will get it in the neck from a senior partner or others, and not least from the client—but I do not see that same accountability for the Crown prosecutor. There is accountability for the police officer handling his case and there is much more in the Crown court, but at the magistrates court, with a pile of cases, when something goes wrong and a decision needs to be made quickly that perhaps goes against the victim and against the interests of justice in the long run, the Crown prosecutor—strained and challenged though they and the system are—is not challenged and accountable. We do not allow wasted costs orders now because of decisions about publicly funded cases, so the Crown prosecutor does not get it in the neck about wasted costs and lessons are not learnt—it is not so much about berating that individual prosecutor but about the system learning the lessons. Is there a way to provide greater accountability for the CPS, particularly when decisions are made?

Can we recover more costs for the system through costs orders? Can we have more full costs orders in CPS cases, not just contributions to costs? Yes, there are those who cannot afford those, but there are others who certainly can afford to pay prosecution costs. Other agencies will apply for the full costs of a case, including the police enforcement costs; can the CPS introduce full costs orders? Can the CPS also benefit from successful proceeds of crime applications, and can that funding go to the CPS and those prosecuting agencies, rather than to the coffers of the Treasury and the Home Office?

5 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I was not planning on speaking, but having heard some of the remarks that have been made, I thought I would briefly volunteer a few thoughts of my own.

Karl Turner: I am surprised to hear that the hon. Gentleman did not intend to speak. I received an email that said he intended to do so.

Alex Chalk: First, by way of background, like the hon. Gentleman, I worked through the night to prepare long lists for the CPS, from 2002 to 2005. I went around the courts in Hertfordshire—going to the magistrates court and the Crown court, prosecuting and defending cases involving everything from rape to murder to terrorism offences.

I take this opportunity to agree with the hon. Gentleman that the calibre of some of the prosecutors and caseworkers in our Crown Prosecution Service is very high and stands up to comparison with any other prosecuting authority anywhere in the world. One thing I found disappointing was that prosecutors or caseworkers who were exceptionally conscientious or hardworking did not seem to get advancement any faster than people who were not quite as attentive. I thought that was a little unfair.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman on equality of arms. It is vital, particularly when dealing with a serious case, that the prosecution is able to show that there is equality of arms. It is therefore absolutely right, in a serious case, that silk should be instructed if they are up against silk. Where I begin to part company with the hon. Gentleman is on his bald assertion—made with the best of intentions, I accept—that everything can be attributable to funding.

Karl Turner: I did not say it is.

Alex Chalk: Well, one might be forgiven for thinking that that was part of the assertion. If one looks at the figures from 2010, although the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there has been a decline, I am afraid it is wrong to suggest somehow that there were no problems previously but there are now.
From my experience when I was in court, all too often the reason cases cracked, if there was a problem with the prosecution, was system failure. For example, if witnesses had not been warned, if dates to avoid had not been provided or if disclosure had not been served. Those were systematic failings. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrows) correctly made the point that systematic change can sometimes be as significant as financial change. The changes we are seeing to the digital case system are causing such an important step change in the quality of the prosecuting service that, for example, when one turns up at the Crown court, one can immediately see on the system that a disclosure has taken place. It provides for that in a far more efficient way.

**Karl Turner:** Does the hon. Gentleman think that those “systematic failings”, as he puts it, are getting better because the CPS is experiencing a £185 million a year cut to its funds?

**Alex Chalk:** Let me make it crystal clear: of course I would like to see more funding for the CPS. There is no question about that. However, I take slight issue with the blandishment that if we simply put in the money that has been taken out, everything would be improved. The reality is that, unless we reform the system to make it more efficient, we will be throwing money at the situation and not taking a sensible, radical and reform-minded approach. The simple point I make is that, where we are making real progress as a country, and where the CPS, through its diligent prosecutors and caseworkers, is able to make a difference, is through systematic changes such as those to the digital case system, which are achieving a step change and improvement in quality. That point is worth making.

The hon. Gentleman also rightly praised that excellent public servant, Alison Saunders. In that vein, is it not worth listening very carefully to what she herself said? She came before the Justice Committee, and I think it was I who asked—by the way, I have no difficulties with asking an open question to get an answer that might be unhelpful to the Government—if the CPS has enough money. I would have been perfectly prepared for her to say, “No, it’s hopeless; we’re going to hell in a handbasket and something has to be sorted out”, but her response was:

“Yes, we think we do, particularly now that we have the CSR settlement. I am not saying that it is easy; let me say that first. Over the last five years, our budget has reduced by 23% or so.”

She went on to talk about the sensible and pragmatic steps that have been taken, but she answered that question in the affirmative. On a subsequent occasion, she indicated she fully agreed with this CPS comment:

“This settlement will allow the CPS to respond to a changing caseload and the significant increase in complex and sensitive cases, such as terrorism, rape and serious sexual assaults and child sex abuse.”

One cannot have it both ways by saying she is a fantastic public servant—which she is, by the way—and ignoring what she says.

I respectfully and completely agree with the hon. Gentleman’s intentions. He wants an excellent Crown Prosecution Service. I do, too. He values excellent Crown prosecutors. I do, too. Equally, however, we have to look at this in a sophisticated way, not simply through the blunt instrument of funding. I believe, broadly speaking, that we are on the right track. We have excellent public servants; we should allow them to get on with their job.

5.6 pm

**Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con):** First, I should say that my wife is a non-practising solicitor. For the avoidance of doubt, that is my declaration of interest.

I recently met the chief Crown prosecutor for Wessex, Kate Brown, who is based in Hampshire. She and I discussed the “CPS 2020” plan. It seems to me that it is a clear plan to continuously improve the way the CPS works—those are its own words. I must say to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) that the picture he paints is certainly not the whole story. It may be one side of the story; it is more likely part of the story from a particular perspective. While I respect his views and experience, in the interest of fairness, it is important that some of the successes of the CPS are also placed on the record in the short time available.

For instance—I have different statistics from the hon. Gentleman—net annual expenditure since 2011-12 is down £101 million. Yes, a reduction in expenditure has led to a 27% reduction in headcount from that date, but convictions remain steady at around 83%. Some £84 million has been put back into public funds through the proceeds of crime being recovered, even though, owing to the way the criminal justice system has evolved, there is a shifting case load.

There are now 28% more sexual offence cases and 23% more fraud and forgery cases than five years ago. How? Because the CPS has changed the way it works. It is building stronger cases from the start and encouraging more early and appropriate guilty pleas. Some 76% of pleas are now guilty, up from 69% in 2011-12. While Crown court cases remain steady at around 100,000 cases per annum, there has been a 36% reduction in magistrates court cases. The way the CPS works is changing to deliver the right outcomes for citizens across the country.

**Karl Turner:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Jayawardena:** I am afraid, in the interest of time, I cannot. As the CPS put it, it will deliver an efficient operating model through “digitisation”—which has been referred to—

“Better Case Management and Transforming Summary Justice.”

Digitisation alone will potentially save more than 5% of the £3.3 million cost of paper and couriers. That is one small element of the savings that can be made in the CPS budget.

The CPS budget is constantly reviewed, which is important. When the Attorney General was asked about that, he made it clear that he has regular discussions with the Director of Public Prosecutions, but that she and he “both believe that the spending review settlement enables the CPS to respond effectively”.—[Official Report, 14 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 978.]

I think that sums it up. It is clear, if we look at those statistics and at the “CPS 2020” plan—which is the CPS’s document, not this Government’s—that the CPS’s
funding should be reviewed, as it always is, but that more importantly, it is delivering for the needs of decent people across this country who want to see justice done.

5.9 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I have already referred to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) on securing this debate and pay tribute to the work he did as a shadow Law Officer. When I came into this House, I watched him carry out the role of shadow Solicitor General and, subsequently, shadow Attorney General, and his was a model to follow. His passionate speech at the start of the debate sums up his depth of feeling about the issues before us.

It was great to hear the speech of the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk). His praise of the work done by Crown Prosecution Service staff was very well put, and I think we all agree across the House that tremendous work is done in the circumstances in which those staff find themselves. The hon. Members for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) and for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) both spoke powerfully and talked about digitisation, which clearly will be an issue.

I think all Opposition Members agree with the hon. Member for Cheltenham that this is not purely about money. Obviously it is not. However, it is now 2017, and the Conservative party, either in coalition or on its own, has been in power and responsible for our criminal justice system for nearly seven years. It has to bear responsibility for the system as it is today.

We have heard eye-watering figures about the cuts in the budget. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East talked about the overall cut in expenditure. Indeed, the resource budget has seen a real-terms cut of 24% since 2010-11. I am grateful to the Solicitor General for answering my written questions about the staffing budget. The figures given show that the staffing budget in 2015-16 is 40% of what it was in 2010-11.

I will make two broad points about the Crown Prosecution Service. The first is about where our criminal justice system is in 2017. No doubt the Solicitor General, the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), His praise of the work done

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman draws attention, quite properly, to a very salient figure, but how can one be absolutely clear that that is to do with the Crown Prosecution Service as against the list office, the offence or the actions of the court? Why focus specifically on the CPS?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I hoped I had made it clear that this is about the performance of the system. The Conservative party, in one way or another, has been responsible for that system for seven years. Wherever in the system we isolate the cause, the Conservative party cannot escape blame for the performance of the system. That is the point I have been seeking to make.

When we talk about money, we have to be extremely careful about false economies, because things can seem as if they will save money. Let me give an example. I drew attention to the staffing budget, which I asked a specific written question about, and the Solicitor General was kind enough to answer very directly. It has been substantially reduced, but at the same time the Crown Prosecution Service is spending substantial amounts of money on agency staff. The response to my written question showed that in 2015-16, more than £7.8 million was spent on agency staff.

When we look at this in the round, we have to do so in two senses. First, of course this is not purely about money, but when money is cut from certain budgets, we have to be conscious of the effect on the system and whether false economies are causing problems further down the line or mean that we have to hire agency staff instead. The second point is about the whole system of which the Crown Prosecution Service is a part. I hope that all of us across this House want to see these measures improve. The responsibility is on the Government for these measures to improve. I am sure they accept that responsibility, but they have to act, and act quickly, because the performance of the system clearly needs to improve rapidly.

5.16 pm

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I know, on a personal level, that you have had a long interest in these matters. I hope the debate has been of particular salience to you.

I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), my former shadow. It has been nice to be together again in that sense. I have often thought that it would have been great if he and I had done a case against each other, but I was in another part of the country from him. When he was reminiscing—not quite eulogising—about his days carrying large amounts of files to the magistrates court, it took me back to my time back in the ’90s when I did precisely the same thing.

Here is the rub: times have changed. The hon. Gentleman will be glad to know that he does not now have to carry all those files. He can have it all on an iPad or a laptop, because of the Transforming Summary Justice initiative in the magistrates court. That means there is far more efficiency now in the use of digital technology in the court. If he came with me to CPS offices, he would be amazed that in magistrates court divisions now, paper is the exception, rather than the rule.
Karl Turner: It is all very good when it works, but people are reporting to me that, sadly, it does not work and often goes wrong—very badly wrong. Cases are vacated as a result of the very thing the Solicitor General mentions.

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for sharing some powerful anecdotes. I do not underplay anecdote; it certainly helped to inform me in my long career at the criminal Bar. However, the overall statistics tell the full story about what is happening across the system. There is no doubt that in the magistrates court, we are seeing an increase in efficiency. For example, guilty pleas at the first hearing in the magistrates court have increased as a proportion of total cases from just over 62% back in 2010 to over 70% in the past year. That is indicative—

Karl Turner: Of self-represented clients—litigants in person.

The Solicitor General: No, it is not. It is indicative of much better preparation by the prosecution of the cases, so that when defendants appear, they face a case that has been properly put together. That is also reflected by the increase in the overall guilty plea rate, which has gone up from just under 68% to 76.3%.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East talked about inefficiency. I am pleased to tell him that average hearings per case for both guilty pleas and trials have reduced. For trials heard in the magistrates court, we are now looking at just under three days, as opposed to three and a half days or more. Compliance with judges’ orders was always an issue when it came to the Crown Prosecution Service. Hon. Members will remember “mentions”—my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) will know exactly what I am talking about. I am glad to say that we have seen an increase in timely compliance with judges’ orders in the Crown court in recent years. The rate has increased to more than 80% in the last two years.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): Does my hon. and learned Gentleman proved that the CPS through that period. He did a remarkable job of delivering efficiency and providing leadership, which was then taken up by Alison Saunders, the Director of Public Prosecutions, who has rightly been praised here today. The hon. and learned Gentleman proved that the job could be done with a declining share of expenditure. When we look at the figures—my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) mentioned this—we see that performance and conviction rates have stayed remarkably steady through the years.

I am delighted to see on my visits to regional offices that there is smarter use of personnel within the CPS. I will give an example. North-east prosecutors will be able to work remotely—and do so—on south-east cases. That is a good emblematic example of how the CPS is able to work remotely—and do so—on south-east cases. Digital case management has now made its way into the Crown court and is making a real difference. With my long years at the coalface of the criminal Bar, I was the first to be sceptical about digital and the use of IT. I have seen it before, but, believe you me, when I saw the pilots in Southwark, for example, I was delighted to see judges embracing that and telling me that the system was user friendly and starting to make a difference. Now that it has been rolled out across the country, it is starting to bear fruit.

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Hon. Members talked about the challenges of the CPS and about charging decisions. It is right to say that the police have a role with regard to some charging decisions.
There was a sea change, in that motoring offences were largely transferred to the police for decision making. That of course added to the reality that, with the increase in sexual offences, the CPS was now dealing with an entirely different caseload. There was not a like-for-like transition, and that complexity means extra challenges for CPS lawyers.

The hon. Member for Torfaen referred to the use of agency workers. I make no apology for that, because I think that using the independent Bar—whether to do agency work in the magistrates court or, vitally, to prosecute serious cases in the Crown court—is exactly what the Crown Prosecution Service should be doing. I am glad to say, having spoken with chief Crown prosecutors across the country, that it is increasingly using the experience and expertise of prosecutors to manage cases effectively within the system, so that we have the excellence in advocacy that we get from the independent Bar and the excellence in case management that we get from experienced CPS employees.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I do not think that there would be any disagreement about the excellence of the advocacy of the independent Bar. I was simply making the point that when we see apparent cuts in the staffing budget, we have to look at the overall picture. We have to look at the temporary staff as well in adding things up to a single figure.

The Solicitor General: Again, I have spoken directly to many CPS staff, particularly in Wales; indeed, a lot of them used to instruct me. Some of the staff have been there for 30 years—the CPS’s retention rate is extraordinary. I think I get a bit of frankness from them, and they tell me that, in many respects, working practices have improved. The reduction in offices has helped them to work more smartly. They are now physically co-located in buildings with the police. They are working in ways that they did not dream were possible before.

Alex Chalk: Does my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General agree with me, and indeed the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), that if one is to use the independent Bar, it is also important to ensure that equality of arms is observed? There comes a point at which victims’ groups and victims’ families can rightly note the disparity that apparently exists between the seniority of counsel for the defence and the relatively junior status of counsel for the Crown.

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend makes an important general point. Equality of arms is, of course, enshrined in article 6 of the European convention on human rights. It is something that we all understand as practitioners. It would be wrong of me to comment on individual cases, but I will say that where the Crown Prosecution Service is having to deal with complicated and complex issues relating to homicide, resource is never a bar to using the most experienced and senior counsel available, and that of course includes leading counsel.

Time is extremely short, and I want to give the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East a minute to respond, but let me say this. With regard to engagement, the most recent survey of employees of the CPS, of which two thirds took part, showed a welcome increase this year of 5%, right up to a figure of just over 59% telling us that morale in the CPS is good. They face significant challenges, but with increased numbers, particularly in the rape and serious sexual offences units, and an emphasis on the prosecution not just of volume cases but of serious sexual offences, conviction rates continue to stay steady and the numbers of people being brought to justice continue to rise, particularly in the important area of violence against women and girls. I could say much more, but I am mindful of the time.

Karl Turner: I am grateful to the Solicitor General for what he has said, but I am disappointed that he has not been prepared to admit that everything is not entirely rosy in the garden at the CPS. He describes a scenario in which senior people in the CPS in his own area, who indeed instructed him—

Mr David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. I am loth to stop the hon. Gentleman in full flow, but the sitting stands adjourned.

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Thursday 12 January 2017

[Mr Nigel Evans in the Chair]

Restorative Justice

1.30 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Justice Committee, Restorative justice, HC 164, and the Government response, Cm 9343.

It is a particular pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and to move the motion on behalf of the Justice Committee. I am grateful to my Committee colleagues who are here to take part in the debate. We believe that this topic is important and look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to the issues we raised.

Restorative justice is defined by the Ministry of Justice as “the process that brings those harmed by crime, and those responsible for the harm, into communication, enabling everyone affected by a particular incident to play a part in repairing the harm and finding a positive way forward.”

We heard evidence during our inquiry that restorative justice had been largely offender-led, aimed at the tangible measure of reducing reoffending, but that everyone involved recognised that it was crucial for restorative justice to be initiated by victims and focused on their needs, even if increased victim satisfaction does not have an easily measurable financial benefit. We are now much more alert to issues affecting victims. It is particularly sad that Jill Saward, who did so much to highlight the plight of victims, died only recently; I am sure that everyone of us would want to pay tribute to her courage and bravery in this area.

The Committee thinks that refocusing restorative justice to put victims at the heart of the process has been a welcome development. Any reduction in reoffending is of benefit to society and achieving that is a good thing, in any event. Restorative justice can be delivered in various ways, the most well known of which is through a conference or meeting between the victim of a crime, and any of their supporters, and the offender. That can be directly—face-to-face—or sometimes by telephone or video conferencing.

It is worth stressing that victims and offenders are not simply brought together and left to get on with it. A lot of people do not understand how the process works. In reality, expert facilitation and preparation are essential parts of the restorative justice process. That can often involve a lot of work and discussion with victims and offenders in advance of their actual contact with one another in order to explain the process, manage expectations and set out objectives and ground rules. Facilitators are also present during the conference to set the scene and guide the conversation.

According to the Restorative Justice Council, whose work we recognise and pay tribute to, victim and offender conferences can be beneficial both for offenders and victims. The RJC said that for offenders the experience can be incredibly challenging, because it confronts them with the personal impact of their crime. For victims, meeting the person who has harmed them can be a huge step in moving forward and recovering from the crime. I say in parenthesis that my experience of practising for 30 years at the criminal Bar led me to recognise the truth of both those aspects. Frequently offenders—even repeat offenders—had no concept of the human cost of their offending. It is a powerful means of bringing them up sharp and causing them to think differently, and it is part of a cathartic process for victims as well.

The Ministry of Justice is currently working to its third action plan on restorative justice, which was published in November 2014 and has objectives and information going up to 2018. We were advised during our inquiry that the Government were preparing a progress report on the action plan, but that report appears not to have seen the light of day. We have also heard suggestions informally that the Government have been thinking about producing a new action plan to replace the final year of the current action plan. With just over a year left, not much time is left to report on progress or revise the plan for the rest of its lifetime. I hope that the Minister—I welcome him to the debate—will explain what the Government’s intentions are in that respect when he responds.

In the action plan as it stands, the Ministry’s vision is for “good quality, victim-focused restorative justice…to be available at all stages of the criminal justice system…in England and Wales.”

Within that vision the Ministry has set itself three broad objectives: first, equal access to restorative justice for victims of crime, wherever they are in England and Wales, whatever the age of the offender, and whatever the offence committed; secondly, raising awareness of restorative justice and its potential benefits among victims, offenders, criminal justice practitioners, the media and the general public; and thirdly, ensuring that restorative justice is of good quality, safe, in line with the European Union directive on victims’ rights, focused on the needs of the victim and delivered by a trained facilitator. I hope that even after this country leaves the European Union, we will maintain awareness of that particular directive, which sets out sensible good practice. I am sure that any sensible Government would wish to maintain that, whatever our future relationship with our European neighbours.

We clearly state in our report that we support the aims and objectives of the action plan, welcoming in particular the Ministry’s focus on ensuring that restorative justice services are high quality and focused on victims. During the inquiry we discovered that evidence on the effectiveness, and cost-effectiveness, of restorative justice is not as well developed as it might be. We recommend further work by the Ministry, together with stakeholders, to establish criteria for judging the success of restorative justice in relation both to offenders and to victims.

The Government’s response to our report states that “work is already underway to develop an evidence base for the effective delivery of restorative justice services and the outcomes achieved by those services.”

I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us a little more about that work, where it is leading and the progress so far.
On restorative justice in general, there is much agreement between the Ministry, other authorities and stakeholders about its use within the criminal justice system. That may mean that there is a higher degree of consensus in this debate than in some other debates we have had on our reports in Westminster Hall—I hope so, because this is an important topic and perhaps an often under-appreciated part of the criminal justice system.

I am conscious that other Members wish to contribute to the debate, so I will briefly touch on four important topics arising from our report, including the restorative justice landscape and funding, and the recent Victims’ Commissioner report on victims’ experiences and perceptions—I am delighted to see the Victims’ Commissioner and the chief executive of her office in the Public Gallery today; they were helpful in their evidence to the Committee. I will touch briefly on restorative justice in domestic abuse and violence cases—my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) will also refer to those matters—and on the potential role of legislation.

I say to the Minister—not simply because he is an old friend and it is still post-Christmas—that we are grateful for, and commend him and the Government for, the comprehensiveness and quality of their response to our report. That is appreciated, and we accept that they have taken the report seriously. However, we still have a number of concerns and might want to push him to do a bit bolder and go a bit further and faster, but we recognise the spirit in which the response was delivered.

Let me touch on the landscape of restorative justice and funding. A range of bodies within the criminal justice system are responsible for the funding and delivery of restorative justice at various points in the system. The primary responsibility for provision lies with police and crime commissioners, within their overall remit for delivering victims’ services. Some £29 million was made available to police and crime commissioners over the past three years for restorative justice, although it was not ring-fenced; it was within an overall provision for victims, which stands at £63 million in 2016-17. The Ministry of Justice has provided other funding to the Youth Justice Board to build restorative justice capacity within youth offending teams, and the National Offender Management Service has also spent money to build restorative justice capacity.

We were pleased that the Government accepted the thrust of our recommendation that annual collation and publication of information on spending by police and crime commissioners on restorative justice would be helpful in assessing progress on the action plan and supporting an evidence base to test the effectiveness of restorative justice. However, they did not make a firm commitment to do so. I press the Minister again to make that firm commitment, following what seems to be the spirit and tenor of the Government’s response to our recommendations. The Government response states that the overall victim services budget has been protected during International Restorative Justice Week last November. The second part of the commissioner’s report on restorative justice examined victims’ experiences and perceptions of restorative justice, on the basis of 35 interviews with victims. It is worth saying that the first part of the review examined the subject from the perspective of providers. The second part of the report raised several issues of concern, on which it would be helpful to hear the Minister’s views.

First, as I said, the Government allocated £23 million to build capacity for restorative justice between 2013 and 2016, but the crime survey for England and Wales shows that only 4.2% of all victims of crime were offered restorative justice in the year to March 2016, the lowest percentage since 2010. What will be done to ensure that restorative justice is offered to victims in accordance with their entitlement under the victims’ code? What do the Government intend to do, or encourage others to do, to raise awareness of restorative justice to meet those objectives?

Our report recommended that the main means of raising awareness should be through criminal justice: effectively, it should be mainstreamed into the system through various agencies. What we discovered, though, was that when restorative justice is offered, it is often during the later stages of the criminal justice process. Nearly half of victims in the Victims’ Commissioner’s review said that they were informed of restorative justice only after the offender had been sentenced. That is not in line with the vision in the Government’s action plan to make restorative justice available at all stages in the criminal justice process, including pre-sentencing or as part of the conditions for an out-of-court disposal. Does the Minister recognise that point, and do the Government plan to address it?

What plans do the Government have to increase the use of restorative justice as part of the conditions attached to community orders or suspended sentences? When we visited north America as part of our inquiry, we were struck by the amount of use made of restorative justice as part of a robust set of out-of-court disposals or, in our language, community types of disposal. We think that more could be done here in the UK as well.

Let me turn to domestic abuse and violence cases. One of the most difficult and sensitive questions to address is the suitability of restorative justice processes in cases of domestic abuse and violence. In our report we set out the concern, expressed to us in evidence by Women’s Aid and others, that restorative justice was potentially harmful. It was put to us that it could be “another way for a perpetrator to continue their control and abuse.”

Again, it is timely to review the topic, because that point is not dissimilar to the one made about cross-examination by litigants in person in family courts, and I am delighted to see the Government taking steps to prevent such abuse. There is a concern that the same sort of risk could arise in the restorative justice process.

Of particular concern to us, and I think to Ministers too, was evidence that restorative justice was being used at level 1—at street level, to put it in everyday language—by police officers in domestic abuse cases, contrary to police guidance. We are pleased that the Government’s response stated that they were considering with the police...
how to reinforce the message that such unsophisticated level 1 restorative justice is not appropriate in such cases.

More generally, our report expressed the view that, in principle, restorative justice should be available for every type of offence. However, given the clear risks in the use of restorative justice for certain types of offence, we recommended that the Ministry should work with the Restorative Justice Council to create and fund training and promote best practice guidance for restorative justice facilitators. It is an area where care and discretion are needed, particularly in domestic abuse cases. We were pleased that the Government response stated that they were producing a paper setting out the issues that need to be addressed, including any guidance or training, before restorative justice is taken forward in domestic abuse cases. When he replies, will the Minister let us know what progress is being made on that paper and when it is likely to see the light of day?

Finally, I turn to the victims' code and what is sometimes referred to as a potential victim's law. One of the starkest anomalies in relation to restorative justice is that victims' rights are stronger for victims of offenders under the age of 18 than others. In cases where the offender is under 18, victims are entitled to be offered restorative justice by the relevant youth offending team where it is appropriate and available. Victims of adult offenders have a rather weaker right to receive information about restorative justice, including about how they can take part. That anomaly seems to have arisen for historical reasons rather than any other, particularly logic, so we recommended that the code should be strengthened to bring the rights of victims of adult offenders into line with those of victims of young offenders.

On that recommendation, we found the Minister's response disappointing. The Ministry said:

"We continue to keep the Victims' Code under review and will consider the Committee's recommendations the next time we consult on changes."

I urge the Minister to be a bit more specific. I would never accuse my right hon. and learned Friend of sitting on the fence, but the Government need to be more specific about where they stand on the issue. It seems to us that the evidence makes a clear case that that anomaly should not exist. It would not be difficult to rectify, although I grant that it might require legislation. Do the Government acknowledge that in a victim-focused restorative justice system, which is the Government's objective and one that we agree with, there can be no good reason for victims' rights to differ, purely arbitrarily, depending on the age of the offender? I hope that he will give us more detail on that point.

Things have gone quiet since the undertaking in the 2015 Queen's Speech to put key entitlements under the victims' code into a victims' law. A Green Paper on the victims' law was expected before the summer recess last year, but it has not appeared. We noted that a number of amendments concerning victims' rights have been made in the House of Lords to the Policing and Crime Bill. On the question of victims' right to restorative justice, we made what we thought was a nuanced recommendation on introducing a statutory right. We said that due to questions about the capacity to provide restorative justice services, it was probably too soon to bring a statutory right into effect—there is not much point having a statutory right if it cannot be delivered and used—but we felt that the power to introduce such a right, when appropriate, should be conferred by legislation on Ministers. We know that a significant Ministry of Justice Bill is forthcoming. Without riskmg overloading it even more, it might be an opportunity to consider that. I would be interested to know what the Minister feels about that.

In their response, the Government were equally guarded, saying merely:

"Careful consideration is being given to suggestions made by the Victims' Commissioner and others about key rights and entitlements that might be set out in a Victims' Law."

Given the wider debate about the desirability of a victims' law and about what it might contain, I must press the Minister to be more forthcoming about the Government's intentions for such a law, which has long been heralded, and what provisions for restorative justice rights it might make.

Those are the issues I wanted to address in opening the debate and the key issues that our report raised. I know that other hon. Members wish to participate, so I will leave my observations there.

1.50 pm

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I am grateful for the opportunity to follow my friend—in this context—the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), who as Chair of the Justice Committee has ably steered our report and brought our conclusions to the House. He covered a number of the report's points and I do not wish to go over the same ground; I just want to focus on a couple of issues and perhaps focus the Minister's mind on a couple of the report's key points and recommendations.

It is clear to all members of the Committee—and, in fairness, I think to the Government, too—that restorative justice has a value. It is a useful tool for helping people who have committed crimes to understand the impact on the victims and, through that process, for helping to prevent reoffending. There is general agreement from the Justice Committee, the Opposition—I look forward to hearing from my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) in due course—and the Government that there is a valuable role for restorative justice. Indeed, when I held ministerial roles, I propagated restorative justice both in Northern Ireland and in the United Kingdom as a whole. There is a genuine understanding of it.

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): The right hon. Gentleman may recall that when he and I served on the Crime and Courts Bill Committee, we both made common cause for the restorative justice condition for deferred sentences, so that it had a stronger footing.

Mr Hanson: Indeed. As I say, there is common ground across the House, the various parties, the Justice Committee, this Government and, I believe, the previous Government to ensure that we can facilitate restorative justice. There is evidence—it is anecdotal, so we might not give it too much weight—that every £1 spent on restorative justice can save £8 in further costs down the line. That is important.
[Mr Hanson]

The Government’s commitment of £29 million, in their November 2013 plan, to help the development of restorative justice is supportive and indicative of the progress that needs to be made. However, I want to press the Minister on a couple of points, if I may. First, I would welcome some clarity from him on what the £29 million, which we have discussed in the Justice Committee, has been spent on. Has it been spent on restorative justice? I ask because it was not ring-fenced, but was part of a general grant. Has he produced a list of projects that benefit from that £29 million investment? If it is being spent on restorative justice, is it for local decision making? What is the Government’s assessment of what works best for restorative justice? Simply pouring £29 million centrally to police and crime commissioners without a ring fence and hoping that it will develop the seedcorn of good, positive, evaluated, determined restorative justice may not be enough; it may need a little more central direction from Government.

That point leads me to recommendation 66 of the Committee’s report:

“The Ministry of Justice is well placed to take a leadership role in restorative justice and set out a clear overall vision for how it expects restorative justice services to be delivered.”

The Ministry responded to our recommendation—I would be grateful for the Minister’s concentration on this—in paragraph 17 of the Government’s response:

“The Government agrees it is important that all relevant parties have a common understanding of how restorative justice works within the criminal justice system in England and Wales. We will consider the points raised by the Committee before publishing a progress report.”

With due respect, that is civil-service speak for: “We publish a progress report.”

The test for the Minister is whether he can give some indication today of how he envisages a viable restorative justice scheme that avoids the postcode lottery that our report referred to. That might be through effective use of the £29 million; it might be by picking from operational schemes that the Ministry of Justice thinks are working well, have an output and have proved successful in reducing offending and giving victim satisfaction; or it might be from both those things. It is important that he focuses in his reply on how he envisages ensuring that people in north Wales get the same services and opportunities as people in south Wales, in Hertfordshire, in Bromley and Chislehurst and in every other part of the United Kingdom—perhaps even in Ribble Valley, Mr Evans.

We need a collective understanding of what is available, so that people do not feel left out because they cannot access a service. I recognise that we cannot deliver everything or concentrate on everything. The Minister’s response to paragraph 66 therefore needs to look at the key issues: what works, what is good value for money; what gives best victim satisfaction, what most reduces reoffending and how individuals become aware of the offer in the first place.

Our report refers to the understanding of restorative justice. I have to go back to a point that I know Members will be aware of: someone minding their own business who suddenly becomes a victim of crime may not necessarily know what the courts and the police service do, what restorative justice is, how it is available, what benefit it might bring to them or what it might do to prevent future victims from going through the same experience. Until the day someone is a victim, they are not focused on the criminal justice system. I therefore ask the Minister not only what is available, whether it is a postcode lottery and how the funding is used, but how victims become aware of the facilities and support available in their local area. If the Government’s direction of travel is towards localism, how does someone in north Wales who is minding their own business today, living their life peacefully and not expecting to be a victim of crime, but who wakes up as a victim tomorrow, know that such services are available? How do they know how to access them? How are they helped through at a local level?

Those questions take us back to the postcode lottery. I have no problems with devolving funding to police and crime commissioners or local services through community rehabilitation companies, the voluntary sector or other means, but my test for the Minister on his responsibilities is how he assesses what works, who is doing it and whether it is happening. If he is putting a pot of money in, how does he know that it has been delivered at a local level? I would welcome it if the progress report promised in paragraph 17 of the Government response considered those points.

Finally, I would welcome some information from the Minister on what progress has been made on the victims’ law. As the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst mentioned, it was promised in the Conservative manifesto and there was promise of a Green Paper and of legislation. However, we will have a Gracious Speech in May and there is still no Green Paper on a victims’ law. There may be reasons for that. I understand that this is a five-year Parliament—I believe it is—and if that is the case, it might be helpful to people who are interested in this topic for the Minister to say, without breaching any confidentialities, at what stage in this five-year Parliament he expects to bring forward the Green Paper and at what stage he expects the legislation to be in place, to give some support to the principle of the victims’ law, on which, again, I would expect general cross-party co-operation.

With those comments, I hope I can encourage the Minister to respond in a positive way to what is a positive report.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. Just for hon. Members’ guidance, I shall be calling the wind-ups at 2.27 pm, which will allow 10 minutes each for the Minister and the Front-Bench spokespeople, and then three minutes for Mr Neill to speak at the end. I am sure that hon. Members can divvy up the remaining time among themselves.

2 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans.

The difficulty of coming after the previous two speakers is that they have said everything about the report, and I am scrabbling around to find things to say. However, I will concentrate on two issues. The first is domestic
abuse and the second is the youth area. On the one hand, domestic abuse is an area where restorative justice perhaps needs to be restricted—done very well—as opposed to the youth area, where we should use it more and where it should be firmly embedded in the system.

I turn first to the domestic abuse situation. I fully accept the conclusion that we reached as a Committee: that restorative justice should not be excluded from particular types of offence. I do not think that domestic abuse should be outside of the restorative justice area. As my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) will say, in the Thames valley, for example, restorative justice is done very, very well, which is a good example of how things can be brought together. Although some police and crime commissioners do not seem to offer restorative justice in domestic abuse cases, I do not see that as justified, for the reasons I have given.

During the Committee’s inquiry, we heard evidence on this point from both sides. We were told about one victim of abuse who talked about how they were “empowered” by restorative justice in a domestic abuse situation. They said:

“When I walked out of that meeting, I felt as if I could knock out Mike Tyson. I could have taken on anything or anyone.”

That is a very powerful statement about the liberating effects that restorative justice has for some people.

On the other hand, we heard from organisations such as Refuge, which argued that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) has said, restorative justice simply provided offenders with a means of exerting more control over their victims. That point needs to be taken into consideration and examined very carefully; I will say something about it later, when I consider the context of how the police operate in this area.

It was interesting to hear from the then Justice Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning), who said that

“it is absolutely wrong for anybody, whether it be the police or any other part of the criminal justice system, to push and cajole someone into restorative justice.”

I completely agree with that sentiment. It is fine to have restorative justice as part of the domestic abuse landscape, but it is wrong to force people to use it.

However, whichever side one comes down on regarding restorative justice, what we cannot have is restorative justice being applied differently in different areas across the country. That goes back to what the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) said about the postcode lottery, or, as I have said, the possibility of people being pressurised to take part. Again, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst has already mentioned, this comes down to how restorative justice is applied in domestic abuse cases and whether it occurs at the street level—the so-called level 1 area. Whatever the Ministry may think about how things are operating, the evidence we heard was that level 1 was still being used by the police. That is something we completely disagree with. I accept that the Government are going to talk to the police about this, but the Government need to emphasise that that should not take place. Street level is the wrong location for restorative justice and using it there takes away all the subtlety and all the benefits that can come out of it.

A tremendous amount of guidance can be provided by the Ministry of Justice for the police. Also, a greater degree of training on restorative justice can be provided by the Ministry right across the board, but particularly in the domestic abuse area, to take this issue forward. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed exactly what the Ministry is doing to achieve that.

The second area I want to touch on is the youth system, where I think restorative justice could be used more. We were heartened by how extensively it seems to be used in the youth justice system. I think it is already embedded, but more can be done to ensure that it is firmly part of the youth justice system. Restorative justice helps both victims and offenders to understand what has occurred, what the implications are and why the offence should not be committed again.

As we pointed out in our report, Northern Ireland has youth conferences, which can occur both before and after conviction. However, I understand from the ministerial response to our report that the Ministry is not looking at restoring those for the rest of the country outside of Northern Ireland. I would ask the Minister to have another look at that and see whether there was not something in Northern Ireland that we could apply elsewhere in the UK.

2.7 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I am not a member of the Justice Committee, but I thank its members for raising the issue of restorative justice and for calling for greater support to be given to RJ programmes.

If Members will allow me, I will add to the debate the words of an offender who is still serving a sentence. I talked to him on Christmas day and he has given me permission to tell colleagues about his experience of the RJ course. He said to me on Christmas day, “People here think they’re here just out of bad luck, but considering the consequences of your action can make you think.” He went on to say, “I was really angry, but the RJ course gave me an opportunity to take responsibility for my actions”.

I asked this offender to write to me and he wrote a very long and thoughtful letter; he must have spent a lot of Christmas day writing it, and I thank him for it. He wrote that the RJ course he completed, which was the Sycamore Tree course, was a six-week course for 20 offenders that is staffed by volunteers who give up one afternoon weekly over that six-week period to come into the prison. The ratio of volunteers to offenders is 1:1.

I have attended part of that course myself, particularly the sixth week, when offenders summarise what they have learned and speak about the changes within themselves that have occurred, and it is very moving and quite profound. The young man wrote about

“the stand-out watershed moment when a victim of crime comes in to discuss her/his situation. The power of this, conversation cannot be over-emphasised. Our case dealt with ‘Lyn’—”

I do not think that is her real name, because he puts it in inverted commas—
“who recounted the tale of how her son was murdered in Liverpool. This tale struck a chord with all in the room. The first-hand experience and a media presentation of holiday photos and photos from this young man’s life rammed home the message of the consequences of crime. The subsequent letters to Lyn from prisoners is a testament to the lasting power of her presentation. All prisoners should be exposed to such raw emotion.”

The young man said that it was such a positive tool for him and others.

The young man’s perspective on restorative justice was that “it is the mind of the offender we are seeking to change…Many prisoners believe they are only in prison due to bad luck.”

In other words, “I got caught and many others do not.” He said that he was really angry before he did the course, but that it was a way for him to take responsibility for his actions. Early in his letter he says that prisoners “must accept their own culpability. This is the first step in an RJ approach.”

I remember one former offender who was a burglar. He used to burgle houses regularly in the middle of the night. He would go home and by 5 am he was fast asleep, never having a thought about the householder he had burgled. He never once thought about them as a victim.

The young man who wrote to me said that he had been “cynical” about the approach taken in the RJ course, particularly because it was somewhat repetitive and a little childish at times. He said there were “sketches of a burglar saying, ‘She deserved to be burgled as she left the window open’”, but, as he said, “chaps really do think like that.”

By exposing them to their faulty thinking, they see that their actions are wrong. Powerfully, he said:

“The scales falling from my eyes with this method allowed me to release the anger that was dwelling in me.”

In another perceptive comment, the young man said, “RJ allows the offender to recognise their culpability, accept their actions are directly responsible for their circumstances and realise their family are victims of their incarceration…individuals, especially young men, need to be supported…to stop the cycle of shame and rejection”.

He said that through an RJ discussion, the cycle and sense of hostility can be stopped and “remorse and forgiveness comes into play.”

Profoundly, he said:

“The past cannot be changed, but correct actions in the future can atone for incorrect actions of the past.”

In the letter, he gave a quote—“I think it is someone else’s words, but clearly they made great sense to him—which was that the RJ process could “lift the fog of misunderstanding, intolerance and recrimination that can entirely obscure the offender and victim, but with an RJ meeting a richer perspective may be seen and in time, may even draw them closer.”

In other words, he said that such meetings can change both sides, as the one with “Lyn” obviously did for him.

The young man said that the RJ approach clearly helps to stop reoffending, but that to be as effective as possible, it needs to be linked with other forms of support, whether that is education, drug rehabilitation, employment, training, family contact and what he calls “engaging in the community”. He described the example of members of the Hallé orchestra, who come into the prison I volunteer in and help young people learn instruments. Indeed, on that Christmas day morning, one of the young men gave us a remarkable performance of six different tunes, including Christmas carols, on a brass instrument that he had been learning with the Hallé for only 20 weeks. The young man who wrote to me said that contact like that can “act as a lifeline to save them from being drowned by reoffending.”

He very much sees RJ as effective, but said that it must sit with other forms of constructive activity. Finally, he said:

“The first step in getting society to change its opinion of prisoners is in getting prisoners to change their opinion of themselves.”

2.14 pm

**Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): I am in an even worse position than my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) in following superb speeches from all those who have spoken in the debate. They leave me with very little to say, but it is worth summing up by saying that we all know that restorative justice saves money by breaking the cycle of reoffending, and we all know that it plays an important part in victim recovery. What we have to do now is ensure that all those who need to benefit from it can benefit from it. I will try to find a few crumbs that have not yet been touched on.

It is always a great pleasure to speak in Justice Committee debates and to take part in the Justice Committee. Our report was particularly positive, as was the Government’s response, and that has not always been the case with our reports. We welcome that as a Committee, particularly given the importance of the issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke about the prisoner perspective, and I would like to touch on the issue of victims. I draw the attention of those present to an excellent website organised by Why me?, representatives of which are present here today. It is a fantastic website. If people have 10 minutes later today or in the near future, it is worth a look. I will not read out any of the case studies, because Why me? specifically asks that that is not done, but it has excellent studies from victims’ ambassadors on the website. I encourage anyone who is not yet convinced or knowledgeable about restorative justice to look them up. The case studies make it clear that restorative justice helps a wide range of people, all of whom have had their own very different experiences of the criminal justice system. Some lost loved ones, but found that meeting the perpetrator helped them to come to terms with that loss. Other victims have seen their confidence restored from an open dialogue with the offender. That is a plug that I would make again and again; the website is worth while.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) said, the Victims’ Commissioner is with us today. She is a brave lady and an example of the many people in this field who have made something really positive out of their own tragedy. She brought out a report on victims’ perspectives in November. One statistic that I highlight—I do not think it has been mentioned—is that only 4.2% of all victims of crime are...
offered restorative justice. That is a very small percentage, and I know that everyone in this room is working hard to increase it. It is clear that much more needs to be done to raise awareness of the benefits of restorative justice. Only with raised awareness will the uptake increase.

Another concern expressed by the Victims' Commissioner that I do not think has been touched on is that restorative justice is often offered far too late. Nearly half of the victims in her review said that they were informed about restorative justice only after the offender had been sentenced, and that brings me to one of the major barriers to the provision of restorative justice, which sadly is the considerable pressures facing our prison service at this time. It is clear that used properly, early and often, restorative justice can help us to reduce the prison population by helping to reduce reoffending. At the moment, with the considerable difficulties experienced with prisons, prison officers have limited time for supervision and building up the relationships that we know aid rehabilitation.

It is even difficult at the moment to find sufficient staff to move prisoners to the rooms they need to go to for restorative justice sessions. The NOMS capacity-building programme that was launched in January 2012 included training delivered by Restorative Solutions. It had limited success because of the organisational changes and difficulties in the Prison Service. It may be unrealistic to expect major advances in restorative justice in prisons until the bigger issues of staff shortages and safety are tackled. Nevertheless, governors should be instructed to facilitate meetings wherever possible and to view that as part of the wider picture in reducing reoffending and the number of people in our prisons.

We are currently half way through the pilot on restorative approaches to conflict resolution in prisons. Would today be a good moment for the Minister to comment on the data that have come in to date? Otherwise, we will not hear for probably another year; I believe that the pilot is ending in the autumn and then responses will have to be collated. If possible, it would be helpful if he could comment on the material that has come in and the response of the Ministry of Justice to it.

There is a widespread lack of understanding of the benefits of restorative justice. We need to ensure that other parts of the criminal justice system, including the police, the probation service and other charitable organisations, play an increasing role in delivering restorative justice. We need to provide consistent solutions across the country, as the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) said.

At the moment, we find pockets of real success. I am glad to say that in my own area, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley mentioned, the Thames Valley restorative justice service has been a leading light in the field. It recently celebrated its 15th anniversary and has worked closely with the Ministry of Justice throughout that time. It was one of the first organisations in the UK to be awarded the Restorative Justice Council's restorative service quality mark and has, at its centre, a belief in a measure of the effectiveness of restorative justice. We need to go through the process. He was also right to say—this is an important issue, and he was right to say that this should always be victim-based, but that victims should never be forced to go through the process. He was also right to say—that awareness is absolutely crucial. I would add to his call for the Minister to explain how we can better improve the measure of the effectiveness of restorative justice.

The right hon. Member for Delyn, who brings a wealth of experience, made the point clearly that there is common ground and consensus. It is not often that the Justice Committee produces a report that has that consensus, and I think that the Government's response corroborates that position. He also made the crucial point about awareness. He gave a very vivid description of somebody going about their life, having never been involved in the criminal justice system, who becomes a victim of crime. The prospect of that person being asked to meet the offender of the crime, without knowing anything about restorative justice or understanding what it is that they are going to be doing, could be
counterproductive and might set things back rather than moving them forward—moving forward is the principle we are all striving towards.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) talked vividly about the effects and reiterated some of the vivid evidence that we heard in Committee, particularly the phrase used by one victim that they felt they could go and “knock out Mike Tyson.” Although that was clearly a liberating experience for the victim and had a tangible confidence-building effect, perhaps that course of action might be counterproductive to what we are trying to achieve, although I think we all understood what she was trying to say. The hon. Gentleman made a point about consistency of approach and the fact that it is more widely used in the youth justice system, which I suppose is for obvious and good reasons.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is not a member of the Justice Committee, put us all to shame by explaining extensively all the constituency work she was doing on Christmas day. I did send a couple of messages but clearly did not work as hard as she did. I was very taken by the letter she received from her constituent who had been incarcerated, and I was struck by her point that the first step to rehabilitation is when an offender starts to understand the consequences of their crime, departs from the point of, “Well, they left their window open so they deserved it” and starts to understand how the victims feel. That is the first step in rehabilitation. It was a powerful point well made—but I urge the hon. Member to take some time off over the next festive season.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) said that, rather peculiarly, she was stuck for words, but clearly she never is. She was right to point out that the Government response was positive, and to criticise the fact that only 14% of victims are offered restorative justice.

Victoria Prentis: It is 4.2%.

Richard Arkless: Only 4.2%, which is a rather shocking figure, when Opposition parties, Government parties, Ministers, stakeholders and interested parties all agree that restorative justice has a crucial role to play. If we do not strive to increase that figure, we surely ought to feel a wee bit ashamed.

I am a progressive social democrat; I believe in rehabilitation and community justice, and I do not believe in short prison sentences. I believe that victims, wherever possible, should have the option of restorative justice across the criminal justice system, although it should never be compulsory. It can provide closure and can be the first step in the rehabilitation of offenders.

In Scotland, we use restorative justice across the criminal justice system. The procurator fiscal can even use it as an alternative to prosecution. It can be used from the point of arrest to the point of release from incarceration. Of course, it is not perfect and we still have much more to do, particularly on the point of raising awareness, and I think that point is the most powerful of all to come out of today’s debate. It is all very well having a system of restorative justice, but if victims and offenders do not understand the principles and the process and embrace them with open arms and an open mind, it will fail to work. We have to increase the numbers, but we also have to dramatically increase awareness.

2.28 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), for his customary eloquent delivery. I commend the work of his Committee, of which I used to be a member, and thank all the hon. Members who have given some tremendous contributions today. I will do my very best not to repeat anything that has been said. Overall, I strongly agree with the key issues highlighted in the report as being the most salient to progress restorative justice. It clearly identified the key blockers to restorative justice in England and Wales.

It is excellent that all offences and all points of the criminal justice system are to be treated the same, in terms of victims’ access to good-quality services, in line with many countries in mainland Europe and elsewhere, such as New Zealand, Canada and Australia. I am glad that there is the caveat that there needs to be scrutiny of properly trained staff, especially for specialised areas such as domestic abuse and sexual offences. We know that victims can and do benefit when restorative justice is offered and facilitated with supportive systems wide of restorative justice, but there is a danger that it can become a profit-making industry unless quality assurance is built in. I am concerned that, unless a clear timeline is set out soon for progressing local and national developments, with a clear cross-party, long-term action plan, tighter legislation, mandated resourcing and, ideally, milestones in place, there will be a major time gap between the initial pump-priming and the ring-fenced funding, which was introduced three years ago.

Current and emerging projects need to be sustained and grow; they cannot wait for more short-term planning or occasional one-off funds. New systems need three to five-year core budgets to flourish. Many new local services, initially resourced when police and crime commissioner funding began, were not sustained as funds were subsequently diverted when the ring-fencing of funding for restorative justice within the victims service funding was removed.

Restorative justice provision is not joined up, except in a few best-practice areas in England where provision was strong already and where there were restorative justice advocates in police and crime commissioner offices, and in service areas that persevered, so this has been personality-driven. A solution that would lead to more regional best practice would be to mandate the establishment of police and crime commissioner area restorative justice steering groups across sectors, which should definitely include the third sector, to join up knowledge and share and co-fund delivery capacity. That is evidenced in best-practice models such as Cambridgeshire, Avon and Somerset, and the already-mentioned Thames Valley. There needs to be a clear pathway from early intervention restorative approaches and diversionary activities to high-end restorative provision for victims, offenders and communities, with a well advertised and clearly signposted single point of contact for anyone to access on a local and regional basis.
Although the police have an important role to play in engaging with and advocating restorative justice, their core job does not give them the time or the expertise to deliver much more than level 1 or 2 restorative justice, except in specialised roles, so training everyone beyond that level is sometimes a false investment. The focus only on restorative justice conferences is limited for victims, offenders and families, as not everyone can safely meet their offender and many do not want to, although they may want to understand the other side’s perspective better to move forward.

We also need to teach restorative skills at an early stage in schools to all pupils and staff working with children, young people and families so that society can benefit from those principles and skills over time. That would empower individuals and communities to act restoratively themselves without depending on agencies, and it would prevent the escalation of problems and allow them to be resolved quickly.

In Wales, the Welsh Government recognise that, for their education reform, a restorative justice approach is best practice for preventing harm and responding in schools. Involving Families First and recognising the whole restorative team around the family and in social services is best practice. Often the same families are known to all agencies and have the greatest needs. They frequently cause the greatest harm to each other and others and are a drain on resources, so targeted and joined-up work is essential.

The Crime and Courts Act 2013, which was welcome, the antisocial behaviour powers, the Ministry of Justice restorative justice capacity building and the victims’ code all promised great things and were long-awaited, but they were introduced alongside an unprecedented rapid upheaval and huge cuts across the criminal justice system, so no wonder the situation today is patchy.

Access to restorative justice is an inconsistent postcode lottery for victims and offenders, and there is no guarantee of quality. That meant that it was highly unlikely for the brand-new provision to be sustained beyond the initial flurry of political statements and activity. Only pre-existing, long-established restorative services and the larger private or third-sector restorative justice providers have been able to gain or maintain training or delivery contracts.

The report highlights that the third sector might be better placed to increase capacity, so the issue of the growth of local provision is a key point. Restorative justice is suffering in the same way that other innovations have suffered from the concurrent break-up of systems. Probation service and community rehabilitation company delivery of restorative justice is dependent on tendering from private providers. Police and crime commissioners have been introduced, and victims’ services have been tendered across several areas with different providers, so the courts and witness services sometimes have different providers from those of the victims’ support services.

Cuts to the Ministry of Justice’s budget were spread across NOMS and all community and police services, and prison staffing was cut at the same time. Prisons are full beyond capacity, so the capacity of prison offender managers to contribute to restorative justice has been pushed to the limit. Restorative justice is less of a priority when mandatory tasks are hard to complete.

Will the Minister provide details of the Government’s timelines? When will they be ready to introduce a legislative right for victims to access restorative justice services?

Will he consider threading restorative justice through any new legislation and victims services across the criminal justice system, so that it is an embedded principle as systems change, rather than a separate, optional add-on, which it risks becoming? Does he agree that there needs to be a more radical rehabilitative and restorative justice mindset? The risk is that the UK will have the highest rate of imprisonment, cycles of family breakdown and inter-generational offending.

Restorative justice is about rehabilitation and relationship building, as well as repairing the harm for all. It is about social justice as well as criminal and community justice.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): You have all been incredibly disciplined on time, so the Minister has plenty of time to respond.

2.37 pm

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): As usual, it is a great pleasure to be in your charge, Mr Evans.

I will start by making some general remarks, and then I will come on to some of the points that have been made in the debate. We have had a good debate, opened by the Chair of the Justice Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), in his customary way. He drew on his experience and made a number of very important points, which I will come to as my speech unfolds itself.

We were lucky to hear the wisdom of the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson), who has a lot of experience in this area, both as a Member and as a very constructive member of the Opposition during, for example, the passage of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which makes provision for restorative justice. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) made some excellent points about domestic abuse and the position of young people. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) came up with a very good way of illustrating the advantages of restorative justice by pointing to the experience of particular prisoners. I must say I am rather impressed by the fact that she was so busy on Christmas day, as I thought the fact that she was not the best day of the year it is for her. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) mentioned the charity Why me?, which I intend to mention in a moment. The Front-Bench Members also made some very constructive comments.

It is critically important that victims get the support they need to help them cope with the trauma that crime can cause, and whenever possible to recover from it. I believe that restorative justice can be part of that. I pay tribute to all those involved in providing restorative justice and enabling it to happen, including the Restorative Justice Council. We need the council, which brings together the various bodies that provide such services and which has innovated to tremendous effect in the area, exactly because in restorative justice we have seen a lot of innovation by particular individuals, groups and bodies. In a way, we are on a journey, from the early days when restorative justice tended to be seen as a way of helping young offenders to realise the nature of their actions through to the existing position in which we see it as valuable for victims, so giving it a wider remit than previously. In the code of practice for victims of crime, for example, there is now a substantial section dealing with restorative justice, from page 34 of the document.
In 2013, as I mentioned, the right hon. Member for Delyn and I served on the Public Bill Committee considering what is now the Crime and Courts Act, which I was taking through as a Minister. With all-party support, we introduced the restorative justice condition in the context of deferred sentences. Restorative justice is the process that brings those harmed by crime into communication with those responsible for it. It allows everyone affected by a particular incident to play a part in finding a more positive way forward. A fundamental element is dialogue between offender and victim, although that does not need to be face to face.

Where a person has committed a criminal offence and a criminal justice response is appropriate, it is not right that restorative justice activity should take place on its own; it should be alongside, not instead of, a criminal justice response. We know from research in this country and abroad that restorative justice can be a positive experience and empowering for victims, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley—I would not necessarily suggest that they go in for a fight with Mike Tyson. The point that my hon. Friend made was quite right, however, that restorative justice can change the way in which individuals feel about what was a dreadful experience for them.

Restorative justice can also help offenders to reduce their reoffending. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, with his 30 years of experience at the bar—I can probably admit a fair amount myself—my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless), all made it clear that many people simply do not consider their actions—they have no insight into them. Restorative justice can do something about that, so it is important in that way.

As far as victims are concerned, some present may remember reading about Paul Kohler, the well-known law professor who suffered a most brutal attack during a burglary. Photographs published in the media showed the terrible injuries he sustained, in particular to his face. Paul has spoken powerfully about how he and his family accessed the restorative justice process and how it had been important for them. The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), who is the victims Minister, recently met Paul through the restorative justice organisation Why me? to learn how his first-hand experience of restorative justice had helped him.

There are therefore reasons to be supportive of restorative justice. As the Justice Committee report makes clear, however, it is important that we develop our understanding of the area and what it can deliver, in particular with its effects on victims. We need to do that through proper research and effort. Our vision is for good-quality, victim-focused restorative justice to be available at all stages of the criminal justice system, which was a point made earlier. It is essential that victims who want restorative justice can access it at the stage that is right for them. Every victim participating should feel safe and in control. I know not every victim will want to participate. Restorative justice should remain voluntary. With domestic violence in particular, which was mentioned by a number of colleagues including my hon. Friend the Member for Henley, we must continue to ensure that no victim feels pressured into taking part. That is key to our approach.

As we highlighted in our response to the Justice Committee report, in recent years a lot of work has been done to make that vision a reality. Police and crime commissioners now receive funding to provide or commission restorative justice services for victims as part of a range of services to support victims of crime. The figure is about £23 million over three years, but it is of concern that the budget has not been spent in full—the money has been spent on victim services, but not all of it on restorative justice services. We need to look into why and at the effectiveness of the spending.

Measures such as the restorative service quality mark and the training provider quality mark, which were developed by the Restorative Justice Council with Government funding, offer assurance to those commissioning services and to victims that services are of a high standard. As is known, the national probation service is working closely with the council to produce guidance on that. We also funded the council to work with a range of criminal justice organisations to develop targeted information packs aimed at helping criminal justice practitioners better understand restorative justice and its benefits.

Robert Neill: The Minister is giving a comprehensive response, for which I am grateful. Does he accept that the need to ensure that the money is properly spent and well spent, as he referred to, is precisely the reason why it is important to press ahead firmly with the annual collation and publication of the spend by PCCs, so that we have genuine transparency and build the evidence base that he is seeking to achieve to make progress?

Sir Oliver Heald: My hon. Friend for Bracknell is looking at that at the moment. The other concern, however, is that although much is about gathering information—I fully accept that—this is an area with an absence of objective research. We need to grab the information about what is effective, why the spending is what it is, and the national picture showing the differences between areas.

Mr Hanson: Does the Minister know what the allocated £29 million was spent on?

Sir Oliver Heald: Twenty-three million pounds was allocated, and £11 million was spent on restorative justice, so the concern is the gap, which is where we need to gather and work through the information.

Mr Hanson: The point I made in my contribution was that if the Minister allocated £23 million, he needs to know what it was spent on and what he allocated it for.

Sir Oliver Heald: Of course the money is not ring-fenced, so police and crime commissioners who receive it are able to spend it on other victim services. However, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the amount for restorative justice was £23 million, so questions need to be answered. He asked us to say something in our update report on the action plan, which I will mention in a moment, and I will certainly bring that point to the attention of those who are preparing the response.

As we build on those foundations, we will take account of the Justice Committee’s work and the recent review of the Victims’ Commissioner, as well as working closely...
with police and crime commissioners and their association. It is excellent that the Victims’ Commissioner has been able to be in the Public Gallery for our debate. On a personal note, having attended a Crown Prosecution Service conference at which she spoke a couple of years ago, I was very impressed with the personal commitment she made to this area after experiences in her own life. Her role is very important and the way in which she performs it is admirable.

The priority now is to be satisfied by the evidence that the restorative justice services being funded or delivered meet the needs of victims of crime throughout England and Wales. Victims’ needs must be met. There is good practice in delivery, which it is important to share. My Department will work with a number of police and crime commissioners and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners to identify and share good practice and to obtain the data I mentioned that will not only help us but help areas to assess how well they are doing compared with other areas. In the long term, we want to introduce consistent outcome measures across all victim services, including restorative justice, which will allow us to take a more detailed and systematic approach to identifying and sharing good practice and driving up performance. It will also provide a firm evidence base on which we can make decisions about the future landscape of victim services. I should have said that we are also looking carefully at the range of proposals made by the Victims’ Commissioner and others.

I should perhaps say that if I do not finish dealing with all the points that have been made, we will go through them and write to the Committee.

I was asked about the action plan. The original plan for the period until March 2018 was published in November 2014. Ministers decided to publish a progress report covering that period. However, written evidence to the Committee highlighted the progress so far. We explained, for example, that we had the national conference in 2015, regional workshops to share best practice, and successful awareness-raising campaigns in both years during International Restorative Justice Week. Ministers have decided to continue with the action plan and refresh it. The victims Minister has been engaged in that detailed work since November, and we are not far away from publishing it.

Robert Neill: I am grateful to the Minister for that information. Can we therefore take it that, precisely as he says, the plan will be refreshed but there will not be a paper to go ahead as previously announced.

I have mentioned the position on victims’ participation in restorative justice and the need for undue influence not to be imposed. Someone asked about the paper on the use of restorative justice in domestic abuse cases that is mentioned in the ending violence against women and girls strategy for 2016 to 2020. We are working on that with stakeholders, and we certainly intend that paper to go ahead as previously announced.

I was asked about the police’s use of what is often described as first-tier restorative justice, among other such names. It is made clear in the victims code, which I referred to, that community resolutions by the police are not restorative justice, but it is clearly wrong that that sort of approach—saying, “There has been a discussion between the parties and therefore nothing else should happen”—should not be taken, particularly in domestic violence cases. It is contrary to guidance, it is not in the victims code, and we continue to press to ensure that that is not the way things happen on the ground. We are certainly not keen to encourage that street-level or level 1 RJ, and it should not really happen.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury mentioned about pre-sentence restorative justice. Police and crime commissioners are best placed to determine how to meet the needs of victims in their areas. Given that there are innovative bodies in this area that are prepared to try particular approaches to restorative justice, there are advantages in allowing several approaches to be tried, and it is important that we do not make things so restrictive that we lose those advantages. However, we moved to put restorative justice in a legislative context through the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which I have dealt with, and the national probation service is working with the Restorative Justice Council. Those measures, which are designed to ensure that there is a standard approach, but not so standard that there is no innovation, are all moves in the right direction. There is of course a lot of detail about exactly what is going on.

I was asked about the role of probation. I have mentioned the guidance that is being prepared. There has also been a big effort to raise awareness in prisons. The national probation service has positioned itself not so much as a direct provider of restorative justice—although the community rehabilitation companies provide a direct service—but as a referral agent that seeks to ensure that knowledge, experience, capacity and value are maximised and best practice is shared.

I was asked about the differences in the victims code in the availability of restorative justice for offenders of different ages. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said, that is a historical matter. Because restorative justice was first provided for young people, it is in some ways more advanced for young people than it is for adults. We are certainly looking at the points that have been made about extending availability to victims on the basis of not so much the age of the offender but merit.

How do victims find out about restorative justice? Several things are happening here. The victims code requires victims to be informed about restorative justice, and PCCs have a duty to advertise it on their websites. There are also taking an active role in prisons, which I think have been alluded to, and doing work to encourage professionals to understand the importance of restorative justice.
I probably have time to mention the ring-fencing of funding, which we used to do. Police and crime commissioners feel that flexibility is helpful, so we are keeping that under review, but it is certainly not acceptable that spending on restorative justice should fall too low. I conclude by saying that the Select Committee produced an extremely valuable report about an extremely important area, and I am glad that our response was acceptable.

2.57 pm

Robert Neill: I thank the Minister for the care with which he has responded to this considered and constructive debate, and right hon. and hon. Members from across the House for their input. People have been kind enough to help me during my time as Chairman of the Select Committee. As we know, Select Committees work best when they work as teams. Fortunately, the Justice Committee is a good team.

I am particularly pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is not a member of the Committee, also made a contribution, which I thought was powerful and underlined the significant point about changes in thinking and behaviour. I suppose that Christmas day is not a bad time to think about redemption. The previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), of course was not afraid to refer to redemption as well as rehabilitation in our criminal justice system. Ultimately, part of our work on restorative justice is to try to change mindsets so that there can be redemption and rehabilitation as well as closure and comfort for victims.

As the person in the room whom the snow will probably reach last, I will not delay matters any longer; other than to say that I, too, was delighted to see Baroness Newlove, the Victims’ Commissioner, here. Our Committee is always grateful for her co-operation and her remarkable personal efforts, to which we all pay tribute. I am grateful to all those who have contributed to this constructive and positive debate. I believe that there is a cross-party view on this issue. Progress is being made. There is more to do, but I hope that we will be able to work constructively with the Government to take this important agenda forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Justice Committee, Restorative justice, HC 164, and the Government response, Cm 9343.
the shipowners in those cases to leave the seafarers they employ effectively destitute does them no credit. Sadly, it does not reflect particularly well on the wider industry, either.

Where we have seen some progress—the Seatruck case—is however perhaps the low-hanging fruit. As I see it, that is just the tip of the iceberg. As we speak here in London, there are non-domiciled seafarers, principally Filipinos, working out of Scottish ports, being paid significantly less than the national minimum wage but still having retained by their employment agents—also domiciled outside the EU and also principally Filipinos. I am told—one 32% of their wages in respect of UK tax and national insurance. In some ways, that illustrates the absurdity and inadequacy of the current enforcement arrangements. If these men are not here working as part of the UK, why are they paying UK taxes? If they are here working as part of the UK, why are they not given the protection offered to other UK employees and workers?

The more I find out, the more it seems that the situation facing many seafarers working on ships that in some cases have not left UK waters effectively for decades is just as bad as the situation that led the previous Labour Government to set up the gangmasters licensing system. It may be that at some point we will have to take a similar approach on the position of seafarers.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): I intervene because it is so often the case that we will do more on this—he can be assured of that—and I hope to say a little more about that at the end.

Mr Carmichael: I am immensely grateful to the Minister for that intervention. I know he has a personal and political commitment in this regard and I am delighted that he was able to offer us that assurance again.

This is not just about the treatment of Filipino seafarers; there is also an effect on UK seafarers. First, because of such employment practices, UK seafarers are excluded from employment opportunities that would otherwise be available to them. That also drives down wages for those who are employed. I am told that Stena Line, the largest UK employer of seafarers, cut the hourly rate of pay for ratings employed seasonally—from June to September—from £8.31 to £7.20, which is the minimum wage rate. That is a graphic illustration of the direct impact on UK seafarers.

The situation has a context. For the Government’s purposes, that context is the maritime growth strategy that they commissioned in 2014. That was a good, comprehensive piece of work, and it was welcomed. If anything, it was somewhat overdue, coming the best of what the industry had been done. It made a number of recommendations.

The Minister and the Government really need to look at the roles of the Merchant Navy Training Board and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and the lack of joined-up administration between them. We might then see people getting quality training that gets the taxpayer value for the money that they are putting into it. I do not believe there is any shortage of people looking for a
career at sea, but there are obvious and significant obstacles being put in their way. The head of UK shipping for Maersk said that it had taken on 34 cadets selected from 936 applications, which illustrates the demand out there for careers in this vital sector.

I want to remind the House what the industry brings to the United Kingdom. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers, the maritime services sector directly contributes £4.4 billion and 10,000 jobs to the UK economy. Shipping in general produces £11 billion and 113,000 jobs. The Baltic and International Maritime Council's latest five-year report to the International Maritime Organisation states that the worldwide shortage of officers is 16,500, which could rise to 92,000 by 2020. That is the scale of the opportunity ahead of us, as a highly respected maritime nation, if we take the right decisions now for the future of our industry.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. Since so many colleagues want to speak, I shall impose a limit of five minutes.

3.13 pm

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak, Mr Walker. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this Back-Bench debate. Like the right hon. Gentleman, I represent an island. It is well known that the UK is the world's foremost country for shipping and freight. As some Members might know, the Solent is one of the major gateways for ships coming into the UK. The maritime sector is an issue that lies close to me and my constituents on the Isle of Wight.

Brexit means Brexit. I know that many in the port sector can see direct benefits from leaving the European Union. However, the port services regulation has once again reappeared from the deep, dark corners of the EU institutions. Anyone who has any knowledge about the proposed regulation knows what dangers it poses to our open, competitive and efficient ports sector. I know that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland secured this debate because he believes that the employees in the maritime sector are being exploited, but I think it is important to note the risk to the UK of being tied up in regulations that will substantially damage our thriving maritime industry.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): We dealt with this issue when I was a member of the European Scrutiny Committee, as the hon. Gentleman might know. The regulation has been unanimously opposed by all the port employers and all the port unions. Does he agree?

Mr Andrew Turner: I absolutely agree.

The port services regulation is threatening future investment in the sector as well as jobs. It has been opposed by British port owners, trade unions and Government and Opposition Members. It is unwanted, unworkable and, simply put, unacceptable for the UK. The large dark cloud in the sky relates to whether the UK will be affected by the regulation between now and when we leave the EU.

Today the Minister of State for Transport said at Transport questions: “we are freed from the clutches of the European Union.”

Before Christmas, the European Scrutiny Committee, of which I am a member, held an evidence session with the Minister. It was then unclear whether the regulation would enter into force before the UK had formally left the EU. It was also unclear whether—heaven forbid—a transitional agreement between the UK and EU might mean that the regulation could apply to us, even though we had left. Is the Minister now saying that these uncertainties are settled, because that does not seem to be the view of the European Scrutiny Committee? Is it possible that the new regulations can commit us before we leave the European Union, and we will then have to change things back?

Mr Hayes: Disraeli said: “Taking a new step, uttering a new word, is what people fear most.”

So let me utter a few new words. I have opposed the port services regulation since I first heard of it. We will vote against it. We will record our vote against it. When we do so, we will show why. It will take two years, as the hon. Gentleman knows, to come into effect. It is not for me to anticipate when we will leave the European Union, but I want nothing to do with the port services regulation, and I do not want our ports to have anything to do with it either.

Mr Andrew Turner: I absolutely agree. I am pleased to have that promise. Throughout the referendum I argued that there were many opportunities to be found in the uncertainties that leaving the EU could bring. However, I am not willing to accept the uncertainties that the port services regulation brings. It jeopardises our maritime industry on such a great scale that it must be avoided by all available means. I am fully aware that the Government do not intend to provide a running commentary on ongoing negotiations, but there is one thing we must fight for as we negotiate leaving the EU, which is for the UK to be wholly exempted from the EU’s port services regulation.

3.18 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I was expecting to sum up as the Front-Bench spokesman.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): You are allowed to have 10 minutes, Mr Hendry.

Drew Hendry: That is fine. I am happy to speak now, so thank you very much, Mr Walker. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate. I agree with the praise that he has given to seafarers and to the contribution that they make not only to island communities, but to coastal communities in Scotland and around the UK.

The Minister said that the right hon. Gentleman’s comments struck a chord. I hope some of mine will strike a chord as well, and I hope my questions will be answered, although I must give warning that I have...
many questions, so perhaps saving them might be the best thing to do. This is about the future of the UK maritime industry, and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said it was about leadership. He is right: the future needs a vision and a plan—for employment, fair conditions, business and safety, as well as to attract young people and, especially, correct the lack of young women in the industry.

To begin with employment and fair conditions, I join the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland in being delighted that there is now an agreement in principle to end the long-running issue about the freight vessel serving the Northern Isles. The new charter basis will allow the wage issue to be resolved and crew members will be paid the minimum wage. The new arrangements come into effect next month, which is to be welcomed. I shall not go through the details, which he covered.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the important question of the number of women employed in the industry, because there is a significant shortage. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) raised the matter of vacancies, training and how much more effort could go into bringing more women into the industry. I have seen in the Humber ports a number of women playing an important and valuable role in the portside industry.

Drew Hendry: I welcome that comment, and will talk some more about such opportunities.

The wage deal that has been struck adds to the CalMac public sector contractor deal that runs in Scotland; it was named the Living Wage Foundation’s Scottish champion in 2016. Let us be straight about it: fair pay and conditions attract people to the industry and we should support that. All seafarers should have the national minimum wage, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) mentioned. However, while the RMT and Nautilus International have welcomed the actions in Scotland, they have sounded a code blue for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said it was about leadership. That is what we should do.

Drew Hendry: I join them in that disappointment over those opportunities.

While I am talking about the MCA, I want to mention that at the moment it has the final say over ship-to-ship transfers in the Moray firth. I hope that the Minister will take on board the strength of feeling of the communities around the coast in my constituency and those of my colleagues about the order for ship-to-ship, and that he will consider that we have many times called—and still do—for power over that to be devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

The UK Government will need to get their act together on employment opportunities. According to their own transport figures—this relates to recruitment—more than half of UK seafarers are over 41 years old. Only 3% are women. Women make up only 28% to 30% of uncertified officers and ratings, and the bulk of those jobs are in catering. Men take up almost 100% of the engineering jobs. Brexit will no doubt pose challenges, but we should also consider that a high number of EU nationals are employed. For example, Polish people alone make up 16% of non-UK holders of certificates of equivalent competency for the UK shipping industry.

Things will not be helped, either, by the approach that is taken to looking after cadets. I was involved in trying to arrange the rescue of cadets from the Hanjin Louisiana, when the ship was moored offshore because the company had gone into administration. Four young cadets from Scotland were trapped on board for well over a month, with supplies scarce and not knowing what was going to happen. They were stuck there with limited communication, through email only. The UK Government were slow to get into action and attempt to look after them.

To move on to the maritime sector plan for business, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland mentioned, a great deal of the economy is affected by shipping. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) mentioned the complexities that we will face in the future. Peter Karlsen of Norbulk Shipping has said: “The shipping industry in the UK will view the referendum result negatively, as does most business. It is a potential disruption to trade, movement of goods and labour. We are facing years of complex negotiations to divorce ourselves from the EU.”

He continues: “Whether it remains as attractive to foreign investors or entrepreneurs, especially from the EU, to establish and conduct business here is uncertain.”

A lot needs to be done to put confidence into the UK maritime industry.

Of course, there are questions: what is to be done about freedom of movement, migrant workers, a customs union, and rights to operate in domestic trades of EU members who maintain flag-based cabotage restrictions? Will there be slower turnarounds that affect volume? I could go on and talk about employment law and contract. There are many questions but no answers yet and the clock is ticking. Of course in Scotland our preference is to stay in the single market and maintain a customs union. That is what we should do.

I want to conclude with some points about the MCA and safety. There is a long-running issue in the west of Scotland in particular as to emergency towing vessels. Two are required in the north of Scotland. One should be berthed in Stornaway to cover the west coast, the Northern Isles and, in particular, the Minches. We have had near things with the MV Parida, the oil rig the Transocean Winner famously coming to ground off the coast, and even HMS Astute, a nuclear submarine, running aground off Skye. We need to make sure that action will be taken, and there will not be another six years of ignoring communities and their representatives.

I want to finish with some questions. As to the towing vessels, when will the UK Government stop ignoring the needs of the people who work and live in, and know, the west of Scotland, and the many warning incidents that have been racked up, each edging closer to the
possibility of a disaster? What lessons will they learn from the Hanjin Louisiana incident, and will they ensure cadets’ rights under the maritime labour convention the next time such an incident occurs? Would they take action or make representations to shipowners and flag states if there was evidence of seafarers being mistreated, or of the contravention of MLC-ILO measures? What plans do they have to tackle the recruitment and retention problem in the MCA? What initiatives are they taking or have they planned with respect to the incredible age and gender imbalance in UK shipping?

3.27 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am very pleased to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Walker. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing the debate. I am pleased to follow the Scottish National party’s Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry).

I have a number of shipping connections, although none are required to be included in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. However, it would probably be worth noting that I am a member of the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights and co-chair with Lord Greenway of the all-party maritime and ports group. I was Shipping Minister from 2007 to 2009 and am a younger brother at Trinity House, whose royal charter dates back 500 years and which has a statutory duty as the UK’s general lighthouse authority. It is ably led at present by the excellent Captain Ian McNaught, the deputy master.

I know that the Minister is visiting Harwich in February. Trinity House keenly anticipates his visit. The organisation is undertaking a fleet review process at the moment. The Minister knows how important it is to have proper assets around our shores to carry out not only the statutory work but the emergency work of the lighthouse authority, to mitigate the risk of disaster in our waters. The visit will be most welcome. I hope that it is locked into the Minister’s diary and that parliamentary business will not get in its way.

My final shipping connection—apart from having born in the great shipbuilding city of Glasgow—is that my previous constituency of Poplar and Canning Town, as well as my present one of Poplar and Limehouse, contained the first purpose-built docks in London and were a key part of London’s docklands for centuries. Much of it is now occupied by the Canary Wharf estate, which is important to our modern economy as the docks used to be.

Apart from the importance of the role and wellbeing of the general lighthouse authority, I will make two points, neither of which will be of any surprise to the Minister. First, the UK Chamber of Shipping has set out in its “Blueprint for Growth” after Brexit—I am sure the Minister has read it—six key points that it believes are necessary to ensure a bright future for the UK’s shipping industry: preserving the existing ease of doing business—Dover is one port that has made representations about the problems and disruption that border controls and customs changes could have—ensuring business has access to the world’s brightest talent, as already mentioned by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland; reforming domestic maritime policy to put the UK on the best possible footing; promoting the red ensign, and hence the UK register; ensuring a visa regime that works; and tonnage tax flexibility.

Part of the blueprint is the Chamber of Shipping’s campaign to help create thousands of jobs in shipping through the SMarT Plus scheme that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, which is supported by Nautilus UK, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and others. The Minister knows that the industry trains around 800 cadets every year, although the Chamber estimates that that could be 1,200 if shipowners committed to employing cadets after training. Some, such as Shell and Carnival UK, have already done so.

The Chamber of Shipping’s figures make positive arguments. First, in the ‘90s SMarT money covered around 50% of training costs; it is now a third. Secondly, the economic value of a seafarer to the UK economy is about £58,000, which is up to £17,500 higher than the national average. Thirdly, it concludes that the Government’s £15 million investment delivers a £70 million annual yield that could be scaled up significantly; we have the candidates and the industry needs good-quality trainees. Increasing that investment would be a win-win for the UK and for shipping, both internationally and domestically.

Last year the former Lord Mayor of London, Lord Jeffrey Mountevans, championed all matters maritime, ports and shipping, given his personal and professional connection to the industry. I know the Minister attended many events with the Lord Mayor, so I need not remind him of those campaigns, but I would be grateful for his comments on them.

The Minister has a good standing within UK shipping. He was previously the Shipping Minister and knows the industry well—and the industry knows him. I know he is also aware of the various welfare organisations, such as Seafarers UK, the Mission to Seafarers, the Apostleship of the Sea and the International Seafarers Welfare and Assistance Network, among others. I hope that he will commit to continuing to work with and support their efforts in looking after seafarers.

If he is still Shipping Minister in September—I certainly hope he will be—it will be great to welcome the Minister to attend the Merchant Navy Day memorial service on 3 September at Tower Hill; I am not an organiser, but it is taking place in my constituency. The national memorial commemorates the tens of thousands of merchant mariners who died in the first and second world wars and the Falklands war. For their families, there are no graves to visit; that is their loved one’s resting place.

In conclusion, shipping moves 95% of the country’s international trade and supports 250,000 jobs. It is a vital industry that, because it is now mostly conducted at huge container ports on our coastline, is invisible to the majority of the population. That does not mean it is less important, but the opposite. The lack of public awareness means that Government recognition is absolutely essential. I look forward to the Minister confirming that it will continue to receive that recognition.

3.33 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate on such an important subject. I declare an interest as the honorary vice president of the Society of Maritime Industries.
It is not as widely recognised as it should be that maritime industries are a key sector in the United Kingdom. The maritime sector gets less attention and, arguably, government support than aerospace, despite being a bigger contributor to the UK economy and a sector that creates high-skilled jobs and employees. The right hon. Gentleman has already given us all of the figures.

I pay tribute to employers, such as BAE Systems in my constituency, whose trade union I meet regularly, and which is taking on a further 50 apprentices in 2017 in its maritime operations in Portsmouth, after taking on 82 last year. There are others nearby, such as Lockheed Martin, which is active in the naval defence sector and recruits from Portsmouth schools and colleges. A university technical college is opening in the area in September, which is heavily supported by leading local businesses and the Royal Navy, and will focus on maritime engineering. I hope that everyone in Portsmouth will back that great initiative and make it a big success.

I welcome the announcement to draw up the national shipbuilding strategy. I read Sir John Parker’s report with great interest and I am pleased with the amount of detail in it. He is right to recommend that we use the Type 31 programme to maintain capability away from the Clyde, and so avoid putting all of our eggs in one basket. That will mean that the Type 31s can be built while the Type 26 programme is ongoing in Glasgow. I called for that in the House last year, and I hope that the Ministry of Defence will follow up on that suggestion. It is vital that we get this right when the Government respond to Sir John in the coming months.

Given the growing uncertainty in the world, it makes sense to get on now with the commitment in the 2015 strategic defence and security review to expand the basic number of ships available beyond the 19 at frigate and destroyer level, which is already a bare minimum. Of course, I would like some of the Type 31 work to come to Portsmouth, but whatever happens, I pay tribute to the staff in our naval base, who still carry out vital skilled work in ship repair. Minehunter refit work is going on in the ship hall, which HMS Quorn and HMS Atherstone have recently entered. Work is being completed on HMS Brocklesby before it returns to service later in the year. That work is less high profile than that which is being done to bring our new aircraft carriers into service, but it is no less important; every part of the Royal Navy, and the industrial sector that supports it, plays a vital role.

Portsmouth is a vital civilian port, too. We import 70% of the UK’s bananas, which is no joking matter as it is a trade worth millions to our port. The long and difficult history of banana tariffs ought to be a warning sign of the complexity of trade deals post-Brexit; it might make life easier, but it might not. As a ferry port, we are the second busiest cross-channel port after Dover. When I hear news about disputes causing delays to people getting into Dover, which seems to be frequently, I often think that Portsmouth is open as a port, and that travellers could avoid a lot of heartache by travelling with us. Anyone who wants an easy, reliable and friendly way to the continent should look no further than Portsmouth.

While I am pleased to see initiatives, such as the national shipbuilding strategy and the maritime growth study, we have to make sure that Government support is sustained. This vital, strategic industry must be protected in the coming uncertain years. I look forward to the Government’s committing to that.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): As a red duster man, my hon. Friend knows what it is to go down to the sea in ships. He has my respect for that. He mentioned Northern Ireland. I am keen to ensure that this debate does not exclude the reality of the situation in Northern Ireland, where in ports such as Kilkeel in South Down and Strangford we have a real recruitment problem. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be appropriate for the Minister to liaise with the Administration—which I hope pertains—in Northern Ireland over non-devolved matters relating to maritime training?

Albert Owen: Absolutely. I am sure that the Minister will pass that on to his colleague in the Northern Ireland Office.

My hon. Friend mentions Northern Ireland. Related to the issues I want to talk about is the potential for energy development in our country. The ports are key
to that. In Belfast, for example, there is DONG Energy, which has a big operation with the offshore wind sector. I was pleased to hear the announcement today from the Government about the Swansea bay tidal project. We need to be training highly skilled seafarers to do the support vessel work that is needed around our country. Our coastal communities also depend on growing leisure and tourism, with millions of pounds of revenue and potential future revenue. We need safe training for people to go out in ships, whether on the coast or in the deep water sector.

I want to link ports with not only wind but the potential for tidal energy. We have an opportunity to be pioneers. As an island community, we have regular tides that come in very predictably, and we need to tap into that. When we talk about these projects, it is about not only the location they will be in but the whole maritime industry of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

This industry creates vital jobs in communities. My own port community of Holyhead is the busiest seafaring port on the western seaboard. I will stray slightly into the western seaboard. I will stray slightly into Northern Ireland. My own port community of Holyhead is the busiest seafaring port on the western seaboard. I will stray slightly into Northern Ireland.

This industry creates vital jobs in communities. My own port community of Holyhead is the busiest seafaring port on the western seaboard. I will stay slightly into Brexit. I am concerned, as people who live in the communities on the west coast and the gateways into Wales and the United Kingdom from Ireland are, that this issue has not had sufficient attention. We talk about the important land border, but there are sea borders as well. I do not want to see additional barriers on Welsh ports and British ports if we go full Brexit.

We need a common travel arrangement. We need arrangements between the communities of Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, so that we have a strong maritime industry and so that businesses that are dependent on our ports know there will be no additional costs. We need to continue to generate that revenue for the future.

I know we are short on time; I would have taken 17 minutes if you had allowed me, Mr Walker. British seafarers are the best seafarers in the world. They are dependent on our ports know there will be no additional barriers on Welsh ports and British ports if we go full Brexit.

We need a common travel arrangement. We need arrangements between the communities of Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, so that we have a strong maritime industry and so that businesses that are dependent on our ports know there will be no additional costs. We need to continue to generate that revenue for the future.

I know we are short on time; I would have taken 17 minutes if you had allowed me, Mr Walker. British seafarers are the best seafarers in the world. They should have proper training facilities and proper wages that reflect our proud history and the potential for a proud future.

3.43 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Walker. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this timely debate.

Wales exported £11.8 billion-worth of goods last year—an increase of £31 million from the previous year. As a net exporter, Wales’s economic, social and security interests depend on a resilient maritime industry. With 53.7 million tonnes of goods passing through Welsh ports annually, a thriving maritime industry is an essential mechanism for the workings of our economy.

A range of concerns need to be addressed to ensure that a healthy maritime industry is able to flourish, but I will focus my comments on two issues. As the proud mother of a female seafarer, I will discuss the current situation for women in the industry. I will then move on to discuss something that is equally important, given that I am the mother of a female seafarer, which is the safety issues faced by those working in the maritime sector.

Like other Members, I had quite a bit prepared about training. Women have been mentioned as an underused resource in the maritime industry. I will concentrate my comments on women. We need to look at barriers holding women back from entering this sector as a career prospect. I propose that we look at what is preventing them from not only looking at this area but gaining the certificates for higher salaried and higher status jobs. I propose that the Minister considers within that issues related to the facilities on board for female crew members; safety for women in seafaring, including internationally; attitudes towards women; and careers advice for women.

I will rush ahead, because time is of the essence, to the issue of safety. The £38 million of cuts faced by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency last year, coupled with pressure from shipowners who demand a more commercially friendly safety regime, risks jeopardising the lives of British seafarers. The International Transport Workers’ Federation estimates that 2,000 seafarers lose their lives working at sea every year. I estimate that the number is higher than that, but that is what is recorded.

I would like to highlight the case of six Russian crew members who lost their lives on 27 November 2011 when the 34-year-old general cargo ship the Swanland registered in the Cook Islands sank in the Irish sea, 12 miles off Pen Llyn. The 300-hour search and rescue operation demanded that the courageous RNLI volunteer crew from Porthdinllaen, Aberdaron, Trawddwr bay and Holyhead were called out in atrocious weather conditions. The Marine Accident Investigation Branch’s investigation into the wreck of the Swanland found that maintenance and repair had lacked focus and oversight, and that the cargo of limestone was loaded dangerously.

There is, of course, a great deal of good practice in the industry too. The RNLI has done excellent work in recent years with the man overboard guardian system for commercial fishermen.

Albert Owen: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Liz Saville Roberts: I will indeed.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I will give everyone five minutes, but Members have to be mindful of interventions—particularly those who have already spoken.

Albert Owen: The hon. Lady talked about women crew members on merchant ships. Will she join me in paying tribute to the RNLI for the increasing number of women who are on our lifeboats, saving lives?

Liz Saville Roberts: Forgive me, but my daughter is also one of the crew at Porthdinllaen, along with three others; they are an increasing number. I pay tribute to Mike Davis, the cox of Porthdinllaen, who has been outstanding in encouraging young women to join the RNLI.

The RNLI’s latest campaign, in partnership with the Welsh Fishing Safety Committee, will promote the general use of personal locator beacons on lifejackets, which alert rescue services within one minute of a seafarer going into the sea. That has potential for rescuing people and, of course, in tragic incidents where seafarers die, it enables families to recover the bodies of their loved ones. That is a very important initiative, and we
should support it. That initiative and many like it increase crew safety and save lives, and the RNLI is to be congratulated for the wide-ranging work the charity does.

It is crucial for the safety of the thousands of men and women who dedicate their lives to work at sea that we do not allow UK shipping companies, or indeed others, to erode safety regulations once the UK leaves the European Union. We must ensure that safety standards are not only upheld but updated and strengthened, to ensure that the lives of seafarers are protected. I therefore call on the Minister to review the issues I have outlined and commit to making the UK shipping industry more diverse, safer and fairer for all those who work at sea.

3.48 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, and to follow the excellent speech by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who led the debate. Much of what I was going to say has been said, but perhaps in different words.

I speak as a member of the RMT group of MPs. What I will say is largely informed by what the RMT thinks, with which I agree. I urge the Minister to ensure that he consults on all occasions and on all matters with the trade unions properly, including not only the RMT but Nautilus International—I have its excellent “Charter for Jobs” report with me.

There are serious concerns about the declining number of UK seafarers, which has fallen by 60% since 1982. The number of ratings has fallen by 25% in just the past five years, so there is undoubtedly a problem with not only the seafarers concerned but the young people who we should be recruiting and training to be the next generation of seafarers.

It is a matter of national security to have a substantial and sufficient body of seafarers who are UK nationals, home-grown and home-based, and whose personal loyalties are to the UK. That is not in any way to denigrate foreign workers; nevertheless, it is significant to have a majority and a large body of home-grown seafarers whose primary loyalty is, naturally, to their own country. The major factor in that decline has been the employment of foreign nationals from poorer areas of the world, who are often paid pitifully low wages, which has been driving down wages and terms and conditions across the maritime sector. Employers are effectively discriminating against and exploiting foreign workers, as well as undermining the jobs market for British seafarers.

These concerns were taken up in the independent Carter review, which concluded that such discrimination must be outlawed and that the then Government—the previous Labour Government—should commit to a timetable for achieving that. The RMT remains committed, and rightly so, to the enforcement of the minimum wage for all seafarers, which should be just what it says: a minimum, not the normal pay for all. Properly negotiated pay rights for UK seafarers would be higher than that, but the minimum wage would at least provide a basic wage for all seafarers. The unions are urging the Government to form a working group to look at reform of the visa and work permit system as it applies to the UK shipping industry.

Proper training is necessary for UK ratings, supported by public funding and with proper marine apprenticeships. The new Royal Fleet Auxiliary support ships should be designed and built in the UK to supply the UK market. Rebuilding a British shipbuilding industry would be a very good idea.

Employers will no doubt complain about the excessive cost of higher pay, safety, security, training and so on, but labour costs for shipping are a small proportion of the total cost and amount to between 2% and 3% of the total cost. Providing good and proper pay with proper training and security for all workers would not add massively to overall shipping costs. It is time to listen to seafarers and their representatives to make sure there are sufficient UK seafarers for our long-term shipping needs and for national security. They should all be properly paid, properly trained and kept safe in their work. Government action is necessary to ensure that happens.

3.51 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate.

I thought I would take only a moment or two to discuss seafarers, but the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) goaded me with her interpretation of the national shipbuilding strategy, so I will say something about that, although I doubt whether I will take five minutes.

On the principal issue of seafarers and the national minimum wage, I welcome the Minister’s remark that a chord has been struck. I want to take this opportunity to applaud the actions of the Scottish Government, in particular the Minister for Transport and the Islands, Humza Yousaf, who shares a constituency office with me. He knows that I have been on at him about this issue for a while. It is good that a deal seems to have been secured, or at least an agreement in principle, that will ensure that the services operated by Seatruck, which is contracted by Serco Northlink, will now pay its employees the national minimum wage. Many of us in the House today have been concerned about the ill treatment of workers in the maritime industry.

Representatives from various agencies deserve great credit for working hard to find a solution to a complicated situation, including Transport Scotland. I have not been a fan of Transport Scotland for many years, because I was a trade union activist who had to deal with it when I was employed by Glasgow city council. This is a rare occasion when I applaud it for dealing with the matter.

It was manifestly disgraceful that seafarers were being paid as little as £4 an hour—I think the actual figure was £3.66 an hour. I hope the Minister will announce a legislative timetable for ending pay discrimination in the UK shipping industry, which the RMT union has called for and which the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) emphasised. It is not right that shipowners have been cutting the wage bill because they can discriminate against seafarers by paying them less than the statutory minimum wage.

If practices that we have heard about today took place on dry land, the enforcement agencies would be acting almost immediately. I hope the Minister will tell us what discussions are taking place with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to address the situation and ensure adequate enforcement, because the out-of-sight, out-of-mind attitude must be replaced with action.
[Chris Stephens]

The hon. Member for Portsmouth South goaded me with her comments about the national shipbuilding strategy, which contrasted with the excellent remarks by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who, like me, is proud that he was born in the great city of Glasgow, the home of world shipbuilding.

Sir John Parker’s report does not say that shipbuilding should be moved from elsewhere; it caveats that position. There is a flaw in the report where it says that different ships and different Navy ships have been built concurrently on the Clyde. That was the case with the Irish shipbuilders, where my father worked when they were building ships for the Royal Navy and the Malaysian Navy at the same time.

There is shipbuilding on the Clyde because of the tenacious campaigning by the trade union movement over decades to ensure work on the Clyde. I hope we will continue to build ships there because we are the best shipbuilders in the world.

3.56 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is always an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I declare an indirect interest, because if I did not, I suspect my father would be upset with me. For more than 30 years he was a full-time trade union officer for the National Union of Seamen, which is the maritime branch of the RMT. I am a member of the RMT parliamentary group and a very proud member of that.

It is scandalous that we have this problem. The number of UK seafarers has fallen by a whopping 60% since 1982. This is not an issue that has only just come about; it has been an historical issue. However, the number of UK ratings has fallen by a further 25% since 2011 and now stands at about 8,800.

Pay discrimination is outrageous, but before talking about that, I will talk about people coming into the industry without being trained. That is scandalous, especially when we have a deal under the tonnage tax, the SMaRT scheme—the support for maritime training scheme—which makes it a requirement for companies to train ratings and officers, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) mentioned. It is scandalous that we are not doing anything about that.

Since coming to this place in 2010, I think I have met every Shipping Minister, along with Steve Todd, the senior assistant general secretary of the RMT, and on one occasion the then general secretary, Bob Crow. Shipping Ministers always say, “Yes, this is an issue. We’re going to deal with it,” but they do not deal with the problem. It is not even party political. Although the previous Labour Government at least commissioned the independent Carter review, I am ashamed to say that we did not do anything about a timetable to implement its recommendations. That was scandalous. I am not being party political, because we have to be honest. It is time for the Government to act.

The situation in my constituency is just grotesque. P&O North sea ferries run out of my constituency in east Hull, with a hugely declining number of UK ratings. The company is paying £4.70 an hour to Spanish and Portuguese seafarers, more than 300 of whom are employed on those routes, although the minimum wage is £7.20 an hour. That is scandalous. When I speak to the company about the situation, it tells me that it is not making much profit. Well, as my father always reminds me, we do not see many skint shipowners.

In the short time that I have left, I want to just mention that we are doing great things in Hull. Siemens is investing in offshore wind, and Mick Cash, general secretary of the RMT, has written to the Health and Safety Executive to raise the issue that some employers are looking particularly for seafarers to go into the industry. We therefore have a real opportunity to do something about this now. We hope that a cruise terminal will be opened in 2022. We will need more seafarers to manage that terminal—I nearly said to “man” it, and my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) would have been unimpressed if I had. Let us just get on with it and deal with the issue. The situation is scandalous. It needs sorting out.

4.1 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for initiating the debate. I confess that before my election, I had little real knowledge of the modern industry, but I have been steadily learning from my contacts and visits to Forth Ports Grangemouth. I have also attended trips to sites with the local seafarers mission, which I cannot praise enough for doing such a fantastic job in supporting workers, and I have had talks with and briefings from the RMT and Nautilus, as well as haulage contractors in my area. I am grateful to all those bodies for assisting me during the past 18 months.

Grangemouth is of course Scotland’s largest container port. It is also Scotland’s largest port, with the site covering 386 acres. Grangemouth lies at the centre of Scotland’s industrial heartland. It is situated midway between the main Scottish cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh and is served by the M9 motorway, with links to the national motorway network, and is also well rail-linked.

Approximately 9 million tonnes of cargo are handled through the dock facilities each year. With about 150,000 containers and as much as 30% of Scotland’s GDP going through the port, it is the UK’s largest feeder port and the only one that exports more than it imports. Locally, Forth Ports employs some 200 people within the port and supports a further 1,000 jobs within the port estate. Therefore, the industry’s significance to my constituency cannot be overstated, although it may often be overlooked by those driving past the gates.

Almost no topic can be debated nowadays without some reference to the issues surrounding Brexit, and this debate is no exception. The maritime industry plays a major role in helping to facilitate the wider freedom of trade in goods. Given the volumes and patterns of freight, leaving the EU will have implications for the shipping sector. One specific concern is about UK flag ships losing their right to operate in the domestic trades of those EU member states that maintain flag-based
could have had two minutes, but she would prefer to ask the Minister a question. It will obviously be up to the Minister to decide whether to take that intervention, but I know that the hon. Lady would like to ask a question as opposed to making a speech. The Front Benches will have 11 minutes each, which will allow the mover of the motion to have two minutes at the end.

**4.6 pm**

**Pat Glass** (North West Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. This has been a very full debate, with many important contributions. I pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing the debate. I was going to say that Opposition Members welcome it, but judging by the tone of the debate as a whole, I think it is welcomed right across the House, and I look forward to what the Minister will have to say at the end.

I would like first to give credit where it is due. I very rarely give credit to the Scottish Government, but I will on this occasion. I welcome the announcement by the Scottish Government of changes to the charter agreement for the two Seatruck vessels operating between Aberdeen, Shetland and the Orkneys.

However, I have to be fair: we have heard a lot about maritime companies paying less than the national minimum wage. On Scotland’s only commercial maritime freight link to the continent, the hourly rate paid to Lithuanian seafarers can be as low as £1.64. Justifiably, we get angry when we hear about modern-day slavery on ships in the far east harvesting prawns, but we are prepared to see £1.64 an hour paid within our own waters, so I think that although a great job has been done, there is much more to do.

**Drew Hendry:** The hon. Lady will of course be aware that shipping route is in international waters and the Scottish Government have no locus over the pay rates of that company.

**Pat Glass:** I am simply pointing out that the company is operating in our waters and that we need collectively to do something about it.

We are an island nation, a net importer, and we are now leaving the European Union. We have the largest port sector in Europe in terms of tonnage handled and, as has been said, we have millions of ferry passengers every year. Our economic, social and security interests will depend more than at any time since the second world war on seafarers and a resilient UK maritime skills base. It is probably worth putting this in context. At the time of the Falklands war in 1982, the UK had a strong merchant naval sector; we employed 58,000 UK seafarers. That figure has now shrunk by almost 60% to 23,000. That is the context in which we are working.

Sub-national minimum wages continue to blight the lives of seafarers working on UK domestic and short sea journeys. I have seen figures alleging that at least eight operators along 11 short sea routes to and from the UK are underpaying more than 800 crew. In my own area, on ships crossing from Newcastle to Amsterdam, DFDS pays its staff £2.93 an hour—less than £3. I took a recent weekend trip to Amsterdam, which I really enjoyed, but quite honestly, if I had known that—well, I feel really uncomfortable about it. As a result of this debate, I will be writing to DFDS and other companies to say that it is simply not acceptable.
At present, passengers and businesses are travelling on Condor Ferries to the Channel Islands on vessels crewed by seafarers earning as little as £2.40 an hour. On freight-only ships, the pay is as low as £1.64 an hour. That is not acceptable. Prior to the national living wage increase for over-24s last April, it was estimated that 8,300 ratings were working the UK shipping industry for rates of pay below the national minimum wage. That was in April last year; the figure is now considerably higher than 8,300. Increasingly, companies are recruiting outside the UK to crew their ships with non-UK seafarers, particularly ratings, in order to profit from these sub-national minimum wage rates.

This is not a new problem. It has to be said that this goes well beyond the current Government. Beyond the simple injustices, we can see the cost of not having acted in the past. This legalised exploitation has systematically undermined maritime jobs in the UK, damaged the skill base and driven up unemployment rates in seafarer communities across the UK. Since 2011 alone, the number of UK ratings has fallen by 25%. If we end the pay exploitation in shipping, we can help to reverse the decline of our merchant navy. This need not be a party political issue, but one of sense, fairness and humanity.

There are three points that I would like the Minister to take forward from this debate. First, he has already committed to review the application of pay legislation across the shipping industry imminently. However, as we have already heard, that has already happened—the Carter review did it—so this is just a case of setting a timeframe and getting it implemented. Secondly, can the Minister give a date for when we can expect publication of updated guidance to HMRC on enforcement of the national minimum wage for seafarers? Thirdly, when will the Minister give a date for when we can expect publication of updated guidance to HMRC on enforcement of the national minimum wage for seafarers? That work was completed in April last year, yet 10 months later it has still not been published.

However, as we have heard, pay is only part of the problem and part of the solution. More than 70% of deck and 74% of engine ratings are now aged over 40. We are heading for a shortfall in trained and skilled seafarers. If we take no action, that will be filled by non-UK staff. The Select Committee on Transport warned over two years ago that the Government needed to act on funding, on approved standards for maritime apprenticeships, on the take-up of apprenticeships in the industry, on setting annual statutory targets for seafarer training and on including the number of trainee ratings in annual seafarer statistics. We would like to know from the Minister when we will get some action on that.

One area of maritime growth where the Government have not dragged their feet is on the recommendations to make the UK shipping register more commercially responsive, in the form of a Government corporation. I would gently point out to the Minister some other areas where this and former Governments have rushed to privatise—ranging from the rail industry, the energy industry and the water industry to come to mind. Recent attitude polls among the electorate now show that the majority of our constituents—in some cases over 90%—want to see those decisions reversed, because they see formerly Government-owned, privatised industries making massive profits, but customers paying massive bills and getting a poor service. I would gently ask the Minister whether he will properly and carefully consider the costs and benefits of transforming the UK shipping register, fully consider all the options and also promise that this House will be given time to scrutinise those options.

Before closing, I wish to press the Minister on leaving the EU. At the moment we know nothing about the Government’s wider maritime priorities, at a time when we need a clear direction on maritime issues that would inform the Brexit negotiations. How will any changes to the single market affect shipping and seafarers? Will there be customs checks? Will there be tariffs? Is his Department feeding into the Brexit negotiations on these matters? If it is, will he tell us how?

In closing, I hope the Minister can elaborate on his Government’s plans for Brexit, or at least recognise that maritime is an exceptional issue that needs to take precedence. He must also assure the House about the future of the shipping register, along with the timeframe and process for any reforms. Will he outline his priorities for seafarer training and skills, and say whether he will set targets for recruitment? Finally, I look forward to him addressing the key point to come out of this debate about seafarer pay and conditions.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): We have a lot to get through. Will the Minister be mindful to leave a minute or so at the end for Mr Carmichael to wind up?

4.14 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): With great pleasure, Mr Walker. As I looked around the Chamber during this debate, I felt spoiled for choice because so many of my favourites are here. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) springs to mind, as does the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner), the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and, not least, yourself, Mr Walker.

Among those favourites stands proud today the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who introduced the debate. He worked with me in Government and I know that he cares as passionately as I do about this subject—unsurprisingly, given the people he represents. When he introduced the debate he was right to emphasise the significance of the maritime sector to our economy, as well as to his constituents. The sector contributes £13 billion to the United Kingdom. It supports more than 100,000 jobs in thousands of different businesses. Just as much as that, and perhaps more, it is an area in which Britain—indeed, the United Kingdom—stands proud, because the quality of what we do in the sector is world renowned and widely admired across a range of services.

As has been said repeatedly, this is not the first time that I have done this job; it is my second visit to the Department for Transport as Shipping Minister. By the way, all ministerial jobs are visits—no more than that—as it is very important to recognise. None the less, when I was there the first time I initiated the maritime growth study to which the right hon. Gentleman and others have referred. He was very generous about it too, if I might say so. The reason for the study is that it seemed...
really important that we had a stocktake of our maritime circumstances and our maritime future. However, since then we have had the debate on the European Union. I will not digress by saying that the result was, for me, a dream come true, but it certainly changes our maritime future. It is therefore important that we review that growth study. I have put into place a stocktake of the study itself, which is currently taking place, so that we can consider its very helpful recommendations in the context of Brexit.

Melanie Onn: I thank the right hon. Gentleman—my duetting partner on occasions—for giving way.

Mr Hayes: I wasn’t going to mention it.

Melanie Onn: I just share it widely. On the point about embracing that opportunity, as he sees it, the Minister will be aware that the Humber is the UK’s busiest trading port. That is something that my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) will be equally as proud of as I am. It really is critical to hundreds of directly employed jobs and thousands of indirectly employed jobs as well. There is a sense that ports and maritime have been somewhat left behind in the past. Is part of this opportunity about putting ports at the heart of industrial strategy for the UK going forward?

Mr Hayes: Yes, that is a very well made point. The hon. Lady is right to say that we perhaps understated the significance of the maritime sector. This is a point that the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for maritime and ports and former Shipping Minister, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, made in his contribution and has made previously. Part of the role of the Shipping Minister is to champion the sector; to speak loudly and repeatedly about its significance. The hon. Lady is right that it does not just affect the places where our ports are situated; it affects the whole of our economy. Some 95% of the goods that we purchase from abroad, and the things that we send to foreign countries, go through our ports. As the representative for Grimsby, she will know how important that is.

Albert Owen: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I will give way in a second. By the way, I am going to visit Grimsby soon and will have a look at the port. Now I will give way to another of my favourites.

Albert Owen: I was a bit disappointed that I was not listed among the Minister’s friends earlier on. There is a serious point that I want him to answer. Now that we have talk of an industrial strategy, will the Minister, who is in the Department for Transport, liaise with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ensure that both Departments know about this so that we have joined-up thinking when we talk about ports being the catalyst?

Mr Hayes: We are already doing that, but these debates must have a purpose, so I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I will personally meet Ministers on exactly the issue he has raised, and in the fashion that he has described. It is important that the industrial strategy takes full account of the significance of the maritime sector, as has been said. As he spoke earlier I thought to myself for a moment, given our great history, that he has forgotten more about energy than I have ever known, but then I thought to myself Energy Minister, that was a tad too self-deprecating.

Let me highlight the key issues that have been raised, which fall into the following categories. First, there is the maritime growth study, which I have mentioned. That was a very important piece of work and I am immensely grateful to Lord Mountevans for leading it and to others who took part. It provided a series of recommendations that will inform future policy, but as he and others acknowledged, it must be a living document. The great risk with such exercises is that the document is published, the work is done, there is a great furor around its publication and then a year later people think, “What on earth was that study?” In order to give the document continuing relevance, it needs to be regularly updated, which is precisely what I am doing through the work I just described.

The points made about the flag—as highlighted by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass)—and tonnage tax should be pertinent to that review of the study. We can do more with tonnage tax, particularly on recruitment and training, and we need to do more, as has been acknowledged by the Government and those with whom we work, to make the flag more attractive. There has to be an offer in respect of the register that goes beyond simply raising the flag and includes a range of services that we can provide to make it more attractive. We are committed to that.

Secondly, the issue of ports was raised. We may have emphasised ports insufficiently. At the risk of adding contumely to our affairs, I disagreed to some degree with the Opposition spokesman on this issue; the ports are perhaps the best example of how private organisations investing heavily, being responsive to changing circumstances and being very efficient and competitive, compared with their European counterparts, can make a significant difference to the sector. The fact that we have private organisations—not wholly, but for the most part—running our ports is testament to what can be done when private and public interests coincide.

However, we should not be complacent. The shadow Minister is right that we need to look at the new challenges that our ports face, because they work in an extremely dynamic sector and more can be done to support them. We certainly should not have the port services regulation. As I made perfectly clear to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight, we will not have it as we do not want it and we will fight it at every opportunity.

The third issue that was raised was skills and recruitment. I share almost all the views that permeated—indeed coloured—this debate, begun by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland. I think that we are doing too little on recruitment and that we need to do more on skills. As Members will know, I was the apprenticeships Minister when the coalition Government first came into office. I am proud of our work on revitalising apprenticeships, but I take the point that was made. More can be done, and in my discussions on the industrial strategy I will raise the continuing importance of training in this sector. We need to recruit and train more British seafarers. It is as simple as that. Throughout this short debate Members have made the point that there has to
be a career path for those seafarers. It is not enough simply to recruit people at different levels; there has to be a career path so that people can build their life in seafaring. That is a good thing and something of which we should be proud.

Albert Owen: The Minister made two interventions on earlier speakers, and I am really pleased that he has now taken two interventions from me. Sea cadet units across the United Kingdom were a fertile breeding ground for people for both the merchant navy and the Royal Navy. Will he do more to train youngsters up in those facilities? He will also be aware of early-day motion 516, which has been suggested by the unions. Will he work with the unions and others to ensure that we have a proper campaign for skills and safety at sea?

Mr Hayes: Indeed I will. I recently held a roundtable meeting, which the unions attended, on precisely those matters. I have discussed recruitment with the trade unions, and I welcome the excellent briefing produced by my trade union friends. When I first became a Minister, I said to my officials, “I want to meet the unions regularly,” and they looked slightly nervous about it. During the course of those meetings, a union representative—I will not say who—said, “We never got this much out of Labour.” I can assure the hon. Gentleman—and particularly the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), who called for this specifically in his contribution—that I will continue to work with the trade unions in exactly the way in which he has described. It is vital not only that we recruit people, but that we train them appropriately and allow them the kind of career opportunities that he called for.

Karl Turner: Will the Minister commit to meeting a group of cross-party MPs, along with the RMT representatives, very soon to see what progress he has made following this debate?

Mr Hayes: Yes, I am happy to do that, perhaps under the auspices of the all-party group, which I have already met, but I am happy to meet again. That would be a useful vehicle for precisely that kind of discussion.

The fourth area that the debate touched on—this was referred to by a number of hon. Members—was what more can be done on recruitment, as well as how the work I am doing on the maritime growth study should fill some gaps and allow us to consider what more can be done on recruitment, as well as how we can approach skills in a fresh way and how the terms and conditions that apply across the industry can be improved.

The debate has served a useful purpose in allowing me not only to be the champion of the maritime sector, but, I hope, to be able to emulate the best of my predecessors, such as the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, and leave some kind of legacy. I want to do that on behalf of our ports and the towns in which they are situated, our ship owners and our shipbuilders—we build ships and boats in this country, and shipbuilding is something of which we should be proud too—and fundamentally and most of all, what is dearest to my heart, on behalf of our seafarers.

4.28 pm

Mr Carmichael: We have had a truly excellent debate. Although we have had contributions from 15 right hon. and hon. Members, including the Minister, we have managed to cover the full range of areas, instead of each of us standing up and piece by piece repeating what has already been said. I hope that we will see the debate as not just an event in itself, but the start of a process, and that the Minister will make good on his undertakings this afternoon, both on the prioritisation of policy work and on his continuing engagement with parliamentarians. It is clear that there is a common and shared interest in all parts of the House. For me, it is a matter of some satisfaction and relief that the debate has been as well attended and productive as it has been.

I confess that this is the first time I have sponsored a Back-Bench business debate. When I was last a Back Bencher, there was no such thing as the Backbench Business Committee. I got a bit of a telling-off from the Committee because apparently I did not fill in the form very well. Those things are important; I took its criticisms to heart. When the opportunity arises for a reprise of this debate, I will be able to pray in aid our excellent proceedings this afternoon to ensure that we can keep the issue on the Floor of the House and at the front of public attention, because that is where it belongs.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I thank all colleagues for their co-operation on time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the future of the UK maritime industry.

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. We have a delicate path to tread in this debate. Over the past 10 years, there has undoubtedly been a scandalous failure of care within this NHS trust. It has been well documented; I will come to that in the middle of my comments. There has been a failure in the structure of the trust, a failure of management and, in individual cases, failure by clinicians, and people have suffered and died because of those failures.

That discussion and debate needs to be aired, while ensuring—this is the delicate balance—a solid and credible future for the hospitals in the trust, and particularly North Manchester general hospital in my constituency. The vast majority of clinicians, staff and employees in the trust are committed to the good care of patients, and want the best for those patients and devote their careers and time to giving it to them. There is a delicate balance to be struck: I do not want any criticism of the trust to undermine morale further, but we have a responsibility to debate the issues. This is not about the present structure of the trust, a failure of management and, in other journalists—an individual cases, failure by clinicians, and people have suffered and died because of those failures.

One question on which I shall focus is why, even with all those red lights flashing all over the place for 10 years, with dire consequences for patients, the national organisation of the NHS and, more recently, the clinical commissioning groups did not notice them and sort out the situation.

The first strong warning sign that things were wrong came in a report from Channel 4’s “Dispatches” on 11 April 2011. “Dispatches” sent secret cameras into North Manchester and Royal Oldham hospitals in the Pennine trust, and found very poor care, amounting almost to low-level torture of some patients, who were shown not getting what they asked for. It was a terrible situation. At the time, I took up the case, and I am told that staff were disciplined.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that the nurse who was dismissed as a result of “Dispatches” took her case to a tribunal, which instructed the trust to give her back her job?

Graham Stringer: I was not aware of that. There are obviously many technical details about the disciplinary situation of which I am not aware. However, I saw the programme, and the patients in that situation were undoubtedly treated appallingly. One cannot resile from what one sees directly.

Liz McInnes: I caution my hon. Friend against reading too much into the “Dispatches” programme. The tribunal overruled the trust. The reporters spent six months in the trust and managed to find two incidents, which they broadcast. When the case was heard by a tribunal, it ruled that the nurse in question should not have been dismissed.

Graham Stringer: As I just said to my hon. Friend, I will not go into the details, but I probably know more than she does about the situation from the patients’ side, because a relative was affected. I have no doubt that those patients were treated appallingly. I cannot comment on the details of personnel issues, but I can comment on the fact that patients have been badly treated. Given the technicalities of the situation and having watched the programme, I find it worrying that although one or two cases were found after six months, the nurses were re-employed.

After “Dispatches”, the CQC report found scandalous failings within the trust. It found that the safety and wellbeing of patients were inadequate, and that the trust’s responsiveness and effectiveness needed improving, but that the care of patients was good. That report was very worrying: the trust would have been put in special measures, if a new team had not already been put in place to deal with the situation.

As I say, the CQC report found that the care of patients was good, but within a very short time—and after excellent investigative work by Jennifer Williams of the Manchester Evening News and other journalists—an internal report on maternity care was made public, showing that the care provided by some individuals was very poor indeed.

It is worth reading out for the record an extract from that internal report, because we have now had a 13-year period of failure. It is also worth remarking that both that internal report and the CQC report relied on
nothing but internal statements by the trust's staff. A paragraph from the internal report really contradicts the CQC report, as it states:

“Staff attitude has been a feature of a significant number of incidents, from the most basic reports of staff relationship breakdowns, resulting in women and their families exposed to unacceptable situations, to an embedded culture of not responding to the needs of vulnerable women”.

The report went on to say of one woman that

“in one incident it is clear that the failure of the team to identify her increasing deterioration and hypoxia attributed her behaviour to mental health issues. Failure to respond to deterioration over a period of days resulted in her death from catastrophic haemorrhage.”

That means that, according to internal sources, the situation was actually worse than had been thought.

The report continued:

“A further example of staff attitude and culture has been experienced recently when a woman gave birth to her baby just before the legal age of viability (22 weeks and 6 days)... whilst no resuscitation would be offered to an infant of this gestation, compassionate care is essential. However, when the baby was born alive and went on to live for almost two hours, the staff members involved in the care did not find a quiet place to sit with her to nurse her as she died but instead placed her in a Moses basket and left her in the sluice room to die alone.”

That is inhuman treatment.

These failings are the failings of individuals, of management, who failed to sort things out, and of the structure of the Pennine trust itself. I could list a whole series of other cases. In fact, late last night I was contacted by constituents I know about another case. I do not know the details of that case, but my constituents wanted me to take it up, as they strongly believed that a misdiagnosis meant that proper therapeutic care had not been provided. So problems in the Pennine trust continue.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech and I share his absolute horror at some of the reports of the standard of care that some patients have received. Like me, he was at a meeting with staff last month, who also expressed their concerns about the quality of care being provided.

I am trying to understand something. Is my hon. Friend saying that this poor care, as set out in the CQC report and other reports, is endemic and is found right across the Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust? Also, does he recognise that the new leadership is playing an important role and that the site leadership teams will do he recognise that the new leadership is playing an important role and that the site leadership teams will

Graham Stringer: What I am saying is that there have been failures from the very beginning of this trust, in that it has four hospitals that were jealous of each other. That caused administrative problems, which means the trust has never worked well, and there is also a structural problem. Secondly, there have been failures of management to deal with those issues of individual failure to care.

I have enormous confidence in Sir David Dalton and the team who are taking over the Pennine trust. Sir David’s record of developing Salford Royal hospital is exemplary, and I hope that he can do the same with North Manchester general hospital and the other hospitals within Pennine.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) said, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) we met the trade unions in Pennine just before Christmas and, like the vast majority of the staff, they were committed to improving healthcare in the trust. Like my hon. Friend for Oldham East and Saddleworth, I made the point that one has to acknowledge failures to ensure that there is improvement. One cannot just say that, just because so many staff are committed, that is good enough for the future. One also has to recognise the failure of the local clinical commissioning groups to deal with the problems, the fact that the board of the trust seems to have been paralysed and the fact that NHS Improvement has not dealt with the trust’s problems.

I have listed some of the cases that have caused public concern. One cannot put a financial cost on those cases, but if one reads the internal report on maternity care, one sees that the amount of money spent on compensation in the year 2014-15 was £58 million. I repeat—£58 million. Nearly £20 million went on three cases, which means that just over £6 million was spent on each one. In those cases, the people involved took legal action and at the end of the process were awarded that sum to look after severely handicapped patients.

There is no question but that, as I just said to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth, Sir David Dalton has put in place a team who are committed to taking North Manchester general hospital out of Pennine and putting right what was a structural mistake.

It is worth reflecting on another point that was made in the Westminster Hall debate about 10 years ago, which is about why the Pennine trust was created. It was not created for good medical reasons. There was a public reason, which was given at the time by Billy Egerton, the then chair of the North Manchester health trust—I think that was what it was called. He said that he thought that if North Manchester general hospital had remained separate from the trust, it would have been prey to the predatory instincts of Manchester Royal infirmary and the major central hospitals in Manchester. First, I do not think that was a good idea—there could have been co-operation—and secondly, there were a number of chief executives in the trust who were retiring, which meant that three chief executives could be paid off and one chief executive found. Those three chief executives who were paid off came back and did consultancy work for the NHS. Unfortunately, that is the way that the NHS has dealt with problems. It has spent money, and wasted money.

The proposals for devolution will help to deal with the problem. The national structures have not worked. Having the combined authority, encompassing the 10 local authorities, taking decisions and examining these issues, with North Manchester general hospital being within the Manchester hospital schemes, is not a guarantee of success, but I generally believe that when decisions are taken closer to what is happening on the ground, they are more likely to be correct decisions than if they are left to a national body, which has clearly failed in this situation.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this incredibly important debate and on his years of attempting to highlight the dreadful
failure of leadership—not of frontline staff, who do a remarkable job—in the trust. We have to hope that the future is better, but being dependent on the leadership of one individual in the long term is not always the best way to turn around an organisation.

In the light of my hon. Friend’s comments about local decision making, does he believe that at a time when accident and emergency at North Manchester general is under such tremendous pressure, it makes sense for Bury CCG to press ahead with its proposal to close the Prestwich walk-in centre? At a time when patients are being told not to go to accident and emergency services, it seems absolutely bonkers to close a walk-in centre that is so well used.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief.

Graham Stringer: I agree with my hon. Friend about the closure of walk-in centres. There has always been a conflict of interest between GPs getting patients through their surgeries and walk-in centres. At a time when there is stress across the whole Greater Manchester NHS—indeed, across the NHS in the whole country—to increase that pressure by closing walk-in centres seems—my hon. Friend says “bonkers”, but I would use slightly tamer language—perverse.

I will finish with some questions for the Minister. Part of the plans that Sir David Dalton and his team have in place, which involve separate management teams for the three major hospitals—putting Rochdale in with Bury—will require investment in the short term in 24 new beds for intermediate care and hopefully, in the medium term, the demolition of more than half of North Manchester general, which is a 19th-century workhouse, to turn it into a completely modern hospital. What will help staff morale most is a commitment to the future of the hospital on that site, dealing with a community with some of the country’s worst mortality and morbidity statistics. The Minister might not be briefed on this because it happened relatively recently, but the paediatric audiology unit has failed its accreditation assessment. If he does not know about that—I would not necessarily expect him to—will he write to tell me what the response will be and whether paediatric audiology will continue on the site?

On 13 December 2016, in a statement on the NHS deaths review, the Secretary of State, while recognising the difficulty in doing so, committed to trying to understand which of the highlighted cases were avoidable deaths and which were not. It is important for both the families and the public to know which of them could have been avoided and which were, unfortunately, the kind of unavoidable hospital death that takes place when someone is very sick. Was it a mistake to remove 31 medical beds from the hospital just over 12 months ago? As a result, the number of people being admitted into North Manchester general is lower, because there simply are not enough beds. What is happening to the people who otherwise would have been admitted?

Those are the detailed questions. The real question for the future is whether the Minister will give a long-term commitment to the hospital and to its moving into the Manchester hospital system. Given the statistics showing that men from north Manchester are likely to have lives that are six years shorter than those of men in the rest of the country, and that women’s lives are likely to be about 4.4 years shorter, is there a commitment to quality care and investment in the hospital for the future, to ensure that those rather damning statistics are changed?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. The winding-up speeches will begin no later than 10.40 am and four colleagues wish to catch my eye, so the maths does itself.

9.56 am

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): It is a pleasure to have you take charge of our proceedings, Mr Streeter. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer). He was right about our membership of the European Union and he has been proved right again about the Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust. I particularly appreciate the very considered and proportionate way in which he has approached what is clearly a difficult subject.

Deciding on the best and most efficient way to organise our national health service is a problem that has long occupied the intellect of many able minds. I think it is fair to say that both the Conservative party and the Labour party have struggled over the years with how best to manage such an enormous organisation. That is not a political point; it is a matter of fact that there are different ways to organise huge bodies and everyone wants to do it in the best way possible to deliver the best possible service for all our constituents. I want the NHS to be organised in any way that delivers the best service for my constituents in Bury, Ramsbottom and Tottington. They rely on our NHS. They rely on Bury CCG and on the Pennine acute. Frankly, they are not too bothered about precisely where a management committee sits or meets, but they are bothered about whether they can get their appointments on time and, crucially, whether, when they have to use NHS services, they are safe.

Mr Ivan Lewis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Nuttall: I will give certainly way to my neighbour, the hon. Member for Bury South.

Mr Lewis: The hon. Gentleman and I have always sought to work together in the interests of Bury and to put party political differences to one side. Does he agree that the decision being pressed ahead with, to close the walk-in centres in Prestwich and Bury, is perverse—or bonkers, depending on how one wants to look at it? Will he join me in ensuring that, when the formal consultation begins, we fight that decision? Given the pressures on the existing accident and emergency departments at North Manchester and Fairfield general hospitals, that decision would make the situation far worse.

Mr Nuttall: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising walk-in centres. I was going to mention them later, but I will deal with the issue now. I met with representatives from the Bury CCG some months ago, before all this was announced, and they took me through what they were planning. They convinced me that it was in the best interests of my constituents. It would be easy for me to say the popular thing, which is, “I think we
should oppose it.” I entirely appreciate why the good folk of Prestwich do not want their walk-in centre to be closed. I can see that there is a likelihood that it would increase pressure on the A&E. That highlights the point I was making, which is that there are good arguments to be made on both sides of the debate as to whether to have walk-in centres or a more community-based approach to delivering services. That is where Bury CCG was coming from.

Following the devolution of healthcare in Greater Manchester, since last April, we have been in an entirely new situation. We have an opportunity to make a reality of the joining up of health and social care, which has long been argued for.

I want to make three points this morning. First, I do not accept that the problems that have been identified at Pennine acute are all down to a lack of funding. To be fair, I think the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton accepted that the questions went much wider than funding. It is an easy get-out to simply blame a lack of funding.

Debbie Abrahams: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the NHS estimates a shortfall of £1 billion for the Greater Manchester health economy by 2020 under the devolution deal? Does he also accept the differences between the consolidation of different sites into specialist units and the huge shortfall that has meant that Pennine acute has not been able to recruit staff?

Mr Nuttall: There are two separate points there. On the first, I have been involved in politics for getting on for the best part of 40 years, and I have never come across a time when it has been claimed that the NHS is not short of money. I cannot remember a time when the parties have all agreed that the NHS was getting all the money it needed. In every general election that I have ever been involved in, there has always been this claim that the Conservative party is about to privatise the NHS and the NHS is short of money. We are not very good at it—if we had been, we would have privatised it years ago, were that the Conservative party’s intention. The fact of the matter is that Pennine acute alone is a huge organisation, with a budget of more than half a billion pounds. Even with our small part of the NHS, such sums of money are difficult to comprehend, never mind the totality of it.

We can all argue that our particular part of the NHS should be given more funding, but in reality the NHS will always be competing with all the other calls on the public purse. If we are to stick with the current funding model, we will only ever be able to increase spending on the NHS significantly if we have a strong and growing economy. I do not want to get bogged down in the broader questions about our NHS, however, because the specific issue this morning is the future of Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust.

The CQC report identified major problems with the leadership of the organisation. Like the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton, I have every confidence that Sir David Dalton and his new team will bring a fresh approach and outlook to the trust. The one worry I have is that we are perhaps expecting too much of that gentleman. He is clearly a very talented man, but we are all limited by the fact, no matter what our particular talents may be, that there are only 24 hours in the day. I have heard anecdotal stories that he is pulled from pillar to post because he has so many demands on his time. That is understandable; it is not in any way a criticism. It is just a fact of life that he is being asked to do an awful lot. I wish him every success in the world. I hope he can deliver, and I am confident that he will but, if I have one concern, it is that he is perhaps being asked to do too much. I understand that he is focusing on trying to have a more decentralised approach to management to bring management closer to those the trust seeks to manage, and I hope that that will improve matters.

My second point is the issue of maternity services. The removal of children’s services and the closure of the maternity department and the special care baby unit at Fairfield occupied much of my time for years when I first moved to the Bury North constituency. Almost everyone thought that the services at Fairfield were excellent. At the time, my constituents and I were told that things would be even better—even safer—if services were closed at Fairfield and moved to North Manchester and Bolton hospitals. I made it clear that I had doubts about that, as did my constituents. I do not want to quote again from the CQC report, but I want to put on the record this particular quote from it:

“We found poor leadership and oversight in a number of services, notably maternity services, urgent care (particularly at North Manchester Hospital) the HDU at Royal Oldham hospital and in services for children and young people.

In all of these services leaders had not led and managed required service improvements robustly or effectively.”

My constituents could be forgiven for saying, “We told you so.” They can understandably feel vindicated on the stance they took. Incidentally, I understand from a councillor who serves on the Pennine acute scrutiny committee that it was told that the trust was liaising with Newcastle hospitals to learn best practice for maternity services. However, some little time later, when the scrutiny committee asked how that was going and followed up on that idea, it was told, “Sorry, it never went ahead. We are not proceeding with that now.” That little anecdote perhaps gives some idea as to why the CQC discovered problems.

In conclusion, I will make a quick third point. I believe that what Pennine acute would benefit from most in the months and years ahead is a period of stability. It seems to me that part of the problem at Pennine is the constant chopping and changing of leadership. No sooner does one team settle in than they move on and someone else takes over. The difficulty is the resultant lack of accountability. When things go wrong, it can always be blamed on someone else, whether that is to do with a lack of funding or decisions made by a previous management. My constituents and I need to see an end to the changes; we need to see some continuity. My constituents want Pennine acute to be a success. Other NHS trusts are successful, so there is no reason why, with the right leadership in place, Pennine acute cannot be as successful.

10.9 am

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I am an ex-employee of Pennine acute. I worked for Pennine acute and its predecessor trust from 1987 for...
27 years before I was elected to this place. I come to this debate very much from the Pennine acute staff point of view and our experiences of working there.

We have always worked against a background of change. Ever since I started work in the NHS, I cannot remember a time when there was not a new scheme coming up. It was always couched in the same language and everything was going to be different under the latest proposals. That has been my experience of working for the NHS in a 33-year career. There was always a new scheme on the horizon that promised the earth. We would try to give it a go and work with the new system, but systems were never given time to bed in. Just as we were getting used to a different way of working, a new system would come along promising the earth and everything was going to be wonderful under the new system. We all wondered what was so wrong with the old system that we had been told would be so good and solve all our problems. That, in a nutshell, is my experience as a member of staff working in the NHS.

Listening to the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) and the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) was very interesting. They have been MPs in the area for a long time. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton said that Pennine acute was formed from four trusts that were jealous of each other, but I feel that is a misinterpretation. He was partially right in quoting Bill Egeron: the trust was formed because North Manchester general was worried about being swallowed up by Central Manchester. That was a fear shared by the staff as well, because none of the four hospitals that form the Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust are teaching hospitals. There was a real concern among the staff that North Manchester general, a local hospital, might be swallowed up by teaching hospitals in central Manchester and disappear. Patients were also concerned that their local hospital would disappear. The trust treats a disadvantaged area, as has already been highlighted. The fact that life expectancy is low in that region is more to do with the quality of life rather than the standard of hospital care there.

Pennine acute was formed in 2002 from a merger of four existing trusts that I think merged to support each other. It was very much a banding together of four non-teaching hospitals that wanted to work together and make a success of Pennine acute. Obviously, any change is difficult, and the merger was a major change, but when Pennine was formed there was a real spirit to make it work. It was one of the biggest trusts in the country with 10,000 staff.

Graham Stringer: I am glad my hon. Friend agrees with me about the reason for the formation. Does she recall that within three years of the formation of the trust the consultants and the unions had an unprecedented vote of no confidence in the management? All the different hospital sites believed they were going to be closed at the expense of another site. Within three years the formation was not working.

Liz McInnes: I was coming to that point because my hon. Friend referred to the chief executive leaving. I inferred from his speech that that was as a result of a debate my hon. Friend had held in Parliament, but the chief executive left because the doctors had a vote of no confidence. The trade unions similarly expressed concern about the way in which the trust was being managed, but, as I recall, the trade unions did not have a vote of no confidence. Unless my memory is not serving me well, I do not recall the trade unions voting on that. I was heavily involved in the trade unions and I have no recollection of our having a vote of no confidence. That came purely from the doctors, who were concerned about the direction the trust was going in. It was as a result of that vote that Chris Appleby resigned from the trust. I was heavily involved in trade union activities as I was a workplace rep for Unite the union while I worked at the trust.

I want to highlight the issues involved in constant reorganisation and relocation. With the single hospital service proposal and with Healthier Together, we have two proposals running concurrently now, both of which seem to have different aims with different groups of hospitals working together. Healthier Together relies on the four Pennine acute hospitals working together and the single hospital service review, commissioned last year, proposes that North Manchester general should now work with Central Manchester and South Manchester. To add to the background of the constant confusion of reorganisations, we now have two different schemes that do not seek the same outcomes. I am sure everybody can understand how confusing and worrying such uncertainty is for the staff.

During the formation of Pennine acute, as a union rep I dealt with many staff who struggled with suddenly being told that their job was moving to another site and that they would be expected to relocate. Very little attention seemed to be paid to staff’s caring responsibilities. I dealt with several staff with disabilities, who had real issues about suddenly being told their job at North Manchester general no longer existed and that they were now expected to get themselves to Oldham at the same time in the morning, even though they had an extra six or seven miles to travel. There were real issues in dealing with staff and relocation in a sensitive manner. Such issues lead to uncertainty for staff and also make Pennine acute look an unattractive place to work.

In the meeting that we had with staff, they were very concerned about the maternity report that had been reported in the Manchester Evening News and the detrimental effect that it would have on staff who wanted to work there. At the meeting we heard from a representative from the Royal College of Midwives that a scheme had been put in place for improvements. The scheme is ongoing and midwives are now being recruited. There was an anomaly with the grade on which midwives were employed. They were being employed one band lower than they should have been, but that has been remedied. So there is an improvement plan in place and we need to be careful about extrapolating from dreadful incidents and saying that the whole of the trust is failing. I caution against that.

I have spoken about Healthier Together and the single hospital service running simultaneously, but seemingly both requiring different outcomes. The staff at Pennine are concerned about the single hospital service and the proposal that Central Manchester, South Manchester and Pennine acute should begin working together. Unfortunately, a lot of staff have been through it all before. They have been through the assurances that their jobs will be safe and that they will not have to...
move, but they have seen those promises eroded over time. Many are concerned about the prospect of having to journey right across central Manchester to go to work at Wythenshawe. That will be a lot of commuting for staff and they are very concerned about the proposal. The single hospital service review makes a virtue of staff being transferable—that is quoted in the document—and yet, at the moment, staff are being assured that they will not have to move.

On maternity care, the hon. Member for Bury North said that it is not a funding issue, but the appalling report on maternity services highlighted the lack of funding. In the past, there was a proposal to improve maternity services, called “Making It Better.” That was based on an annual birth rate of 3,500. The trust is now dealing with 10,000 births per year on the amount of funding that was settled on 3,500 births, so the funding issue obviously needs to be addressed.

The building stock at North Manchester is a real issue, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton already mentioned. In my understanding, it was never a workhouse and has always been a hospital, but it was built to serve the workhouse that was built next door. The state of the building stock was always the reason that Pennine acute could not get foundation trust status.

10.21 am

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter, and I congratulate the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) on securing this important debate. This subject has been the source of much stress for members of the community and staff who live in the area.

My approach is usually to be supportive of local institutions, particularly because my first proper job was as an apprentice at North Manchester general hospital, or Crumpsall as we call it locally. It is where I was born. The Royal Oldham hospital is where my eldest son and my partner were born; Fairfield is where my youngest son was born. We are very much part of the community infrastructure, so naturally I feel protective of it—it is like a family—and that is right and proper, but it does not mean that we defend the indefensible.

Things have taken place that have affected people’s lives. Deaths that could have been avoided have occurred. Family members who have tried to get answers have been frustrated and have been met with a culture of closing down and restricting information. Usually, people just want to get answers to help the grieving process and to find out what has taken place.

I very much share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) on the Healthier Together programme, which runs on one stream, and a separate desire, with different drivers, to take the North Manchester hospital away from the Pennine trust. There are different forces at play in the background. The clinician approach, Healthier Together, is about making sure the infrastructure in place meets the demands of the community. Then there is a power game at play, which is about taking North Manchester hospital out and making an enlarged Manchester trust that covers the city boundaries. I am yet to be convinced that that is being done with patients in mind, rather than other things—although, of course, I want to be convinced, because those patients are my constituents, my family members and my friends too, so it is important.

When I speak to staff, I see an organisation where people are working hard, trying to make a difference, people who came into public service because they wanted to be good public servants—but who feel that they are waiting for the next criticism. They are waiting to be named and shamed in the local paper; they are waiting for the next inspection to take place that says they are not doing what they need to do. The vast majority of the 9,000 staff are doing a good job. They came into public service in the NHS because they wanted to be good public servants and we need to bear that in mind—we owe most of those people a debt of gratitude. People have been let down, but lives have also been saved—there are people who would not be here today if not for the work that the hospitals have done and babies who have been born into the world who perhaps would not be here if not for the people who work in that place—but there is no doubt that there are issues of culture, leadership and resources.

The culture needs to be more open and transparent. It needs to be more of a learning trust that is open about when mistakes are made and learns from them, rather than being defensive and withholding information, which is my experience from supporting constituents.

Leadership needs to be visible and proactive. It needs to give people a sense that the future is better than the past. If all people see is a constant cycle of criticism, downgrading and talking down, that will not create the conditions to improve the hospital, which is not good for anybody. I welcome the appointment of Sir David Dalton, who has a good track record, but building the capacity and support in the organisation to make sure that it can improve in the way that it needs to goes beyond him. There is a body of staff—our constituents, our family members and our friends—who really want to see that place turned round, but capacity and resources are really important.

I am not saying that all of the issues in the trust are about money, because they run far deeper than that, but resources are important. There is a reason why the trust has an over-reliance on agency staff, why it struggles to recruit and retain high-quality clinicians and staff and why it is not able to get the surety that it needs in the longer term—it is resourcing, and it is also the estate.

A transformation plan has been submitted to Government—we know that there will be a plan in place to improve leadership and culture, but in places, the estate, particularly at the Royal Oldham hospital, is not fit for purpose. Some of it dates back to its opening in 1870 as a workhouse hospital. There have been improvements since then, but in some places the estate, as a place to manage and organise, is just not fit for purpose. It requires cash investment and I plead with the Minister to make sure that money is made available to ensure that the hospital can be all it can be.

My final plea, which chimes with the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton, is that we all have a duty to be part of the solution to turn the trust round and to make sure that each of the hospitals performs to the best of its ability. We will not do that if all we do is focus on the past. The past is
important for context, and in order to get answers for people who have had bad treatment and need those answers, but it is not a foundation for positive progress, which is what the hospitals need. We need to work across parties on this issue—it is beyond party politics—to make sure that resourcing is right and the proper challenge and leadership is in place. That is an open offer, from my point of view, and from that of other Members here today, and I hope it is taken up.

10.27 am

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) for securing this very important debate. In many respects it is overdue, but it is also timely; not least because of the recent Manchester Evening News expose of the trust, and particularly of the maternity units. I put on record the excellent journalism that Jennifer Williams carried out at the Manchester Evening News, which shone a light on the issue and held power to account. That is what journalism should be about.

We have all seen the crisis in the national health service and the suffering that has been caused, the lack of funding and the cuts to social care, but as colleagues have pointed out, this debate is not about funding. It is about leadership, or a lack of leadership, within the trust, which has gone on for quite some time. As others have said, it is about not the leadership of Sir David Dalton, who has just taken up some responsibilities for the trust, but the poor leadership of people such as Gillian Fairfield and indeed John Saxby, her predecessor. They failed to lead the organisation effectively and properly.

We have all read the reports of diverted ambulance services, chronic understaffing and serious incidents going unreported, but as colleagues have pointed out, as MPs, we have also seen behind the headlines. With people coming into our surgeries, we see on a regular basis the real upset and worry that is caused by the failure within the trust.

Last year, I was contacted by Mr Hall, the brother of my constituent Mrs Doreen Malone, who passed away on 22 July. Doreen had diabetes and suffered from kidney disease, and as a result was completely dependent on dialysis twice a week. She was in a critical condition. An ambulance was called at 11 o’clock. Once again, Doreen was left waiting. At 12.15 pm, the ambulance eventually arrived, and she was taken to Fairfield hospital, where she sadly died the following day. Pennine acute attributed the delays to the high number of patients arriving at accident and emergency. This was not during the winter crisis; it was the middle of July. It is no surprise that none of what Pennine acute had to say was of any comfort to Doreen’s family. That tragedy could have been avoided, not least because lessons should have been learned much earlier.

I would appreciate it if the Minister could outline what steps are being taken to hold failing senior managers at Pennine acute to account. What assurances can he give that such people are not able to get jobs elsewhere in the national health service?

10.31 am

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) on securing this extremely important debate and on the knowledgeable way in which he introduced the subject. He set out the history of the concerns, which stretch back as far as the establishment of the trust. He made a powerful case about the need to give the people we represent in north Manchester the excellent health service they deserve.

My hon. Friend made the key point, which we should all reflect on, that life expectancy in that part of the world is much lower than in other parts of the country. We all want to see that improve. He said, and I agree, that there is a delicate balance between getting to the bottom of what has gone wrong and creating a credible plan for the trust’s future. I agree that the vast majority of clinicians at Pennine acute are highly committed and professional. He told us that he led a debate on the subject a decade ago. I have read extracts of the Hansard report of that debate, and many of the points that he raised then have been raised again today. We should all reflect on that. It is a completely unacceptable situation.

The hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) said that the problems at Pennine acute are not all down to money, and that some of them date back to a time when the NHS was receiving record levels of investment, but I think that some of the staffing shortfalls are finance-driven—the Care Quality Commission report refers to the financial pressures. I agree that leadership is very much an issue, and that a period of stability is required.

My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) also spoke about having a period of stability, with great knowledge and experience from her long history of working in the NHS. She said with great eloquence that there seems to be a constant rollercoaster of change. She also pointed out that the trust is undergoing two initiatives, which seem to be in a critical condition. An ambulance was called at 11 o’clock. Once again, Doreen was left waiting. At 12.15 pm, the ambulance eventually arrived, and she was taken to Fairfield hospital, where she sadly died the following day. Pennine acute attributed the delays to the high number of patients arriving at accident and emergency. This was not during the winter crisis; it was the middle of July. It is no surprise that none of what Pennine acute had to say was of any comfort to Doreen’s family. That tragedy could have been avoided, not least because lessons should have been learned much earlier.

I would appreciate it if the Minister could outline what steps are being taken to hold failing senior managers at Pennine acute to account. What assurances can he give that such people are not able to get jobs elsewhere in the national health service?
My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) also has significant connections with the trust. He described it as a family, but he was right to say that that should not mean that we cannot ask difficult questions about what has gone on. He conveyed how demoralising it is for the staff who work there. He said that leadership is a key issue, as did the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk), who also said it is about capacity and resources. I think we all agree that leadership was lacking in the past, but most Members who spoke were positive about the new leadership.

I, too, pay tribute to everyone working at Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust. As Members said, it is not an easy time for them. It is not an easy time for anyone working in the NHS, let alone for those who work in a trust that has been the subject of such negative coverage. We should be mindful of the fact that the crisis currently engulfing the whole of the NHS would be so much worse if it were not for the good will of the staff who go above and beyond the call of duty every day. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton said, we should be extremely grateful for the contribution they make. I recognise how difficult it must be to work in a trust such as Pennine acute. As he said, it has sadly been in the headlines all too often for the wrong reasons. It is worth pointing out that the most recent CQC report into the trust rated the leadership inadequate, but rated the care good. Although we are deeply concerned about the reports about the trust, we recognise that the vast majority of staff are extremely dedicated and caring.

No one can read the CQC report or the other reviews that have been published without feeling deeply uncomfortable about what has gone on at Pennine acute. The report should be a wake-up call for the wider health service. It talks about low morale, severe staff shortages and, worryingly, a feeling among staff that until recently the culture focused on financial matters and operational delivery, rather than quality. We hear such concerns across the whole of the health service. I am not for a minute suggesting that the most concerning incidents at Pennine acute will be repeated, but we should recognise that the pressures that we hear about in Pennine acute can be found in many other trusts up and down the country. The history of this matter should convey how demoralising it is for the staff who work there. He said that leadership is a key issue, as did the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk), who also said it is about capacity and resources. I think we all agree that leadership was lacking in the past, but most Members who spoke were positive about the new leadership.

The CQC report made it clear that the issues it outlined are not new. To paraphrase it, they appear to be part of the culture at Pennine acute. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton said, there is a strong resemblance between the CQC report and a 2005 report by Sir George Alberti, which was very critical of the trust. The only real difference between those reports is that the severity of the criticism has grown. During that decade, there was inaction, patients and staff were let down, and there was a lack of leadership. Although there are concerns about a number of services, the most serious issues appear to be with maternity services, where the CQC said it found “a poor culture with deeply entrenched attitudes where some staff accepted sub optimal care as the norm...and specific needs were not appropriately considered or met.”

As we have said several times already, this is about leadership. Although it is not right to point a finger at individuals on this occasion, it seems that there have been repeated failures over many years and at many levels, and a failure to drive the changes needed to improve outcomes for patients. I was particularly concerned by the statement that not all reportable incidents were reported on the system because “there was often no managerial response or feedback.”

The CQC report also says:

“Incidents and risks were not escalated in a timely way or at times not escalated at all; consequently they did not gain robust executive scrutiny or the required response from managers and the senior team.”

Although the report says that only some departments failed to respond correctly, it is deeply troubling that it happened at all. We can see why some of those incidents happened: there was a culture in which reports were not acted upon.

There were other warnings. Between 2010 and 2015, the trust paid the highest number of compensation claims of any trust within the NHS Litigation Authority. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton said, in one year the compensation totalled £58 million. Compensation levels in maternity claims obviously tend to be extremely high, but no one could claim that those figures did not require further investigation and more action. However, only after the CQC inspection of February 2016 was decisive action taken.

In July last year the Manchester Evening News learned from a whistleblower that an internal review had been carried out into maternity services at North Manchester general and Royal Oldham hospitals. Unfortunately, the newspaper’s requests for a copy of the review were repeatedly sidestepped, until eventually, in August, the trust stated that the review did not exist. It was handed over only after further requests to the trust and the intervention of the Information Commissioner. What does denial of the report’s existence say about the trust’s defensiveness, secrecy and unwillingness to learn from mistakes?

As we have heard from Members today, the report painted a deeply concerning picture of a chronically understaffed service unable to provide patients with the level of care that they deserve. We have heard of incidents such as a mother dying of a catastrophic haemorrhage after her symptoms were attributed to mental illness; a baby who died because staff failed to identify the mother’s rare blood type; and a patient who was left with a colostomy because her condition was missed three times.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton read out the most distressing of those reports, which was the case of a premature baby. It is incredibly difficult for us to comprehend just how distressing that must have been. I agree with him that that incident was inhuman. We cannot undo that terrible event, but we can do our best to prevent it from being repeated and to ask the pertinent question of why the warning signs, which occurred over a number of years, did not bring about more effective change. Only after the CQC got involved did change begin.

It is also deeply concerning that only the diligence of a single journalist at the Manchester Evening News pushed the issue of the internal review into maternity services. When the Minister responds, will he agree that
steps should be taken to unearth the full extent of what happened at the trust, so that we may learn the right lessons for the future?

Members who have spoken in the debate have recognised that the leadership of Sir David Dalton since April has been received positively. The CQC has recognised the improvements made since his appointment. As the hon. Member for Bury North said, even an individual of Sir David’s ability, however, cannot be expected to lead two trusts, as large as they are, as well as carrying out his other responsibilities. I will welcome any comments the Minister might have about the long-term leadership at the trust.

The CCG has, I understand, been able to invest an extra £9 million, but the Government have not allocated any additional funds to the trust, as would usually be the case with a turnaround effort of that nature. The Secretary of State acknowledged that improving Pennine acute would be “incredibly difficult”, but suggested that it was possible after citing the example of the Frimley Health Foundation Trust. According to the *Health Service Journal*, however, Frimley Health will receive £90 million in revenue support, as well as £130 million of capital funding. Is the Minister therefore satisfied that the trust has the resources not only to maintain services in an incredibly challenging climate, but to drive through the improvements that are clearly needed?

Over the years, many opportunities to turn the trust around have been missed. I hope that the Minister will be able to satisfy us that this is a turning point and that we will not be back here in 10 years’ time with another set of patients and staff who have been let down badly.

10.43 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a pleasure, Mr Streeter, to serve under your chairmanship in such a well-attended debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) on securing the debate and on encouraging so many of his neighbours, who clearly have an interest in healthcare in the area served by the Pennine trust, to attend and to make such powerful contributions. Everyone has spoken from the heart and with true sensitivity.

As the hon. Gentleman said at the start of the debate, it is difficult to strike the right balance between drawing attention to trusts’ obvious failings, which need to be brought into the public domain and dealt with, and not seeking to lay blame on individuals. We all recognise that the individuals who work in the trust, as we heard so powerfully from the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who worked at the trust for many years, give of their best and wish to provide the best possible care for their patients. Often the systems and structures around the individuals can inhibit that good intent.

I applaud the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton for highlighting some dreadful examples of very poor care in the trust over many years, but especially those that came to light last year. As he well knows, the problems at Pennine go back many years. The trust is 16 years old, as other Members have said. Within three years of its creation, consultants at the trust had passed a vote of no confidence in its then management, as the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton reminded us.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) pointed out that, in the days before the CQC, Sir Geo Beech Alberti was asked to report on what was happening. Much of last year’s CQC report, however, echoes the findings of the 2005 Alberti report, as the hon. Gentleman said in his constructive contribution. We must try therefore not only to learn the lessons, but to implement them; they clearly have not been in the past few years. I will touch on some key findings of the CQC report before I develop my remarks on what we are doing to respond to the findings and shortcomings.

The CQC report was based on an inspection in February and March last year, which rated the Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust overall as inadequate. In particular, the trust was rated inadequate for safety and leadership. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, however, it was rated good for care, which is a visible tribute to the quality of care provided by the dedicated staff in the main.

The report found other problems: shortages in nursing, midwifery and medical staff, which have been touched on by other hon. Members; a lack of understanding of key risks at departmental, divisional or board level; problems in services, including in A&E, maternity, and children’s and critical care; key risks were not recognised, escalated or mitigated effectively; and there was inconsistent performance reporting and concern about the quality of data to support performance reporting.

In addition, the CQC identified low morale in a number of services, in particular maternity, and described a poor culture with deeply entrenched attitudes. Regrettably, some staff accepted suboptimal care as the norm, and patients’ individual and specific needs were neither appropriately considered nor met.

Those were the CQC findings. In contrast to what has happened following previous problems and subsequent actions, the new CQC regime is introducing beneficial change—which I hope is recognised by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton—and improvement. An inadequate rating by the CQC would normally result in the trust being put into special measures, but in this case a different remedy is being used to turn the trust around and, in particular, to address the obvious challenge of leadership, which almost every contributor to the debate has identified as an historical failing at the trust.

In April last year, the management team of the neighbouring Salford Royal, led by Sir David Dalton and Jim Potter, took over the chief executive and chair roles at Pennine acute on an interim basis. That team is in the process of guiding a management contract for the long term to continue providing the strong leadership needed to drive the improvements that we all recognise. The new management team at the Pennine trust got to work immediately. In July last year, the Salford team completed a diagnostic assessment of the issues facing Pennine and developed a short and long-term improvement programme based on patient safety, governance, workforce, leadership and operational performance.

Debbie Abrahams: Given the Pennine trust’s current position and the staff shortfalls that the Minister has also mentioned, what additional funding support can he offer Pennine acute?

Mr Dunne: I will not be drawn too far down that route at this point, because I would like to develop my overall response. This is not all about funding, as many
hon. Members have said. Staff shortages are not necessarily driven by funding either; they are often driven by a trust’s difficulties making it an unattractive place to work. I do not have in my head the number of applicants for vacancies, or the number of vacancies, but I will tell the hon. Lady in a moment how many staff have joined the trust—what increase there has been—under its new leadership.

Debbie Abrahams rose—

Mr Dunne: I am afraid, unless the hon. Lady can give me some figures on vacancies that will help my understanding—

Debbie Abrahams: Maintained vacancies have caused significant pressure on, for example, middle-grade clinicians in the A&E department. Vacancies have been maintained to try to save money, and that has been a real issue.

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. I will come on to staff issues in a few moments.

As several hon. Members have said, local political leaders have broadly welcomed Sir David Dalton’s appointment as the chief executive of the Salford Royal trust, which is one of the finest trusts in the country and was one of the first to be rated outstanding by the CQC. He is listening to staff and, where appropriate, deploying Salford’s systems and experience to help to support staff in Bury, Rochdale, Oldham and North Manchester to deliver the high standards of service that we all want. I welcome the support that has been expressed for Sir David’s efforts by everyone who has spoken in this debate, in particular the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton.

Sir David believes that all the evidence shows that staff are best placed to know what needs to be improved in their ward or department. He has introduced a system—tried and tested in Salford—that involves staff and supports them to test their ideas for improvement. Ideas that are shown to work will be replicated across the whole hospital. That approach turns on its head the idea that people in senior management positions always know what is best for patients on a ward, and instead recognises that frontline staff have expertise in spades and supports them. It will help to develop the culture change that was called for in particular by the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), who rightly identified that as a fundamental problem in the Pennine acute trust.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) called for, Sir David Dalton at the beginning of this month introduced new site-based leadership teams in each of the four hospitals. For the first time since the creation of the trust 15 years ago, each hospital site and place-based team will consist of a medical director, a nursing director and a managing director, each dedicated to the daily oversight of that hospital. Together, they will manage the services of a care organisation. That site-based arrangement will give leadership teams a clearer focus and enable them to offer staff better support and engagement and take operational decisions for each site. Those leaders will also have the benefit of being in post on site to strengthen local relationships and promote joint working with other partners in the health economy, including local authorities and commissioners.

The hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North highlighted poor maternity care. The newly appointed director for women’s and children’s services led an internal review of maternity services under the new management arrangements. That review dug deeper and revealed even more than the CQC was able to. Some of the instances of poor care that were revealed are truly shocking, and I express my sincere regret to everyone affected by those tragic incidents, some of which were not even more than the CQC was able to. Some of the instances of poor care that were revealed are truly shocking, and I express my sincere regret to everyone affected by those tragic incidents, some of which the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton highlighted. As an immediate result of those reviews, an improvement plan and a new management team for maternity services have been put in place at North Manchester general hospital. Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust maternity staff are working alongside Pennine staff to develop a clinical leadership and staffing support programme.

The A&E departments remain under pressure, not least given the winter pressures that have been common across the NHS in the past couple of weeks. That is particularly true at North Manchester, but that department has been stabilised and measures have been put in place to support staff, including direct GP and primary care input into the A&E department from Manchester GPs. Those GPs are supporting the department seven days a week and seeing around 30 patients a day, taking pressure off the service and ensuring that patients see the right professionals and receive the right care. Similarly, the local NHS in Oldham is piloting embedding enhanced primary care support in the A&E and urgent care system. Two GPs a day work between 11 am and 11 pm to support that system.

Measures have also been taken to stabilise children’s services; there has been a temporary reduction in beds at the Royal Oldham and North Manchester hospitals to reflect the workload that staff, given their current numbers, can deal with safely. Those measures are having an impact on turning around the performance of the hospitals in the trust. Additionally—the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston asked about funding—extra financial support of £9.2 million was secured in year to enable the trust to put in place immediate and short-term measures to stabilise services.

The hon. Members for Blackley and Broughton and for Oldham West and Royton asked about staff shortages. I am advised that between March 2016, when the new management team came into place, and December 2016, the number of people employed on a full-time or part-time basis by the trust increased by more than 300. I think that is 300 more full-time equivalents. That includes seven doctors, 133 registered nurses and 58 midwives and is a net addition to the trust.

Ms Abrahams: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there are variations in the number of staff that are needed by different trusts? It is not an exact science, so it is not easy to make comparisons.
to 90 days. Considerable progress has been made on changing the culture of how problems and complaints are dealt with.

Hon. Members talked about the future and expressed concern, particularly from a staff perspective, about yet another change happening. As all Members are aware, NHS England is in the midst of implementing sustainability and transformation proposals and turning those into plans for 44 areas across the country. Greater Manchester’s five-year plan, “Taking charge of our Health and Social Care”, predates the request for STPs, but NHS England has agreed that that plan meets the STP requirements and they are now effectively one and the same thing. There is, therefore, a real opportunity for healthcare in Manchester, with devolution of control to the council and opportunities for the local authority to work with the NHS to improve services for all the people of Manchester, to become a model for the rest of the country.

The NHS in Manchester has been looking at how acute services can best be organised to deliver benefits, including operational financial efficiency, for quality of care, patient experience and the workforce. As has been said, the proposal is to create a single acute provider for Manchester, with the Wythenshawe hospital and the North Manchester general hospital joining the Central Manchester foundation trust. That is an ambitious proposal, and the organisational change it requires is complex, but we believe that the potential benefits are considerable and offer a real chance for care to be standardised across the city. I know that hon. Members will be concerned about what that means for the Pennine trust. If that proposal proceeds, services at North Manchester general hospital will be combined with those at the other hospitals in Manchester, but the intention is for the remaining hospitals in the Pennine acute trust to continue to work with Salford Royal in a new relationship, which is under active consideration.

Hon. Members mentioned resources for estates. Like any trust, the Pennine acute trust needs better-quality, flexible and fit-for-purpose buildings. I have little time in which to outline what is happening but, as some hon. Members will be aware, construction has begun of a brand new, purpose-built 24-bed community intermediate care unit on the grounds of North Manchester hospital. That unit will cost £5 billion and will take 12 months to build. The Royal Oldham hospital, which includes the old workhouse, is being developed into a high acuity centre to serve the population of north-east Manchester. Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

School Funding Formula and Northern Schools

11 am

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Colleagues, we move on to our next debate, which is also about an important matter: the school funding formula, which the Government have introduced and we are all very excited about.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the school funding formula and Northern schools.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter—it is a first for me. The circumstances of the debate are strange in so far as I originally put in for a one-hour or 90-minute debate, knowing that many parliamentary colleagues were exercised about this topic. I did not win the lottery for an Adjournment debate, but a half-hour slot became available and Mr Speaker offered it to me, so I thought I would go ahead and try to condense this important subject into half an hour. However, I do apologise, Mr Streeter, because you could have had a range of eloquent speakers addressing the subject but unfortunately you will have to listen simply to me droning on. I am sure this will be the first of many such debates for the Minister, because the national funding formula will be contentious in many places, not only in the north, and I dare say he will have an opportunity to rehearse some well-tried Department for Education lines in defence of it.

The Government set themselves a laudable task: to close the north-south gap in educational attainment. I am a little sceptical about the gap because “the north” is often seen from London as an undifferentiated mass. I was brought up on BBC weather forecasts in which the presenters went into great detail about the weather on the south coast and in London, and then they would glibly say, “but in the north it will be” and use that blanket label for the entire area anywhere north of Watford. The tendency is to see the north as a homogenous culture, possibly peopled by men in flat caps with whippets and living with constant drizzle. However, I looked further into what the Government meant by the educational gap—I had to address what the evidence showed—and, if we control for factors such as income and deprivation and exclude pockets of genuine excellence, we see that outcomes for northern secondary schools are inferior to those found in London and the south-east. Primary schools show less evidence of a northern problem.

I am not sure whether the difference we see would be so stark if we excluded those areas that have benefited from schemes such as the London challenge, which has been a successful concentration of money and resources. I met recently with Anne Longfield, the Children’s Commissioner, whom the Government charged with testing some of the assumptions underlying the project. The principal one seems to be the belief that if we have an educational problem, it is capable of an educational fix. The commission has suggested that other things could be taken into account: for example, parents in the north could be a bit pushier.

In a report for the previous Chancellor, Sir Nick Weller, who works for an academy chain, suggested unsurprisingly that the north could do better with more academy chains—and, incidentally, better teaching.
Proponents of grammar schools have not been slow to suggest that what we need in the north is more grammar schools. The Minister will be aware of the study done by ResPublica in Knowsley, which suggested that grammar schools might be a panacea. However, to my certain knowledge, Knowsley has had grammar schools since 1544—I was once a pupil at Prescot grammar school.

The harsh reality is that, in order to change aspiration in the north, we need to do more than change school structures, because the reality that dawns on adolescents in the north is that opportunities are more limited compared with those they might face in the south, regardless of the education they receive. That is why so many young people gravitate to the south, particularly after their degrees; why there are more start-ups in the south; why the south is a magnet; and why the south has critical mass. Young people’s aspirations are simply less when there is less around them to aspire to—it is a chicken and egg dilemma. If we factor in limited parental optimism based on a degree of experience in the north and the limited opportunities available to those who are industrious but not especially talented, is it surprising that the optimism of childhood dwindles as schooling progresses and aspiration and attainment falls? I suggest that correcting that is beyond the scope of the school system alone; it involves regeneration of the whole community to which the child belongs.

That said, we all recognise that education plays a key part in regeneration. It is worth funding, and it is worth funding properly. I am far from believing that good funding is a sufficient condition of educational progress. Were that so, many schemes in the past would have worked far better than they have done. If we think about the money spent over the years in places such as Knowsley to provoke better educational outcomes, we would expect far superior outcomes to those we got. I do, though, note that, according to the Institute for Public Policy Research, £900 less is spent per primary school pupil in the north and at secondary schools that figure goes up to £1,300. That could go part of the way to explaining the significant difference in outcome. However, it is probably fairer to regard good funding as a necessary rather than a sufficient condition. In that respect, the Government’s revision of the school funding formula leaves a little to be desired. Indeed, its effects in some places will probably be catastrophic.

I recognise that no one will oppose a national school formula in principle because it sounds fair on paper, given that we have the effective nationalisation of school funding anyway through the dedicated schools grant. The current situation looks unfair and anomalous partly because of national decisions, but also because of the history of local decisions. We must look at that and see where that has led us.

When local education authorities were important—I do not suggest that they are not important at the moment—some bravely took decisions to sustain or increase budgets while others, less concerned about education, cut school funding to appease ratepayers and council tax payers. A feature of the new system is that that degree of discretion has simply gone, and councils charged with regeneration have lost all real leverage over the educational system. That is regretted by councils now, and clearly it will be also be regretted later on by city region cabinets and by Mayors as they get their hands on the levers of power, because they will want to prompt regeneration but they will lack some of the active levers that would enable them to do that.

I was a council leader in Sefton borough, and during tough years in the 1990s and so on we put money into school funding, sometimes at the cost of other services, because we regarded that as a high priority, and schools were therefore well funded—in fact, they were so well funded that sometimes the council dealt with its financial problems by borrowing from the schools’ balances. However, that was something we could do locally; it was a way in which we could emphasise our commitment to education in the area.

However a new formula is dealt with, it will obviously not please everyone. There will be winners and losers; but the background to the present situation is somewhat unpromising. The cost pressures on schools, such as national insurance, pension increases and school-based inflation, significantly outweigh the projected funding settlement for the sector. The Minister knows—and I think that we will all get to know—that the National Audit Office has vividly set that out. Its report will be investigated in greater detail at a hearing of the Public Accounts Committee, probably next week. To give the House a flavour of it, the NAO concludes that despite modest real-terms increases, the cost pressures on schools and increases in pupil numbers will result in a real-terms reduction of something like 8%. That is the NAO’s figure, not mine or that of a think tank or political party.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing this important debate to the Chamber. It is not just the NAO’s figure. I have had letters from headteachers of schools in my constituency who say they appear to be facing an 8% cut in real terms, and that that will lead to schools either going into deficit or having to make devastating cuts, having already made many efficiency savings.

John Pugh: Yes; they are mandated to make further efficiency savings.

Interestingly, on page 14 of the document, the NAO states that schools “have not experienced this level of reduction in spending power since the mid 1990s.” It may be pure coincidence, Mr Streeter, that there was a Conservative majority Government in the mid-1990s, but I draw your attention to that. Impacts will be worse on secondary schools; the NAO said that the number spending above income has increased from 33% to 59%. Not only has the number gone up but the size of the deficits that are being handled has gone up. If we add to that the disappearance of the education services grant, the fact that—as the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) mentioned—schools are expected to find £3 billion of efficiency savings, and the cost of implementing endless Government initiatives, we have what most of us would describe as a perfect storm, and an absence of financial sustainability.

What is most interesting in the NAO report is what schools appear to be doing to respond to the looming crisis that they can see all too clearly, as the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton suggested. According to the NAO, they are, generally, increasing class sizes,
adjusting teacher contact time, reducing supply cover, replacing experienced staff with less qualified temporary staff, and hiring more bureaucrats to manage the finances as head teachers become not school leaders but accountants. An odd feature of the situation is that schools are spending less in percentage terms on teaching staff than they were. They are shoring up balances to cope with anticipated deficits and potential redundancies. If they are really unlucky, they must also deal with increasing PFI payments, which are the endowment of a Labour Government.

None of that is conducive, most of us would agree, to educational progress. Some areas of the north are already in fairly dire straits. Cumbria is one example. The NAO report was complete before the Government’s new national funding formula went out to consultation, but it has already altered people’s take on the consequences of the new national formula. The realisation is dawning that the formula is not universally good news and that it will do little to offset a particularly bleak outlook.

We must accept that the redistribution of diminishing resources will always have a predictable outcome. In the north the consequences are severe—certainly in the mid to long term. After inner London, the north-west of England benefits least from the general distribution away from London. However, within that regional profile there are significant losers—for no obviously good reason. The worst affected include Manchester, Kirklees, Wigan, Cheshire, Liverpool and Sefton, whether or not we make allowances for floors and ceilings or the 1.5%. Those areas are key components of the northern powerhouse.

When we drill down to the consequences for particular schools, the position is even more frightening. Christ the King school in Sefton in my constituency—the school that my children went to—is scheduled to lose £426,000, or £441 per pupil. Greenbank high school is scheduled to lose £527,000, or £558 per pupil. Down the road in Sefton Central, Formby high school and Range high school are scheduled to lose similar amounts.

I find it ironic that the situation I am now lamenting as an MP is one that I sought assiduously to foretell and prevent as a council leader. Had we in Sefton not, on a cross-party basis, sought to protect the education budget over many years and given schools both enormous financial independence and active support, the shock and the comedown of the national formula would not have been so severe. Paradoxically, a great strength of Sefton has been its tight network of primary schools. A perverse consequence of that is that, under the new formula, handing children on to secondary schools with good prior attainment de facto damages the budgetary position of the secondary schools, and their ability to sustain progress. That is the particular way in which the formula is rejigged. I think the Minister will understand the point I am endeavouring to make.

I hope that the Minister is taking account of what I am saying. I want to put it in a constructive fashion and put my sentiments across in a helpful rather than a wholly negative way. However, the Department for Education is not famous for its listening skills. I speak to many people to whom the Minister and the Department also speak, and I do not hear a constant refrain about the Department being particularly good in that area. At times it has shown an active contempt for those who have brought it messages it did not want to hear, but it is not malicious—I give it credit for that. It wants to help. It offers financial health checks and warnings from school commissioners. It even makes videos to be helpful, because it is genuinely ambitious for schools and genuinely keen on across-the-board improvements in the north.

However, I can see from my analysis no obvious reason why schooling in the north would change for the better in the present circumstances. Many of the ingredients for improvement that were seen in the London challenge are missing. The London challenge had sufficient predictable funding, although unfortunately that will go under the new formula, I think, and there will be rather less funding. Another thing it had going for it was collaboration, but the school system is now more fragmented than ever, with schools that are financially and academically weaker fearing takeover. The London challenge had clear, effective leadership, but heads are now stressing over finances and personnel management rather than the main issue, and local authorities are withering away.

The demise of the local authority has acute effects. Its statutory functions are barely affordable at the moment, given the pressure on council budgets, but following the phasing out of the ESG, its other strategic functions will be dependent on funding from schools that cannot afford to meet their own costs, let alone to pay back and hire local authority services. Ironically, back-office services, which are growing in individual schools, are one area in which schools can get good money from a local authority, from collaboration through the sharing of services. We need only look at the increased problem that primary academies are having with meeting back-office costs to realise that.

I have not come here simply to present the Minister with problems to which there are no obvious solutions. The solution is to recognise that we have a problem and to engage in a debate with headteachers, who have no particular political axe to grind but are now looking at a worrying landscape. That headteachers in the north are looking at that worrying landscape should give us no confidence that any attempt, by commissioners or whomever, to raise educational standards in the north and to deal with long-standing problems will be properly and sustainably addressed. With that plea and that degree of pessimism, I will sit down.

11.20 am

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship as always, Mr Streeter. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) on securing this important debate. He is right—this is one of a number of debates we will undoubtedly have as we consider the second stage of the consultation on our national funding formula. We will debate funding in Devon tomorrow, and I am looking forward to that debate as much as I have looked forward to this one. This is part of a process of consultation on the second phase, in the same way as we consulted on the first.

The Government are committed to improving educational outcomes in the north, and reforming the funding system is essential to underpinning that ambition. Although I represent a southern constituency, I spent many years of my childhood living in Leeds and Wakefield in the 1970s, and I do not recognise some of the hon. Gentleman’s comments on the opportunities available for people in the north. The hon. Gentleman spoke of
cost pressures on schools in general, and in the north in particular. Through our careful management of the economy, we have been able to protect the core schools budget in real terms, which means that schools are receiving more funding than ever before for children's education—more than £40 billion.

We of course recognise the cost pressures facing schools, and we will therefore continue to provide advice and support to help schools use their funding in cost-effective ways and improve the way in which they buy goods and services, so that they get the best possible value for their pupils. We have published a wide range of tools and support on gov.uk, including support for schools to review their level of efficiency, to investigate expenditure levels of similar schools and to take action to improve efficiency in practice. We are also launching a schools buying strategy that will support schools to save more than £1 billion a year by 2019-20 on non-staff expenditure. It will help all schools to improve how they buy goods and services, allowing them to invest more in high-quality education for their pupils.

As well as helping schools make the best use of their resources, we urgently need to reform the unfair system that currently distributes funding across the country. The Government are committed to creating a country that works for everyone no matter where they live, whether in the north or south, in a city or the countryside. Whatever their background, ability or need, children should have access to an excellent education. We want all children to reach their full potential and to succeed in adult life. We know that the current schools and high needs funding system does not support that aspiration—it is unfair, untransparent and out of date. Similar schools and local areas receive different levels of funding with little or no justification.

For example, secondary schools in Darlington receive an additional £40 for each pupil with low prior attainment—pupils who did not reach the expected standard at primary school—but secondary schools in Richmond upon Thames receive £3,229 for such pupils, which is a difference of more than £3,000. We do not only see such differences by comparing the two ends of the country; sometimes it can be a matter of a few miles down the road. For example, a 13-year-old pupil from a deprived background for whom English is an additional language would attract £5,150 to their school if they lived in Redcar and Cleveland; next door in Stockton-on-Tees, that same pupil would attract £8,242 to their school, which is an addition of more than £3,000.

The huge differences in funding that similar areas receive to educate similar pupils are clearly not sustainable. Underfunded schools do not have access to the same opportunities to do the best for their children. It is harder for them to attract the best teachers and to afford the right support, which is why introducing fair funding was a key manifesto commitment for the Government. We need to introduce fair funding so that the same child with the same needs will attract the same funding, regardless of where they happen to live. That is the only way that parents can be sure that there is level playing field.

We launched the first stage of the consultation on reforming the schools and high needs funding systems in March 2016. That consultation set out our principles of reform and our proposals for the design of the schools and high needs funding system. I am grateful to the more than 6,000 teachers, headteachers, governors, local authority representatives and others who took the time to respond to that consultation, and I am pleased that our proposals received wide support.

In the light of that, we are now consulting on the detailed proposals for the design of the schools and high needs funding formula. We have also published illustrative allocations data, so that every school and local authority can see the impact of the proposals. The second stage of the consultation will run until 22 March, and we are keen to hear from as many schools, governors, local authorities and parents as possible. I welcome this debate as a valuable addition to that consultation.

Our proposed formula would result in more than 10,000 schools throughout the country—54% of all schools—gaining funding, with a quarter of all schools gaining more than 5.5%. Those that are due to see gains will see them quickly, with increases of up to 3% in per-pupil funding in 2018-19, and up to a further 2.5% in 2019. Our formula will target money towards pupils who face entrenched barriers to their success, particularly those who are deprived and those who live in areas of deprivation but who are not necessarily eligible for free school meals—those whose families are just about managing. We are putting more money towards supporting pupils who have fallen behind their peers, in both primary and secondary school, to ensure that they get the support that they need to catch up.

Our proposed national funding formula will see gains for schools right across the north. In the north-east, schools will see an average 1½% increase, while schools in Yorkshire and the Humber will see a 1.5% average increase. I acknowledge that the outcome will be more mixed in the north-west, but schools there will also be small gainers on average under our proposals. I recognise that our proposals would result in budget reductions for schools in the constituency of the hon. Member for Southport, but I nevertheless believe that our proposed formula strikes the correct balance between the core schools budget, which every pupil attracts, and the extra funding needed to target those with additional needs.

**John Pugh:** I probably made my point quite imperfectly. Can the Minister assure me that if a secondary school—those are the worst-affected schools in this respect—is in an area in which primary schools have made good progress, and the children who are handed on to them are therefore attaining the expected level and do not enter the secondary school with poor prior attainment, that secondary school will not lose out simply because it has good feeder schools? That scenario would discourage the kind of collaboration between secondary schools and feeder primary schools that the Minister wants to see, because it would almost be in the vested interest of the secondary schools to have incompetent feeder primary schools—from a financial point of view, if not an academic one.

**Mr Gibb:** I do not accept that argument. It is important to ensure that schools—primary or secondary—are well funded for pupils who start school academically behind their peers. I do not believe that any professional I have ever met would deliberately not collaborate with another
school to improve pupils’ attainment simply to attract an element of the funding formula. Of course, the biggest element of it depends on deprivation, whether measured by receipt of free school meals or by children in one of the lower IDACI—income deprivation affecting children index—bands. That is important to ensure that children from those areas are properly supported.

The hon. Gentleman managed to mention Manchester, Kirklees, Liverpool and Sefton. However, he forgot to mention areas that will receive an increase in funding under the proposed funding formula, including 1.7% in Durham and Gateshead; more than 2% in Newcastle; nearly 3% in south Tyneside; nearly 2% in Sunderland; 3.4% in Blackpool; 4.3% in Bury; 4.9% in Knowsley; and 4.3% in Leeds. Schools in northern urban areas will continue to be highly funded; even areas that will see a small reduction under the proposed national funding formula will still be some of the highest-funded in the country, including Manchester and Liverpool, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned. That is right, as those areas have higher levels of socioeconomic deprivation and children with additional needs. Matching funding to need will see schools in those areas funded higher than those elsewhere in the country. A secondary school pupil with significant additional needs could attract more than £10,000 to their school through the proposed national funding formula and the pupil premium.

While introducing these significant reforms to the funding system, we are also delivering stability. We have listened to those who have highlighted the risks of major budget changes.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
that mean? Is it simply window dressing? Are we in the
devolved Administrations just to accept whatever the
UK Government come up with, without any question
or scrutiny? That is even harder to do without a White
Paper.

There was much in it I disagreed with and contested,
but the Scottish Government before their independence
referendum published a very detailed White Paper. We
simply do not have that. We are told that these 12 principles
and this speech today are all we have before we enter
one of the most fundamental changes to impact Wales
and this country for generations to come.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr)
(PC): The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Scottish
Government. They produced a Brexit White Paper. The
Welsh Government are about to publish their own
Brexit White Paper. Is it not bizarre that the one
Government responsible for delivering Brexit are not
going to publish their own White Paper?

Stephen Doughty: We do not always agree on everything,
but I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman on
that—particularly when we see very different visions
emerging from members of the Cabinet as to what a
post-Brexit UK and Wales might look like. We heard
the Chancellor of the Exchequer suggest in Germany
that the UK is going to have a race to the bottom and be
a completely deregulated tax haven on the fringes of
Europe. That is not what I believe the people of Wales
voted for. They voted for a strong economy with strong
rights. They might have had different views on immigration
or the democratic deficit there has been in parts of the
EU, but they did not vote for a race to the bottom or for
us turning into some sort of Gibraltar or one of our
overseas territories on the fringes of Europe.

Leaving the EU will have a significant impact on the
funding and development of infrastructure in Wales.
We all know of examples in our constituencies of where
European funding has delivered results, whether that is
in community facilities in Butetown in my constituency,
road infrastructure or science and innovation in our
universities. We have no clear answers as to what will
happen to that infrastructure support for Wales post-2020
and what will replace it. Businesses and investors need
certainty about the infrastructure and environment that
will support their long-term decisions, so it is vital that
we have greater clarity. We need clarity in particular on
issues such as loans made by the European Investment
Bank, which I will come on to, and the specific assessment
criteria that will be used to guarantee funding for projects
signed after the autumn statement but while we remain
a member of the EU.

I am sure that many hon. Members will mention
individual projects. I will give some examples. EU funding
in recent years has supported many infrastructure projects—for example, through £40 million towards
Swansea University’s new Bay campus; nearly £4 million
towards the development of the Wales coastal path;
£9 million towards Rhyl harbour; and the dualling of
the A465, the “heads of the valleys road”. Many prospective
infrastructure projects are yet to be properly finalised,
such as the Swansea Bay city deal, the North Wales
growth deal, the tidal lagoons and the South Wales
metro, which I raised in a previous debate and is of
great concern to my constituents in Cardiff South and
Penarth. Of course, the uncertainty around those projects
has not only been caused by the referendum result;
there are other factors at play, but that is a crucial part
of whether those projects go forward.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure
to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Flello. My hon.
Friend talks about specific projects. I particularly have
in mind the £106 million that is earmarked from the
European regional development fund for phase 2 of the
South Wales metro. Does he agree that, for projects
such as that, it is all about certainty, and that it is in the
hands of the UK Government to provide that certainty?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely agree. It is about not
only certainty of the funding for projects but managing
the growth of rapidly growing areas in south Wales. In
my own city of Cardiff in particular, we need to know
that we are going to have the transport infrastructure to
cope with the anticipated demand. The South Wales
metro is crucial to that.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): I have two brief
points. One is about a specific project. My hon. Friend
will be aware that, in Sarn in my constituency, significant
transport investment brought a McArthurGlen designer
outlet, ensuring that jobs and services were created. We
can see real examples of where transport infrastructure
works. In terms of planning and Government giving
some reassurance, this situation places local authorities
and the Welsh Government in extreme difficulty. Does
he agree that it is all good and well the Welsh Government
putting in processes for local development plans around
highway infrastructure investment but, if we do not
know what the funding is beyond 2019, it is virtually
impossible for local government in Wales to deliver
large-scale transport infrastructure projects?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend makes an important
point. It is about long-term certainty for not only
businesses but residents and local authorities. He mentioned
McArthurGlen, which I am sure many of us have used.
Many people do not know that the transport infrastructure
and hub there were supported by European funding,
which made a huge difference to access to the lower part
of his constituency and, indeed, to the M4 corridor.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Could we add to
the comprehensive list of threatened infrastructure projects
in Wales the Dwˆr Uisce scheme—those are the Welsh
and Irish words for water—between Ireland and Wales,
which is very exciting? It uses water technology in a very
effective, environmentally clean way. That will be in a
special category, because if Brexit goes ahead, half of
the scheme will be in the EU and half of it will be
outside it. Does my hon. Friend foresee the chaos and
the serious threat to that valuable scheme that would
result?

Stephen Doughty: Indeed. It is about the detail of
these types of project. I was not aware of that particular
one, but it is a very good example. Many of us in Wales
have personal family connections to Ireland. We certainly
have connections in our constituencies. More importantly,
there are crucial connections between our economies, services and infrastructure; my hon. Friend makes a valid point.

The EU’s structural funds over the past 30 years have been vital in supporting regional development and the growth of the Welsh economy. They have supported people into work and training, youth employment, research and innovation, business competitiveness, renewable energy and energy efficiency, connectivity and urban development.

The central aim of the current structural funds programmes is to create an environment that will support economic growth and jobs. Obviously, there are huge implications if we are not part of that.

Under the current round of structural funds, which runs from 2014 to 2020, Wales has been allocated almost £2 billion, with £1.6 billion going to west Wales and the valleys and more than £325 million going to east Wales. In total, along with match funding, the current round of structural funds is expected to support total investment in Wales of approximately £3 billion.

Indeed, research undertaken by Cardiff University’s Wales Governance Centre prior to the referendum concluded that the £658 million of EU funding for Wales from the common agricultural policy and the European structural funds made Wales a net beneficiary of EU funding. In 2014, the estimated net benefit from the EU for Wales was around £245 million. That is equal to about 0.4% of Welsh GDP—it equates to around £79 per head—in 2014.

I talked about the history of these investments. That is the third time that west Wales and the valleys have qualified for the highest level of structural fund support, which is available to regions in the EU that qualify with GDP per head that is less than 75% of the EU average. I have long supported that principle and am yet to be clear, in any way, what the UK Government’s plan is for replacing those structural funds to reduce some of the inequalities that are built into some of our post-industrial economies in particular and rural areas. The spending has been aimed at supporting projects intended to transform the prospects of the most marginalised and vulnerable, to lead to increases in productivity and growth and to invest in the future of our young people in Wales.

Following the vote to leave the European Union, investment in infrastructure in Wales has already experienced some setbacks, with postponements of some asset sales and a downsizing of some projects, according to ratings agency Standard & Poor’s. In a broader note to clients in September, Standard & Poor’s stated that the biggest risks for infrastructure companies could be a likely reduction in capital investment—both domestic and foreign direct investment.

I want to mention the South Wales metro again. It would be useful to know whether the Minister can add any clarity on this. The metro is crucial to my own constituency and the First Minister, Carwyn Jones, has described it as “a catalyst for transforming” the Welsh economy. He made that clear when he met the Commission in December to seek assurances that it will continue to support the project and that it will not be affected by the Brexit negotiations.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The metro is absolutely crucial for connectivity and economic development in my constituency, too. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be particularly helpful today if the Minister could be crystal clear that any shortfall is guaranteed by the UK Government, including beyond 2020?

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely. We need that sort of clarity, which is clearly absent from the so-called plan that has been put before us today by the Prime Minister and the Brexit Secretary. I emphasise that the metro is far more than just a transport scheme—it is a vehicle for transforming the economic and social prospects of many of our communities. It will deliver jobs and connectivity as well as those faster journey times and more frequent services that we all want to see.

It is also of note that, in addition to the funds I have mentioned, at present both public and private organisations in Wales can bid directly to the European Commission for funding from other programmes such as the Connecting Europe Facility and Horizon 2020, which supports many of our academic research projects. Those can also provide funding for infrastructure projects. The House of Commons Library suggested that it is difficult to quantify the funding from each of the direct funding programmes but, to give an idea of the scale, the CEF fund is worth £30.4 billion in total over the period 2014 to 2020. That covers areas such as transport, energy, and telecoms. CEF projects currently funded in Wales include the South Wales railway electrification studies that were conducted around the electrification programme. The Welsh Government and Welsh ports are also in discussions—here, again, are the links with Ireland—with the Irish Government and Irish ports on access to the “motorways of the sea” funding, which can be used to invest in crucial port infrastructure and hinterland connections to ports.

The Horizon 2020 programme has awarded €40 million of grants to organisations in Wales, as of 23 February 2016, and the predecessor to Horizon 2020—the seventh framework programme—allocated €145 million to organisations in Wales. We absolutely need that certainty. I have spoken to many academics locally who are deeply concerned about their ability to participate in these cross-European infrastructure projects based in the academic sector. The issue is not just what that valuable research and co-operation can engender in terms of knowledge and understanding of crucial issues, but the link to products and the frontline economy. Many businesses in my community, particularly in some of the business parks, have strong links with the high tech and biotech industries that have developed around universities such as Cardiff University.

I mentioned the European Investment Bank. I hope that the Minister can provide some clarity about what Wales’s relationship could be post-2020. The European Investment Bank is a significant source of finance for UK infrastructure projects. In 2015 the lending to the UK amounted to €7.7 billion, of which two thirds was provided for infrastructure. Programmes in Wales included €340 million for Welsh Water to make improvements to water supply and wastewater collection, and €174 million for Wales & West Utilities to upgrade and expand gas distribution networks. This funding is integral not only to those high-profile road junctions and road projects and things such as the South Wales metro, but to the utilities that ensure the functioning of our communities.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Flello. After last week’s review from Charles Hendry on tidal lagoons, I
Carolyn Harris: was very proud that he noted the enthusiasm and confidence that the city has had in the tidal bay project. That enthusiasm overflows into the city bay region. In these uncertain times, is now not the time for the Government to commit the important resources in order to take forward these exciting plans, which could see Wales develop as a world-renowned “first” in so many of the fields in respect of tidal power?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. She knows that I have long supported the principle of tidal power coming from the Severn estuary. There have been concerns about some of the projects proposed, but I am interested in and support the proposals for tidal lagoons—obviously each needs to be judged on its own merits—and particularly the Swansea one. So much work has gone into that and it is crucial that we now provide certainty on delivery and funding to enable it to go ahead.

Briefly, the chief of the EIB, Werner Hoyer, stated in October:

“Even if we find a way to continue lending in the UK, I am absolutely sure that the enormous volumes we have achieved over the last couple of years cannot be maintained”.

What clarity can the Minister offer on that issue in particular?

In his conference speech, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that beyond the autumn statement the Treasury would offer a guarantee to bidders whose projects “meet UK priorities and value for money criteria”.

It is absolutely crucial that the Government outline what to “meet UK priorities and value for money” mean and whether that will cover projects currently funded by the EU. I hope that we will have some clarification on that, too. With today’s announcement of a hard Brexit package, in an attempt to appease certain elements in the Prime Minister’s party—as I said earlier, her Chancellor appears intent on pursuing some sort of trade war or commercial war with our European partners—it has become clearer and clearer that we now need guarantees that funding will continue for Welsh infrastructure following any deal to leave the European Union. Wales voted to leave the EU—although not in my constituency—but it did not vote to see investment in Wales cut by a UK Government, and we need those assurances urgently.

Kevin Brennan: I am grateful, again, to my hon. Friend for giving way. He makes some important points about new infrastructure. Are there not also serious implications for existing infrastructure, including our industrial base—for example, the Ford motor plant in Bridgend—if we are seriously saying that we are not interested in staying in the single market? Should the Minister not be telling us how he is going to ensure that plants such as Ford’s have a future in relation to the integrated way in which motor cars are made across Europe?

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely. The same could apply to the steel industry. Companies such as Celsa, in my own constituency, that are part of a European operation have plants in many places.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Before my hon. Friend moves off this point—Airbus is probably the best example. If a wing is not finished, the workers will follow the wing, whether to Bremen or Franzy to make sure that that is done. Are we really saying that they will have to fill out forms, do all sorts of things and wait God knows how many weeks for that to happen? The problem is that we live in a very uncertain climate at the moment.

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely agree. Airbus is always an excellent example and is a crucial player in the Welsh economy, not only in the manufacturing of the wings and aircraft components, but in its defence and space business, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) but employs many people from my own constituency. Let us not forget that this is about not just the infrastructure funding that has come from outside, from European funds, but the infrastructure funding decisions that major companies make themselves and whether those will be put at risk when companies are not sure about the future.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): It is also about giving Welsh workers confidence. Taking up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) about Ford, there is great anxiety in the plant about the future and security of their jobs. These are highly skilled and highly paid jobs. If workers do not know that they can be assured of long-term employment, they are not going to invest and spend, and we need that to keep the Welsh economy turning.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend makes a crucial point. I am delighted that the top focus of the First Minister, Carwyn Jones, and the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure, Ken Skates, and others, has been on ensuring that the Welsh Government have continued to provide certainty where they can, whether that is to industry, infrastructure or building projects. Clearly, we need to keep investing—whether that is in schools and hospitals, as is happening in my constituency, in supporting businesses or in the work being done to support the steel industry—and that can help to provide confidence. However, without clarity on these very large sums of money and on the UK Government’s intentions in that regard, we can only go so far in terms of what Wales is able to do.

I hope that the Minister can give us clarity today. We need guarantees that funding will continue for Welsh infrastructure following any deal to leave the European Union. Wales voted to leave the EU—although not in my constituency—but it did not vote to see investment in Wales cut by a UK Government, and we need those assurances urgently.

Things may work out for us in the long term. Undoubtedly our country, Wales—and this country, Britain—have a history of coming together in difficult circumstances and of finding a way forward for our people when they are faced with difficult challenges. However, the plan may turn out to be reckless, with huge consequences for our economy, jobs and the unity of our country. The Prime Minister should have been here today to account for the plan. I am glad that the Minister is here, and I hope to hear answers to the questions that I and other colleagues raise today.
Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I am delighted to be called to speak so early in the debate, Mr Friel.

We listened to the driblet of nothing from the Prime Minister in one of her typical speeches, which are heroically adjectival but ultimately vacuous, and her love of soundbites and meaningless phrases is clear. She talked about having a red, white and blue Brexit, but in Wales we want a red, white and green Brexit. We want one that is tailor-made for Wales, because our situation is unique in almost every way in the British Isles.

We are talking about infrastructure today. Gerald Holtham—a very accurate observer of these matters—has pointed out that although the amounts of money we get from Europe are not a huge percentage of Welsh GDP, they are 20% of our infrastructure funding. A huge amount of money is being provided for all the schemes that my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) listed in introducing the debate. In my intervention I mentioned the Dwyr Unse scheme, which is a unique example; it does not affect England in the same way. That exciting project is being run by Trinity College Dublin and Bangor University. It has cutting-edge technology, using small turbines in an ecologically sound way to produce energy. The scheme could have marvellous repercussions and pay huge dividends in future, but it will be in a very strange position, because half the scheme will be outside the European Union and half will be inside it. That is one of many complications that will arise from the hell of Brexit that we are facing.

Remember the reason why Brexit is happening and why the Prime Minister made that speech today: it is all about solving internal problems in the Conservative party. That explains how we got into it and how we are now proceeding. At the moment, the Conservative party is a pressure cooker likely to explode in three directions—there are the hard Brexiteers, the soft Brexiteers and the anti-Brexiteers—and all that we have heard today from the Prime Minister is an attempt to soothe future problems with a honeycomb of sweet words that ultimately mean little.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has talked about bumps in the road, but I fear that there will be a giant sinkhole in the road into which the economy could slip in freefall. Very dangerous years could be ahead of us economically. There was talk today of us turning into some kind of banana republic on the world stage, and not being one of the great economies. Standards are going to fall down to the bottom. They will not be brought up to the top, and we will not continue down the stable path that we were on in the past. Brexit is a great gamble, and it is right to look at it from a Welsh point of view.

Important issues in Wales come up again and again, as they did when the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs went out of Parliament to meet the people, having asked for their response. I took part in two such events. Someone who came to Aberystwyth said that he worked for a company that was about to expand in Ceredigion. However, post-Brexit, the company has taken the decision to expand in Ireland. Someone else came to the meeting in Prestatyn to talk about the tidal scheme off Anglesey. That interesting scheme uses tidal flow and is very different from what is happening in Swansea. We know that hydropower and tidal power are Wales’s North sea oil. They are a huge resource and their prospects for the future are marvellous, because of the nature of the tidal flows that go around our coast. A huge cliff of water moves around the coasts of Wales, providing great pulses of electricity throughout the 24-hour cycle. All the calculations are based on using tidal power alone, and they have not taken into account the ideal solution, which would be combining tidal power with pumped storage schemes such as the Dinorwig power station. That would make tidal power entirely demand-responsive. The pulses of electricity that arrive in the early hours of the morning could be used to pump the water up the hills, and then the value of the electricity could be multiplied threefold or fourfold by pumping it down when electricity is in high demand. That will be the future of clean, renewable electricity for Wales.

Another issue that comes up at all these sessions, because farmers are a very well-organised group, is farming in Wales, which is again unique in the British Isles. We have a cultural imperative for supporting the farming industry, because it is the last redoubt of Welsh language and culture. It is at its finest and purest in the farming communities and has gone, sadly, from the anthracite coal areas where it used to be. If we want to invest in the culture in Wales and in our precious, unique heritage, we have to invest in it as a cultural treasure that we all feel is of immense value.

However, the main reason for supporting the farming industry is what it does in Wales as a resource and a source of occupations. It is very different from England. If we are going to have our red, white and green solution, we need an entirely new policy on farming.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): As usual we have heard the platitudes—the Brexit-denial language—that we are used to from the hon. Gentleman, but to get back to the subject of the debate, does he not agree that many parts of Wales have not benefited from European funding? In fact, the European funding source has been very unfair to certain parts of Wales, and a new post-Brexit scheme may be much fairer for the whole of Wales.

Paul Flynn: The hon. Gentleman has not said which parts of Wales he has in mind, but it was noticeable that the parts of Wales that had the greatest amount of infrastructure investment were the least enthusiastic, sadly, for staying in the European Union. If we are looking for a policy, it must be a new one. If Brexit goes ahead, we must take advantage of it to get a Welsh solution for Welsh problems. Take agriculture, for instance: we do not have farmers getting subsidies of £2.5 million. They do not get £750,000—not that I know of anyway—but the Mormon Church gets that. The royal family get £500,000, but in Wales the average subsidy is about £13,000, and we have a preponderance of small farmers.

Let us start again and have a scheme with a cap on it so that we do not give huge subsidies to billionaire and millionaire farmers. We must concentrate subsidies on what are necessary in Wales: the small farmers. We should look at Brexit as an opportunity to have a scheme that is fairer and will help the environment. There should be a strongly environmental imperative in all the subsidies that are given, and we should put a cap
on them, as we put a cap on other things such as welfare payments. I cannot see why anyone should have a subsidy of £94,000, as one farmer in Wales gets regularly, even though he does not appear to be in need of subsidies. We should look at how income support is paid out. To make the farm industry stand on its own feet and be self-supporting, as happened in 1985 in New Zealand, we have to change the pattern of subsidies, and Brexit is the opportunity to do so.

Many of us bitterly regret what happened in the referendum. During the campaign, I said the victors would be the ones who told the most convincing lies, which turned out to be right. Both sides presented a case that was false. We are certainly not going to get our £350 million for the health service every week, as was written on the side of the red bus, and we did not have the economic collapse that was threatened by the other side. The votes that were taken—a snapshot on one single day—were based very much on public relations spin. The same people who directed the leave campaign are the same people who directed the entirely dishonest alternative vote campaign a few years ago and who ran the campaign about devolution in the north of England. We are handing over the power of decision to the PR specialists and snake oil salesmen, and public opinion is manipulated and persuaded by the PR industry and the tabloid press.

Chris Davies: Without question I respect the hon. Gentleman’s years in this House, but do you honestly believe you are helping the Brexit cause by using such language and continuing the route you are now on? Looking at your hon. Friends’ faces as you speak, it does not look to me as though you are helping them in this debate, never mind the cause that you are trying to put forward. We are all Brexiteers now and we need to move forward, not backward.

Robert Flello (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman takes his seat, I remind him that “you” refers to the Chair in debates.

Chris Davies: I apologise.

Robert Flello (in the Chair): I think the hon. Gentleman was referring to the hon. Member for Newport West. Mr Flynn, may I suggest we come back to the subject of the debate and not make it too wide-ranging?

Paul Flynn: We face the inevitability of Brexit. The House will almost certainly agree to go ahead with article 50, and perhaps in two years’ time, when the debate and not make it too wide-ranging?

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): May I start by saying how inadequate I feel in following my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn)? I can assure him that on my face there was the great grin of delighted satisfaction that I always feel when I listen to him speak. There was certainly no grim look on my face; there was a broad grin.

The story of European funding in Wales is a little like the scene in “The Life of Brian” when someone asks “What have the Romans ever done for us?” The answer is nothing—apart from the aqueducts, the education, the clean water, the peace, the stability. What have the Europeans ever done for us? I must thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this debate. It has been long needed and it is right for our constituents to know what they are about to lose.

I went to the offices of Bridgend County Borough Council and asked what funding had been coming into my constituency. Since about 2000, we have received more than £40 million, which is pretty stunning in its own right, and that was only for education, infrastructure and development programmes. The funding is an absolutely vital resource for Bridgend County Borough Council and its strategic partners, enabling the delivery of major infrastructure developments. We have seen, for example, £3 million to develop three strategic employment sites, allowing small and medium-sized enterprises to develop and grow in Bridgend. Bridgend is slap bang in the middle between Cardiff and Swansea. People do not know what comes out of Bridgend, but the number of niche unique firms in the county borough of Bridgend that provide critical employment to highly qualified individuals is absolutely amazing.

Nearly £3 million from the European regional development fund has been invested in Bridgend town centre, which has been radically changed. It is a different, vibrant economy. My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) mentioned the junction 36 development, which is critical for both Ogmore and Bridgend. The bottom half of the site is occupied by McArthurGlen, which is in the Ogmore constituency. At the top half of the site is my large Sainsbury’s store. In between them there are three huge car parks for people who come from my hon. Friend’s constituencies to shop in the county borough of Bridgend. It pulls in people from the whole of the south Wales corridor and even from over the bridge. People come into Bridgend for shopping who would not have come if we had not had that development.

Between 2000 and 2013, we had £12 million ERDF funding to deliver work programmes, including further regeneration work in Bridgend town centre, a tourism development with a watersports centre of excellence in Porthcawl, and coastal path, cycle path and footpath developments across the county borough, which are good for tourism and also good for the health and wellbeing of the people of the county borough.

The rural development programme brought in nearly £3 million from the European regional development fund has been invested in Bridgend town centre, which has been radically changed. It is a different, vibrant economy. My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) mentioned the junction 36 development, which is critical for both Ogmore and Bridgend. The bottom half of the site is occupied by McArthurGlen, which is in the Ogmore constituency. At the top half of the site is my large Sainsbury’s store. In between them there are three huge car parks for people who come from my hon. Friend’s constituencies to shop in the county borough of Bridgend. It pulls in people from the whole of the south Wales corridor and even from over the bridge. People come into Bridgend for shopping who would not have come if we had not had that development.

Between 2000 and 2013, we had £12 million ERDF funding to deliver work programmes, including further regeneration work in Bridgend town centre, a tourism development with a watersports centre of excellence in Porthcawl, and coastal path, cycle path and footpath developments across the county borough, which are good for tourism and also good for the health and wellbeing of the people of the county borough.
So European funding has been instrumental in supporting projects to deliver skills, training and employment in my constituency and in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore. We have had £10 million to support young people at risk of disengaging from education and training. We have had money to support the long-term unemployed and economically inactive back into employment. Those are all key Government projects, yet that money may no longer be there. There has been £3 million for Inspire 2 Work, Bridges into Work 2 and Communities 4 Work. It is vital that the UK Government deliver on the guarantee provided by the Chancellor on 3 October at the Tory party conference. He said:

“The Treasury will offer a guarantee to bidders whose projects meet UK priorities and value for money criteria...that if they secure multi-year EU funding before we exit...we will guarantee those payments after Britain has left the EU.”

Great—but I want to know what happens after that. Can I guarantee that after we leave the European Union there will be, over a 20-year period, another £40 million coming into the Bridgend constituency? Bridgend voters voted to leave, but they did not vote for reduced infrastructure development, worse overwork jobs, reduced education or employment skills, decreased development capacity or slow tourism growth. Certainly, there will be an impact on Welsh youngsters, who did not have their vote, and that will affect whether they consider coming back to Wales to work or look further afield. We need to keep young people’s skills in Wales, and keep a range of viable employment opportunities for them.

My constituency is between Cardiff University and Swansea University, and many university lecturers go from Bridgend to lecture at those universities. I cannot tell hon. Members how many people have expressed concern to me about the funding of science projects in Wales, and about dramatic changes to the health and wellbeing of the UK.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) spoke about Ford. Can the Minister finally give me an assurance that whatever deal was done for Nissan is coming to Ford? The last thing I need is for the Ford engineers in my constituency to decide that they cannot take a risk, and to move out to other jobs. I need that factory and the jobs to be viable. I need the assurance and I should like it today.

3.12 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Fiddler. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) not only on securing the debate but on his comprehensive and thoughtful setting out of the issues. It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon); and I am sure that all Members from south Wales would give testament to the fine shopping at McArthurGlen.

Mrs Moon: And Sainsbury’s.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Absolutely. It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn). Whenever my hon. Friend speaks we learn something new; I am sure we are all very grateful for that. As to the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies), I am slightly worried about the way he reads facial expressions. He may end up getting his enemies and friends the wrong way round in future.

I totally accept the result of last year’s referendum. The Torfaen local authority area had a 59.8% leave vote, and the Torfaen parliamentary constituency makes up the substantial part of that local authority. It is crucial that the result should be respected; but whether people voted remain or leave, they deserve—in Torfaen and across Wales—a Government determined to deliver economic prosperity and to have a clear, coherent negotiating strategy to that end. Before I entered the House I was, among other things, a barrister and a mediator. I know only too well that no one should reveal the fine detail of their negotiating strategy before they begin; but that is not what the Government are being asked to do. We have heard from the Prime Minister today, but what concerns me is that not once has she given a coherent vision of post-Brexit Britain. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth pointed out, we are left with a nightmare scenario of being an island, almost like a giant tax haven, off the end of the EU, instead of a place where inward investment and the floor of workers’ rights established by the EU will continue post-Brexit. We are also left with the impression that the Prime Minister is far more interested in the internal politics of the Conservative party than in the national interest.

Today’s debate is specifically about infrastructure. Wales has benefited tremendously from EU structural funding. When we talk about infrastructure, we must think about it in different senses. We have, of course, physical infrastructure, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth talked about. I have already mentioned the south Wales metro project, which is one of many on which I hope the Minister will give far firmer guarantees. However, there is also the question of digital infrastructure. I commend the Welsh Government for their aim of every household in Wales having access to superfast broadband, and the great progress that has been made. Clearly, there is more progress to be made. I suggest that digital infrastructure will be vital to Wales’s future. There has been an increase in flexible working and the number of people working from home, and a substantial number of people are self-employed throughout the United Kingdom now; all of them will be reliant on the broadband speed available to them at their business premises and at home. That infrastructure, too, must be funded. The Government must have a coherent vision so that, without the European structural funds coming down the line, such things can be realised.

The Minister and the Secretary of State for Wales can play a crucial part in what happens, but they must be the voices of Wales in the Government, standing up for funding. They cannot become, in the years to come, the Government’s voice in Wales. The referendum has of course gone, and we have to concentrate on how Wales is to have a substantial number of highly skilled jobs, such as those in Bridgend that we heard about, and others mentioned by my hon. Friends. That is the vision of Wales that we must deliver, and I hope that the Government will put aside their internal divisions to take it seriously.
3.17 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Friel. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this important debate and setting out the issues in his usual elegant style. I associate myself with many of the comments made by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). I was a Bridgend councillor before I became an MP, and she was my MP. It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds).

Infrastructure is important in all parts of the UK, but in Wales, the region most affected by deindustrialisation, which is still reeling from neglect of public spending in the 1980s—a place which has mountains and valleys in abundance—the need for investment in all forms of infrastructure has never been greater. The uncertainties of leaving the European Union remain fraught with danger. Beyond the loss of environmental protections, trade agreements and workers’ rights, the impact on the economy is still unknown. However, in Wales the threat to structural funds remains a primary concern, and one that will define the Brexit negotiations and the Government’s ability to respond.

A reduction in the amount of funding available for infrastructure projects in Wales, should the UK Government not commit to fully replacing it, will be catastrophic. It is widely accepted that Wales has been a net beneficiary of the European Union, benefiting from billions of pounds of investment. The referendum results across Wales suggest that that message did not permeate communities, but that is astonishing, given the facts that surround the argument. The annual average allocation of EU funding in Wales is €65 per person, compared with €153 across the UK. Wales receives over six times more European structural and investment funding than England. That is not only astounding and depressing, given the qualifying criteria, but concerning given our potential reliance on the funding, and on the UK Government’s commitment to underwriting it after we leave the EU. To put things into context, the European regional development fund, the only European structural and investment funding directly concerned with infrastructure, committed £106 million to Wales during the 2014 to 2020 programme, under the theme of network infrastructures in transport and energy.

Allow me to highlight some real-life examples of the difference that those vast figures make to infrastructure projects in Wales. The superfast broadband business exploitation project, which seeks to increase the take-up of fibre and ICT infrastructure by small and medium-sized enterprises, has secured €6.3 million in the regional development fund. The tourism attractor destinations project, which aims to increase employment through investments in prioritised local or regional infrastructure, has received €27.7 million in ERDF investment.

Closer to home, I can speak of three projects that would not have happened without ERDF funding. The Neath Port Talbot integrated transport hub will use upwards of £5 million in European investment to create a transport modal interchange facility to promote public transport across the area. SPECIFIC, an academic and industrial consortium led by Swansea University to address the challenge of low-carbon electricity and heat by enabling buildings to generate, store and release their own energy, has secured nearly £15 million in ERDF funding and almost certainly would not exist without it. Lastly, the world-class Swansea University bay campus, which I have mentioned, is a multi-partner investment of €450 million, including almost €40 million in European regional development fund money. Those examples do not highlight the value and impact of directly funded European Commission programmes such as the Connecting Europe Facility and Horizon 2020, which are far more difficult to quantify but just as important as those funded via the UK or Welsh Governments; Horizon 2020 alone has awarded grants worth €40 million to organisations in Wales.

Post-Brexit guarantees are worryingly sparse on detail. Although the Chancellor has given a number of promises relating to any lost EU funding, those promises extend only to structural and investment fund projects signed before last year’s autumn statement. For projects signed after that, the commitment is far vaguer. In his conference speech last year, the Chancellor suggested that he would offer guarantees to projects that “meet UK priorities and value for money criteria”, but he has repeatedly failed to set out what those priorities and criteria will be. Surely the Chancellor of the Exchequer of Her Majesty’s Government has a responsibility to instil confidence in Welsh businesses and investments, not undermine it.

Another effect on infrastructure in Wales of the UK leaving the EU will be that the Welsh Government and local authorities have fewer sources from which to seek funding or sustainable loans. The European Investment Bank’s lending to the UK in 2015 amounted to €7.7 billion, of which two thirds, or €5.5 billion, went to infrastructure. Those figures are staggering. The thought of losing that funding leaves me cold. The Swansea University bay campus secured not only substantial ERDF funding but an EIB loan to the value of €60 million. That funding is sustainable, vital and irreplaceable.

Finally, I am concerned about a post-Brexit Wales where UK goals and priorities may be different from the EU priorities on which Wales and its Government have established plans and strategies. What will happen to the electrification of the Great Western line, the South Wales metro and the city deals?

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to confirm that our transport infrastructure investment needs will be secured for the future? Our valley lines have been a great success, but much improvement is still needed, and electrification in particular must be delivered. For that to happen, funding must be guaranteed for phase 2 of the metro system. The project will help jobs in our south-eastern valleys. The Minister must confirm that that will happen.

Christina Rees: I agree completely with my hon. Friend’s valuable point. I hope that is confirmed in the near future.

What will happen to the electrification of the Great western line, the South Wales metro, the city deals and Swansea Bay tidal lagoon should they not be priorities for the UK Government once we have exited the European Union? The Government’s support to date for some of those projects has been questionable, as my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) said,
without the pressure of committing to replace any funding lost post-Brexit. They must rise to the challenge and put in place the necessary guarantees to instil confidence in our businesses, universities and investors. They must commit to replacing any funding lost by projects currently in development but not yet signed, and demonstrate to the people of Wales that we have a Government who work for everyone.

3.26 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Flello. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate and on outlining a powerful case. He made the point that it is important that powers returning to the UK are devolved to Wales to help the Welsh Government to drive forward the regeneration of Wales. He also mentioned the current programme of EU funding, which involves some £3 billion in investment across Wales. In 2014 alone, the net benefit to Wales was £245 million, which demonstrates exactly how much benefit Wales gets from the European Union. He was right to point out that we heard vague commitments from the Prime Minister today, but nothing to give certainty on the regeneration infrastructure that Wales needs to continue. He was also right to point out that Wales did not vote for cuts to regeneration infrastructure projects. That is developing from the chaos unfolding before us.

Hon. Members have made significant points clarifying what risks our exit from the European Union will bring to infrastructure in their constituencies and across Wales. We heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) and for Cardiff South and Penarth about Airbus, Ford, Celsa and many other firms that develop their products across Europe, and the major and problematic impact that a hard Brexit would have on those businesses and many others.

We heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Newport East (Jessica Morden), for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) about infrastructure projects such as the metro, electrification of the valley lines and the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) outlined the unique issues facing Wales from our exit from the EU, and the need for a red, white and green project to develop policies that take account of our unique heritage. We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), who discussed the impact that uncertainty will have on local government’s ability to deliver larger-scale projects. My hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) stated that, although he respects the result of the referendum, whether we are leave or remain, we need a clear vision. As he pointed out, that is sadly lacking in this Prime Minister, who seems fixated on internal factions within the Tory party.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) highlighted the impact that European funding has had on her constituency, including a total of £40 million within the Bridgend County Borough Council area since 2000 for education and infrastructure projects. As in many constituencies across Wales, the strategic development sites have supported small and medium-sized enterprises. There have also been town centre enhancements, which again are common in lots of constituencies across south Wales. My hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) talked about the fact that Wales is affected by deindustrialisation and a lack of investment that dates back to the ‘80s and ‘90s. She said that Wales still has a significant need for structural funds and spoke about projects such as the integrated transport hubs, which again are regeneration projects that have happened in constituencies across south Wales.

In our last debate in this Chamber just before Christmas, I asked the Minister a number of questions, which unfortunately he did not answer. I say to him today that I approach this debate with a genuine desire to have a response from the Minister on the record. I expect him to tell me that he has already answered some of my questions, so, with the greatest of respect, I hope that he will have no problem repeating and clarifying that information and putting it on the record today.

I have no desire to use this debate for gamesmanship or to score cheap political points. The impact of the exit from the European Union on our constituencies and on Wales as a whole is far too important for that. But we need answers. Leaving the European Union will have a significant impact on the funding and development of infrastructure across Wales. That is in absolutely no doubt.

Wales has received more than £2 billion of capital investment in social housing, transport, energy, water and education through the European Investment Bank in the past decade. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth outlined, between 2014 and 2020, £1.9 billion of European structural funds will have driven total investment of almost £3 billion across Wales.

The benefits of that European investment have been seen in major projects, such as the Cardiff University Brain Research Imaging Centre, the Menai Science Park, the Swansea University Bay Campus in the Neath-Port Talbot area, and the Deep Green marine energy technology. In my constituency, we have seen the dualling of the A465, the heads of the valleys road, which historically has had a poor safety record and links west Wales, across the top of the south Wales valleys, to the midlands, so it is a key route for business. We have also seen the investment in jobs created in our communities and various funding streams for social programmes to support the most marginalised and vulnerable in our society.

As those facts demonstrate and as we have heard from hon. Members today, Wales has done incredibly well from European funds and support. So there are now serious and vital questions that the Government need to answer about what will happen to infrastructure support for Wales post-2020 and about what will replace EU funding.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making a strong speech and summarising many of the key challenges, specifically the challenges about infrastructure funding. However, does he share my worry that there is a wider challenge? In the Chancellor’s comments the other day, translated I believe from German, he said that “we will have to change our model to regain competitiveness. And you can be sure we will do whatever we have to do.”

Does my hon. Friend worry that we may be moving away from a programme of investment to reduce inequality...
and to focus on jobs, to one of a race to the bottom on tax, regulation and all those issues, which would damage the prospects for Welsh workers and businesses?

Gerald Jones: I do indeed; that is a very real concern. My hon. Friend highlights some of the chaos in the Government’s thinking on this matter. I hope that we will hear more from the Government in the near future to end the uncertainty and to provide some clarity about exactly what they intend to do.

During the referendum, we were assured by leave campaigners, including a number of senior Tory Ministers, that the UK and Wales would not lose out as a result of our exiting the EU. It is now time for the Government to deliver on the assurances that were given. Businesses and investors need certainty about the infrastructure and environment that will support their long-term decisions, so it is vital that the Government now make it clear how they will offset the negative consequences of EU exit for infrastructure in Wales. I hope that the Minister can give some clarity on what funding streams he envisions will replace EU funding post-2020, and outline his Department’s assessment of how much funding there will be.

Furthermore, even before we reach 2020, we need clarity on the guarantee made by the Chancellor, which was mentioned by the Minister and the Secretary of State for Wales in the media. To be fair, the Chancellor has announced that the Treasury will guarantee all multi-year EU business funding agreed before our exit. However, the detail appears to be a little more complex. For what it is worth, the Treasury said that it will “put in place arrangements for assessing whether to guarantee funding for specific structural and investment fund projects that might be signed after the[2016] Autumn Statement but while we remain a member of the EU. Further details will be provided ahead of the Autumn Statement.”

However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Neath commented, the specific assessment criteria mentioned in the Treasury’s statement were not provided ahead of the autumn statement and they have not been formally put on the record or disclosed in specific terms.

The Minister and the Secretary of State for Wales have repeated the claim that all projects before we leave the EU are secure, but can the Minister now say—purely for clarity and to have it on the record—what the assessment criteria will be to guarantee funding for specific projects that are signed between now and when we leave the EU? Can he also be clear exactly what will be used to assess that and which projects, if any, he expects not to pass that assessment?

Can the Minister also pledge today to guarantee loans made by the EIB to projects in Wales before we leave the EU? When my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), who is the shadow Secretary of State for Wales, raised that issue at the last Welsh questions, the Secretary of State for Wales said only: “Our negotiations with the EIB will run in parallel with our negotiations with the European Commission. The hon. Lady has a responsibility to try to instil confidence in investment in Wales, not to undermine it.”—[Official Report, 30 November 2016, Vol. 617, c. 1505.]

To accuse the Opposition of undermining investor confidence in Wales simply by scrutinising the Government and asking them to reveal to Members, investors and the Welsh public what their plans are is, clearly, remarkable.

Consequently, in a spirit of openness and constructive dialogue on this most crucial of issues, will the Minister tell us whether the Government plan to guarantee loans made by the EIB to projects in Wales before we leave the EU? If not, what assessment has been made of the projects that will not be underwritten, the potential cost of that to the Welsh economy and what jobs may be at risk as a result?

Time is marching on and the longer the uncertainty goes on, the more detriment will be caused to projects, businesses and communities across Wales. I hope that the Minister will provide some answers this afternoon to allay the genuine and growing fears that we now hear almost daily. Will he also take this opportunity specifically to address the issue of the funding received from the European Territorial Cooperation programmes, which provide opportunities for regions in the EU to work together to address common social, economic and environmental challenges? Wales has benefited hugely from that. Examples of other such projects include the Ireland Wales programme, the Atlantic Area programme, the North West Europe programme, Interreg Europe, the European Spatial Planning Observation Network and Interact, which are worth billions of pounds to Wales.

Will the Minister clarify what discussions the Government have had about whether the UK, outside the EU, would be eligible for any of those programmes? If it is not eligible and if Wales is no longer able to secure funding through those EU initiatives, what plans do the Government have to replace the funding?

Long-term infrastructure investment in Wales is vital for the future of our economy, jobs, investment and growth. The Government have a responsibility to ensure that we get the best possible deal from Brexit. It is not good enough just to say that we will get the best deal, whatever that means. Our constituents, businesses and investors need details of what funding will be available, what infrastructure projects will go ahead and what criteria other projects will have to meet before they can go ahead.

The Minister needs to get away from the rhetoric of our previous debates and earnestly give some answers today. I hope that he will take this opportunity to provide us with some answers. I hope that he appreciates how important these decisions and this debate is.

3.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Flello. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing the debate and, indeed, on the fact that today turned out to be an opportune moment to be discussing EU funding and the effect of leaving the European Union on infrastructure investment in Wales.

It is fair to say that there has been a contribution from EU funding into infrastructure investment in Wales. No one who represents any part of Wales would argue that that is not the case, but it is important to place that investment in context, in relation to the south Wales metro, for example, which is a fantastic project that will make a huge difference to south-east Wales and to
which the Wales Office and the UK Government are fully committed. The UK Government’s investment in the scheme is £500 million, while that from European funding is £106 million. That £106 million is crucial, but it is important at the outset to clarify one point once again. I regret that, having made this point on numerous occasions, I have to make it again. I must be speaking very improperly if Opposition Members have not understood thus far. The guarantee is in relation to any EU-funded project that is put in place and secured prior to our leaving the European Union.

The decision as to whether a European project in Wales is in accordance with the UK Government’s priorities is based, in effect, on whether the Welsh Government are in favour of the project. European-funded projects in Wales are signed off by the Welsh Government. If the south Wales metro scheme is under way and there is a commitment of £106 million of European funding for the project, that £106 million will be underwritten by the Treasury. I hope that that is clear—it is as clear as I can make it. The Welsh Government make decisions regarding EU funding in Wales, and that might have been part of the problem in the past because, I would argue, the money has not been spent as well as it should have, but it is crucial to understand that if the Welsh Government are in favour of a project and it is signed off before we exit the European Union, that guarantee is in place.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I apologise, Chair, for not being here for most of the debate. I have been in the Chamber trying to catch the eye of the Speaker on this very issue. The Minister is right that many of the infrastructure schemes are projects initiated by the Welsh Government, but Interreg, which has been important to west Wales and links to Ireland, may now be under different criteria. Will the UK Government, as signatories to the European Union, guarantee those projects in future? With today’s announcement of a common travel area, does the Minister envisage special status for west Wales ports?

Guto Bebb: As the announcement was made only today, it would be incorrect of me to respond immediately to the question of special status for west Wales ports. The hon. Gentleman is perfectly right that decisions relating to Interreg funding will remain with the British Government but, on EU structural funds in a Welsh context, I hope that I have offered the clarity that the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth requested.

It is crucial to understand that the investment in the south Wales metro is part and parcel of the electrification of the Great Western main line, because unless that line is electrified the metro system will not work as we envisage. Across the divide in this debate, we should at least recognise that the investment being made in rail infrastructure in Wales, both north and south, is both to be welcomed and crucial.

Stephen Doughty: The point that my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) made is absolutely crucial, and it raises a wider question about what the suggestion of engagement, with both the Welsh Government and the Welsh Assembly, means. It is not clear, is it, whether if we did not like parts of the deal—solutions, for example, regarding the common British-Irish travel area—we could dispute, veto or change them in some way? Or is it a like-it-or-lump-it strategy?

Guto Bebb: I sincerely hope it would not be a like-it-or-lump-it strategy, because that would not be proper engagement. Proper engagement means listening to the arguments being made by the devolved authorities and taking their views into account. It is clear that a decision will have to be made on a UK basis. I suspect that the hon. Gentleman is not arguing that we should have different settlements for different parts of the UK in relation to exiting the European Union.

We entered the European Union as a United Kingdom and I suspect we will leave as a United Kingdom, but it is imperative in that debate that we take on board the arguments being made by the devolved Administrations. It is important to highlight that we, as a Government, have set up Joint Ministerial Committees to ensure that those discussions happen on a Minister-to-Minister basis. I have been part of those discussions, as a representative of the Wales Office. So this is not a case of attempting a Westminster fix that ignore the views of the devolved Administrations; it is a genuine attempt to take on board the concerns of those Administrations, to ensure that we come up with an approach that reflects the complexities of the United Kingdom.

Paul Flynn: Does the Minister seriously believe that the problems post-Brexit in the home countries will be the same as the problems in England? A red, white and blue Brexit is an England-centric one. The problems in Wales and Scotland, and certainly in Northern Ireland, are unique to those countries and we need Brexit solutions that are tailor-made for the four home countries.

Guto Bebb: I am somewhat surprised by the hon. Gentleman’s comments, because I do not think he would argue that every single part of England has the same issues. The issues in Cornwall are very different to those in London; indeed, there is a devolved administration in London. Also, we are seeing a devolution process in the north of England and the issues facing the north of England will be very different from those in the midlands. I suspect that the Government have a responsibility to listen to arguments being made by all parts of the country. We are a Government who are listening on this issue.

I go back to the structures that have been put in place. Those structures are working. I have attended meetings with Ministers from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, such meetings are not currently possible, and that is a regret, but they have been constructive and for a purpose. I can assure hon. Members that views about the priorities are expressed very strongly in all parts of the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth asked whether the engagement is serious, and I argue that it is. Certainly the meetings I have attended have been robust but very worth while.

Nick Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Guto Bebb: I will of course give way to my former colleague on the Public Accounts Committee.
Nick Smith: I acknowledge that the electrification of Paddington to Cardiff is seen through, and hope it will be a great success. However, as the Minister knows, that project has cost a lot of money and has seen significant delays which, I think, have led to the delay in the delivery of the Cardiff to Swansea electrification. I think that the Minister will find that hard to deny. What I want from him today is a guarantee that he will ensure that the UK Government will support the Welsh Government to deliver the electrification of the valleys lines so that is not shunted off into the middle distance and not delivered.

Guto Bebb: The assurance I can give is that my Department and this Government are committed to the south Wales metro scheme, which includes the need to electrify the south Wales valleys lines. The excitement that is felt about that project is not confined to south-east Wales; as a north Walian, I see it as a coherent strategy to revitalise the valleys. Cardiff is a huge success story, with jobs being created, and the south Wales metro scheme will make it so much easier to ensure that people in the valleys can be part of that. Listening to this debate will perhaps make people forget that we have success stories in Wales. I understand and fully support the view that the project is dependent on the electrification of the Great Western main line, but although there have been delays with that work, that does not prevent this investment.

The £500 million coming from Westminster for the south Wales metro scheme is on top of the settlement for the Welsh Government, and it is important to state that the investment we are seeing in infrastructure such as the railways is complemented by a significant increase in the capital funding of the Welsh Government, which has come through as a result of budget announcements, and which I hope all hon. Members welcome.

In addition, there has been significant discussion about and development of the possibility of a city deal for Swansea and the west Wales region, which is imperative, and work is being undertaken on a north Wales growth deal. What is exciting about the development of a city deal in the north Wales context is the constructive engagement between Westminster, the Welsh Government and partners on both sides of the north Wales border. There is an understanding that a growth deal, and infrastructure investment as part of that, is dependent on co-operation between the north-west of England and north Wales, and between the Welsh and UK Governments. I stress again that the relationships that are being developed as a result of the work on the city region deal in Cardiff, the Swansea city region deal and the north Wales growth deal are building confidence between the Welsh and UK Governments.

Albert Owen: At the inception of the north Wales growth deal, it was envisaged that it would include European money, because it was linking England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland. Is the Minister suggesting that there will be a bid to Europe before we exit the European Union? If that is not the case, does he envisage the UK Government working with the Irish Government and the Welsh Government to get that funding?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman is well aware that the north Wales growth deal, in partnership with the Mersey Dee Alliance and so on, is dependent on a bottom-up approach. The answer to his question is that if the scheme and a deal are in place in good time to make an application for EU funding, it might be possible, but it depends on the timing. We are not a Government who say, “We know best in Westminster.” We are certainly not a Government who think Cardiff knows best. The city deals are based on growth from the bottom up. They are successful, and I hope they are proving their worth. It is a new way of working, and hon. Members should take it on board.

On investment in infrastructure and the co-operation between the Welsh Government and Westminster, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) highlighted an important point about investment in our digital infrastructure. We should at least willing be to concede that more than 11% of the entire funding at the UK level for broadband connectivity was allocated to Wales. I openly congratulate the Welsh Government on match-funding that investment with European funding. We know that great strides have been made on broadband connectivity in Wales, but more should be done. That is why I was absolutely delighted to be involved in a conference in Cardiff last week—it was attended by the Welsh Government Minister—on how we could further improve broadband connectivity and, more important, ensure that we have adequate mobile communications in Wales. We also need to look at how we ensure that those areas of Wales that will perhaps not be reached by broadband connectivity will be able to access broadband via 4G and, in the future, 5G services.

Money is part of that issue, and there is a need for investment, but there is also a need to look again at planning issues, which are the responsibility of the Welsh Government. A very positive outcome of the meeting was that the Welsh Minister highlighted that the Welsh Government would have a meeting this week with stakeholders in Wales to look at whether the planning infrastructure needs to be changed to make it easier to provide mobile infrastructure.

The key point is that there have been changes to the planning infrastructure in England to allow taller masts without the need for planning permission, but the approach taken by the Scottish Government has been very different, and that is perfectly fine. As we have devolved Administrations within the UK, there is nothing wrong with having a response in Wales that looks at Welsh needs, a response in England to the situation in England and a response in Scotland to the Scottish situation. The key point I stress is that co-operation on the issue between Westminster and the Welsh Government is of vital importance for communities in all parts of Wales and for the economic prosperity of Wales.

Mrs Moon: I totally agree with what the Minister is saying about different views from different parts of the devolved Administrations in Wales, but funding for car manufacturers in the UK is a central Government decision and has nothing to do with the Welsh Assembly. Can I have the assurance that, whatever agreement was made with Nissan, there will be a comparable agreement for Ford and that assurances can be given that Brexit will not impact on the capacity of the Ford plant in Bridgend?

Guto Bebb: I assure the hon. Lady that on the third page of my notes of questions to respond to is the question on Ford in Bridgend. It is not just about Ford in Bridgend; we also have Toyota in north Wales, which
is a crucial part of the north-east Welsh economy. I can only repeat what was said to the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure in Wales, Ken Skates, in a meeting that I attended with Lord Price, the Minister of State for International Trade: nothing that was offered to Nissan is not on the table for Ford and Toyota.

I want to correct the hon. Lady, because some of the possible support for Ford and Toyota is a matter for the Welsh Government. Economic development is to a large extent a devolved matter. I fully accept the argument that, although the support might be coming from the Welsh Government, the reassurance has to be at the UK Government-level. I am delighted to say that we were able to say categorically that the deal offered to Nissan is on the table for Ford and Toyota when we were sitting in the office of the Welsh Government Economy Minister. Such businesses are crucial for the hon. Lady’s constituency in the same way that they are for north-east Wales, and we would not want to lose them under any future trading arrangements that we have with the European Union. Those commitments have been made and relayed to the Welsh Government.

Responding to the question that the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth asked about engagement, there is nothing better than taking the trade Minister to see the Welsh Government economy Minister and giving those reassurances in person within a week of the decision being made about Nissan. That decision was welcomed by Opposition Members and by Government Members, because it was a vote of confidence in the workforce of the Nissan plant. That vote of confidence should be given for Ford and Toyota, too.

Kevin Brennan: Just to be clear on that point, is the Minister confirming today that the Government have offered absolutely the same deal to Ford as was offered to Nissan?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman is clearly attempting to distort my words. The assurances given to Nissan are available to Ford and Toyota in the same way. A meeting has been offered. The Welsh Government Economy Minister is aware that that offer has been made. The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) asked for assurances, and I hope I have offered them in as open a manner as I can.

On infrastructure, we have seen significant infrastructure in north Wales with the super-prison in Berwyn. That was another investment into north Wales by the UK Government over and above any settlement with the Welsh Government. The importance of infrastructure investment as a means of boosting the economy is highlighted by the fact that that prison development has resulted in a significant contract being won by a consortium that included Coleg Cambria, which is based in north-east Wales. We should welcome that success story.

I am running out of time so I will try to respond quickly to the specific questions asked by Members. The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) is looking at me in anticipation of a comment on tidal lagoons. Those of us who support the concept of tidal lagoons undoubtedly welcome the Hendry report, which was published last Thursday. News broke of Charles Hendry’s positive comments while I was at the mobile infrastructure summit in Cardiff Bay. The report was positive, but it was complex, too, and it needs to be looked at in depth. I sincerely hope that the Government will be able to respond in due course from a financial point of view to the issues with the cost of the tidal lagoon and the impact on the taxpayer and the electricity consumer. There is no doubt that the report was positive and needs to be taken seriously within Government. When the report was commissioned, many people said that the issue was being kicked into the long grass, but if they were looking for a negative report, that was not what they received. We are looking at the matter carefully, but there are no doubt issues still to be addressed over the next few months.

On the European Investment Bank, it is difficult to offer guarantees that the loans in question would be supported, but it is worth highlighting that the Chancellor has announced a £23 billion investment into the national productivity investment fund. We are putting in place alternative options for local authorities and stakeholders in Wales to bid into. Life after Brexit will not be the same as it is now, but that reflects that things will be changing.

I need to draw my comments to a conclusion. I apologise to Members if I have not been able to respond to specific points they have made, but I have certainly attempted to do so. The key point is that the decisions on leaving the European Union will be made on the basis of in-depth, proper consultation with partner local authorities throughout England and with the devolved Administrations in Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast. The key thing is that we must do the right thing for the people of the United Kingdom, whether they voted to remain or to leave.

Robert Felloo (in the Chair): Stephen Doughty, you have about 10 seconds.

3.59 pm

Stephen Doughty: Thank you, Mr Felloo. I am conscious of the time. I thank the Minister for his comments. He has provided some helpful clarifications, but what is clear from all the comments today is that there are real-world impacts on jobs and businesses in our communities in all parts of Wales. The suggestion that we have had the totality of the plan we will receive is simply not good enough. We need more clarity. The Minister has provided some today, but not enough in some areas. That is why we need a Government White Paper so that we can all understand the future for Wales in the Brexit process.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the effect of the UK leaving the EU on infrastructure in Wales.
Murder of UK Nationals Abroad

[Steve McCabe in the Chair]

4 pm

Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered police force support for investigations of murder of UK nationals abroad.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe—I think it is the first time I have spoken under your stewardship. I also thank the Minister for taking the time to respond.

I wish to raise a specific local case as an illustration of the wider plight of British families whose loved ones are murdered overseas. I want to understand what has gone wrong in my local case, which concerns Ollie Gobat, a young businessman murdered in St Lucia, whose parents are my constituents. On their behalf, my aim is to try to secure some sense of justice for a truly distraught family and, in the process, to glean a wider sense of what British policing support other families in this appalling situation can and should reasonably expect in pursuit of the perpetrators of these heinous crimes.

Ollie Gobat was shot and killed, and his body and car set alight, on 25 April 2014. It was a cowardly and heinous crime, and the St Lucia police force immediately confirmed that it was an execution-style murder carried out by organised criminals. Ollie was a much loved family man and a successful real estate executive, working in St Lucia at the time of his murder. The crime has appalled both the St Lucia population and the large expat community living there. That sense of disgust and frustration has been aggravated, over time, by the lack of progress in solving the murder. The dramatic nature of Ollie’s murder and the delays and obstacles to bringing those responsible to justice has generated a lot of media interest there and some media reports back home in the UK.

As St Lucia is a relatively small island, there are relatively few organised criminal groups present, active and operating on the island. Yet the St Lucian police force made no early progress in the case, which started to raise serious questions over the force’s conduct in the investigation. The Gobat family—UK residents and British nationals—swiftly reached out to the relevant UK authorities for help. Ollie was a British citizen, raised in Surrey. The request for UK support was made with the encouragement and blessing of the St Lucian Prime Minister, with whom the family had and maintain a strong relationship. At the same time, the family engaged the private services of a former UK police detective. That resulted in some clear lines of inquiry, which have yet to be properly followed up. Some relate to UK persons of interest, including at least one individual believed to be on UK soil.

As anticipated, the St Lucian Prime Minister formally contacted the UK Government requesting mutual legal assistance in the case. That request was complicated by various legal and bureaucratic obstacles. I was hugely relieved and grateful that in June 2014, the then Home Secretary accepted the request, pledging full assistance, subject to UK police being able to operate properly and safely.

Following the relevant protocol, Surrey police force was tasked with providing the requisite assistance. I recognise that Ministers and officials worked very hard to secure that authorisation, and I think it is reasonable to say that we all hoped it would mark a turning point in the case. Regrettably, there has been no progress and no proactive engagement or assistance provided by Surrey police. Worse still, the family are now also receiving death threats as a result of their private investigation.

I want to recognize that Surrey police met me and the family in February last year, and in fairness, following that meeting, they have provided some reactive responses to the St Lucian requests for assistance, but it is crystal clear that what is really needed is more proactive support, which the family had reasonably understood would be forthcoming. With that in mind, I understand that the St Lucian Prime Minister Allen Chastanet intends to request, or is in the process of requesting, a further elevation of UK assistance in keeping with the previous assurances provided by the Home Office.

Of course, any assistance needs to take into account St Lucia’s background. It is a former British colony, a member of the Commonwealth and an island much loved by hundreds of thousands of British visitors every year. It is public knowledge that St Lucia has a serious policing challenge, which is demonstrated by the commissioning by the Caribbean Community of a report on serious police corruption and extra-judicial killings in St Lucia.

I have gotten to know the Gobat family rather well since June 2014. Today as then, they just want what any family in their position would want: some measure of justice and accountability for their much loved and sorely missed son and brother. Although they recognise the complex nature of the case, they feel completely let down, not just by the lack of progress but by the failure of UK police to deliver the kind of support envisaged after the Home Office approval. I recognise the pressure of an investigation of this nature, and how complicated it must be—it would put a strain on any single force’s budget—and we can understand some of what may be holding it back, but surely justice for mourning British families is not entirely dependent on a postcode lottery. Is there no additional centralised support that can be provided in such a highly serious case?

The Gobat family recognise that the perpetrators may never be brought to justice, but that only reinforces their desire, and indeed mine, to see the un-ending pursuit of a proper investigation to get some answers. In their situation, I think we would all want the same. In particular, the family now want to see the level of UK assistance escalated and elevated to a more proactive role and the case moved from Surrey police to the Metropolitan police, which has greater expertise and manpower and might reasonably be expected, given its centralised role in counter-terrorism and organised crime, to take up some of the slack.

I know that there is a limit on the extent to which the Minister will be able to be drawn on the specifics of any operational matters in a pending criminal investigation, but it is entirely reasonable to ask some questions and expect some clearer answers. First, what level of support should the family of a British citizen murdered by an
organised criminal gang abroad reasonably expect, through UK police supplementing or supporting the local criminal investigation overseas?

In the case of Ollie Gobat, having secured agreement for UK police to support the St Lucian investigation in June 2015, the Home Office envisaged that full assistance would follow. Why has that not happened, and what should happen next to make sure the lapsing of time does not render any subsequent investigation meaningless?

Are the Home Office and the Minister satisfied that Surrey police has the capacity and resources to engage properly with the St Lucian investigation, given the expectation of full assistance? How can that vital policing support be transferred to the Metropolitan police, in keeping with the family’s wishes, to make sure the required UK support has the expertise and capacity to make a real difference in St Lucia? Finally, what can the Minister say to reassure the family that any further request that comes from the Government of St Lucia with the Prime Minister’s blessing will be fully, properly and swiftly actioned?

The Gobat family feel abandoned. They expected concerted and material UK support to the St Lucian investigation, but there has been no real action on the ground. That comes on top of the terrible grief that they continue to endure. That cannot be right. On behalf of them and the other British families who find themselves in similarly tragic circumstances, I would be very grateful if the Minister could answer the questions I have laid out and above all assure us that we will see ground. That comes on top of the terrible grief that they themselves in similarly tragic circumstances, I would be very grateful if the Minister could answer the questions I have laid out and above all assure us that we will see ground. That comes on top of the terrible grief that they continue to endure. That cannot be right. On behalf of them and the other British families who find themselves in similarly tragic circumstances, I would be very grateful if the Minister could answer the questions I have laid out and above all assure us that we will see some serious movement in the UK police involvement in the investigation before it is too late for justice in their very tragic case.

4.10 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab) on securing this debate and on the concise and clear way in which he outlined the issues relating to the tragic events of 2014. Such issues affect a number of British families in similar situations. I am only too aware of the devastating impact that such cases can have on families and communities. I was recently touched by the death of my constituent Hannah Witheridge, who died alongside David Miller in tragic and awful circumstances in Thailand in 2014, so I have seen the impact that such cases have. The Norfolk police did a fantastic job with the family liaison officers in working with the families and giving support to the community.

I am sure my hon. Friend understands that it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the detail of specific cases. As he said, to do so could prejudice any current or future investigations. However, I recognise the concerns that he raised about the support available to bereaved families, and I hope to respond to those points, even if I use more general terms.

It is always a tragedy when a family member dies. I cannot begin to imagine the heartache that families feel when it happens away from home. I saw that for myself in the tragic case of Hannah in my constituency. It is particularly devastating when there are suspicious circumstances that are hard to get to the bottom of, and when the family believes that they have not been investigated as thoroughly as they could have been.

Our police are among the finest in the world and rightly have an enviable reputation for professionalism, so it is entirely understandable that families want UK police officers to investigate the circumstances of their loved one’s death overseas. Although UK police support is provided in a number of cases, including consular support provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and police liaison support, I am sure my hon. Friend appreciates that it is not always possible to provide it due to circumstances that can be outside our and those agencies’ control. It is important to recognise that UK police officers can assist in a foreign state’s investigation of crimes committed overseas only with the express invitation of the host Government, and for a number of reasons invitations are not always forthcoming. I understand that that must be extremely frustrating for families seeking justice for deceased relatives, but it is simply not possible to support investigations in another country without its permission.

There will also be circumstances when support is requested by a host Government, but it does not meet the expectations of bereaved families or does not go far enough to address their concerns. Again, we are limited by the scope of the request and cannot independently provide investigative assistance unless explicitly asked to do so by the host country.

Requests for support are considered carefully by Home Office Ministers to ensure that any assistance requested is consistent with our international obligations and will not potentially lead to any human rights abuses. It is then for the police, who are operationally independent of the Government, to consider what support they may be able to provide to an investigation overseas. Inevitably, there will be occasions when the police in that locality judge that there is little value that can be added to an investigation, or that support would be impractical. Those are rightly operational decisions for the police to make, and it would be inappropriate for the Government to seek to influence them.

That is not to say that the police do not support overseas investigations. As I said, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on specific cases, but I can confirm that the Home Office frequently authorises support to overseas law enforcement agencies. In those cases, a request will have been made by a foreign law enforcement agency. The request will have been authorised by Ministers, and the police will have confirmed that they are in a position to provide assistance.

Mutual legal assistance, which my hon. Friend mentioned, is distinct from law enforcement or police-to-police co-operation. It is a formal method of judicial co-operation between states to obtain assistance in the investigation or prosecution of criminal offences. Such requests are considered carefully by Home Office Ministers, and the UK provides assistance wherever we can. Again, it must be in line with our international obligations.

As such cases are sensitive, family members are often unfortunately but necessarily not aware that support has been requested or is being provided. Although I completely understand that it must be extremely difficult for a family member who is desperate for answers, it is absolutely critical that nothing is done to jeopardise any ongoing investigations, as that may ultimately result in the failed prosecution of any suspects who are identified.

In addition to the support provided to specific investigations, it is also worth mentioning that police officers do excellent work in undertaking to improve the
capabilities and professionalism of foreign police services. That can include the routine deployment of officers to carry out training in areas such as leadership, forensics, intelligence and other activities, sharing the best practice that our police have and building relationships to improve policing at home and abroad. By enhancing the capability and capacity of foreign police services to conduct thorough, evidence-based investigations, we increase not only the likelihood of successful prosecutions but compliance with human rights obligations. That in turn can remove some of the barriers to co-operation on individual cases that come up.

My hon. Friend spoke primarily about the particular case of his constituents, but this issue has implications for people more widely. I thank him for securing the debate and for raising the profile of the challenge of being able to work in other countries, which affects both families and the police. I understand that it is an emotive issue for the people involved. I want to take the opportunity to commend the police across the country for the vital role they play in what can often be very challenging circumstances. I assure my hon. Friend that the Government will continue to support requests for assistance where the circumstances allow. I will certainly make sure I keep him and, through him, the family apprised of the situation where we can.

Question put and agreed to.

4.18 pm

Sitting suspended.

4.30 pm

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I beg to move.

That this House has considered Digital Equipment Ltd’s pension scheme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe, and to move this motion on behalf of my constituents. I am grateful to those Members who are here to take part in the debate. I am sure that they share my belief that this is an important topic.

Digital Equipment Ltd started in Massachusetts in the 1950s, in the days when computers were so big that they filled whole rooms. Its story is one of a dramatic rise and fall. From humble beginnings, it became a leading vendor of computer systems, including computers and software. By 1977, when Digital came to Ayr, it had grown into an entrepreneurial computer company boasting $1.5 billion in annual sales. In the ‘70s and ‘80s, computer technology changed rapidly, and Digital was at the forefront of that change. It quickly became a major employer not just in my constituency but across Scotland and the UK. At its peak, it employed around 1,500 people in Ayr.

Unfortunately, the company failed to adapt successfully after the rise of the personal computer eroded its minicomputer market, and it was acquired in June 1998 by Compaq, which merged with Hewlett Packard in 2002. Some parts of Digital were sold to Intel, but the plant in Ayr met its end. From the accounts given to me by my constituents, Digital was considered a good place to work, and it is remembered locally with fondness. It seems that its approach to technology—it was at the forefront of networking computers as peers—was mirrored in its corporate approach, with management structures that treated its people as equals.

The pension scheme was open to all employees and started paying pension from the age of 60 for both men and women. Although pension indexation was not guaranteed and Digital was not legally bound to award increases, the company made it its practice to do so. Staff were reassured that that custom would continue when Compaq acquired Digital in 1998, and Compaq continued to pay discretionary increases to pensioners. That trend was broken only following Hewlett Packard’s acquisition in 2002. In October 2006, the assets and liabilities of the Digital plan were transferred to the Digital section of Hewlett Packard’s retirement benefits plan, which provides for increases of pre-1997 pension rights at the discretion of the principal employer.

Since 2002, Digital pensioners in the UK have seen only two increases to their pre-1997 pensions, each amounting to 1%. In the past 14 years, the value of those pensions has stagnated. Those pensioners’ buying power has diminished and continues to shrink year on year, in contrast with their former colleagues in Europe. Pensioners in Hewlett Packard’s European subsidiaries have received regular cost of living increases, because only the UK Government have set an exclusion for pre-1997 contributions. The former staff of Digital in the UK do not feel quite so equal now.

I appreciate that HP is a huge multinational company that operates in around 150 countries and pays its pensioners in full accordance with the law in each of
those countries, and I did not secure this debate to beat it about the head with a stick for not fulfilling its obligations to my constituents. However, I have great sympathy with those Digital employees who trusted their employer and paid into what they saw at the time as a great pension scheme, but have found that it does not support them in their old age and rely on Government support to get by. Many of my constituents paid into their Digital pensions for more than 20 years, and the bulk of their contributions were paid before 1997. Those who have not reached pensionable age do not yet know how little their pensions will be worth to them.

When this issue was first brought to my attention, I wrote to the Pensions Minister on behalf of my constituents to find out how the Government intended to resolve some of the issues with defined-benefit pension schemes such as the Digital scheme. I am grateful to him for his prompt response, in which he stated that “the Government has no plans to force schemes to pay any increases to the pre-1997 pensions—beyond those that are already required by scheme rules”

and outlined that Government interference would be wrong and liability increases for which an employer had not planned or could not provide could lead to widespread scheme closures and risks. But I have a host of constituents who had planned for their retirement but have found that their pension scheme does not support them.

The Government have made it clear that, if the demands of the Hewlett Packard Pension Association, which has campaigned about this issue, were met, the additional liability on employers would mean that they would need to find extra money, and the Government do not plan to make them do that. I understand their position on that point. However, according to the Office for National Statistics occupational pension schemes survey, in 2015, there were around 5.2 million defined-benefit schemes in payment in the UK with rights accrued before 1997, of which more than 90% paid an increase. Just 8% of schemes like Digital’s used their discretion to deny any cost of living increase to their pensioners. Despite the fact that indexation is not mandatory for rights accrued before 1997, it appears that many schemes voluntarily apply some form of inflation protection to pensions in payment, and many apply limited price indexation retrospectively to service before 1997.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an excellent case on behalf of her constituents. Does she agree that not only Digital or Hewlett Packard employees but those of other companies are affected? She mentioned that only 10% of defined-benefit pension schemes do not pay indexation. Campaigners are asking not for indexation to be backdated but for this issue to be corrected going forward. Does she also welcome the fact that the Pensions Minister has agreed to meet some of my constituents? I welcome the way that he is engaging with this debate.

Corri Wilson: The right hon. Lady makes a valid point that campaigners are not asking for indexation to be backdated, which would cause considerable difficulties for the companies involved. I will come to that point later.

I empathise with Hewlett Packard and other businesses that inherited defined-benefit schemes through expanding their operations during the boom years. They are all experiencing a global turnaround and an extremely challenging marketplace. Difficult decisions have to be made, and looking after the former employees of businesses that have long since been subsumed has to be balanced with current business concerns and the welfare of current workforces. Hewlett Packard is breaking no laws, and I understand that it fully appreciates the impact of its decision on its pensioner population and that is taken into account during annual reviews. However, I have greater sympathy for the concerns of the pensioners who have pensions with HP that will be frozen due to not being covered by legislation, and I would like the UK Government to take action to address the problems with defined-benefit schemes.

The Hewlett Packard Pension Association claims that withheld cost of living increases have so far cost pensioners an average of £24,000 compared with their colleagues whose contributions were made post-1997. That has led to severe financial hardship for many of those pensioners and has resulted in them being unable to afford an ordinary living pattern, being on the verge of poverty and requiring Government subsidies in the form of income support benefits.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I speak because one of my constituents has been in contact with me. I have explained that I cannot stay for the whole debate. Is the hon. Lady essentially saying that it is the older, poorer pensioners who do not get increases, and the younger ones, who earn more, who do?

Corri Wilson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The people who have paid in for the longest are getting the least benefit back from the scheme, although I recognise that pension schemes have changed.

I would like to hear from the Government what options, if any, are open to scheme members. The Pensions Minister has stated that defined-benefit schemes will be looked at early this year and he intends to consider what the Government can do to tweak the environment of those schemes. Is indexation increases for all defined-benefit pension schemes one of the tweaks that he will look at? The change that HPPA is seeking is for the discrimination between pre-1997 and post-1997 contributions to be removed from legislation, and the minimum permissible increases for all defined-benefit pensions in payment in future to be indexed in line with increases in the retail prices index. Will the Government look at that in their forthcoming Green Paper?

The Scottish National party is committed to ensuring dignity in retirement for all pensioners in Scotland, and although many recent debates have focused on reducing the statutory minimum requirements rather than increasing them, it is important that we examine closely what will bring about fairness and sustainability and deliver that dignity. Those are the issues I want to address in opening the debate. I know that other hon. Members wish to participate, so I will draw to a close by appealing to the Minister to take into account the situation that, as we heard earlier, people—not just Digital pensioners—find themselves in.

Pension plans are made over decades. They are long-term investments in our future to ensure that we can survive when we are no longer working and to ensure that we are not a burden on the state or our families. However,
it appears that plans that seemed sound at the time have turned out to be considerably less appealing, whether private company pensions or indeed state pensions— all their lives but find that, when they retire, the goalposts have been moved. To paraphrase our national bard, the best laid schemes have indeed gang-gley. I look to the Government and the forthcoming Green Paper to start addressing some of those issues on behalf of my constituents, and so that future generations can plan for their retirement.

4.40 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): This is a particular issue for Ayrshire. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) pointed out, a large Digital Equipment site there got taken over by Compaq and then by Hewlett Packard. The problem is that this is not like the BHS scenario—it is not that the company has ceased to exist. The company does exist, but it is choosing not to upgrade these people’s pensions. As was mentioned, under HP, in 15 years, those people have had a miserly two upgrades of their pre-1997 contributions. The problem with that is that their buying power is almost cut in half—as was mentioned, they have lost £24,000 each.

Currently, the guidance basically says that pensionable contributions after 1997 get the consumer prices index rate of 5%, whichever is lower, and those after 2005 get CPI or 2.5%, whichever is lower. All those people want is to change that bit of wording so that everything before 2005 qualifies for 5% or CPI, with 2.5% for everything after. They are talking about CPI, not even RPI, and, as was mentioned, they are not asking for it to be backdated. Their pensions are withering on the vine and, as they get older, they will continue to wither. As the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) said, it is indeed the older pensioner who will have a larger chunk of pre-1997 pension and therefore find that it does not give them the return they counted on.

HP is not skint. HP is a big company, making a lot of money. It sells a lot of IT in the UK and it accounts for 25% of public IT contracts. Along with other FTSE 100 companies, it pays much more out in dividends to shareholders than to correct its deficits—five times, it is estimated, what it puts in to cover deficits. Perhaps the Government should be looking at that. We hear that defined-benefit pension schemes are struggling because the companies cannot afford to put the money in. If they would be willing to pay 20% into correcting deficits and 80% to shareholders, that seems to me already a pretty generous solution, rather than leaving the pensioners to struggle.

That brings us back to situations we have debated multiple times in the Chamber, such as Equitable Life, the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign and BHS. People at the start of their working lives are doing so on trust that, when they reach whatever the retirement age is, they will be able to live in dignity. They have taken the trouble to open a pension. We are now making people enrol. What will happen in 20, 30 or 40 years’ time? Will we be discussing auto-enrolment pensions that people were forced into that still do not give a return? It is our role as legislators to ensure that the goalposts are set and dependable so that people who sign up to pensions know what they will get.

To call for pre-1997 contributions to be treated the same as those between 1997 and 2005, without backdating, is a reasonable request from the pensioners. I call on the Minister to respond.

4.45 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I apologise in advance: I will not be here at the end because I will be in a meeting with Equitable Life, which was just mentioned by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). May I make one positive suggestion, almost as an intervention, open to those pension funds, trade union funds and insurance companies that hold our money and own Hewlett Packard shares? They should ask HP whether it thinks it is socially responsible to discriminate between the different groups of UK employees it has taken over by acquisition. It seems that it should be asked to say to its shareholders—whether or not at the annual general meeting—whether it thinks the savings it is making are justified and whether it would like to illustrate what the pension arrangements are for their top executives and what those are for those who were in businesses in Ayrshire and other parts of the United Kingdom when it made its decisions. Is it lawfully open to putting the pensioners in the situation suggested by the hon. Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) and for Central Ayrshire? If so, it should do that without delay.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): I will now call the Front Benchers. You will have noticed that we have more time than we might have expected, which means we can allow about 10 minutes—probably no more—for the SNP and Labour Front Benchers and about 20 minutes for the Minister. You are not obliged to take that time, and make sure you leave at least three or four minutes for the mover of the motion to wind up.

4.46 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you, Mr McCabe. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) for securing this important debate, and the HP Pension Association for its work and all it has done to highlight the issue, particularly the indexation of pre-1997 defined-benefit schemes. I am here on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), our pensions spokesperson, who unfortunately is in the Chamber and unable to attend. Hon. Members will have to forgive me if I do a bit more reading normal.

On defined-benefit and defined-contribution schemes, my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) covered the issue of trust nicely. If we expect members of the public to be opted into those schemes, they should expect a reasonable return, and they should have trust that their pension scheme will pay out what it said it would. That is particularly true of young people coming into schemes, with the possibility that the state pension may not kick in at 65 or 67 in the future—it may be 70 by the time I get there. We do not know what the state pension age will be at that stage. We
need to ensure that people pay into private pensions, so we need to keep up the level of trust in private pension schemes, which has been eroded in recent years.

The UK Government recognise that it is important that the state pension keeps up with inflation. That is why they have committed to the triple lock, and there has been support for that from throughout the House. However, it is not right that we have that for the state pension, but elsewhere there is effectively, if not an ability to dodge that, then almost a loophole. There is a gap, with a lack of legislation committing organisations to sticking to that, particularly in relation to the pre-1997 situation.

Inflation is important. If a pension scheme is not keeping up with inflation, things are less affordable, so pensioners cannot support their retirement in the ways they expected. It is therefore key that the term “inflation” is used, and that we look at that rather than at a certain defined percentage increase.

On the pre-1997 rights and the estimated 3,500 pensioners in the HP pension scheme, as has been said already, according to the HP Pension Association the buying power of their pensions has diminished by almost 50%. That has cost each pensioner an average of £24,000 in cost of living increases compared with those whose contributions were made post-1997.

The HP Pension Association estimates that the average pension paid to Digital pensioners in 2002 was £6,008 per year. If that had kept up with inflation it would now be £9,070 per year—a difference of £3,000 per annum. That is a significant amount of money that people do not have to spend, and it means that people do not have the retirement that they expected. If Brexit causes a period of rising inflation—the current situation has happened over a period of relatively low inflation—the problem will be compounded even further, and it will be even more difficult for people to survive and have the quality of life they expected from their pensions.

Data from the Office for National Statistics occupational pensions survey showed that 3.2 million pensioners were in receipt of pensions with pre-1997 rights, of whom 400,000 were not receiving inflationary increases. Some 40% of those with pre-1997 accrued rights received increases of 2% or more, which was down from 85% a year earlier. There has been a significant change, possibly because companies are seeing that they do not have to pay extra. I therefore think it would be sensible for the Government to consider looking at the issue. I understand that there is going to be a Green Paper, in which I hope the Government will touch on it.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is also outrageous that Hewlett Packard pays cost of living rises to its pensioners in Europe but not those here? That shows that this is totally related to the loophole in the UK guidance.

Kirsty Blackman: That is a real discrepancy, and it shows that those payments are affordable. Hewlett Packard can afford to pay the increases if it is doing so in other places. The UK Government have a responsibility to consider that and see what changes they can make.

We are all aware of the widely reported challenges that defined-benefit schemes are facing, including from increased life expectancy—companies did not expect to have to pay out such amounts of money for such a long period of time—and the impact of declining yields, while the increase in many schemes’ deficits has been highlighted in the past. The UK Government and Parliament have discussed changes to the rules that govern those pension schemes and to uplifts, but we do not want a situation in which we are putting the schemes before the people. We need people’s rights to be protected and the schemes to continue to be affordable. It is important that we take the pensioners into account first.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber tells me that the Government’s Green Paper will offer an opportunity to examine this issue. He asked me, on behalf of the Scottish National party, to commit to working constructively with the Minister, to see whether we could find an affordable way to offer protection to those with pensions with pre-1997 rights. We are keen to have that constructive conversation, and my hon. Friend, who is our pensions spokesperson, would be keen to go ahead on that basis.

As has been said, in the case of the Digital pensioners we are talking about the difference between pre-1997 and post-1997 contributions. The Government could specifically consider that in their Green Paper. Many recent debates have focused on reducing the statutory minimum contribution requirements, and as I have said, we need to make sure that do not further erode those requirements and that we put pensioners first.

This is the kind of issue that ought to be looked at by a pensions and savings commission. The SNP has called for that before and will continue to do so, because this issue will not go away. Pensions will be ever-increasing in importance, as both inflation and life expectancy increase and as possible future changes to the state pension come through. It is now time for a pensions and savings commission to go ahead. That would benefit not only the pensioners in the Digital scheme but pensioners in all schemes and in no scheme. I appreciate the Minister taking the time to listen to the debate, and I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock for bringing the debate to the House.

4.54 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is an extra special pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe—I prepared a seven-minute speech, you suggested I might get five minutes and I now have 10. That is so unusual in this place.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) on bringing this matter to the House for us to debate. I am pleased she has the time do so, as she is doubtless preparing for a series of suppers over the next couple of weeks to mark the special day set aside for Robert Burns. Had he been alive today, he would, I believe, have been a constituent of hers.

Other hon. Members have explained the background to this issue. The pension plan changed hands from Compaq, which acquired Digital Equipment Ltd, to Hewlett Packard when it acquired Compaq in 2002. Hon. Members have also highlighted the legislation that determines that payments prior to 1997 are not entitled to increases in line with inflation. I welcome all the contributions that have been made.

I confess that, until Wednesday of last week, I was not aware of this particular failure, which has resulted in what appears to be the unfair and inconsistent treatment
of thousands of pensioners who have a defined-benefit pension with Hewlett Packard. Despite legislation being in place that states that pension providers are under no legal obligation to increase the value of a pension in line with inflation, we are facing a situation, not unlike that facing the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign, in which people find themselves at a disadvantage simply because they were born in a particular timeframe or had worked prior to particular legislation being introduced.

Through my research, I found that the average pension paid to Digital pensioners in 2002 was £6,008, which would now be worth £9,070 if it had kept in line with inflation—that is 50% more, and would go a long way in anybody’s home. As we have heard, when the pension plan was held by Digital Equipment Ltd and then Compaq, both companies made discretionary increases. However, once the plan was acquired by Hewlett Packard, it received only two token 1½% rises, with no increases in the past 14 years. That is not good enough. The value of the pensioners’ money has decreased, the cost of living has increased and we once again face the crisis of vulnerable people facing increased difficulty and being on the verge of poverty in many cases.

**Sir Peter Bottomley:** The thought going through my mind is that, when I go back to my office, I find Parliament-supplied equipment made by Hewlett Packard. I also bought my own printers from Hewlett Packard. I am beginning to wonder whether I knew enough to regard it as a reputable firm that I should go on patronising.

**Alex Cunningham:** I certainly wonder the same thing; I have something to say to the Minister specifically on that—not about my personal choices or the hon. Gentleman’s, but about the Government’s.

Hewlett Packard can hide behind the law, and has for years, but that does not mean that what it is doing is right. When we—a group of north-east England MPs—meet representatives from Hewlett Packard a week on Monday, I intend to challenge them specifically on the decision. Despite being a large company with a substantial turnover, it is clearly shirking its responsibility to ensure that people who worked for a company that it took over receive the same level of support as before. Another parallel between this case and the plight of the WASPI women is that there has been no real opportunity for the people affected to make up for the shortfall in the value of their pension.

How has Hewlett Packard dealt with other pensioners in its group? Much, much better. Pensioners in all of Hewlett Packard’s European subsidiaries, except in the UK, have received regular cost of living increases. This is a case not of a business being unable to increase pensions in line with the cost of living, but of a large international corporation using a loophole in UK legislation to give it a window to not fulfil what is a moral duty. I wonder what its problem is with treating its British pensioners the same as others.

As we have heard, Hewlett Packard is not a struggling business that cannot make ends meet. It is actually the Government’s largest IT supplier, and makes sales of more than a £1 billion a year to the Government alone. It is a company that, in 2015, had revenues of $139 billion—not million—and profits of $7 billion. The UK Government spent £1.2 billion with the company in 2014-15, which was 25% of Hewlett Packard’s British turnover. Its highest-paid UK director received £1.64 million in 2014 and £920,000 in 2015. It would cost that company about half the cash paid to that one UK director to pay a cost of living increase this year—half the cash that one person earned in wages last year.

The pensioners affected served their time working for HP and the companies it took over. They thought they were safe in the knowledge that they had a pension and were doing everything they were supposed to. I believe the Minister should put pressure on Hewlett Packard, as I will a week on Monday, to fulfil its moral responsibility, although not a legal one, to ensure that those workers are treated fairly in retirement.

Are the Government really content with doing more than £1 billion-worth of business a year with a company that has cocked a snook at this group of British pensioners? I hope the Minister will agree that even though companies are not legally required to pay annual cost of living increases in line with inflation for workers who made contributions prior to 1997, it is a scandal that there are thousands of pensioners in this country right now whose pensions’ value has dropped significantly, and who are probably now relying on social security benefits to get by.

**Dr Philippa Whitford:** As the hon. Gentleman has pointed out, this is not a legal failure of Hewlett Packard but a moral one. Does the responsibility not therefore lie in this place to ensure that the law and guidance are very clear? It is our job to protect the pensioners.

**Alex Cunningham:** I certainly agree with that. Dealing with the situation retrospectively is extremely difficult, and I do not think that is possible, but we have various Green Papers coming through the system in the near future, and I hope the Minister is listening carefully about the problems we have seen. There are so many schemes out there, and we have schemes that are not operating effectively for the people who have paid into them, whether they are turkey sandwich makers or whoever.

As I said, some of the people affected may be relying on state social security. Why is the British taxpayer having to foot that social security bill, while the Government are handing out such lucrative contracts to a company that makes vast profits from them? Clearly we need to ensure that legislation will never again allow a company to shirk its responsibilities, and I would welcome the Minister’s view on that. I hope he will also take action to resolve this injustice by sending a direct message to Hewlett Packard that if it can afford to pay cost of living increases to pensioners in other European countries, it can pay the same increase to pensioners in the UK.

5.2 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) on securing this debate and am grateful for everybody’s contributions. I quite understand that the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who is the SNP’s spokesman on this issue, is probably
Richard Harrington: I fully accept that point. However, what matters to individual pensioners is quite clearly the amount of money that matters to them, but as far as a company is concerned—be it Hewlett Packard, which I accept is very substantial, or a small company—it may be a very significant amount of money. If there were to be legislation, it would have to cover all of them, to be reasonable. No Government could select one company and not another one because it is one of the world’s biggest companies, but I take the hon. Lady’s point.

Normally it is not appropriate or right for Ministers to talk about individual companies’ schemes, so I will try to circumvent that as much as I can. I have listened very carefully to what has been said. I listen very carefully to what the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition spokesman on pensions, says, as indeed I do to the SNP’s spokesperson.

On Front-Bench duty in the Chamber at the moment. I always listen to him very carefully, as I did to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who eloquently stood in for him.

This debate is about making retrospective changes to pension legislation. Doing so, we contend, would have significant financial implications for the schemes involved. I read in preparing for this debate the information provided by the HPPA, which has been used by Opposition Members. It is a very well argued paper, but I must say that I picked up one inconsistency in it. The briefing paper says, as indeed Opposition Members who have spoken do, that the effects of making these changes retrospectively would be minimal. As far as I can see, a few schemes would fit into this, but I see no evidence from any of the figures that the effects would be minimal.

I intend to do some further work and would be grateful for further data, to assess what the actual cost would be. I have not seen anything in the information provided. That is not a criticism of the general information at all; these things are just very difficult to work out. Of course, expressions such as “minimal” or “a lot” can mean different things to different people. I am not trying any political tricks or pretending something is the case that is not, but I do not know, for example, what it would cost Hewlett Packard to make this change.

The Government have a broad principle in legislation, which I think is generally fair, of not imposing such retrospective changes, because of uncertainty. There is no doubt that this kind of change—this is not the only one we are lobbying about—will place unexpected and significant costs on employers. We all know that in the defined benefit world, schemes and businesses are at risk at all times because of pensions. It is part of our whole policy, and of the policy of Governments of any political party, to try to bring some stability to defined benefit schemes, which involves considering the interests of employees and pensioners and of the sponsoring employers. However, I accept that Hewlett Packard is a very substantial company—a point made clear by all speakers.

**Dr Philippa Whitford:** That is one of the points—Hewlett Packard could carry this on its shoulders an awful lot more easily than individual pensioners. Frankly, it is individual pensioners who are facing retrospective changes. They think they are signing up to and investing in a company that is concerned—be it Hewlett Packard, which I accept is very substantial, or a small company—it may be a very significant amount of money. If there were to be legislation, it would have to cover all of them, to be reasonable. No Government could select one company and not another one because it is one of the world’s biggest companies, but I take the hon. Lady’s point.

**Richard Harrington:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention and his comments about Harold Macmillan. He asks what pressure the Government can put on Hewlett Packard. In preparing for this debate, I have not received Hewlett Packard’s position. There is no record of any information that I have had. I look forward to receiving a report from the meeting that hon. Members are having with Hewlett Packard. I would be happy for those who attend the meeting to come and discuss it with me as a result. I suspect that the people at the company will say, “Look, you can do it in Europe. Why can’t you do it in the UK as well?”

**Alex Cunningham:** Harold Macmillan was in fact the last Conservative to represent any part of my constituency, until he was sacked by the people of Stockton. He was a man who believed in playing fair; and that is what we want here: we want Hewlett Packard to play fair. What opportunities does the Minister have to contact the company and say, “Look, you can do it in Europe. Why can’t you do it in the UK as well?”

**Richard Harrington:** Like the hon. Member for Stockton North, I was not aware of this issue until it was brought to my attention quite recently. I therefore cannot say that I have considered this for weeks or months, but it is important. I will come on to the Green Paper in a moment.

I strongly believe, as I am sure hon. Members in this Parliament or indeed any others do, that employers should stand by their pension promises unless there is a very good reason not to and that schemes should have to act within the law. It has been accepted in this debate that the legal position is clear: pensions accrued after 1997 have a level of inflation protection, and pensions accrued pre-1997 have indexation requirements only in relation to certain contracting-out arrangements, but not generally. In fact, the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock confirmed that the company had broken no law.

The argument seems to be that the company has a moral responsibility, but that it is for Government to change the law if the company will not accept that. My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) is not in his place; he explained perfectly well why. As he said, it is very legitimate for institutional shareholders, which may include trade unions or pension funds—everything is very circular in pensions, with them owning a lot of shares in it—to use pressure on Hewlett Packard.

The hon. Member for Stockton North represents the former seat of Harold Macmillan. I just read his biography. I look forward to the day when Harold Macmillan’s successor one nation Conservatives take the constituency back, but the hon. Gentleman is doing an excellent job in the interregnum. He said that the fact that the Government spend significant amounts of money with Hewlett Packard could be used as a point of pressure. I cannot really comment on that. I do not have anything in my office, to the best of knowledge and belief, from Hewlett Packard, but I know that the Government have strict rules about things they can and cannot use as investment criteria.
Dr Philippa Whitford: Is that not, therefore, why this issue should go into the Green Paper and we should consider tightening up that loophole in our law? It is not just Hewlett Packard; it is 3M, Chevron, Unisys—it is other big multinational companies who know that here they do not have to do that for the pre-97. As we heard, 90% of them do, but there is obviously a cohort of companies that are just not bothering so we have to tighten it up.

Richard Harrington: I agree with the hon. Lady. That the company’s obligation appears to be a moral obligation—that point has been made clearly. The Government’s obligation is to pass laws that have to take everybody’s views into consideration. As I have learnt, because it has dominated my life since last July, with pensions and defined-benefits schemes, particularly on the private side, there are the interests of employers and the interests of employees and pensioners. As Governments of all political complexities—all three, if we include the coalition—have done, the Government have had to find ways to take consideration in from the others. I will come to the Green Paper a bit later on.

Kirsty Blackman: I fear that we might end up going round in circles about whether or not it would be affordable for lots of companies to do this, without having the data. I appreciate the Minister’s commitment to look at obtaining more data about how this might work, or the potential costs, and would appreciate it if he would consider sharing those data once he has gathered them, so that we are all in a position to understand the costs.

Richard Harrington: I think that is very reasonable. As I said, I am not trying to hide any data—nobody is—because I am sure that the HPPA would have included them in its paper, had it known. I suppose that in the end, they can just be estimates because we do not actually know for the moment what companies fit into this category. From speaking to people since I became aware of this issue, I believe it is true that one of Hewlett Packard’s predecessors—I cannot remember if it was Digital or Compaq—did increase the pension rates most years to some criteria for inflation, although I do not know exactly what criteria.

As I said, I have not come across any views that Hewlett Packard has broken the law, but I will say that many things that companies do are beyond the law in many ways. They have policies on this and policies on that, and many of them have moral, socially responsible policies in many areas. That is the sort of thing that boards of companies decide. They do not just have to comply with the law—that is the minimum. Obviously everybody, individuals and corporates alike, has to comply with the law. In a way, that is why we are all here in this building.

I want to make progress, although Mr McCabe has kindly allowed ample time for interventions if there are any. We believe that the Government retrospectively changing the legislative requirements on indexation would be inappropriate and would have a significant impact on the schemes of employers involved. The legislation introduced in 1995, by Harold Macmillan’s successors in a Conservative Government, was introduced to provide a limited level of inflation protection. The then Government were conscious of this balance between protection against inflation and the ability of the schemes, and the employers who stand behind them, to afford such protection. Of course, the financial deficits in defined-benefit schemes are very much a topic of conversations in this House and in the press—particularly the trade press—and are something that will be discussed in the Green Paper.

I am not a great believer in providing people with straws to clutch on to. Many politicians across the House do so in politics, and probably the reason for my lack of progress, compared to certain people of my age in all political parties, is that I try to be as candid as possible. I do not want to give a straw to clutch on to, but I do think that hon. Members have to remember that costs of business are also a factor to consider. Hewlett Packard, Compaq and Digital before them have been regarded as good employers; they employ a lot of people in this country and help to generate the prosperity of this country.

I accept the point made by the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Stockton North, that there are people in Hewlett Packard who earn big money—it is all relative—but that is also true about footballers and many other people. It is not the actual position—I know that it makes a good comparison in a speech, but the fact is that the quantum of pension fund commitments that Hewlett Packard took on amount to many, many millions of pounds. The company knew that when it was acquiring the business. I am sure that if it felt that was far too much, it would not have done so. It would have calculated the cost and taken it into account.

I had better make some progress now, Mr McCabe, because time is running out.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way, very briefly?

Richard Harrington: Certainly.

Alex Cunningham: I accept everything the Minister is saying, but will he, following this debate, write to the company telling it that we have had this debate and ask it to consider its position?

Richard Harrington: I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members here after their meeting with the company so that we can formulate some kind of opinion on it. This is not to take away from the standing of this debate, but rather than send a letter as a result of this debate, it would be more appropriate to meet after you have met with the company. I am sorry, I did not mean you, Mr McCabe; I meant the hon. Gentleman. I got carried away, such is the excitement of this issue.

The pensioners with a pre-1997 defined-benefit occupational pension that was contracted out of the additional state pension could be receiving some inflation protection on that pension from the state, because their pension entitlement includes a guaranteed minimum pension, or GMP. I understand from officials that that applies to many of the Digital Equipment pensioners. When the additional state pension was introduced in 1978, employers were allowed to contract their employees out of its provision in return for the employer and employee paying lower national insurance contributions. In order to contract out, the employer had to promise to pay a pension that was at least as good as the
additional state pension that had been given up, in effect guaranteeing a pension payment that was as a minimum equal to the state pension—hence the name.

The state pension, through a complex calculation that I agree is difficult to understand, provides for some indexation of the GMP for those individuals who reached state pension age before April 2016. Those who reach state pension age from 6 April 2016 will benefit from transitional arrangements in the new state pension. The majority of people who were contracted out will do better over their lifetime than under the old arrangements. In short, although the members may not be receiving the full inflation protection as part of their scheme rules, as demanded by their representatives and Members here today, they are likely to receive some mitigation and protection due to GMP arrangements. As I said, my understanding is that that applies to some Digital Equipment pensioners.

I can only repeat that the Government have no plans to impose retrospective changes on pension schemes, but as the hon. Member for Stockton North and other hon. Members have stated, there will be a Green Paper shortly. I said that would happen in the spring; I hope that that will be in spring in the south of England rather than in parts of Scotland, based on my experience of very nice, if rather cold, spring holidays elsewhere. The Green Paper will look at many aspects of defined benefit schemes, including methods of valuation of schemes, index-linking criteria and the consolidation of pension schemes, among others.

I do not want Members to think that we have plans specifically to impose retrospective changes on pension schemes such as the one we are discussing, but many aspects of pension rules will be considered in the Green Paper, and I believe that will include several issues that are relevant to this matter. Obviously I cannot go into more detail because the Green Paper is an official document, but it will look generally at defined benefit schemes. There are a lot of different factors, some of which are genuine complaints and difficulties on behalf of employers, and some of which are fundamental things about protecting pensioner rights and prospective pensioners—people working and paying into schemes now. Obvious related examples include the rules of the pension regulator, which, although not relevant today, certainly are relevant to defined benefit schemes.

Today’s debate and the preparation work for it—the briefings and other things that I was provided with, including from the House of Commons Library and the Hewlett Packard Pension Association—have led to a lot of thinking on my behalf about this matter, and I thank Members for raising it. I look forward to hearing Hewlett Packard’s response and I am very happy to meet with it, after that stage, to discuss the situation.

5.21 pm

Corri Wilson: I thank hon. Members for coming along today and welcome their contributions. I am also pleased that the issue is now on the Minister’s radar. If the Government are encouraging people to save for the future, people need to know that the goalposts will not change. As has been mentioned, trust is key. When people enter their retirement years, the last thing they want is to discover that they do not have enough to live on and that their pension is not what they thought it was, with absolutely no time to do anything about it. A contract is a contract and it needs to be transparent. Going forward, including through the Green Paper, I hope that the Government will look at the wider issue of having pension legislation that protects employees and employers.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Digital Equipment Ltd’s pension scheme.

5.22 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 18 January 2017

[Mr David Hanson in the Chair]

Education Funding: Devon

9.30 am

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered education funding in Devon.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson.

The situation for schools in Devon that will result from the proposals set out in the Government’s consultation is of great concern to us all. As a member of the f40 Group, Devon has historically been one of the lowest-funded education authorities in the whole of England. At the moment, in education funding, it stands in 143rd place out of 150 local authorities. Devon received a schools block unit of funding allocation of £4,346 per pupil in 2016-17. The national average was £4,636, which means that there is a shortfall for Devon of £290 per pupil, or £25.5 million for all 88,065 pupils in the local authority. For those listening to the debate who are not as informed as you are, Mr Hanson, it is worth pointing out that, when I speak about Devon, I exclude the unitary authorities of Torbay and Plymouth, but no doubt Members who represent both places will want to contribute to the debate.

The current situation is manifestly unfair, not only for pupils in Devon but for teachers and headteachers, whose performance will be judged against that of other schools throughout the country. Devon Members of Parliament have been campaigning for a fairer funding settlement for many years, so this is not something new. I have been a Member of the House since 2001, and other Devon MPs have served for longer. I think it is fair to say that we have all been campaigning, throughout the Labour years when money was channelled away from rural areas into Labour heartlands, under the coalition Government and under the Conservative Government. Quite frankly, under this Government, we expect better.

Cost pressures, combined with the necessary fiscal consolidation, have had a significant cumulative effect on school budgets. Let me give a few examples of such pressures—other Members will cite others. Areas such as my own, East Devon, have experienced significant population growth because of the often required growth in house building and the incentives for it that there are now. The inevitable resulting growth in pupil numbers has had and is having a huge impact. The education services grant, which previously gave authorities and academy trusts money to fund their schools’ services, has been cut. The national living wage, which has absorbed much of the increase in social care funding—we have debated how much in the House—has had the same effect on education, with an increase in staff costs. Initial analysis suggests that the apprenticeship levy could cost Devon County Council as much as £424,000. The change in the SEND—special educational needs and disabilities—code of practice, which enables people with special educational needs to remain in education up to the age of 25, has added huge pressure, especially considering the increase in the average cost of specialist independent provision. Of course all Members welcome the change, but it needs to be properly funded. Devon County Council proposes to reduce funding to all schools by £33 per pupil for two years to make up for the high needs block shortfall; Devon’s high needs block has increased from £53 million in 2014 to £61 million in 2017-18.

It is not that some of those measures and developments are not welcome—we are very positive about some of them—but it is important to recognise that schools are now expected to do more with less, which inevitably leads to cuts, redundancies or increased class sizes.

The effect of these pressures on contingency reserves is being seen in the level of carry-forwards being forecast for maintained schools in Devon. We have a huge backlog, particularly in respect of the maintenance of many of our primary schools. In 2015-16, contingency reserves were £21.1 million, but in 2016-17 the figure is estimated to be £9.6 million. That is hardly much of a contingency reserve, given the number of schools we have across the county.

A number of headteachers in my constituency of East Devon have said in letters to me that, as a result of these pressures, there is “a very real probability that our schools can no longer continue to sustain high quality provision of education and essential support for every pupil without the urgent necessity to take some very undesirable as well as far-reaching decisions to reduce costs in order to balance the finite resources available. Sadly, the implications of these decisions will undoubtedly impact upon the children in our care, including those from some of our most vulnerable families, and these will ultimately manifest further into the wider community.”

Since they are in one of the lowest-funded education authorities in the country, schools in East Devon were looking forward to the new funding formula, especially considering the year-long delay. The review and the subsequent public consultation are certainly welcome, and I encourage constituents to respond to it. It is important to emphasise that the proposals are not final and that they are subject to the consultation, which I understand runs until the end of March; the Minister may wish to enlighten us further on that.

I do not want to get into a bidding war between different authorities, but I would like to highlight some of the misunderstandings about funding that have arisen between us and our neighbours in Cornwall. The foreword to the Department for Education’s consultation on the national funding formula notes that “a primary school in Cornwall teaching a pupil eligible for free school meals with English as an additional language would receive £3,389, whereas if the same child was at a school in Devon the school funding would be £4,718.”

That difference is mainly explained by the amount allocated directly to schools by each authority to support disadvantaged pupils or those with additional educational needs. Devon County Council delegates a much larger proportion of funding directly to primary schools. For example, using the free school meals deprivation factor alone, Devon allocates £1,378, compared with Cornwall’s £340. However, Devon still trails Cornwall in funding per pupil; Cornwall’s average funding per pupil is £4,355, which is £9 more than Devon’s average of £4,346.
If Devon got the same rate as Cornwall, we would receive an additional £792,000 for education across the county.

If implemented, the national funding formula proposals will result in 212 Devon schools, or 62%, gaining; 129 schools, or 37%, losing; and two schools, or 1%, remaining the same. The proposals will reduce Devon County Council’s overall schools funding by £500,000 for the first year, when the Department for Education proposes transitional arrangements to prevent schools from gaining or losing considerably in one year and to ensure that the national budget can cope with the changes throughout the country. When the transitional arrangements are removed, the proposed changes will result in a relatively slight increase of £1.4 million, or 0.38%, in Devon’s overall funding for schools. The Minister may point to that and say that Devon will be a net winner, but a 0.38% increase is woefully insufficient to meet the rising cost pressures. It will not even meet the 0.5% increase in the apprenticeship levy. We need to go beyond the headline figures.

Illustrative funding under the national funding formula in the first year of transition would see 15 schools in East Devon gaining funding but 20 losing out. On average, that would mean a 0% change in the amount of school funding for East Devon. That includes all my secondary schools in East Devon losing funding: Sidmouth College, Exmouth Community College, Clyst Vale Community College, the King’s School and St Peter’s Church of England Aided School. How can it possibly be fair to reduce the level of funding available to schools in East Devon, a part of the country that has been historically underfunded?

The headteacher of the King’s School, Rob Gammon, has said that these cuts would have a “considerable” impact, especially considering the other rising costs. The chair of governors at Exmouth Community College, the excellent Councillor Jill Elson, has also expressed concern. The school is already one of the biggest in Europe. It is certainly—I hope the Minister will confirm this—the biggest secondary school in England; if it is not the biggest, it is the second biggest. It has an excellent headteacher in Tony Alexander, who has done magnificent things in that place. The school has found savings of more than £1 million per year over the past five years, and it has now been asked to increase its pupil numbers to 2,900 by 2020.

Similarly, the headteacher of Sidmouth College, James Ingham-Hill, has expressed his “bitter disappointment” following the publication of the proposals. He said that “without a significant rise in funding over the next few years, class sizes will need to rise to unprecedented levels and standards are bound to fall in all underfunded areas of the country.”

He also said that the proposed formula “leans heavily towards measures of prior attainment. Devon has a high standard of pupil attainment in primary schools, so the county’s secondary schools will also lose out from a formula that penalises this success.”

This Government talk about reintroducing or expanding grammar schools to allow those who are good to get on, but at the same time they seem to be introducing a national funding formula that penalises at secondary level parts of the country that have high levels of achievement at primary level. That seems to contradict entirely what we, as a Government and a party, are seeking to do. What they are saying is that the less an area achieves at primary school level, the more money it will get at secondary school level. In other words, they want to tell all our primary headmasters in Devon to lower standards, lower attainment and lower the exam results because more money will be made available to secondary schools. That is a perverse incentive that has no place in any kind of logical, joined-up thinking.

Currently, schools in Devon face a triple whammy. One is the historical underfunding. I look forward to the speech by the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). I hope that he will not be too party political, otherwise Conservative Members will need to point out the educational gerrymandering that went on under Labour and the expensive private finance initiative that has saddled primary schools, particularly in Exeter, with an almost unsustainable weight of debt. That went on for many years under “old Labour”, as we must now call it, so I hope that he will approach this in the spirit of a Devon MP, not the only, rather diminished red beacon in the south-west.

I think that we would all agree across the House that the Minister needs to go back to the drawing board and look again at the national funding formula in order to get this right. The Government must take a holistic approach to the issue and fully consider not only the historical funding factors—I have not yet said anything about the huge amount of money that Devon County Council has to come up with every year just to get children to school. I think that Yorkshire’s bill was a bit higher than ours, but it must be about £25 million that we have to come up with to get children to school. I have not even touched on that cost this morning. I have been talking about what happens when pupils actually get to school, if there are going to be schools.

Therefore, the Government must take a holistic approach to the issue and fully consider not only the historical funding factors but the current pressures on education budgets in order ultimately to give schools in areas such as mine a real financial boost. Fairer funding has been promised by many Governments, of all persuasions, many times, and it is my hope and belief that this will be the Government who finally deliver.

Having been a Minister in the Government from 2010 to 2016, I am acutely aware of how easy it is for Back Benchers of all parties to demand more funding from the Government. I am equally aware of the quite appalling financial situation that we inherited in 2010. This country simply cannot go on a financial spending splurge, which would saddle our children and our children’s children with ever more debt, particularly at the same time as we are renegotiating our relationship with the world outside the European Union. It would be absolutely wrong, counterproductive and irresponsible in the extreme to adopt some of the spending proposals, which seem to change fairly regularly, that Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition come up with from time to time. So I am not suggesting that.

What I am saying is that, within the spending envelope that the Government have set out, we want fairness. I believe that all Members in this Chamber this morning, across the party divide, would agree that, for too long Devon, as a county, has lost out in terms of educational funding. We have waited and waited and waited for the new review of the situation, in the expectation that
finally that will be recognised and our children, our teachers and the other staff in education will receive a fair and properly funded settlement. On the face of it, I have to say to the Minister that that does not appear to be the position we are in. I say to him gently, as south-west MPs come together perhaps more regularly than we have in the past, that it was the south-west that delivered a majority for this Government in 2015. It is the south-west that often considers itself to be an overlooked part of the country in terms of spend and infrastructure. It is the south-west and south-west MPs who, together, will not put up with being overlooked any more. We have come together this morning to say, “Let’s look again at the review, let’s get it right and let’s get a fair deal for Devon.”

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr David Hanson (in the Chair): Before I call other right hon. and hon. Members, we appear to have an abundance of time, but I intend to call the Opposition Front Bencher at 10.35 am. Five right hon. and hon. Members wish to speak, so I hope that you can self-regulate in that 45 or so minutes.

9.45 am

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on securing this debate. However, although it is very important that we discuss and focus on the Government’s new proposed funding formula and its impact on Devon, we should not lose sight of the big picture, which is that funding for all schools in England will fall dramatically in this Parliament. The National Audit Office has confirmed that by 2020 English schools will suffer overall a cut of 8% in real terms in their funding.

As the right hon. Gentleman has already said, huge expectations were raised when the Government said they would consult on the new formula. At the time, I warned Ministers in a meeting with them that changing any funding formula when overall funding levels are falling is a risky business, because it inevitably creates more losers than winners. My assessment of what is being proposed for Devon rather mirrors that of the right hon. Gentleman. I mean that we are just fiddling around the edges here. Overall, Devon will gain a tiny amount—a 0.38% rise in overall schools funding—but many schools would lose out. As he has already pointed out, that minuscule improvement would be more than wiped out by the cost to our schools of the increase in the apprenticeship levy, although that is only a 0.5% increase and is dwarfed by the overall cut of 8% in school funding in this Parliament that I referred to a moment ago.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about a “triple whammy”. If Devon faces a triple whammy, Exeter will suffer a quadruple whammy, because—like many cities in shire counties—we are already at a double disadvantage. Devon schools are already among the worst funded in England, receiving £270 per pupil less than the England average, but Exeter schools lose out even more badly because they subsidise the huge cost of providing school transport in a largely rural county and the cost of keeping open small rural schools. Two of my high schools, St James School and Isca Academy, have each lost £300,000 a year since 2014.

Despite Exeter’s position, under the Government’s new proposed formula we will lose out by 0.14%. All the Government seem to be proposing for my constituency is to take money away from them in the many worthy of which would lose out in the new formula, to give a tiny bit more to most, but not all, of my high schools. That is not robbing Peter to pay Paul; it is more like robbing Peter to pay Peter. The overall impact will be that by 2020 the average student in Exeter will suffer a £420 cut in annual funding compared with 2015-16, and that is after seven years of coalition and Conservative Government. That will have very serious consequences for children’s education in my constituency.

Two of my primary schools in the least well-off parts of Exeter will actually lose funding. I have been told by a headteacher that one primary school in Exeter is planning to move to class sizes of 45 to cope with the funding squeeze. Under the Labour Government, we got class sizes down to a maximum of 30. We are losing teaching assistants, school counsellors and support for children with complex and special needs at a time when the Government claim they are concerned by the deterioration in young people’s mental health and wellbeing.

Since the Labour Governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown invested significant extra resources in all our schools, attainment in Exeter’s schools has risen significantly. We have also benefited from five brand-new high schools, which replaced the dilapidated schools that I inherited in 1997, and new and improved primary schools. That has given a huge boost to the life chances of my constituents’ children, and that progress has been maintained despite the funding freeze since 2010. However, that quality will not survive the sort of cuts our schools now face. As the right hon. Gentleman has already said, Conservative-run Devon County Council is proposing to raid the schools budget even further, to the tune of £2.22 million, because of the big deficit it faces in the budget for children with special needs. I am sure we all agree that Devon must fulfil its legal obligation to some extent to provide for children with special needs. I am sure we all agree that Devon must fulfil its legal obligation to some extent to provide for children with special needs. I am sure we all agree that Devon’s children and families and vote against their Government’s damaging policies.

There is widespread reporting in the media and discussion in this place about the crisis in our health and social care system, but we are also seeing the beginning of if not a crisis, then a serious deterioration in education. We have a recruitment, retention and teacher morale crisis, even in an attractive place like Devon, where people like to live and work. But the Government, as the right hon. Gentleman acknowledged, focus on irrelevant issues, such as their ideological obsession with free schools, forced academisation and the reintroduction of selection. I hope that we see real opposition from Devon’s Conservative MPs to some of those damaging Government policies, rather than just warm words. They should stand up and fight for the interests of Devon’s children and families and vote against their Government’s damaging policies.

9.52 am

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): It is a very good for the rest of us in Devon to have him back
on the Back Benches, because we face a number of challenges. His experience, energy and expertise will help us try to tackle some of these long-term challenges.

I am delighted that the Minister is in his place. He knows that I think he is a tremendous Schools Minister. In all seriousness, his rigour and commitment to increasing the academic achievements of young people in this country are appreciated up and down the country. He is making a difference, and that is tremendous. I also know that the consultation exercise on funding is genuine. I expect him to nod vehemently here. The reality is that if the funding stays as it is, it will not attract the support of a number of us here in this room, because it is unfair.

It is true to say that we have been waiting for years in Devon for a revision to the national funding formula. When the Secretary of State came to the House just before Christmas and announced that a new funding formula was about to be unleashed on the world, it seemed to be extremely good news for us in the far south-west. The expectation was that some of the overfunding of schools in other parts of the country would be corrected to improve things for those of us living in the west country. Everyone thinks it is just a place to go on holiday and have cream teas and so on, but it has genuine challenges of infrastructure, connectivity, education, social services and health that we need additional investment to help us with.

We were like thirsty men and women crossing the desert, approaching the oasis. The end was in sight. Good news was just around the corner. Sadly, when we started to look at some of the details, it was not an oasis at all—it was a mirage. That was disappointing. In the Secretary of State’s statement at the Dispatch Box, I heard her say, “Isn’t it great that over a number of years we will correct the fact that pupils in Plymouth—” I will explain the difference between Plymouth and Devon in a second—“currently receive £500 a year less than pupils in Coventry?” Coventry and Plymouth are very similar places, as they were both devastated by Hitler in the second world war and rebuilt.

We were encouraged to think that a long-standing grievance and injustice would be corrected. Even though it is true that many Plymouth schools are doing well, and I thank the Minister for that, unfortunately when we start to look at the numbers, we see how illogical they are. Schools face similar challenges with similar pupils from similar backgrounds and, as my right hon. Friend said, have transportation issues and costs on top of that, so it is crazy to learn that in many Devon schools the situation will go backwards.

My constituency is two thirds Plymouth and one third Devon, so I am partly encouraged by some of the news that the Minister has brought in recent weeks, but I am concerned about some of the outcomes in the consultation document. He will remember coming to Ivybridge Community College just before Christmas to open a new maths block. Unfortunately, I could not be there, but the reaction from the school was, “What a great man! He spoke very positively and inspired the young people.” He perhaps neglected to say that as part of the national funding review, the college—an outstanding beacon of excellence in Devon—was about to receive a cut of £203,000 from its budget. That would not have gone down quite so well in the new building opening ceremony.

Ivybridge Community College is outstanding and has been brilliantly led for many years. It is in a multi-academy trust. Three of the primary schools involved in that trust are: Stowford School, which faces a 2.75% cut, representing £37,000; Woodlands Park Primary School, which faces a 2.57% cut, representing £28,000; and Yealmpton Primary School, which faces a 1.35% cut, representing £9,000. In total, the multi-academy trust faces a cut of £277,000. It is being penalised for being outstanding and teaching kids in a most remarkable way. That simply is not good enough.

It is rumoured that the Minister carries around with him—he possibly even takes it to bed at night—a list of all the education authorities in the country, showing where they are in relation to each other and what the baseline is. It may even have different colours in it, with green for those doing well and red for those at the bottom. If he looks at that list, I think he will find—if the list exists at all—that Devon appears about an inch from the bottom of the second page. Our baseline is right down at the bottom compared with all the other education authorities in the country. We were expecting to come up his list. We were expecting to come towards the top of at least the second page, if not the first. What has happened? We are either standing still or going backwards. We are staying right at the bottom of his list of education authority funding. I am sorry to say that simply is not good enough.

The Minister will be pleased to hear about one thing that is happening in my area at the moment. My four secondary schools in Plymouth—two in Plympton and two in Plymstock—and Ivybridge Community College in Devon are consulting with parents, staff and everyone else about becoming a large multi-academy trust over the next 12 months or so. That is what the Government are seeking to inspire. It is all very exciting and I fully support it, but the four schools in Plymouth, which are having their budgets increased, are coming together with an outstanding school in Devon that is having its budget slashed. It teaches children from similar backgrounds who are from exactly the same golden triangle of Plympton, Plymstock and Ivybridge. It makes no sense and there is no logic or reason to it.

I am afraid that the Minister, of whom I am a great fan, must look again at the formula and tweak it in some magical way. I realise it is difficult when applying such a formula. For years no one has understood what either the local government or the education funding formulae are all about. I know it is very difficult. One cannot just take £100 and put it there. I urge the Minister to look again at the formula, because the formula that we have seen and the proposed education settlement for the next two years are simply not acceptable.

I want to conclude on this point. I had a meeting with my Whip yesterday. He is a very fine man and we talked about the future and how well the Government are doing. Of course, this was on the back of a most outstanding speech by the Prime Minister yesterday, setting out a clear, strong and coherent vision for this country, which many of us can get behind. However, I said to my Whip, “There are a number of things coming down the track about which I need to give due notice.” It is wrong for any colleague to say to the Government,
“I don’t like what we are about to do tonight; I am going to vote against it.” Proper notice needs to be given. That is the mature way forward, but I wish to send a clear notice if I may, Mr. Hanson, to my Whip, to the Government and the Minister, and perhaps the Parliamentary Private Secretary can take a little note and send it to the Education Whip. If the education funding settlement does not change in relation to Devon schools and if there is no significant uplift in whatever format it comes in six, nine or 12 months’ time to be voted on by the House, whether in a statutory instrument Committee or wherever else it might be, I will vote against it.

Mr. Bradshaw: Hear, hear!

Mr. Streeter: The settlement that is being proposed for Devon schools is simply illogical and unfair.

10.1 am

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Previous speakers, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire), have set out clearly Devon’s underfunding predicament and its history. I want to delve a little more deeply into some of the causes and the action that the Government need to take now.

I was fortunate. Prior to the start of this parliamentary Session, I had a meeting with the Devon Association of Primary Headteachers and the Devon Association of Secondary Heads. Their input was illuminating to say the least. The current funding formula is unfair and the proposals for the future funding formula are equally unfair. But why? The heads are concerned that the consultation is one in which they are not really being listened to. It is far from clear to them what assumptions the Government have made in coming up with the new formula. My headteachers would be delighted to meet and help the Minister in Westminster or in the constituency. Unless we can help him really understand the issues and make sure his assumptions are right, we will always get a second-rate result. We cannot simply take the old and fiddle with it. We have to fundamentally look at what it is that we need to do differently.

Part of the problem is the decisions made by central Government and those made by local government. When I sent one of my many letters to the Minister, which he swiftly replied to, he explained that I should draw comfort from the fact that the school block was ring-fenced. That sounds great, but unfortunately it does not really work. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon has pointed out, it is for the local authority to determine what goes into each school. The approach taken by Devon, as has already been explained, is very different from the approach taken by Cornwall. Partly for that reason, the statistics appear to show that Cornwall gets better funding than Devon, but that is because the local authority has chosen to adjust in a different way.

I do not think our children should be the victims of a postcode lottery, depending on which council does what. I am not in favour of prescription, but I am in favour of guidance, and we need to make sure that every child is fairly funded, whichever county they are in. So we need to look again at the school block and exactly how that is calculated. We also need to look at how the local authority distributes it. If we look at the proposed new formula, it gives some strange results. The small rural schools do better, as do the large schools, but the ones in the middle lose out. There is something strange about a formula that comes up with such results.

...
that removal is a straight cut. It is not as if the schools are suddenly finding another way. They cannot raise business rates. Where will they find the extra money to provide those services? They can of course work together, and work differently, but a complete cut is not a viable way forward.

The coalition Government could be praised for introducing the troubled families programme, through which local authorities could help families identified with multiple social and educational problems. Under this watch, that funding now only comes into play when a child is over 11 years old. I wish I did not have to say this, but in my constituency we have to make extreme interventions for a large number of children—in some schools, up to 85%. Children coming to school today are often not toilet-trained; many of them have real challenges with some basic reading skills. In part, that is a result of changes in our society. The Minister cannot change society, and we cannot change the fact that children are glued to iPads instead of conversing with their parents and their peers, but we need to recognise the consequences, budget accordingly and ensure support is there for those troubled families.

I urge the Minister to look at the issues now. We cannot wait until the new funding review. This is crucial; it is about our children today, our children tomorrow. I urge him to consider the issues now.

10.11 am

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on securing this important debate. While I am doing thank yous, I want to say a personal thank you to the Minister, who just a few weeks ago accepted my invitation to come to North Devon to meet in a roundtable setting with a delegation of headteachers representing pretty much every education sector in Devon. The Minister came, I know that he listened and I am grateful that he did so.

Let us continue this positive start. I welcome the Government’s commitment to the new national funding formula and the principle that we must eradicate the unfairness of the current system. Good; that is a tick. The Government’s additional funding of £390 million to the least funded authorities in 2015-16 made a real difference, with an increase in funding per pupil in Devon of just over 4.5%. Good; that is another gold star for the Government. As I am sure the Minister will be pointing out, under the indicative figures for the new funding formula, more schools will gain funding than lose it in my constituency of North Devon—so it seems like we are getting gold marks all round for homework at the moment. However, I am afraid I have to move gently to a position where we are potentially putting the Minister in detention.

The Government are moving in the right direction—that is true—but under the indicative figures very little will be done to correct the fundamental, historical unfairness of funding in Devon, especially in my constituency of North Devon. That inherent and historical underfunding has existed for many decades, under Governments of all colours, and it needs to be put right. I thought that the national funding formula would put it right. From what I have seen of the indicative figures, I am disappointed.

As right hon. and hon. Members have said, Devon is a very poorly funded local education authority. Under the current system, funding is £290 less per pupil than the average across England, which means that North Devon schools receive just under £4 million less per year than the national average. If the proposed national funding formula changes were brought in, the cumulative change to North Devon schools funding—these figures are provided by the House of Commons Library, which is a neutral and always accepted source of facts, as everyone here knows but I note for those outside of this place—would be between 0%, no change at all, and a 1% increase across the board. Crunching the figures, that means that, at best, across all its schools, North Devon would receive an extra £40,000. Clearly, that does not rectify the imbalance and historical unfairness in the current system. North Devon would continue to receive an unfair level of funding. The principle of a national funding formula is sound only if it rectifies the imbalance that sees my constituents and those of other hon. Members here lose out. What is currently on the table does not do that for Devon, and certainly not for North Devon.

Not only does the proposed formula fail to correct the unfairness between Devon and the rest of the country, but it throws up some perverse variations between schools within North Devon. There are 52 schools across all sectors and all age ranges in my constituency. I have visited a great many of them in my 18 months as Member of Parliament for North Devon, and it is a pleasure to do so. They are fantastic schools doing tremendous work, with teaching staff and managers working really hard to get some excellent results. Six of those schools are secondary schools.

If we put those 52 schools in a league table ranked in order of the percentage change to their funding next year compared with this year, something rather worrying happens. The three schools at the bottom of that league table, which lose the most under the proposals, are the three secondary schools with the most rural catchment areas in my constituency: Chulmleigh, South Molton and Braunton. I feel sure that that was not the intention when the formula started to be cooked. It needs to be reccooked, because that is the result under the indicative figures, and that cannot be right. These are schools where the teaching staff, managers, pupils and parents are already struggling because of the historical unfairness.

I had hoped that the national funding formula would do something to correct that, but on the indicative figures at present, it does not.

I have been written to by the headteachers of many schools across Devon and they are all saying the same thing: “We don’t get it. We don’t understand why this historical unfairness is being allowed to continue.” Most make the extremely reasonable point that the national funding formula is a fine idea in principle and congratulate this Minister and this Government on the principle of wanting to correct the historical unfairness, but the devil is in the detail and I am afraid that the detail my headteachers see does nothing to address the historical problems.

I want to draw out two specific points that headteachers have raised with me. The first is high needs educational funding in Devon. High needs expenditure has grown...
rapidly, from £53 million in 2014 to an estimated £61 million in 2017-18. To meet the forecast overspend, Devon County Council has been forced to approve transferring more than £2 million from individual schools budgets to the high needs budget in 2017-18, just to bring the expected deficit down to zero. Someone else used the phrase, “We are robbing Peter to pay Paul.” That cannot be right.

The second issue, which has been raised by a number of my colleagues, is the personalised transport budget in Devon. In a largely rural, sparsely populated area such as the one I represent, that is a real challenge. The personalised transport budget for children with special needs accounts for 34%—more than a third—of the total schools transport budget in Devon. That is £21 million, and an overspend of more than £1.2 million on that budget is forecast for this year. The cost of transport cannot be taken from the high needs budget. It must be funded from county council budgets, and we all know that local authority budgets also face challenges. Those are two areas that I believe we need to look at.

Let us look again at the overall position. Devon is one of the lowest-funded local authority areas in England for education. In 2016-17, Department for Education spending per pupil in Devon is £4,346. That is £290 per pupil less than the English average, which means that DFE spending on education in Devon is more than £25 million a year less than the English average. I am afraid that the proposed indicative figures do nothing to correct that fundamental unfairness. As I am sure the Minister will tell us, this is a consultation and those are only indicative figures. I say, good, because we need to change what is being proposed. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon, I am sure that it is a real, genuine consultation and that the Minister and the Government are listening. It seems to me, to the people who run, teach in and manage the schools in my constituency, and to the parents whose children go to those schools that the current proposals are unfair.

I wish I could be more elegant in my language. I wish I had a more sophisticated argument and could indulge in some fine Churchillian parliamentary oratory, but I cannot. It comes down to three words: this is just not fair. Devon was hoping for a fairer slice of the funding cake. Instead, it seems to the schools community that we have received only a few crumbs. I say gently and helpfully to the Minister—please get on the hotline to Mary Berry and rebake this cake.

10.22 am

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): It is a pleasure and a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on securing this debate. I am delighted that he was my mentor when I got elected to this place, and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) was also brilliantly good at looking after me and keeping me on the right track.

I enter this debate with a certain amount of trepidation, because my constituency has done rather well out of this process, but there are some issues that I want to raise. Let me set out the context. I am one of the very few Members of Parliament on the Conservative Benches who represents a totally inner-city seat outside London.

I have only one rather muddy field, called the Ponderosa pony sanctuary, in my constituency, and everything else is very much inner city.

I declare an interest: I am a governor of St Andrew’s Church of England Primary School, and in the 1980s and early 1990s I worked for a woman called Angela Rumbold, who was the Member of Parliament for Mitcham and Morden and a Minister at the Department for Education. She was very much responsible, with Kenneth Baker, for introducing the local curriculum, local management of schools and things like that. My constituency has high levels of deprivation. There is an 11 to 12-year life expectancy difference between the north-east of my constituency and the south-west. I am very concerned indeed about that. We must ensure that children who are at school in a low-wage and low-skills economy have a good education and can end up going on to university and other schools.

I am delighted that Government have provided greater education choice in my constituency. I have not only three grammar schools, which I will talk about in a second, but the creative arts school, which is doing incredibly well, and a university technical college. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon pointed out to me earlier that my constituency has done very well out of this. Therefore, I am very grateful.

We need to ensure that children are able to read, write and add up when they leave school. I do not think we talk enough about standards. I sit on school governing bodies, and I think we should spend more time talking about how we are going to help children to achieve, rather than reviewing policy. Indeed, I occasionally feel that, when I go to school governing meetings, we end up spending more time reviewing policy than people spend reviewing west end plays. I am always slightly concerned about that.

Schools in Plymouth are likely to receive a 3.9% increase, but there is an issue. I understand why the Government’s position has changed and why they are looking at deprivation, because it is an important issue. The majority of my schools have done quite well, although there are some up in Compton that have some concerns. The grammar schools have also written to me, because they do not fit into the deprivation issue, so they do not get as good a deal as possible. I am very grateful indeed to Dan Roberts, the headteacher of Devonport High School for Boys. He said that he recognises that public services need to shoulder their fair share of the burden of public debt, but he has real concerns that the latest proposals will cause serious damage to the one type of school that our current Prime Minister believes has the potential to transform education in our country. He said that this is not all children in Plymouth but “If you happen to be an able child attending Devonport High School for Boys we are actually receiving a reduction of 2.9%.”

Other grammar schools have said that, too.

I would be grateful if the Minister were willing to meet me and some of the grammar schools to talk about how we could ensure that they can make savings and so that he can hear the case from the grammar
Given cost pressures, inflation and an increase in pupil numbers, schools budgets are facing real-terms cuts. There has already been a sharp rise in the number of secondary schools that are in deficit, reaching nearly 60% of the total in 2014-15, according to the National Audit Office. According to the North Devon Gazette, only three schools in Devon are set to gain extra funding under the proposed national funding formula, as announced by Secretary of State. The changes to education funding have been branded “ridiculous” and “a shambles” by Devon headteachers. The hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) rightly pointed out that the Government are simply not listening at the moment, and while they are still in consultation, we have to plead with them to start listening.

Michael Johnson, the headteacher at Chulmleigh Community College, said he had received calls from other headteachers who simply did not know what they were to do. He said:

“Early indications are that all or most Devon secondary schools will receive less through the new funding formula. I have had other secondary school headteachers telling me today ‘I don’t know what I am going to do now’.

Nationally, this formula offers the same money for more children and we have now got increased costs that we have had imposed upon us.

With the limited information available to us at this time, we believe that most secondary schools in North Devon will not be better off and will continue to face budgetary shortfalls.

So far, this exercise looks to me like the same budget has been through a hot-wash to present it differently. It looks like a shambles to me.”

That is a headteacher in one of our schools.

Mr Glenn Smith, the principal of Honiton College, said that Devon is one of the lowest-funded education authorities in England:

“Whilst the announcement in the...2015 Autumn Spending Review of firm proposals for the introduction of a new fairer national funding formula from April 2017 was most welcome, this promise of ‘jam tomorrow’ has since been delayed by 12 months and we still await further information around the detail, timing and implementation of any such policy.

Meanwhile the legacy of an unsatisfactory funding settlement has been further worsened for schools by rising expenditure demands owing to national policy decisions beyond our control, notably those associated with staffing costs.”

Mr Smith sent a stark warning to the Department that harsh cuts in Devon might see some of the smaller schools not able to produce a balanced budget, in effect putting them into special measures, so they might therefore be lost altogether. He worried:

“Maybe, when some Devon schools start to buckle under the increasing financial pressures, the government will start to make education a priority once more.”

The right hon. Member for East Devon said that we should not be too political, although he was critical in quite a party political way of the Tony Blair and Gordon Brown Governments. Mr Smith of Honiton College, however, said:

“Tony Blair’s top three priorities for government were: Education, Education and Education——God knows how far down”

the importance and fairness of education policy have gone. Schools did extraordinarily well under that Government: schools were rebuilt and they got more money than they had had in a generation.
I was beginning my teacher training in 1997, and I spent most of the time going around with buckets to collect the rain. By the time I left education, 10 or 15 years later, after the Labour Government, if the roofs had not been rebuilt, it was only because the school had been rebuilt. The only thing going through the roof were standards and attainment, so Labour Members will not stand for any lectures about our record.

On top of that, the hon. Members for Newton Abbot and for North Devon rightly pointed to the requirements for special educational needs in Devon, where there is a particular problem. “Schools Week” has done an analysis of local authorities’ high-needs budgets, which are given a set amount by the Government depending on how many special needs pupils each council caters for. Many heads are already struggling to cope.

Devon faces a £4.5 million shortfall this year, and the council is proposing to move £55 per pupil from its schools block funding—the money for pupils in mainstream schools—to its high-needs budget. Lorraine Heath, headteacher of Uffculme School, said that the reallocation would cost her school £56,265, “which I have not budgeted for”.

That was her reaction. She said that the only way to meet the cut would be to reduce staff numbers and to increase class sizes.

In conclusion, may I praise the Devon MPs who are holding the Government’s feet to the fire on the issue? They are standing up for their constituencies and their county. I also remind them, however, that it is their party’s Government who are doing this.

**Mr David Hanson (in the Chair):** Before I call the Minister, I remind him that the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) should have a couple of minutes to speak at the end of the debate.

10.37 am

**The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and to follow the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane). The hon. Gentleman, as a Labour shadow spokesman, defended his party’s legacy, but since this Government came to power, 1.8 million more children than in 2010 are in schools graded by Ofsted as good and outstanding—1.8 million more children receiving a higher standard of education. This year 147,000 more six-year-olds are reading more effectively as a consequence of the reforms implemented since 2010.

I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on securing his important debate. I am sure he agrees that we share the same ambition to see a country that works for everyone, where all children receive an excellent education that unlocks talent and creates opportunity, regardless of where they live, their background, ability or needs.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) referred to the funding levels for schools in his constituency. He is astounded in visiting the schools in his constituency, as I saw at first hand when I joined him on one of those visits. We had a roundtable discussion with a number of his local headteachers. Overall, his schools will receive an increase of 0.7% in funding as a result of the national funding formula. As I said at that meeting, however, we are paying close attention to the responses to the first-stage consultation and to the second-stage consultation on the detailed proposals. The latter consultation closes on 27 March.

The Government are prioritising spending on education. We have protected the core schools budget in real terms so that as pupils numbers increase, so will the amount of money for schools. That means that schools are receiving more funding than ever before, totalising more than £40 billion. The existing funding system, however, prevents us from getting that record amount of money to where it is needed most. Underfunded schools do not have access to the same opportunities to do the best for their pupils, and it is harder for them to attract the best teachers and afford the right support. That is why we are reforming the funding system by introducing a national funding formula for both mainstream schools and high-need support for children with special educational needs. That will be the biggest change to school and high-needs funding for well over a decade, and means that we will for the first time have a clear, simple and transparent system that matches funding to pupils’ needs and the schools that they attend. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to introduce a national funding formula.

The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) is right that introducing a national funding formula when we are still tackling the historic budget deficit that we inherited from his Government is challenging. We have protected core school spending in real terms, but I accept that there are cost pressures on schools. We believe that it is nevertheless important to use this one-time-only opportunity to introduce a fairer funding system.

In the current system, similar schools and local areas receive very different levels of funding, with little or no justification. For example, a primary-age pupil who is eligible for free school meals attracts an extra £1,378 for their school if they live in Devon but an extra £2,642—£1,264 more—if they live in Brighton and Hove. Those anomalies will end once we have a national funding formula in place. Introducing fair funding was a key manifesto commitment for this Government, and it will mean that the same child with the same needs will attract the same funding regardless of where they live.

We launched the first stage of our consultation on reforming the schools and high-needs funding system in March last year. We set out the principles for reform and proposals for the overall design of the system. More than 6,000 people responded, and there was wide support for the proposals. Building on that support, we were able in December to proceed to the second stage of the consultation and set out detailed proposals for the design of both the schools and high-needs funding formulae. The consultation period will last until 22 March, and the issues raised in this debate and others are part and parcel of that process.

Under our proposals, money will be targeted towards pupils who face the greatest barriers. In particular, support will be boosted for children from the most deprived families and those who live in areas of deprivation but are not eligible for free school meals—those whose families are just about managing. We are putting more money towards supporting pupils in both primary and
[Mr Nick Gibb]

secondary schools who have fallen behind, to ensure that they, too, have the support they need to catch up.

Overall, 10,740 schools—54% of all schools—will gain funding, and the formula will allow them to see those gains quickly, with increases in per-pupil funding of up to 3% in 2018-19 and 2.5% in 2019-20. Some 72 local authority areas are due to gain high-needs funding, and they, too, will see that quickly, with gains of up to 3% in both those financial years. As well as providing for those increases, we have listened to those who highlighted the risks of major budget changes for schools during the first stage of our consultation and will include significant protections in both formulae. No school will face per-pupil reductions of more than 1.5% per year or 3% overall, and no local authority will lose high-needs funding.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) mentioned my visit to the outstanding Ivybridge Community College in his constituency. It was a pleasure to see such high academic standards being delivered in that school. He referred to a list. I do have such a list, which says that under the new national funding formula, schools funding in Devon as a whole will rise from £377.2 million in 2016-17 to £378.7 million—an increase of 0.4%. Some 213 schools in Devon—62% of all Devon schools—will gain funding. I recognise that the proposals would result in budget reductions for some schools in the constituencies of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon and other hon. Members, but I believe that the formula strikes the correct balance between the core funding that every child attracts and the extra funding that is targeted at those with additional needs—both children in areas of deprivation and schools that serve rural communities.

Our proposed protections will mean that schools in Devon that do not gain funding can manage these significant reforms while continuing to raise standards. All schools need to make the best use of the resources they have and ensure that every pound is used effectively to improve standards. To help schools, we have put in place and continue to develop a comprehensive package of support to enable them to make efficiency savings and manage cost pressures while continuing to improve the quality of education for their pupils.

Although Devon will not receive any additional high-needs funding as a result of the new formulae, I hope that my hon. Friends understand that the funding floor will allow underfunded local authorities to gain funding and go a long way to protect the local authorities that spend the most, in recognition of the fact that their spending levels are the result of decisions on placem ent taken in consultation with parents. We are also providing £23 million of additional funding this year to support all local authorities to undertake strategic reviews of their high-needs provision.

As a member of the f40, Devon has played a significant role in campaigning for fair schools funding, as have my right hon. and hon. Friends. The Government’s proposed formula is based on our assessment of needs across the whole country and is not designed around the interests of any one area or group in isolation. None the less, and reflecting the underfunding that several f40 members have suffered for many years, most of the areas represented by the f40, including Devon, will gain: overall, funding for their schools will increase by £210 million. I understand that some f40 members are disappointed with the formula’s effect on their area. Funding reform is always difficult—many competing demands have to be balanced—and it is particularly difficult in an area as complex as education. That is why we are holding such a long consultation to gather views.

I am aware of the concern that my hon. Friends and others have raised that fairer funding for schools in Devon and other parts of the country is overdue. We agree that these reforms are vital, but they are an historic change, which is why we have taken time to consider the options and implications carefully. The new system will be in place from April 2018, but in the meantime we have confirmed funding for 2017-18 so that local authorities and schools have the information and certainty that they need to plan their budgets for the coming year.

Anne Marie Morris: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gibb: I will give way in one moment. I was just coming to my hon. Friend’s point about funding levels in 2017-18, the year before the new national funding formula comes into effect. We have confirmed that no area will see a reduction in their schools or high-needs funding in 2017-18, and areas such as Devon that benefited from the £390 million that we added to the schools budget in the last Parliament will have that extra funding protected in their baseline in 2017-18, as they did in 2016-17.

Anne Marie Morris: That is helpful, but it does not address the cost issue that I raised. For any institution, what comes in and what goes out needs to balance. I respectfully ask the Minister whether he will undertake to consult his fellow Ministers in the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about these costs and how they fall on schools—particularly the apprenticeship levy. Clearly, it is not for him to slash that on a whim, but it is incumbent on him to discuss it.

Mr Gibb: We recognise that schools face cost pressures, including salary increases, the introduction of the national living wage, increases to employers’ national insurance and pension scheme contributions, and general inflation, as well as the introduction of the apprenticeship levy. The current, unfair funding system makes those pressures harder to manage. The new national funding formula will not only direct funding where it is most needed but give schools greater certainty about funding and allow them to plan ahead effectively. The Government are also providing a wide range of tools and other support to schools to improve their efficiency, and we will soon launch a school buying strategy to support schools to save more than £1 billion a year by 2019 on non-staff expenditure.

I appreciate what my hon. Friend says; in addition to those pressures, schools will pay the apprenticeship levy. The apprenticeship levy has real benefits for schools. It will support them to train and develop new and existing staff. It is an integral part of the Government’s wider plans to improve productivity and to provide opportunities for people of all backgrounds and all ages to enter the
workplace. That is why we encourage all schools to employ or designate apprenticeships, whether or not they pay the apprenticeship levy.

**Anne Marie Morris:** Does the Minister recognise that—as I understand it—there is no such thing as an apprentice teacher? Does he agree that the most important thing to spend money on, for any school facing the pressures they are facing, is teachers, not administrative staff?

**Mr Gibb:** There is an employers’ group that is preparing and working on the introduction of a graduate-entry apprenticeship scheme for teachers, so there will be opportunities for schools to use that funding and indeed spend more than the money from the apprenticeship levy on training teachers and also support staff and other technical staff that help schools operate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) described his constituency as in part inner city, where there are significant areas of deprivation. The Government are seeking to tackle that, not least through improving education. Social mobility lies at the core of the Government’s objectives, and that is one reason why schools in his constituency are seeing an overall increase of some 4.4% in funding, which he was magnanimous enough to acknowledge.

We are using a broad definition of disadvantage to target additional funding to the schools most likely to use it, comprising pupil and area-level deprivation data, prior attainment data and English as an additional language data. No individual measure is enough on its own; each addresses different challenges that schools face. When a child qualifies under more than one of those factors, the school receives funding for each qualifying factor. For example, if a child comes from a more disadvantaged household and they live in an area of socioeconomic deprivation, their school will attract funding through both the free school meals factor and the area-level deprivation factor. That helps us to target funding most accurately to the schools that face the most acute challenges.

**Mr Streeter:** The Minister has said that this is a genuine consultation exercise, but I am not hearing too much in terms of a willingness to amend the national funding formula. I understand that that will be tricky, but will he confirm that if a sufficiently strong case is made he is prepared to look again and that changes might be made?

**Mr Gibb:** I am seeking to explain the reasoning behind why we place such emphasis on deprivation and low prior attainment—that is something that will affect the grammar schools in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport—and why we place such emphasis on helping children with English as an additional language. This is a Government driven to improve social mobility.

This is a genuine consultation. I have set out the explanation as to why we produced the formula for consultation that we did. We are listening to the responses—we will be going through and reading the written responses and we will listen to debates such as this one in the consultation process—and where we can make changes that address unfairnesses revealed through that process of course we will make changes to the approach we are taking. The decisions we are taking are driven principally by social mobility and ensuring that children from the most deprived parts of our country are properly funded at their schools to ensure that they make progress and fulfil their potential.

I acknowledge the concerns about the schools block ring fence and the level of flexibility between schools and high needs raised in the debate, given that Devon has in the past moved funding from the schools block to the high-needs block to support its high-needs pressures. We recognise that some continuing flexibility between the schools and high-needs blocks will be important in ensuring that the funding system is responsive to changes in the balance of mainstream and specialist provision.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon for the important work he and the WESC Foundation do for children and young people with visual impairment. The reforms of high-needs funding and the additional funding we are providing this year and next year support the most vulnerable children in the country who are supported by high-needs funding.

In order to give my right hon. Friend time to respond, I will conclude. I am enormously grateful to him for raising this issue and to other hon. Friends and right hon. and hon. Members for airing their concerns and issues about funding of schools. I hope that my right hon. and hon. Friends are reassured that the Government are committed to reforming school funding and delivering a fair funding system for children in Devon and throughout the country.

**Oliver Colvile:** May I thank the Minister very much for his response? Will he be willing to meet the grammar schools in my constituency? Would he like to comment on why grammar schools did not feature in the speech made by the Opposition spokesman?

**Mr Gibb:** I will be delighted to meet the grammar school headteachers from his constituency either in the constituency or at the Department. To be fair to the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), this debate is about funding, but we want to create more good school places, whether those are more good grammar school places or more good school places in non-selective schools, helped by the independent sector and universities, and by having more faith schools. We want more good school places, and that is what drives our continuing education reforms.

I hope that hon. Members will be reassured about the Government’s commitment to reforming school funding. It is a system where funding reflects the real level of need and where every pupil has the same opportunities.

**Anne Marie Morris:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Gibb:** If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I would like to give time for my right hon. Friend to respond.

A fair national funding formula for schools and high needs underpins our ambition for social mobility and social justice. It will mean that every pupil is supported to achieve to the best of their potential, wherever they are in the country. I hope that while recognising the challenges that lie ahead, my hon. Friends will give their support to working with us to achieve that vital aim.
Sir Hugo Swire: The first thing on which we can all be agreed is that we are delighted to see the Minister back in his job. At one point he had an enforced holiday from the Front Bench; his proper place is on the Front Bench, doing what he is doing for education. It may not seem like it, but he can be assured that he is largely among friends this morning.

The Opposition spokesman referred back to the halcyon days of the Governments of Mr Blair and Mr Brown. I gently point out to him—he was not in the House at that time—that Devon certainly did not prosper in terms of schools funding in those days. He talked about how a Labour Government stopped water coming through the roof. Unfortunately, they did not stop the economy going through the floor. We are picking up the pieces, and, as I said at the beginning, we must be realistic as to what we can afford, given the appalling legacy we inherited.

I think the debate has been constructive, thoughtful and indeed insightful. I agree with the Minister that we all have the same eventual aim. This is an extraordinarily challenging time for the United Kingdom, given the great educational achievements of Asia, for instance, especially in mathematics and science. If we are to turn out a generation of British people who can compete in a highly competitive world, we will have to do that better. That is informing the Government’s thinking, but we must ensure that that is fair as well as ambitious.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that west country Members of Parliament have a history of being fairly independent-minded, and I think he will have learned from this morning that that tradition continues. Indeed, there are those of us who will be looking carefully at the Government’s proposals to see whether we can back them in terms of representing the best interests of our teachers and constituents.

This is one of the rare occasions in Parliament on which we want to hear more of the C-word—that is, of course, consultation. If the consultation is genuine, the Minister would do well to meet the Devon Association of Primary Headteachers—we would like him to come to Devon, or we can bring them all here—to hear at first hand how the changes will affect us in the county of Devon. Unfortunately, they did not stop the economy going through the roof. We are picking up the pieces, and, as I said at the beginning, we must be realistic as to what we can afford, given the appalling legacy we inherited.

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Mr David Hanson (in the Chair): We have about 30 seconds until the next debate and I hope that the Minister for that debate will arrive shortly. May I say it has been a pleasure to listen to the debate? As a former resident of Plymouth and an employee of Plymouth and South Devon Co-op many years ago, I found it interesting to hear the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered education funding in Devon.

10.56 am

Sir Hugo Swire: The first thing on which we can all be agreed is that we are delighted to see the Minister back in his job. At one point he had an enforced holiday from the Front Bench; his proper place is on the Front Bench, doing what he is doing for education. It may not seem like it, but he can be assured that he is largely among friends this morning.

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Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered education funding in Devon.

11 am

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I beg to move, That this House has considered future arrangements for S4C.

I am grateful to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and pleased to see the Minister taking his place for this important debate. Perhaps predictably, I want to set out the importance of S4C to Wales, talk about some of its aspirations and plans for the future, and show how it hopes to continue playing an important role in the life and culture of Wales, and then talk specifically about funding needs and the announced review of its remit.

S4C is the only Welsh-language TV channel in the world and has made a huge contribution to the culture of Wales and the Welsh language. Indeed, it has been pivotal in helping to maintain spoken Welsh throughout Wales and develop its use in a positive and forward-looking way. Usually, in debates such as this—perhaps lengthier ones—there will be some on the Government side who remind us that the creation of S4C in 1982 was a Conservative achievement. I do not dispute the date but I will say at the outset that of course many people from all political parties were involved in the creation of S4C. A more critical point is that since 1982 the channel has enjoyed strong cross-party support, as we can partly see from attendance in the Chamber today. S4C is critical to Wales’s 562,000 Welsh speakers—and the UK’s estimated 700,000; to learners such as me; and to those interested more generally in the nation of Wales.

Although S4C has had a fundamental and primary role in helping to preserve the language, it has focused on new and innovative ways to spread Welsh-language broadcasting, which has helped its programming to extend beyond Welsh speakers and learners. Since 2015 there has been a 107% increase in S4C’s viewers from outside the UK, through its S4C/Gwylio online platform. A fantastic example of the type of content that has spread beyond Welsh-speaking communities is S4C’s innovation in drama, such as the now internationally renowned “Y Gwyll”, or “Hinterland”, which was filmed in my constituency. I should perhaps declare an interest: my 10-year-old twins came home from school one day at the end of last year and announced that they were “on ‘Hinterland’”. They are extras in one of the recently filmed editions; we shall see what happens. They have not been paid a penny, but I declare it. “Y Gwyll” has won numerous awards including the main award at last year’s New York international film and television awards.

There have been other high-quality Welsh language productions, such as the political drama “Bwyd Celwydd”, focusing on a dramatised version of the Welsh Assembly. The mind boggles. The production of “Y Gwyll”, which has now been sold internationally, has had a huge impact on my constituency, but also more generally in Wales. The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) often reminds me, when I talk about that great advertisement for Ceredigion, that usually the plots are done, and I celebrate that.

The programme’s impact, and that of much of S4C’s innovative content, should not be underestimated. Investment in S4C has been shown to have a huge
multiplier effect on the Welsh economy. Independent research has shown that during 2014-15, every £1 that was invested by S4C in the creative industries in Wales was worth more than £2 to the economy—double the value. Using the example of the first series of “Hinterland”, its impact on the economy alone was more than £1 million in my locality; S4C’s total impact across the UK in the period was estimated at a staggering £170 million.

That has to be seen in the context of a television channel that is increasingly lean. Some members of the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs went last year to the headquarters of S4C in Cardiff and saw how lean the operation is, and what is achieved on limited resources: overheads of just 4.2% compared with 11.3% across the public sector, fewer than 150 staff, and a 35% reduction in the cost of commissioned content since 2009. It is indeed value for money. With the change in how many people consume content, S4C has also been successful in moving away from traditional scheduled television programming to catch-up services and social media.

**Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. He and many in the Chamber have campaigned for S4C for many years. The Minister is in charge of the digital economy; the new media that the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) has mentioned are difficult to obtain in many areas of Wales, for infrastructure reasons. I welcome the Digital Economy Bill but there is a need for greater emphasis not just on rural but peripheral and Welsh-speaking areas, so that they can enjoy S4C content.

**Mr Williams:** I very much agree; the hon. Gentleman is right. I represent a peripheral and Welsh-speaking area, and he has hit the nail on the head. I am sure that the Minister will respond to the point.

I was talking about catch-up services and social media and want to make the point that S4C has been hugely responsive in catering for demand. In just a few months, the viewing figure for S4C video content on social media alone, notwithstanding what the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) has said, has more than doubled—from 737,000 views in September 2016 to more than 2.235 million by December 2016. It is vital, more generally, that public service broadcasters respond to the change in demand, and S4C has been doing just that. It is with that in mind that I welcome the Government’s commitment to an independent review of S4C’s remit, funding and accountability arrangements. It is something that many hon. Members have called for. The industry has called for it, and it is important that we achieve it.

In recent years substantial cuts have been made to the funding that S4C receives through the BBC licence fee and the direct funding that it receives through the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Through the licence fee, it receives £74.5 million annually, and will do until 2021-22, although that is likely to represent a 10% cut by the end of the period. The Government’s 2015 Budget made an attempt to cut the direct funding to S4C from DCMS from £6.7 million to £5 million. In view of what I have said about the lean operation, that is a substantial sum and would have had a heavy impact on S4C.

**Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. DCMS funding is now only 8% of S4C’s funding; does he agree that people in Wales, Welsh-speaking or not, pay taxes too and that any further cut would be totally unacceptable to us?

**Mr Williams:** I very much agree and will develop a more extensive answer to that comment in the rest of my speech. I think that that view is widely shared, including, I am pleased to say, on the Conservative side. The hon. Lady will remember, as I do, the 2 am debate in the Chamber last January, initiated by the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart). I was grateful for the opportunity of that debate, despite its being at 2 in the morning. Notwithstanding bleary eyes, we saw strong opposition from Members across the House to an attempt to make a severe cut to S4C’s funding from DCMS. We were relieved that staying up was worth while, because spending was frozen at the original level for 2016-17, pending a review into S4C’s remit. According to the then Digital Minister, the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), that would:

“ensure financial stability”—crucially, now—“through the review process.”

Although it represents a real-terms cut, I greatly welcome, with the caveats I mentioned, the decision to give S4C stability over its funding through the licence fee for the next few years. I also welcome the freezing of the cut to the DCMS portion of its funding last year.

**Simon Hart** (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government could immediately grant S4C borrowing powers, which it has asked for and which would not have a detrimental effect on budgets? None of us can see any reason why that should be rejected. Perhaps the Minister will respond to that during the debate.

**Mr Williams:** I am not averse to that suggestion at all; it would be a positive step forward. However, I will develop how I intend to achieve for the coming year what the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) achieved last year.

There is little doubt in my mind or, I think, in the minds of Members from other parties, that cuts to S4C have been almost to the bone, not only making it extremely difficult for the broadcaster to meet the obligations of its remit, but making it particularly challenging to be innovative and to cater to the changing demands of the Welsh public. However, S4C has to date, with increasing difficulty, continued to meet its obligations and the changing demands.

With the difficulties facing the broadcaster as a result of those cuts, it is absolutely right that a review takes place to ensure that it has the necessary funding to fulfil its remit and strategy over the longer term. A comprehensive review into S4C announced in February of last year by the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), along with a reversal of the cuts prior to the outcome of the review, was welcome. However, we are now in 2017, and we still waiting for...
that promised review. There is cross-party concern about the delay, as well as concern in the creative industries that rely so heavily on a strong Welsh broadcasting sector.

I hope the Minister will enlighten us as to the reason for the delay. Why is a statement from February 2016, made in the early hours of the morning during the debate called by the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire, only now being acted on? Critically, can he also give us details about when the review is likely to take place, its timetable and when it is anticipated to conclude? With that in mind, and with the former Secretary of State’s commitment, I would also appreciate the Minister’s assurance that cuts to Government funding of S4C that were frozen under the previous Secretary of State will continue to be frozen at least until the review gives its recommendations.

One big issue that requires Government assurance is on the specifics of the review. Many hon. Members, and many people outside the Chamber, hope for confirmation from the Minister that the review will be chaired by an independent individual with a thorough understanding of Wales, the Welsh language and broadcasting. It is also important that the remit of the review considers the need to update S4C’s remit, to reflect changes in the broadcasting industry and to ensure that the channel meets the needs of its audience, both in the short and long term.

**Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC):** Does the hon. Gentleman also hope that the review will look at devolving the funding that S4C gets from this place? It might also hope that the review will look at devolving the funding. That is why this fits in neatly with the DCMS Secretary of State would decide on the sufficiency of abandoned and replaced by a clause stating that the Committee with me, will remember the concern expressed by the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), because he was on the Public Bodies Bill over the long term. The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) always regarded Sir Paul Silk’s work as a political bible—not only for members of his party but mine. As he suggested, devolution of that funding would be a good thing. It is something that should be considered as part of the review, which is why we asked the question about its remit. My concern about broadcasting being devolved to the National Assembly in Cardiff, as recommended by the Silk commission.

**Mr Williams:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have always regarded Sir Paul Silk’s work as a political bible—not only for members of his party but mine. As he suggested, devolution of that funding would be a good thing. It is something that should be considered as part of the review, which is why we asked the question about its remit. My concern about broadcasting being devolved to the National Assembly in its entirety—it is a different issue, but I will raise it—is whether our friends working in the Assembly would guarantee the required level of funding for S4C. However, there is merit in what the hon. Gentleman says in his question.

I am sure the Minister understands that S4C’s future funding is certainly one of its big concerns. As such, I would appreciate if he would set out whether the review will make recommendations on the process by which the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport decides on the sufficiency of funding for S4C, as required by the Public Bodies Act 2011, to ensure that S4C remains competitive in the public service broadcasting market and is able to continue to meet audience expectations over the long term. The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), because he was on the Public Bodies Bill Committee with me, will remember the concern expressed at the time when the funding formula for S4C was abandoned and replaced by a clause stating that the Secretary of State would decide on the sufficiency of funding. That is why this fits in neatly with the DCMS element of the budget.

Will the review consider the most appropriate mechanisms by which S4C should be funded? It is important that that includes the UK Government’s direct contribution to S4C. Security and visibility of funding for S4C over a reasonable period to prevent unnecessary uncertainty and to allow it to plan for the future is vital. Will the Minister ensure that that is reviewed, both in the context of the funding it receives directly and any potential governance and accountability changes to the BBC that could have an impact on S4C’s funding through the licence fee?

I have had many concerns, as has, I think, almost every Member here, about cuts to S4C’s funding over the years. However, that is not the subject of the debate. On a positive note, I still—as I did in the early hours during that debate in February 2016—welcome the review and the budget being frozen. However, we need answers to those questions. Many questions have yet to be answered, and I know that it will help to clarify the situation if the Minister is able to provide those answers to Members today. S4C is too important a working, practical, achieving institution to have any more delays in these matters.

11.17 am

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock):

It is a great pleasure to respond to this debate on the importance of S4C and its future. Although I grew up on the Welsh borders, I am still in the early stages of learning Welsh. My vocabulary runs to only a few words, most of which were learned from road signs—“Araf” is something I will never forget. This is something that is close to my heart and to the Government’s heart as well. Mae’r iaith Gymraeg ac S4C yn bwysig iawn i’ r Deyrnas Unedig. I hope the record will show that I said that the Welsh language and S4C are very important to the United Kingdom.

I will respond to the questions from the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) and from elsewhere. On his comments about S4C’s origins, it was of course a Conservative Government who brought in S4C. I acknowledge that success has many fathers, and there was a lot of support at the time for S4C’s introduction, but that its introduction was a Conservative achievement shows the heritage of the Government’s support for the Welsh language and for S4C.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned borrowing powers and asked when the review would take place. It will take place shortly. We are aware of the issues around borrowing powers and we are looking at options. The TV licence fee funding for S4C is being protected in cash terms. That means it will be flat over the spending review period. The advantage of that is, first, that it is not being cut and, secondly, that there is certainty over a long period to allow for planning. I hope that that helps.

I have read the transcripts of the debates on this issue before I came into this post. I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart), who has really led the charge. While awaiting the review, the funding was frozen rather than cut last year, essentially after the lobbying of a large group of people, led by my hon. Friend, who stands up for his constituency so powerfully.
We will be announcing the review shortly. We will certainly take into account the comments that my hon. Friend and others have made as to what the review should consider. I can commit to the reviewer having a thorough understanding of Wales and an interest in the Welsh language. Of course, the review needs to look into how S4C can succeed in the short term and long term. The licence fee now contributes the vast majority of funding—more than £74 million. The direct funding from DCMS is currently just over £6 million, which, as the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) said, is a relatively small element of the overall funding. We are aware of the commitments given by a predecessor on timing, and the Secretary of State is currently considering that issue.

Simon Hart: I thank the Minister for his kind comments, but in his letter to me on 14 December he said: “this year the Government gave over £6 million and we will be giving over £6 million next year.” Can he be a bit more precise? That could mean £6.9 million in 2016 and £6.1 million in 2017. If he could tighten that up, we would be much relieved.

Matt Hancock: That is an incredibly tempting invitation. In this financial year, the DCMS funding is £6.762 million, and the funding next year is set to be £6.058 million. I know that my hon. Friend is suggesting that those two figures ought to be closer—

Simon Hart: Or the same.

Matt Hancock: Or, as my hon. Friend says, the same.

In terms of timing, we always said that the review of S4C would follow the BBC charter renewal, which is now complete. In fact, the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport today announced its support for the new chair of the BBC unitary board. That decision now needs to go to the Privy Council. It would be unusual and constitutionally interesting should the Privy Council not approve that decision. We are now in a position to push on with the S4C review shortly.

Albert Owen: I did not quite hear the figures that the Minister read out. My understanding was that it is a cut, not a freezing, of the budget from this year to next year. Will he confirm those figures again?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. The figures set out in the spending review 2015 are £6.762 million for this financial year and £6.058 million for the next financial year. It is thanks to the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire and others—not least those who called this debate today—that the Secretary of State is looking at that issue.

We are considering the question of borrowing powers. The Silk commission said that we should consider the devolution of S4C. Of course, all broadcasting is a reserved matter, rather than a devolved one. That is the basis on which we have been operating, but we accepted that Silk review recommendation, so that consideration will happen.

On the overall question of the link to the licence fee, moving the funding from direct taxpayer support to licence fee funding was controversial at the time. However, since the S4C-BBC link started after 2010, it has been a huge success, not least because S4C can use some of the BBC’s digital technology. For instance, its content is now on iPlayer, and I understand that viewing figures have increased by over 3.000%.

As was mentioned, the impact of digital technology is incredibly important in this area, not least so that we can get broadcast material to people who live outside Wales where S4C is broadcast, in the rest of the UK and the rest of the world. For lovers of the Welsh language, that link-up and the fact that S4C can partner with the BBC in getting its content out are very positive. It is reasonable to say that the decision to move the majority of S4C funding over to the licence fee has generated further partnerships and been a success.

The S4C’s economic impact was a big part of the case made by hon. Members. The contribution made by S4C to the Welsh economy is not only through the direct impact of the broadcasting but through its work with the TV production industry. The success of Welsh TV production has been impressive in the past few years, in both the English and Welsh languages. We heard a few examples. Welsh-made TV shows and formats are now sold worldwide. As well as being the home of dynamic independent producers, Wales has become a hub of creativity and a desirable place to make programmes. For instance, Wales is the production centre for “Dr Who”—an iconic British success, aired in 200 countries around the world. Children’s programmes such as “Ludus” are shown on CBBC, with the spin-off app winning a BAFTA Cymru award. S4C’s “Fferm Ffactor” is now licensed and produced in Denmark, Sweden and China. “Y Gwyll”, or “Hinterland”, is screened in both Welsh and English, showing the innovations and economies of scale by using both languages.

When I was in Los Angeles the week before last, some of the film producers there were at pains to point out to me what an innovative, powerful and increasingly impressive TV and film production system there is in Wales and how they are looking to Wales to expand into some of the new areas of production—so Hollywood goes to the Welsh valleys. We have seen some of that theme in the past few years, and I hope that we will see much more of it. S4C plays its role in developing that TV production centre. Wales is home to more than 50 TV and animation companies that collectively generate around £1 billion for the Welsh economy, of which S4C alone directly contributed £114 million in 2015-16.

As well as the impact on the Welsh language and economy, the other reason to support S4C is its importance in Wales’s media plurality, which ensures that the public have access to a wide range of views, news and information about the world in which we live, while specifically focusing on what is happening in Wales. While the media landscape and technology change, our support for S4C remains resolute and will continue as we hold it in its place in Wales’s broad landscape of media and TV production and in the hearts of the Welsh people. I hope that we can continue this dialogue and can continue across the House to support S4C.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
At the weekend, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) co-ordinated a letter to the Secretary of State for Scotland calling on him to take action on the jobcentre closures. I signed that letter with every other Glasgow MP; Scotland’s First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon; Scottish National party Members of the Scottish Parliament; Scottish Labour Members and Scottish Green party Members, as well as Labour and SNP leaders on Glasgow City Council. Despite voicing concerns on social media when the closures were first announced, Glasgow’s two Tory MSPs decided not to sign the letter.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and apologise for not being able to stay owing to commitments in the Procedure Committee. Will she join me in hoping that tomorrow Glasgow’s Conservative MSPs will have an opportunity to put on the record their opposition to the closures, especially that of Maryhill jobcentre, which is not far from their office and is in my constituency, when our colleague Bob Doris MSP leads a debate on the issue in the Scottish Parliament?

Margaret Ferrier: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We hope that there is consensus across all parties, including the Tory party in Scotland. I congratulate our colleague in the Scottish Parliament on again bringing forward this important debate in the Holyrood Chamber tomorrow. The decision is for Tory MSPs to make, but it is regrettable that they seem to have chosen to adopt an ideological party line rather than to lend their voice and support to the people they were elected to represent.

The Public and Commercial Services Union has also condemned the closure proposals, saying they represent a slash and burn policy by DWP. I want to put on the record my appreciation for the Evening Times, which has diligently reported the jobcentre closure story from the start and deserves recognition for its “Hands off our jobcentres” campaign. The cuts are so worrying that the Church of Scotland has intervened, condemning the effect they will have on people as fundamentally wrong and unjust, while our Catholic Archbishop, Philip Tartaglia, has expressed his concern and called on the Department to reconsider the proposals in a way that respects the dignity of claimants and meets their needs.

The concern of Members, which is demonstrably shared by civic society, is not political bluster or point scoring; it is born of genuine and legitimate concern for some of our most vulnerable constituents. I hope the Minister will listen properly today. It is unfortunate that some of our most vulnerable constituents.

Patrick Grady: The Scottish Secretary has admitted that he met DWP representatives in July, but they provided only an overview of the Department’s estates process in general without detailing specific plans. The Minister must address this matter in her response today. Why were proposals...
which would cause him when the truth came out? I can understand with the Scottish Secretary because it seems that none of us was deemed important enough to be consulted or even informed by the DWP prior to the story breaking in the press. Indeed, it took the Department another seven hours thereafter to get round to sending affected MPs correspondence about the plans.

It is completely outrageous that the Scottish Government were not consulted on the proposals. That point specifically raises serious concerns about the UK Government’s commitment to paragraph 58 of the Smith commission’s report, which recognised that Jobcentre Plus will remain reserved, but called on the UK and Scottish Governments to “identify ways to further link services through methods such as co-location wherever possible and establish more formal mechanisms to govern the Jobcentre Plus network in Scotland.”

The Scottish Minister for Employability and Training has written to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions asking how the change will reduce access to services and perhaps increase the risk of sanctions that may be applied in relation to the need to attend such facilities.

The Scottish Minister has also asked for urgent advice on the future of Jobcentre Plus facilities across the rest of the country. I want to ask the same question today. Tens of thousands of people in the Glasgow area will, unacceptably, have to travel further and incur additional costs to access their social security entitlement and support. They deserve full and frank answers to these questions.

The PCS has said the closures will have an adverse impact, particularly on women, vulnerable children and people with disabilities, who are already hardest hit by Government cuts. The Government must be mindful that people travelling to jobcentres are seeking work or employment support and are doing so on very low incomes. One in three children in Glasgow last year were living in poverty—that is consistently the highest rate in Scotland according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Making it more difficult for people to reach jobcentres will surely further exacerbate the problem. Indeed, the Tory Government continue to peddle the line that they want to help people into work, but continued cuts to benefits, and now these planned closures, only serve to push people further into hardship.

The Poverty Alliance has raised concerns that this reduction in face-to-face support could put people off claiming support that they need. The current sanctions regime has made accessing social security almost impossible for many people, particularly the young, and this move is likely to put people off claiming the support that they are actually entitled to. The Minister must realise that the jobcentre closures are seen as yet another callous attack on the disadvantaged and the vulnerable. They will create more hoops to jump through and increase the risk of sanctioning as a result.

I appreciate that the Minister’s response will probably seek to justify the rationale behind the closures, and I would not be obliged if she could allude to the next points. We have been told that fewer jobcentres are needed because more people are in employment. The Fraser of Allander Institute has estimated that a hard Brexit could cost as many as 80,000 Scottish jobs. Following the Prime Minister’s speech yesterday, it now appears that we are facing not only a hard Brexit but, indeed, the hardest Brexit. Given that fact, and the significant potential for economic volatility ahead of us, what sense does it make to close the doors of jobcentres, let alone half of all the Glasgow jobcentres? Surely we should be cautious in our approach. The approach that the DWP is taking is like leaving the house in the morning wearing shorts and a T-shirt when snow is forecast later in the day. There is a shocking lack of foresight here, and I ask that the potential impact of Brexit be given proper consideration as a reason to halt these plans.

The other point that I would like to make regarding the rationale for closing the centres concerns savings. We are told that the financial benefit to the taxpayer is sufficient reason to close these centres. What we have not seen is any proof that other avenues were explored. Closure seems to have been the desired and only option on the table, rather than the one of last resort. Is the Minister able to tell us today what other options were considered for each of the eight centres marked for closure? Were alternative premises sought? What is the option of co-location fully explored for each of them?

The Minister must understand the lack of faith that we have in this process. This is particularly the case because of the shambolic manner in which another Government Department recently handled the closure of offices in Scotland. In total, 137 Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs offices across the UK are closing, with potentially thousands of job losses in Scotland. The Government say they are prioritising closing the tax gap and getting people back into work, but the closure of HMRC offices and jobcentres could seriously compromise both. The National Audit Office recently released a report on HMRC’s estate changes, showing that up to 38,000 staff will be expected to move large distances as part of a reorganisation, with some having to relocate by up to 174 miles if they want to keep their jobs. Now, although the Government have said that no jobcentre staff are expected to lose their jobs as a result of DWP estate changes, the HMRC changes have set a worrying precedent. We need to be clear about how many staff will be affected, and when, and the guarantee of no redundancies—I repeat, no redundancies.

We in the SNP are concerned that this is a slippery slope—a move to downsize with a view to making savings that will ultimately lead to job losses as well as having a negative impact on service delivery. We are calling for progress on plans to close the sites to be halted immediately until a full equality impact assessment is carried out. We remain concerned that the proposed exercise will not consider the vast impact that these closures will have across Glasgow. Only three of the eight proposed closures are going to consultation, while the others will not be consulted on. That is completely inadequate; the consultation must look at the entire package of closures. Will the Minister, in her response, undertake to widen the scope of the consultation to look at the broader picture right across Glasgow? We are disappointed and worried that only carrying out an equality analysis post the consultation period will fail to identify the devastating hardships that these closures would cause our communities in Glasgow. We must have a proper guarantee that the results of any equality analysis will be considered in the eventual decision,
and assurance that the Government will amend their plans accordingly. It is vital that a full equality impact assessment is conducted by the DWP urgently; I seek assurance from the Minister today that she will give that very serious consideration.

In summary, I would like the Minister to tell me why the Secretary of State for Scotland was kept in the dark about the planned closures in Glasgow. How might these changes reduce access to services and possibly increase the risk of sanctions, which are applied around the need to attend these facilities? What future changes are being discussed within the DWP for Jobcentre Plus facilities across the rest of the country? I would like the Minister to address the points that I made regarding our uncertain economic future due to Brexit, and the wisdom of closing the centres at this time. Also, what other options were considered for each of the eight centres that are marked for closure? Finally, will the Minister commit to widening the scope of the consultation and carrying out a full equality impact assessment?

Justin Tomlinson: This was at the Hackney community hub run by the Shaw Trust, so it would have been at Amazon there. This debate is on the future of the DWP estate, which covers the whole of the UK, but I wish any Kazeem in the hon. Lady’s constituency the best of luck with finding work, whether at Amazon or somewhere else.

Understandably, a lot of people who arrive at a jobcentre lack confidence and are nervous. I have seen that at first hand when I have supported my own constituents. All too often, I am afraid, people are greeted by a security guard, who is probably the last person that somebody wishes to see when they are nervous. Some jobcentres are drab buildings from the ’60s, ’70s or ’80s. They do not celebrate success stories. There are no posters or videos that show people who have gone through the same challenges, faced and overcome them, come through at the other end and benefited from work. The staff are too often fixed to the facility. I suspect most other hon. Members who speak in this debate will highlight the challenge of getting to jobcentres; sometimes the solution is taking the jobcentre directly to people.

One of the most important parts of the universal credit roll-out is that, for the first time ever, people entering work will continue to get support. I hope that support will extend to those coming into the workplace. A lot of those people will be entering work on the national living wage, at the beginning of a career path. They will need support in work to secure additional hours and to get promotion when they lack the confidence to push themselves forward. We are all confident here—we all wish to push ourselves forward. We are all confident here—we all wish to push ourselves forward. We are all confident here—we all wish to push ourselves forward. We are all confident here—we all wish to push ourselves forward. We are all confident here—we all wish to push ourselves forward. We are all confident here—we all wish to push ourselves forward. We are all confident here—we all wish to push ourselves forward. We are all confident here—we all wish to push ourselves forward. We are all confident here—we all wish to push ourselves forward. We are all confident here—we all wish to push ourselves forward. We are all confident here—we all wish to push ourselves forward. We are all confident here—we all wish to push ourselves forward.
the jobcentre staff would say, “Go off and apply for some more jobs”, but he would come back two weeks later and he had talked himself out of another job. All it needed was a job coach to go with him to an interview to explain to the employer, “When you have had enough of him talking, just say stop”. He would have secured work straight away. Yet the system meant that he kept returning at his inconvenience every two weeks on a continuous loop, when it just needed somebody to go with him to the interview.

Rightly, we have started piloting a small business employment scheme. Too many employers do not want to engage with their local jobcentre—I was the same when I ran a business for 10 years. We need to get jobcentre people going out to small and medium-sized businesses and saying, “What skills gaps do you have? Can we identify them?” The DWP has been running a small business pilot, in which staff go around retail, industrial and business parks and find people. It was so successful that the DWP ran out of people, either at the jobcentre or in the Work programme, to fill all those roles. That is exactly the sort of challenge that we need to take on. Again, it saves time for the claimant. We also need to organise job fairs.

In an ideal world, the jobcentre would be a hub. It would be a co-location, so that we are not sending claimants from building to building. We need health support. My point about being close to full structural employment is that the vast majority of people are now looking for work. More than 50% of people on employment and support allowance have a health condition or a disability; having instant health support on site will make a huge difference.

For some bizarre reason, rather than letting Work programme providers use our space, we send them off to find their own facilities, for which they secure a contract for a number of years. They spend a huge amount of time finding facilities, settling into them and getting to know them before having to renew the contract. It also gives claimants the inconvenience of having to go from the jobcentre to the Work programme provider and to health support, spending all their time travelling rather than looking for work. That is something that we need to address.

A jobcentre should be a hive of activity. It should have job fairs in the evenings and it should get in external employers, charities and mentors. That should all happen in a brightly coloured, constructive hub that supports people.

Margaret Ferrier: The hon. Gentleman talks about hubs. Is he suggesting that there should no longer be any security staff in jobcentres?

Justin Tomlinson: Absolutely not. Experienced organisations such as the Shaw Trust have dealt with that issue. Their security staff are also meeters and greeters. They have blurred those roles so that, instead of somebody in a uniform who will make people even more nervous, there is somebody who can act as a security person if they need to, which I am afraid they sometimes do, but who also make people welcome when they arrive. That is so important for people who have a number of barriers to overcome.

We need to be mindful of those with disabilities. Representatives of Action on Hearing Loss came to Parliament today to meet a number of MPs; it reminded me that it is often the hidden impairments that people do not take account of. I urge the Minister to consult with disabled people whenever we consider future facilities. We need to ensure not only that staff are trained but that, when we build facilities, we make them fully accessible. We can embrace technology such as the video relay service that DWP has trialled, the pilots for which were so successful that it will continue for evermore. We need to ensure that that technology is used in the rest of Government facilities and by those who provide contracts to them. I know from visiting SSE that the private sector has embraced that. It allows those who rely on British sign language to get instant access to facilities, rather than having to wait for an interpreter. It is an absolute must for all Government facilities to have hearing loops and for staff to be trained to use them. I could say much more on disabilities, but I am conscious of the time.

What I have said applies not just to jobcentres but to assessment centres for benefits such as the personal independence payment, which are often soulless places. There should be videos in the waiting areas to advertise other support offered to people who have a disability or a long-term health condition. The Government often do pilots, but people often do not know about them, so let us advertise them. Mental health is a really good example: there is cross-party support for improving support to people with mental health conditions and considerable additional money is being spent, but, all too often, those who most need that help simply do not know about it.

I know that the Minister is extremely constructive and engages regularly with Work programme providers, charities and people with experience. We have a real opportunity to build on the Green Paper. I look forward to her response.

2.57 pm

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I thoroughly congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on her fantastic speech and on securing the debate.

The Government must feel as if they are in a film. I certainly feel as if I am in “Groundhog Day”, because we keep repeating the same arguments. We will be back again and again until the Minister and the DWP stop, listen and recognise the error of their decision. In the last debate before Christmas, the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) said, like a modern-day Arnold Schwarzenegger, “We will be back.” Here we are again, and we will not tire of making the same arguments, because we are right and the Government and the DWP are wrong. We know our areas, we know the people and the geography, and we know the challenges they face.

Glasgow East is not a dot on Google Maps; it is multiple communities with amazing characteristics but many unique challenges. The Government’s plans to rip jobcentres from the people who need them most, in some of the most deprived areas of the country, are bereft of logic, bereft of evidence and completely bereft of compassion. If the jobcentre closures go ahead in Glasgow, 50% of our jobcentres will close—half of them! That is in spite of the DWP’s plan to reduce its
“is in a unique position within the DWP that the DWP believes that Glasgow

cuts. The only thing close to an answer was the statement

singled out for such swingeing and disproportionate

answer has been forthcoming on why Glasgow is being

meetings with the Minister before Christmas. No adequate

previous Westminster Hall debate and in a number of

of my hon. Friends, I raised precisely that point in a

Glasgow is being hit hardest. I am at peril of repeating

estate by only 20% across the country. Proportionally,

Glasgow is being hit hardest. I am at peril of repeating

myself here—groundhog day again—because, like many

of my hon. Friends, I raised precisely that point in a

previous Westminster Hall debate and in a number of

meetings with the Minister before Christmas. No adequate

answer has been forthcoming on why Glasgow is being

singed out for such swingeing and disproportionate
cuts. The only thing close to an answer was the statement

that the DWP believes that Glasgow

“is in a unique position within the DWP...Estate”.

I cannot but feel that the Government believe that

Glasgow is in a unique position to be useful in an

ideologically driven cost-cutting exercise—a test subject,

so to speak. Well, they have picked the wrong fight with

the right people, because, as I am sure they are fast

learning, we are not the strong silent types.

For entirely different reasons, I agree that Glasgow is,

for want of a better phrase, in a unique position.

Almost half of Glasgow’s residents live in areas that are

among the 20% most deprived in Scotland. The city has

been labelled the jobless capital of Europe. That is not a

title that I claim with any satisfaction, but unfortunately

it is the reality. Just today, we have all received the most

recent figures on unemployment. In my constituency,

it is at 4.9%, which is more than double the national

average and is the 36th highest of the 650 constituencies

in the UK. The so-called “unique” position that Glasgow

finds itself in, through no fault of its own, illustrates that

the UK Government should be doing more to help

my constituents, not less. Instead, if the proposals go

ahead, they will affect over 74,000 people across Glasgow

and will create more barriers to employment and support

for people seeking work, rather than breaking them
down.

In the previous debate, I raised the issue of territorialism

and the historical gang culture as unique issues in the

east end of Glasgow. The Minister and the DWP flippantly

dismissed those serious concerns by pointing out that

Shettleston served as a youth hub jobcentre for four years.

They ignored the extensive preparation and engagement

work that was done with the police, stakeholders and the

jobcentre. I said that the same work had not been
done in this situation, when it is more critical, given the

ages of the claimants, the historical nature of gang

violence and the levels of unemployment among the

mainly men involved.

Alison Thewlis (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon.

Lady is right to point out that Ministers trumpeted the

youth hub as a success, but I have had discussions with

local organisations on the ground and they pulled away

from participation in the hub because they were not

prepared to submit to using conditionality and clients

making young people travel every day for something

they were not obliged to do.

Natalie McGarry: That is a fantastic point, which I

no longer need to make. The response from the Government

that, in extreme cases, remote sign-ons would work will

not satisfy me or the people I represent. Like the hon.

Lady, I have gone further and spoken to former senior

members of Shettleston jobcentre, who were there at

the time. They told me that not only impact assessments,

but multiple risk assessments were carried out to prepare

for that. That experiment has failed. It is not here now

for the reasons that the hon. Lady mentioned, and also

because, I am told, the resources at Shettleston were not

adequate for the demand, yet Shettleton will now

replace three jobcentres. It beggars belief. I will not be

papped off or shooed away on this. I want answers and

I demand that that is properly considered as part of the

consultation.

Another barrier is additional transport and the costs

and logistics of it for the people we represent in Glasgow.

If the plans go ahead, many of our constituents who are

already on meagre incomes will incur additional costs

and extra travel with no confirmed support from the

DWP. With all due respect, the Government’s response

has been woeful thus far and many questions remain

unanswered. Does the Minister honestly and wholeheartedly

believe that this situation is fair? Given that two thirds

of households in deprived areas of Glasgow do not

have access to a car, what assessment has she made of

the impact this decision will have on jobseekers reliant

on public transport?

If the plans go ahead, will the Minister ensure our

constituents are reimbursed for extra travel costs? Will

she give us a commitment today that no jobseeker will

be sanctioned for delays caused by public transport?

What assessment has been made of the impact the

closures will have on additional travelling for people

with caring responsibilities and those with a claimant

commitment? What provisions will be made to assist

people with mobility problems and people with caring

responsibilities? Why did the Government fail to conduct

and publish an equality impact assessment before the

consultation period began? Such an assessment is surely

key to informing those who participate in the consultation.

Does the Minister not agree that the closures would

undermine the Government’s commitment to halving

the disability employment gap by 2020, and what assessment

has been made of that?

Another issue that the Government must seriously

address, but have thus far failed to, is the increase in

demand for the reduced number of jobcentres in Glasgow.

The jobcentre in Shettleston currently serves 1,025 people.

However, when we add in the caseloads of Parkhead,

Bridge顿 and Easterhouse, that figure more than triples

to 3,210. Shettleston would become one of the largest

jobcentres in the entire UK in one of the areas with the

highest levels of deprivation and unemployment. As I

have said before, it would add insult to injury if the

Government forced people in Glasgow to travel further

at additional cost only to be inconvenienced in longer

queues to receive a poorer service. What assessment has

the Minister made of the potential delays for service

users? What provisions would be put in place to ensure

the quality of service did not deteriorate under the

plans for closure?

The harm resulting from the Government’s plans to

close the jobcentre in Easterhouse is potentially eye-

watering. The communities of Easterhouse are strong

and resilient, but that does not mitigate the impact that

the closures would have on them. Isolated on the edge

of the city, suffering from poor public transport and

feeling the effects of high unemployment, Easterhouse

cannot afford to lose its jobcentre. The plans destroy

any kind of joined-up logic. Moreover, the journey

from the jobcentre in Easterhouse to the jobcentre in
Shettleston, if one of my constituents takes the 60 or 60A bus, which are the only buses available for that journey, is just over 3 miles. Yet Easterhouse has not been included in the consultation—perhaps Google did not identify it.

Margaret Ferrier: Is it the case that nobody has thought to travel north at all to find out the proper distances and how the plans will affect our constituents?

Natalie McGarry: That is an excellent point. I believe the Minister for Employment, who took part in the previous debate, is visiting Scotland. We have invited him to travel to Glasgow, but so far he has not taken us up on that offer. I am happy to ride a bus from some of the areas in my constituency, but will have to take two buses at additional cost to get to the new jobcentre.

I will conclude soon because I am aware I am slightly over time. Easterhouse has not been included in this consultation. That appears to contradict the DWP's own guidelines. It undermines the Department's consultation and absolutely fails to serve the interests of my constituents. The plans to close half of Glasgow's jobcentres are cack-handed and are being done in the most cavalier way. The case for closures is cruel and contradictory. The Government cannot spout the rhetoric of, “all in this together...for hardworking people” and “not just for the privileged few” if they then pursue such ideologically-driven, ill-thought-out decisions. I implore the Minister and the Government to listen to local people and organisations across Glasgow and to hear the warnings from me and hon. Members. We are consulting our constituents and they will feed into the consultation process. I hope that the Minister will listen to the people who know Glasgow best.

Several hon. Members rose—

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. Owing to the number of lengthy interventions, I now have to impose a time limit of five minutes on speeches.

3.7 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Thank you very much, Ms Dorries. This will test me.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on bringing this subject to this place again. As the MP who represents Glasgow North East, which has the 16th highest unemployment rate in the UK—at 5.9%, it is 2.5 times the UK average—I couldn’t not be here, but I will cut out huge swathes of my speech.

I have used my personal experience in this place on previous occasions. I have spoken about my own experience of being unemployed and how I was treated and how I responded. When I have spoken about it, it has elicited empathy from Members of all parties, with everyone agreeing that I did not deserve to be treated in that way, but I am aware that many here will think that what I speak of is my experience alone and that I am different, but I am not. When I have talked about the pain of being unable to find work and desperately wanting it, people have said to me, “But you are probably the exception to the rule”, but I am not. When I talked about being treated like a child by some—though not all—jobcentre staff and about that having the reverse effect in terms of getting me into employment, I was told that that was a one-off, but it was not. I am no different from any of my constituents. I have family, friends and constituents who all wanted to work, worked hard to find work and needed help, not punishment. I am saying this because I am coming to a suggestion as to what we can do with these jobcentres.

The small minority who do not put effort into finding work are those who need the most support. It is more often than not a deep lack of self-confidence that stops them, as has been said previously. We need to support, encourage and empower them, not criticise, ridicule and punish them by cruel sanctions and by making it far harder to get to the jobcentre. Here is my suggestion for using the excess space that we have heard about within the earmarked jobcentres. The DWP work services director for Scotland, Denise Horsfall, said earlier this week:

“In Glasgow the buildings are between 20% and 40% under occupied. When you go in you will see a floor fully occupied but there are floors above which are empty”;

so why not use that space to provide room where people can utilise services that will actually assist them to gain employment? I am thinking of the difficulty I once had when I had no printer. I was required to print 20 CVs: a total of 60 pages at a cost of 10p a photocopy every week. That was £6 that I honestly could not afford, so I asked the jobcentre staff if they would print them for me. The answer I got was—I paraphrase, but this is the sense of it: “Don’t be ridiculous. We can’t do that sort of thing here.” I am thinking of the times when I could not afford credit for my phone, but I needed to make phone calls about employment opportunities. I wanted to be proactive. Why not use the space that is said to be leading to jobcentre closures, and provide office equipment and anything that people need for support in their search for work? Why not provide space for people to come together and support each other, build their confidence and get advice when they want and need it? The Minister will say that that happens already, but it honestly does not. There are areas of good practice, and we have heard about some of them today, but on the whole the DWP’s approach is completely wrong.

Many years ago as a young graduate I was offered the opportunity to attend a group that was for some reason called the executive job club. It was not compulsory, so I did not feel like a naughty schoolchild in detention. It was respectful: the group co-ordinators made it clear that they believed everyone would work, given the opportunity, so none of us felt as if we were being judged. Peer support was encouraged, which meant that we spent time with people who were also struggling to find work, and felt useful because we could advise each other. One-to-one coaching, group sessions, pair work and drop-in were available; and it was all voluntary. It was therefore well attended, and the atmosphere was supportive and respectful. The turnover was high, because most of us got jobs. For me it removed a huge blockage. I was there only a few weeks, but it had a big impact on me. It changed the way I viewed myself and my professional skills. It gave me confidence and got me into a well-paid, challenging job, which put me on the path to a fairly successful career. The Government could learn from that and from other groups, including the numerous unemployed workers centres around the country.
I am suggesting that there is something missing in the experience of a person who is unemployed. Without any facetiousness I want to say that I would be happy to meet the Minister to talk some more about what I have outlined. Now that we have the space in the jobcentres in Glasgow, why, instead of closing them down, do we not consider using that space to provide the sort of services I have described? It would require more resources, but if it works it is surely worth it.

3.11 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Dorries. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on securing the second but, I am confident, not the last Westminster Hall debate on the jobcentre estate, with a focus on Glasgow.

On 28 October 1977, that great chronicler of local news the Barnet Press published an article following a visit to a local jobcentre by the then Member of Parliament for Finchley. It was of course the late Mrs Thatcher. At the time, the jobcentre was serving 1,066 people in the constituency, and even Mrs Thatcher remarked at that point how overrun and busy it seemed to be. We have heard from the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) that one of her jobcentres will be expected to serve 3,000 people—three times the number that shocked even the late Mrs Thatcher. It is often said that the present Government are positively wet, by comparison with her ideology, but they have gone where even she would not.

It was excellent to hear from the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) and from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (Anne McLaughlin) about all the excellent things that there can be in jobcentres to support vulnerable people—particularly, as the hon. Gentleman noted, those with mental health challenges. It is a wonderful idea, which is why we should not close Glasgow jobcentres, or reduce their number from 16 to eight—halving it, when there is supposed to be a 20% reduction elsewhere in the country.

I and my colleagues have submitted a range of written questions to Ministers in the Department for Work and Pensions, and I want to run through some of the answers. I am sure that if a jobcentre in your constituency was closing, Ms Dorries, you would, as would any Member, look for some basic, elementary information about how the Government had reached the conclusion that it was a good idea. You would want to know how many disabled people used the jobcentre. That was what I asked about both Castlemilk and Langside jobcentres in my constituency, which the Minister wants closed. The answer was that the Department does not have that information and to find out would incur a disproportionate cost. I asked the same question about full-time work and got the exact same answer.

The Government have a plan that is so upside down and ill-thought-out that it is starting to make the Trump transition look positively orderly. There is no equality impact assessment, so the Minister cannot tell Members of Parliament at the end of the debate that she is confident her Department will not break her public sector equality obligations under the Equality Act 2010. That is because it has not bothered to work it out. You will not believe it, Ms Dorries, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West mentioned, the Department works with travel distances and refers to bus services that Google Maps has told it about. In some cases those bus services and routes no longer exist. The result, I promise, will be that people will be late to the jobcentre and will be sanctioned. That is the decision that the Government have taken.

There are two jobcentres in my constituency that the Government want to close. Castlemilk, a community in my constituency, is geographically the largest in Glasgow, and it used to be bigger than Perth. There are almost 20,000 people in just that area, and the Minister will force them to take an eight-mile round trip. The Langside jobcentre serves the second most densely populated council ward in Scotland. It is across the road from a college. I cannot think of a better place for a jobcentre than the second most densely populated ward, across the road from a college. The Minister needs to think again. The Government picked the fight, and until we get the right answer and the closures are scrapped, we shall keep fighting.

3.16 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for securing today’s debate. We have had a number of debates on this issue, as my colleagues have mentioned. During the Westminster Hall debate on 20 December, I raised concerns about the planning application with respect to Anniesland jobcentre in my constituency, whose closure is planned. It turns out that the planning application was made in February 2016, which came as a surprise to the Minister for Employment, when I informed him. The go-ahead has been given to convert the building to private flats, so the DWP has had a long-term plan. The decision did not happen just before Christmas.

Like my colleagues, I submitted some written questions after that debate, including one about “how many jobcentre offices in the UK are subject to live planning applications”.

The answer was:

“It is not known precisely how many Jobcentres are subject to planning applications across our entire estate at this time. This is because any party can make a planning application for a change of use for a building without the involvement of either the landlord or current tenants.

DWP will identify this information as part of conveyancing activity on buildings it is planning to retain or acquire.”

So the DWP has no idea which jobcentres or even which buildings will be affected. That has implications for constituencies throughout the UK, as I have said, and it is quite disappointing that other areas are not as well represented in this debate as Scotland. I did a simple check to find out the plans for Anniesland; surely the same could be done with respect to the other jobcentres that are part of the DWP estate.

Increasingly, therefore, it looks as though the planned closure of Anniesland jobcentre is not to provide “value for money” for the taxpayer, as we have been told, but because the DWP does not own any of the properties...
that it occupies and in fact has no say over what the future use of those properties will be. More worryingly, the DWP does not seek any sort of resolution when its current offices are threatened. It should be trying its utmost—as we Glasgow MPs are, here today—to work with landlords, to ensure that there can be continuity with these offices, but that is just not happening.

The DWP simply expects that claimants will go elsewhere, transferring to another jobcentre. As some of my hon. Friends have already said, a distance of three miles seems reasonable, but of course these jobcentres have much wider catchment areas. We have repeatedly asked for those catchment areas but we have repeatedly not been given that information, so we actually have no idea just how wide-reaching these jobcentres are, and, frankly, that is information we need to know.

My colleagues and I have done what no Government Minister has done—we have visited the jobcentres and spoken to those affected by these proposals. I visited Anniesland jobcentre, just as my colleagues have visited their local jobcentres. I spoke to service users there, and it is clear how important Anniesland jobcentre is and how wide its catchment area is. I spoke to one person who is travelling nearly 10 miles to attend that jobcentre, so it is crucial that the UK Government understand the implications for claimants in the communities that will be affected before any changes are made.

Finally, I will mention the consultation. It has been promoted by us through social media, leafleting and local campaigns, and not by a letter that could have been sent out to claimants at these jobcentres. There are many important questions to be answered and my colleagues and I will continue to ask them.

3.22 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under you today, Madam Chair.

First of all, I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on presenting her case so very well. When I saw the title of this debate, I felt that I had to come along and make a comment, primarily because the future changes to the Department for Work and Pensions estate will affect my constituency. The changes are a devolved matter and I will explain some of the issues for us in relation to it. Perhaps the Minister will find herself with a direct role in this if things do not go according to plan in the elections.

I remember my time as a councillor and as a Member of the Legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland, when the idea of a private finance initiative was first brought to my attention, with regard to building a new hospital at the Ulster hospital site. It must be the Ulster Scots in me, but I just could not bring myself to see how that could be value for money and I opposed it on that ground, and on the ground that it was putting local people out of work. I have a great problem with PFI. The fact is that we are scrambling to find people now that the contract has finished, and we cannot do anything because we do not own anything. Of course, as you will point out, Madam Chair, PFI is not directly the issue that we are considering today, but it is one that we cannot ignore and I wanted to make a point about it on the record.

I know that, on paper, the people to office ratio may allow for an office to close, but we do not live on paper; we live in the real world, where transport systems, and rural and urban issues, come into play. Let me give a Northern Ireland perspective. I say again that the Minister’s responsibility is clearly to the mainland of the United Kingdom, but if the elections in Northern Ireland in two to six weeks do not deliver the democratic process that we wish to have, direct rule will become a reality. If that is the case, responsibility for this issue will fall upon the Minister’s shoulders.

Ballynahinch social security office is out to consultation, with a view to the closure of the premises. The office is long overdue an upgrade, to both its interior and exterior, but it seems that the Department responsible simply cannot afford it, or at least that is what it is telling us. It is impractical to expect or insist that all claimants who use the Ballynahinch office should instead use the Lisburn office or the Downpatrick office, which on paper are less than 20 miles away. That does not seem far, but in reality it is a journey that many find difficult to make. In addition, both those offices are already oversubscribed and fully utilised.

The public transport links to Downpatrick or Lisburn already have problems, and for many people on benefits making such a journey would be another cost and another outgoing that they do not need. Some of those who attend Ballynahinch have severe mobility and access issues, and it would be harmful to their needs if the Ballynahinch office closed.

Let us look at some of the finer detail of the Ballynahinch SSO. Last year, it had 6,172 referrals for jobseeker’s allowance not including phone call inquiries, which could easily double that number. There were also 7,406 jobcentre referrals, and it is imperative that that figure is highlighted in the consultation process. Very often people say that a jobcentre only provides benefits, but it does more than that: it is training people for jobs, as a number of hon. Members have already said.

All those who have an interest in this service must take the time to do their part, in order to see the retention of this office in Ballynahinch. In the four months prior to the start of the consultation, JSA inquiries were as follows: in May 2016, there were nearly 500; in June 2016, 596; in July 2016, 448; and in August 2016, 550. All those cases were dealt with by the Ballynahinch jobseeker’s allowance staff alone.

The jobcentres in my area also have close contact with three local high schools. The point about schools is important one; it has already been made by others and I make it in relation to my area. Those schools will be affected by any potential closures of jobcentres.

The new personal independence payment system is coming in. Staff need to be trained to use that system, and the increase in workload is quite phenomenal. I cannot speak for others, but I can speak for my own office and its staff—the number of PIP referrals that the office is getting is incredible. The staff’s workload has probably doubled as a result, and I cannot say any more than that. People applying for PIP need to speak to staff who understand their problems, and who have both compassion and a good knowledge of the system. We also have to address the issue of those people who may not have educational achievements or the ability who come to the office. There is also the issue of the reduction in footfall for local businesses; there is a knock-on effect for them as well.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) referred to the equality impact assessment and I will, too. Thought must be given to the equality impact assessment,
as the rural town of Ballynahinch cannot afford to have the local jobcentre moved. That cannot be considered as “rural proofing”.

On paper, this decision about my jobcentre may be a no-brainer, but in reality we will leave hundreds of people without the support they need to find a job or to access other help, or to get advice about benefits. I am sure that this case is replicated in many ways in other hon. Members’ constituencies, which shows that, while we must cut outgoings, in doing so we cannot and must not cut people off from the help and support they need.

Again, I thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West for raising this issue, and I ask the Minister for a reasoned opinion on what is being proposed for the DWP estate, and to ensure that, when it comes to making these decisions, we are there for the people who need us most.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): I call Chris Stephens to speak. Mr Stephens, you can have an extra minute or so.

3.27 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Chair. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for a barnstorming speech in protection of jobcentres.

Perhaps to continue the theme of the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), I have also researched not only my own written questions and the answers that I received but the written questions put by my hon. Friends. The answers we have received put me in mind of the infamous press conference by Donald Rumsfeld, the former US Defence Secretary, when he used that memorable term: “There are things we don’t know”.

That phrase reminds me of the answers that we have received from the Government. When asked about the actual travel time for an individual to get to a jobcentre, they “don’t know”; as for the number of benefit claimants using each jobcentre, they “don’t know”; regarding the catchment area for each jobcentre, they “don’t know”; when asked about the bus routes to jobcentres, they “don’t know”; regarding the planning application that has been made in relation to Anniesland jobcentre, they did not know about it; that the landlord of the property housing Castlemilk jobcentre had offered to reduce the rent on the site, they did not know; and as for the impact of these changes on disabled people and women, they “don’t know”.

All these points are important, because if the Government do not know all those things, why are they so certain that jobcentres should close in Glasgow? And why is it that no other announcements have been made by the Department for Work and Pensions in relation to the closures of jobcentres? Is it because of the public backlash that the DWP has already seen in Glasgow, or is it because the DWP now knows, through the Glasgow experiment, that there is a lack of evidence to close other jobcentres across the UK? Or is it because the information that the DWP does not have for Glasgow is required elsewhere?

Yesterday, we were told in the main Chamber that work is the way out of poverty, but what consolation is that to the people in Glasgow who will find that the very places to find work are no longer there to support them?

If the Government do not have the information that I referred to at the beginning of my remarks, why are they only consulting publicly on three of the eight jobcentres earmarked for closure? If the closure of a package of eight jobcentres is announced, the whole package should be consulted on. What consolation is that consultation for those working in other Government Departments who are being made redundant? Is the Government’s vision to reduce the workforce in other Departments and for that workforce to then find that they cannot find a jobcentre, because they have been closed? That seems to be a perverse vision of ensuring that work is a way out of poverty.

The plan to close 50% of the jobcentres in Glasgow is a moral outrage. Some 68% of the people in Glasgow in receipt of jobseeker’s allowance, employment and support allowance and universal credit will be impacted by the closures. These closures will result in more people having to pay the telephone tax—the premium rate charges to call Departments. There is support among Members on the Government Benches and the SNP Benches for ensuring that the telephone tax is ended.

The cost of the jobcentre closures will be borne by the people the Government should be assisting. I recommend the submission from Parkhead Housing Association, which makes the very point that travel will impose extra costs ‘on people living off of the minimum the government states is required for day to day survival.’

It is the people on low incomes who will be affected. It is unacceptable that tens of thousands of people will now travel further and incur additional costs to access social security. These individuals are seeking work or employment support. As the civil service trade union, the PCS, has said, the impact will be ‘on women, vulnerable children and people with disabilities already hit hardest by government cuts.’

There must be an equality impact assessment. We must have a guarantee from the Government that the results of any equality analysis will be considered in the eventual decision. The Government have behaved in a disgraceful manner. They did not consult the Scottish Government before the announcement, nor did they consult the local authority. There have been inadequate responses to written questions, with that familiar answer “Information can only be provided at disproportionate cost” often being given. What is disproportionate is to close 50% of the jobcentres in Glasgow when the expectation is that that figure will be 20% elsewhere.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Mr Stephens, you were allowed 10 minutes as the SNP spokesman. If you want to go on, you can.

Chris Stephens: I could have gone on.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Would you like to go on?

Chris Stephens: Okay, I will.
As well as impressing the comments of Parkhead Housing Association on the Minister, I want to raise the comments of the Glasgow citizens advice bureau. It said:

"The increased numbers will put pressure on staff who have no leeway if someone is five or ten minutes late. They will be recorded as missing an appointment and sanctions will be applied. Some people have to sign on weekly and in some cases people can be called in daily. Even at once a week the bus fare is almost 10% of a young person's Jobseeker's Allowance."

That is a true cost of closing the jobcentres in Glasgow for those who seek the support of the state.

3.33 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. This is yet another debate on this important matter. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on bringing the debate to the House and on the real clarity and focus that she showed in the course of her remarks. I commend everyone who has taken part. We have had particularly interesting contributions. The hon. Lady referred to the comments made by PCS condemning the closures. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) talked about the "moral outrage" of the proposals. That view was shared by many people in the Chamber today. Numerous other important contributions have been made.

The debate is on the future of the DWP estate, but the focus has clearly been on Glasgow, which is facing the closure of half of its jobcentres. In today's debate and in preceding debates, Members have rightly focused on the huge range of issues that impact on claimants, including increased journey times; the complexity of the journeys and the impact that will have, particularly for those with mobility problems, those with young children and older people who might find it more difficult to travel on public transport; the cost of those journeys, which can be considerable for people on benefits; the increased likelihood of claimants being late as a result of public transport failure; and the increased risk of claimants being sanctioned, with the attendant risk that that will push people further into poverty.

From one single error, we can see such a process having devastating effects. That is most clearly exemplified in Ken Loach's film, "I, Daniel Blake", which tells one such story with immense power. The film has picked up five BAFTA nominations this year. I feel sure that that is not just because it is such a powerful film, but because the story that it tells is so highly relevant for today.

[Interruption.] I am not quite sure what the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) is saying from a sedentary position. It is such a powerful film.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I wish to help the hon. Lady. Perhaps the comments from the hon. Member for North Swindon were that the director, Ken Loach, has publicly backed our campaign to save the Glasgow jobcentres.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. The comments from the hon. Member for North Swindon were totally relevant, then.

It is immensely important that the DWP estate is managed with due respect for the impact that any changes might have on claimants, their families, their communities and those who work there. For those who work there, the concerns are about job losses, the downgrading of posts and increased case loads. Will the Government comment on how they will manage the estate for the future? What are their plans for future technology, the changing roles of DWP staff and the introduction of in-work conditionality, which will require that those in work demonstrate that they are searching for more work? How will that will impact on the people in Glasgow who are having their jobcentres removed?

The changes are important for the people of Glasgow, but they are also important for the rest of the country, as has been clearly stated. I am short of time.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Ms Greenwood, you have 10 minutes for your speech as a Front-Bench spokesperson.

Margaret Greenwood: Thank you. There have been several comments on the level of unemployment in the area. The latest claimant count shows that 5,810 people are registered as unemployed at the eight jobcentres threatened with closure. I would be interested to hear what will happen when those centres close. I understand that the remaining jobcentres in Glasgow will have to deal with twice the volume of claimants as a result. That is especially a concern for the Shettleston jobcentre, which will take on the case load from three of the jobcentres that will close. Can the Minister provide us with a breakdown of the expected increase in case loads for those jobcentres that will remain open? What will be done to help the DWP staff who have to deal with that increased workload?

Alison Thewliss: Does the hon. Lady appreciate that the jobcentres at Easterhouse, Parkhead and Bridgeton all have citizens advice bureaux nearby and other support services wrapped around those jobcentres? The Shettleston jobcentre does not, and that will make it even more difficult for clients to seek help when they need it.

Margaret Greenwood: That is an important point. Several Members have spoken about the difficulties people face when they approach a jobcentre. I have spoken to people in my constituency who feel frightened and intimidated about going to the jobcentre, so having that kind of support is invaluable. It is particular invaluable given that for universal credit people are being asked to make and manage claims online. Many find that very challenging.

In that regard, can the Minister update us on the work she has done to identify the number of people who struggle to fill in those online applications and maintain their claims online? I know the 2011 skills for life survey found that 14.5% of people have below entry-level skills for word processing, 30% had below entry-level skills for email, and 38% had below entry-level skills for spreadsheets. I have taught on a programme to get women back to work, and I have worked alongside adult learners who have difficulty reading and writing and even handling things about their name and address. What is the Minister doing to support those people, particularly with the move to the digital environment?

Natalie McGarry: The hon. Lady is making a very interesting point and I wonder if she shares my concern. Many people in my constituency suffer from digital
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on securing this debate and to all hon. Members who have spoken are from Scotland, but the south-west, the north-west and of course Northern Ireland have been represented. I thank those hon. Members for their comments.

Our network of jobcentres is absolutely at the heart of Department for Work and Pensions services. Across the country, jobcentre staff work hard to help people to access the support and assistance they need to move into employment and into better and more employment—and it is working. The claimant count has dropped from almost 1.5 million in 2010 to around 800,000 now. Unemployment is down by more than 900,000 since 2010, as the economy has grown. We are at near record levels of employment across the country.

As the needs of our claimants have changed, so have our jobcentres, and rightly so. The way that the Department is delivering its services is changing in response to significant societal trends. The Department continues to make the most of the opportunity technology brings and more services are moving online, reflecting that increase in digital capability and accessibility. Eight out of 10 claims for jobseeker’s allowance are made using digital channels and almost 90% of universal credit claims are currently made online.

There are several examples where the Department is working in shared Government facilities or with local authorities and other local partners. The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) both mentioned co-location and talked about hubs where we can bring services together and make local arrangements that bring—

Chris Stephens rose—

Natalie McGarry rose—

Caroline Nokes: Everyone wishes to intervene at once. I give way to the hon. Lady.

Natalie McGarry: At a meeting we had before Christmas with members of the DWP, we were told that co-location would not happen in some of these cases because the jobcentre was a “toxic brand”. I wonder whether the Minister can answer that.

Caroline Nokes: When I have been visiting jobcentres up and down the country, I do not recognise a toxic brand. In fact, I recognise very hard-working staff who champion the successes that they have had and the jobs that they have helped people into.

Chris Stephens: If co-location is such a good thing, why was there no consultation with the local authorities and other public bodies in Glasgow before the announcement of the jobcentre closures? Co-location could have been a solution to the issue.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Of course the DWP works hard with the Scottish Government and other local authorities to ensure that we investigate opportunities. I am conscious that, in Glasgow, outreach and co-location services are already provided at Anniesland College. I want to see more of that. Outreach provides one of the solutions to helping jobseekers where they are, rather than expecting them to travel to centres. The working environments are good,
more of the services that customers use when there is co-location are in one place and it can cost considerably less to run services. We are building on partnerships with local organisations to expand that range. As I mentioned, in Glasgow, we work closely with Anniesland College to offer services, including helping claimants with their job searches and offering benefit advice.

Carol Monaghan: Of course, Anniesland College no longer exists—it is Glasgow Clyde College and has been for a number of years.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Lady for pointing that out to me.

A key ambition of the DWP is to enable claimants to access our services in ways that suit them. At the heart of our reforms is a digitally-focused approach, which is more secure, more accessible and more efficient. We need to have a modern welfare system that is fair while providing good value to the taxpayer—a welfare system that ensures we are not under-utilising space in our buildings. That is the best way of making sure that the Department is delivering value for money, both for those using its services and the taxpayer.

We need a modern welfare system that is not only fair but simple to use and takes full advantage of the opportunities modern technology and communication channels afford us. Universal credit is absolutely at the heart of that, allowing claimants to manage their claims online. It is the key that unlocks the flexibility and the modern support that we want for people, not just to help them into jobs but to help them progress in work, too. They can manage claims online and receive the personalised support they need in order to find more work and better paid work.

Since coming into this role, I have seen the positive impact of personalised work coach support for myself. I have been struck by how work coaches are committed to helping the individual claimants they work with to find more hours of work and better paid work. At the heart of that is the principle of ensuring easy online access, which allows households to make claims and report changes securely, without necessarily having to travel to a jobcentre. It is right that the future of the DWP estate reflects not only the fundamental changes in the welfare system but the near record levels of employment across the country.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP) rose—

Margaret Greenwood rose—

Caroline Nokes: I will give way to the Opposition spokesperson, but this really must be the last time.

Margaret Greenwood: I may be pre-empting what the Minister is going to say. She has talked about online access several times. I would appreciate it if she could answer my question about the assessment that she has made of the difficulties that people who are not IT-literate have in accessing things online and the kind of support that is provided for them.

Caroline Nokes: As I said at the outset, 90% of UC claims are now successfully managed by our claimants.

Ronnie Cowan rose—
UK and Scottish Governments. As hon. Members mentioned today, my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment is travelling to Scotland, where he is meeting members of the Scottish Government. We welcome the chance to work with them. Indeed, DWP officials have been working closely with them on this process.

We are building contingency into the system, building on lessons learned in 2008. More flexible arrangements and new contracts are being brought forward. Last night, we debated DWP policies in the main Chamber. It was a wide-ranging debate, which included the question of Glasgow jobcentres. My hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) stated, and I cannot disagree with her,

“There is too much clinging on to bricks and mortar when the real questions should be what works and what will get more people into work.”—[Official Report, 17 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 888.]

Hon. Members would do well to reflect on that. It is about the service we deliver—[Interruption.]

Caroline Nokes: The claimants must come first in the service we deliver to them. We must also deliver value to taxpayers in Scotland and across the rest of the UK. The Department’s services always have and always will adapt to social trends, and it is right that we reflect the digital revolution. These proposals are the result of careful analysis and planning. I appreciate the concerns of the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West about the proposed closures, and I thank her again for securing the debate. I think the rationale for the proposals is clear. The overall number of people claiming the main out-of-work benefits has fallen by more than 1.1 million. The changes are about reducing floor space, not the number of dedicated frontline staff helping claimants back into work.

Alison Thewliss: There are six minutes left.

Caroline Nokes: The claimants must come first in the service we deliver to them. We must also deliver value to taxpayers in Scotland and across the rest of the UK.

The Department’s services always have and always will adapt to social trends, and it is right that we reflect the digital revolution. These proposals are the result of careful analysis and planning. I appreciate the concerns of the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West about the proposed closures, and I thank her again for securing the debate. I think the rationale for the proposals is clear. The overall number of people claiming the main out-of-work benefits has fallen by more than 1.1 million. The changes are about reducing floor space, not the number of dedicated frontline staff helping claimants back into work.

Margaret Ferrier: Thank you, Ms Dorries. I would like to thank—[Interruption.]

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. I will address the chuntering from your Back Benchers. Time limits on speeches are limited to Back Benchers, not official spokesmen or Front-Bench representatives.

Margaret Ferrier: Thank you, Ms Dorries. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to my debate. However, I did not get any answers to any of the questions I asked, and I am not sure whether any other hon. Member did either.

Ronnie Cowan: Talking about not getting answers to questions, I did not get the opportunity to put my question. I was going to ask the Minister whether she would guarantee that the closures in Glasgow are not the opening salvo in a widespread closure of jobcentres across the United Kingdom, including in my constituency. It would have been nice to have had the opportunity to put that question.

Margaret Ferrier: I think my hon. Friend has just put that question very succinctly. He has two jobcentres in his area, and there is a rumour that one of them may close. They are not close to one another—they are in Port Glasgow and Greenock—so there will be a lot of travel for claimants.

The Minister made much of co-location, which was not considered before the announcement of the closure of these jobcentres. On the point about digital, Glasgow is one of the highest areas of digital exclusion. I urge everyone to sign the change.org petition to save the eight Glasgow jobcentres. As the shadow Minister said, this debate has focused primarily on the Glasgow jobcentre closures, but next week or next month it could be North Swindon, Cardiff, Sheffield or Belfast—in fact, any town or city up and down the country. This fight is not over. As the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) said, we will be back to speak up for all our constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the future of the DWP estate.

3.56 pm

Sitting suspended.
East Suffolk Railway Line

[Mr Adrian Bailey in the Chair]

3.58 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered future investment in the East Suffolk railway line.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

I am pleased to have secured this debate, which provides a timely opportunity to highlight the important role that the East Suffolk railway plays in the local transport network. It is the line that runs north to south and links Lowestoft in my constituency to Ipswich via 10 intervening stations. The line has a fascinating and in many ways illustrious history, including many great moments, some sad times and a fight for survival. At present, things are going well. With the right investment we can do even better and provide local people with a high-quality railway service to play a key role in bringing jobs and growth to the area.

The East Suffolk opened on 1 June 1859. At the time it ran from Ipswich to Yarmouth South Town, in Great Yarmouth, with branches to Framlingham, Snape, Leiston and Lowestoft. Further branches were subsequently built to Southwold and Felixstowe; the former has long since closed, but is remembered with affection, while the latter remains and is a key national freight route from the port of Felixstowe to the east and west coast main lines. Today, the East Suffolk runs for 44 miles from Ipswich to Lowestoft through four parliamentary constituencies: Ipswich, Central Suffolk and North Ipswich, Suffolk Coastal and my own, Waveney. Much of what I say will highlight the importance of the railway to my constituency, but it would be remiss of me not to think strategically and to consider the whole line and the opportunities that it brings to the wider east Suffolk area.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), and the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), are not able to be here because of their ministerial duties and commitments, but I am pleased to be joined in the Chamber by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). He will no doubt highlight those issues to which I do not give sufficient weight and will pick me up if I get anything wrong or wander too far off track.

The East Suffolk faced its darkest hour in the 1960s when Dr Beeching earmarked it for closure. A strong local rearguard action was mounted and, ultimately, the East Suffolk dodged the Beeching bullet, with Barbara Castle reprieving the line in autumn 1966. Much of the credit for that victory must go to ESTA, the East Suffolk Travellers Association, which formed in 1965 and continues to campaign today for improvements to the line and the bus services that link to it. I am a member, and I commend it for its work. ESTA campaigns are properly researched and evidence-based.

It is appropriate to consider the role that the East Suffolk line plays in linking the county’s two largest towns, with stations along its route in market towns and villages. John Brodribb commented in his 2003 book, “An Illustrated History of the East Suffolk Railway”:

“The East Suffolk had never been promoted simply for private advantage or pecuniary profit: it was a public utility serving a rich cultivated district.”

The East Suffolk is still very much a public utility, and although I do not wish to be downbeat and say that the area is no longer rich and cultivated, things were very different in the mid-19th century. Agriculture dominated the local economy, and Lowestoft, owing to the entrepreneurial flair of Sir Samuel Morton Peto, was a flourishing resort and port with a new harbour. Today things are different. Agriculture is still important but not as significant, and Lowestoft has, like many coastal communities, been hit hard by the decline of the fishing industry and the challenges faced by much of British manufacturing at the end of the 20th century.

Good communications are one of the keys to secure an economic renaissance and to bring prosperity back to an area. Along with improved roads and superfast broadband, the railways have an important role to play. Improving the East Suffolk line would benefit the industries and economic centres so important to the area’s future: ports and logistics, with sidings into Felixstowe and Lowestoft ports; the energy sector, with freight access to Sizewell via the former Leiston branch, where planning is stepping up for the construction of the Sizewell C nuclear power station, and to Lowestoft which is a fast-emerging hub for the offshore renewables sector; and tourism, with stations providing gateways to Suffolk’s historic towns or the potential of bus connections to a wide variety of attractions such as the broads, Framlingham Castle or the Latitude festival.

The past few years have been good for the East Suffolk line. That renaissance is under way, but we need to nurture, sustain and encourage it. As a result of the reintroduction of an hourly service following the construction of the £4 million Beccles loop, in 2011-12 to 2015-16 passenger movements at East Suffolk line stations averaged growth of 29%, compared with average growth of 13% across the rest of Suffolk. The growth figure varies from station to station: at Beccles it is 38%; Brampton 43%; Wickham Market 34%; and, way out on its own, Oulton Broad South 134%. The one blot on the landscape is Westerfield, where passenger numbers have declined by 42%, although that can almost certainly be attributed to the previous half-hour service for the station, at the junction with the Felixstowe branch line, being reduced to an hourly one. That highlights the need for specific work at Westerfield, to which I shall return.

It is also appropriate to mention improvements carried out by local community groups. For many years the Halesworth and District Museum has been located in the station. Last year an inspiring and highly imaginative redevelopment of Beccles station was completed. Previously the station was an eyesore; now it is an inviting and attractive gateway to the town. The East Suffolk also has the advantage of a proactive and visionary Community Rail Partnership, which has worked up a wide variety of schemes to increase and broaden the line’s appeal to passengers.

Last October a new franchise was granted to Abellio Greater Anglia. Many of the new arrangements rightly focus on improving the main line, the Great Eastern from Liverpool Street to Norwich, but many elements...
of the package will have direct benefits for the East Suffolk, such as brand new trains on the line from 2019-20. The new trains will have air-conditioning, wi-fi and plug points, and they are particularly welcome because for too long East Anglia has been the elephants' graveyard for old trains. Also from 2019, there will be four trains a day between Lowestoft and London, which is important and highly symbolic. One of the disadvantages that Lowestoft faces is its perceived remote location. For me, personally, with a heavy suitcase in tow, to stagger up the steps from the underground to the main concourse at Liverpool Street and to look up at the display board to see there in lights through trains to Lowestoft is so very important.

Those improvements are welcome but must be the beginning and not the end of investment in the East Suffolk line. We must not rest on our laurels. The work that has been carried out so far and the positive outcomes that have resulted show the great potential for further investment to promote economic growth. The Great Eastern line is the spine of the East Anglia rail network. The need now is to focus on the feeder lines, of which the East Suffolk is one of the most important. There are pressing reasons and a strong case for pressing ahead for further improvements to the East Suffolk line.

The first reason is Sizewell C. EDF is consulting on its plans for a new nuclear power station at Sizewell near Leiston, with a view to submitting a planning application next year. The railway could play an important role in delivering aggregates for an enormous construction project to the site in a way that causes minimal disruption to local communities. EDF is working with Network Rail to carry out a governance for railway investment projects, or GRIP 2, study of the alternatives. Additional line capacity would need to be provided between Saxmundham and Woodbridge, and the various options must be carefully analysed. Those options include a passing loop at Campsea Ashe, a longer section of double track to the south, or complete redoubling of the track between Woodbridge and Saxmundham. Any improvements must take place well in advance of construction starting at Sizewell, which is scheduled for three years’ time, and the case to get on with the work as quickly as possible is very compelling. Welcome funding was provided in the autumn statement for a business case to be worked up for upgrading the A12, with specific reference to the four-villages bypass, and a similar appraisal for the railway should be twin-tracked at the same time.

The second reason for further upgrading the East Suffolk line is the port of Felixstowe. The branch line from Westerfield to Felixstowe plays an important role in enabling people to commute to work and get to and from what is a popular seaside resort, as well as facilitating the working of the port by getting more freight on to the railways, thereby relieving pressure on the A14 to the midlands. As I have mentioned, there is a capacity bottleneck at the junction at Westerfield that constrains such plans, and we must address now how best to resolve that problem, which would bring significant benefits to the area and allow Felixstowe to maintain its position as a leading global container port. That is so important as the country seeks to build new trading arrangements around the world. Additional capacity should be provided on the Felixstowe branch, which should be part of an electrified bespoke freight line between Felixstowe and Peterborough.

The third reason for further investment is Lowestoft station. In 1961, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner commented: “The railway reached Lowestoft in 1847 and the station was built close to the harbour. It is Italianate, of yellow brick, asymmetrical and picturesque”. I am afraid that I have to report that Lowestoft Central station is at present not picturesque. The building and its surrounds are in a sorry, dilapidated state. The good news is that the Lowestoft station partners, with whom I am working closely, have come together with a visionary set of proposals to refurbish the station and revitalise the surrounding area. They presented those plans to the Minister at a meeting in his office in November, and he has kindly given his support to them and agreed to visit the station to view the situation for himself.

Lowestoft Central is Britain’s most easterly railway station, occupying a unique location in the town centre within walking distance of the blue flag south beach. It was built by Lucas Brothers, which also built the Royal Albert Hall, Alexandra Palace and York station. Its refurbishment can act as a catalyst for the regeneration of the surrounding station square. That will be facilitated by the third crossing of Lake Lothing, which will divert traffic away from the town centre.

The fourth factor behind my request for further investment is the need to promote growth and, linked to that, improve journey times. An improved service on the East Suffolk line can play an important role in helping to attract more business, new jobs and more visitors along the entire length of the line and its surrounds. That is recognised and is being promoted by the Suffolk chamber of commerce, the Lowestoft and Waveney chamber of commerce, Suffolk County Council in its rail prospectus, Waveney District Council and Suffolk Coastal District Council.

At present, the journey time from Lowestoft to Ipswich—a 44-mile journey—is more than 90 minutes. For a lot of people, that is a major disincentive to let the train take the strain. When the through service to Liverpool Street is reintroduced, it is likely to have a journey time of more than 160 minutes. That is longer than it took in 1904 to make the same journey on one of the seaside specials that ran on Saturdays in the summer. Speeding up that journey will also help to get traffic off the A12, and it will be achieved in four ways: through the faster trains that are on their way, more dual tracking, track replacement and a review of which of the numerous crossings of the line, many of which are private and pedestrian, are absolutely necessary. That work, particularly on the last issue, will require thorough consideration and wide-ranging consultation, but we need to get on with it straightaway.

My fifth point is that there is a need for better bus connections at stations. The new interchange facilities at Lowestoft station are welcome, and good arrangements are in place at Halesworth, where buses to Southwold meet the trains, but these need to be extended to other stations. We need a network of virtual railways along the entire line, whereby trains and buses seamlessly serve the market towns and coastal resorts that do not have stations. I have in mind such places as Bungay, Aldeburgh and Orford.
In conclusion, I see a great future for the East Suffolk line, which can help to bring a better quality of life, jobs and prosperity to the whole east Suffolk region. However, that will not happen on its own; we need to kick-start it. We need to plan for it and have a business plan in place. Time is of the essence, particularly with Sizewell C and the need for better freight facilities serving the port of Felixstowe. We must start that work now. I would be grateful if the Minister outlined how best we can secure the funds for a study. Once the plan has been completed, we can set about delivering the improvements that I have outlined. That said, we should start work straightaway on the refurbishment of Lowestoft station and improving bus connections, and I would be most grateful for the Minister’s support for those schemes.

If it is acceptable, Mr Bailey, I think my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) would like to say a few words.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I had not actually received any indication that Dr Daniel Poulter wanted to contribute to the debate. However, if you are in agreement, Mr Aldous, as I gather you are, and if the Minister is also in agreement—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard) indicated assent.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I will permit that, but we need to give the Minister at least 10 minutes to respond, so please bear that in mind, Dr Poulter.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) not just on securing the debate but on eloquently putting forward the case for his constituency, as he always does. I join with him in congratulating the East Suffolk Travellers Association and the local community rail partnership on all the work they do to sustain this important line. I well recall his visit to my office to show me the delights of Lowestoft Central station, not least because that was only last November—my memory is not that bad. I recall a more favourable impression of Lowestoft station than the one he portrayed in the debate. If the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), were here, he would cite it as an example of the beauty he wishes to see in all our stations for the work he does on the physical appearance of the network. I think my hon. Friend was a little harsh about his station.

My hon. Friend will not need me to tell him that the East Anglia region is a major economic engine. That is reflected in the amount of investment we have put into infrastructure across the whole of East Anglia, not least the £151 million for river crossings at Ipswich and Lowestoft, which I know he has been a champion of for a long while, and £1.1 billion going into road improvements, including to the A47 and A12. It is however right and proper that we focus on the East Suffolk rail line to which he referred. I understand how important it is to balance the needs of all passengers in the region with the opportunities that he rightly mentioned are coming up in the future.

There are many lessons from the past about how to balance affordability and deliverability when prioritising what we do across the region as a whole. My hon. Friend will know that a useful and important document has been produced in recent months in terms of the Anglia route utilisation strategy that has come from Network Rail. That was put together with the help of many stakeholders including Suffolk County Council.
[Paul Maynard]

and the New Anglia local enterprise partnership. While it found no immediate case on demand alone for the improvements he seeks on the line, it pointed out—as he rightly did—that the immense amount of work that will be ongoing at Sizewell C changes the parameters of the debate. He was right to raise that issue.

We must also remember that the East Suffolk line is part of the much wider Abellio Greater Anglia franchise, on which we are seeing almost a revolution. As my hon. Friend pointed out, it used to be the graveyard for old carriages, but that is certainly not the case any longer, given the amount of investment that will go in. He rightly listed many of those improvements.

I for one entirely understand the importance of arriving at a terminus station and seeing one’s constituency or town in lights on the destination board. I get that thrill on the one occasion a day that Blackpool North appears at Euston station—it is only once a day; he will have far more services than me. I recognise why that matters to a town’s sense of place and purpose and where it sits in the wider world. In addition, we will see increased services from Cambridge and Norwich to Stansted as well as to Ipswich, so there are all positive things going on there.

That does not mean that there are not small, local improvements that we can make on the line that will help to improve journey times and line speeds, as well as the many other points my hon. Friend raised. Take what we have done at the level crossing at Halesworth: that is an example of a relatively small-scale investment that can make a meaningful contribution by speeding up the line, removing temporary speed restrictions and enhancing the service for local residents. That is a good thing.

We also have to take the longer term view. There have been many calls by local stakeholders, not least both of my hon. Friends in the debate, for improved transport links in east Suffolk ahead of the proposed development at Sizewell C. In particular, such improvements could help to accommodate the considerable increase in heavy goods vehicle movements expected once construction of that major infrastructure project commences. The focus of such movements to date has been on the road network, and I certainly acknowledge that local partners see the A12 as a key local route within Suffolk and vital for the planned growth within that corridor.

The A12 will see a substantial increase in traffic if the proposed power station gets the go-ahead. That is why, as my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney rightly pointed out, we recently awarded £1 million of funding for further development work on the business case for the project. Improving rail links has to be part of that project. It is entirely in line with Government policy on freight to encourage use of more environmentally friendly means of transport wherever feasible, not least—as both my hon. Friends pointed out—because of the proximity of the major port of Felixstowe on which so much of our wider maritime strategy is crucially dependent. Any steps to move heavy vehicles off the roads of Suffolk are likely to improve road safety radically as well, which is also important as we consider how to move forward. I am personally keen to ensure that future development at Sizewell also supports rail development.

I must be clear that my Department would not be involved in any rail proposals being put forward in advance of construction at Sizewell C. Planning consent has not yet been granted, and we would expect that rail costs directly linked to construction would be included as part of those construction costs. I urge the promoter, EDF, to enter into dialogue with the rail industry on future plans for rail freight movements: for example, to discuss expected loads and frequency, and how the network can manage any increase in freight during the construction of Sizewell C, if it goes ahead. I would be more than happy for my Department to help to facilitate such discussions if my hon. Friend would like us to play a role in that.

The existing spur off the East Suffolk line to Sizewell B is currently used for freight, but opportunities may also arise for new passenger services. In addition, any wider upgrades associated with Sizewell C may deliver benefits that could also be used by passenger services. Once the promoter’s plans are clear in that regard, I will be happy to commit that my Department will work with it and the rail industry to consider what enhancements to passenger services can be delivered in parallel with the freight plans.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the issue of bus services and their interaction with the local rail network. The ultimate goal is the integrated transport network that transport planners always talk of and we always wish to see. He will be aware that the Bus Services Bill will shortly come before the House. It will give local authorities new partnership powers that could enhance services at stations. In many areas, local authorities and operators have created such partnerships, which have led to improved bus services. The Bill will build on the success of those partnerships by allowing local authorities and operators to develop specific sets of measures to improve bus services in their areas. That should include better connections to rail stations.

My hon. Friend also raised the issue of improvements to Lowestoft station as well as improving journey times along the line. As we discussed at our meeting last year, no funding is currently identified for the level of improvement he seeks. Indeed, given that the line serves a local, regional market, it is unlikely at this stage that we would be able to agree any funding from the national rail enhancements budget. However, local authorities and the New Anglia local enterprise partnership are funded and well placed to assist with that work and facilitate funding on the basis of potential wider economic impacts. I urge my hon. Friend to engage with them, as I know he has done, and the wider rail industry to develop a case for those improvements.

My hon. Friend is right that we have to both nurture and sustain the existing line, to use his words. I hope he agrees that the many improvements already committed to in the new franchise will deliver significant benefits across his constituency. I look forward to hearing from him in the near future on how plans at Sizewell C can act as a further catalyst for new developments on this important railway line.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved.**

That this House has considered future investment in the East Suffolk railway line.
Leaving the EU

4.30 pm

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con):

I beg to move.

That this House has considered the process for the UK to leave the EU.

I am pleased that you are chairing the debate, Mr Bailey. I drafted the wording of the motion with a purpose. We have come to use Brexit as shorthand for our country’s extracting itself from the EU, but Brexit does our friends and neighbours in Northern Ireland a grave disservice. It is not Britain that will be leaving the EU, but the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Technically, if we are to use a shorthand at all it should be “UKexit”.

I applied for the debate before the Prime Minister’s excellent speech yesterday, in which she set out her objectives for the negotiations that will take place with the EU during the next couple of years. I wanted a debate because some of my constituents are confused. Like me, they are simple souls who believed that they knew exactly what they were doing when they voted to leave the EU in June 2016. The more knowledgeable among them even knew the process for achieving our withdrawal.

However, they are now confused, because they see certain hon. Members who apparently do not understand what is meant by democracy, such as the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who seems to think that a referendum result is only democratic if he is on the winning side. My constituents do not understand why, having voted overwhelmingly to leave the EU, their wishes are dismissed as only “advisory” by many remainers. It is not，“They should’ve listened to us,” but “They should’ve listened to me.”

My understanding of the process of leaving the EU is probably an oversimplification of the situation, although, as I said before, I am a simple soul. I believe that the first step is to notify other EU members that we intend to leave, by invoking article 50, and that nothing can be done until that happens, including negotiating with our EU partners. Article 50 is also bandied about as shorthand for setting the ball rolling, but I wonder how many people have actually read what it entails. I will enlighten those who do not know by reading it out:

“This is important—

“The Treaties shall cease to apply to the State in question from the date of entry into force of the withdrawal agreement or, failing that, two years after the notification referred to in paragraph 2, unless the European Council, in agreement with the Member State concerned, unanimously decides to extend this period.

4. For the purposes of paragraphs 2 and 3, the member of the European Council or of the Council representing the withdrawing Member State shall not participate in the discussions of the European Council or Council or in decisions concerning it.”

That seems pretty clear to me: the United Kingdom will leave the EU two years after invoking article 50, whether or not an agreement has been reached. That is my understanding of the process. I would like confirmation that I am right, and that article 50 of the Lisbon treaty will be triggered by the end of March.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he agree with my interpretation of the triggering of article 50: once triggered, it is an irrevocable process that nothing—not even Parliament—can stop either that being completed or Britain’s leaving the European Union?

Gordon Henderson: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, because it allows me to emphasise again that not only is that his interpretation and mine, but it is the EU’s interpretation. What he says is quite true: once we have invoked article 50, that is the end of the matter—we will be leaving the EU. That is my understanding of the process, and I would like confirmation that I am right.

I would also like the Minister to clarify what will happen should the Supreme Court uphold the High Court’s ruling that Parliament should have a vote on any decision. As the Prime Minister made clear yesterday, leaving the EU will entail divorcing ourselves from all of the EU’s institutions, rules and regulations, including the single market, the customs union and the free movement of people—except under terms negotiated between the UK and the remaining member states. That is what my constituents understood, and it is what they voted for by a large majority in last year’s referendum.

Nationally, the United Kingdom voted by a margin of 52% to 48% to leave the EU. Some Members have said that that result is indecisive and should be ignored, but most of those Members were elected to this place with a lower percentage of the vote than 52%. Does that mean that we can ignore their opinion? I should add that, in my constituency of Sittingbourne and Sheppey, the margin in favour of leave was 62% to 38%.

I also add that my constituents who voted to leave are absolutely livid that some professor at Cambridge University called Nicholas Boyle is reported to have said:

“The referendum vote does not deserve to be respected...Like resentful ruffians uprooting the new trees in the park and trashing the new play area, 17 million English, the lager louts of Europe, voted for Brexit in an act of geopolitical vandalism.”

That is a disgraceful slur on my constituents and the rest of the 17 million decent people who voted to leave the EU—many of whom were Irish, Welsh and, indeed, Scottish.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman may have anticipated my point. I was going to say that, although he correctly pointed to the respective statuses of the United Kingdom and Great Britain earlier, there is clearly a massive flaw in the quote he read out. It was
not very many. 

Gordon Henderson: It was not my quote; it was by a professor of German from Cambridge University. He is a far more intelligent person than I am, but I understood that it was not only English people who voted to leave. I should add—the hon. Gentleman will probably realise this from my name—that my father comes from Glasgow. He is a proud Scot, but has lived in this country for 69 years. He is first and foremost British and considers himself so. Not only are those people called lager louts and vandals by this two-bit academic, but they are accused by other remainers, including Members of this place, of not understanding what they were voting for last June and of not being aware of the implications of an out vote. In addition to being insultingly patronising, that accusation simply does not stand up to even the flimsiest scrutiny.

Before the EU referendum campaign even started, the then Government sent every household an expensive leaflet, funded by taxpayers, setting out why people should vote to remain in the EU. Let me quote verbatim from that leaflet. It said that voting to remain would “protect jobs, provide security, and strengthen the UK’s economy for every family in this country—a clear path into the future, in contrast to the uncertainty of leaving.”

That was a pretty clear warning, but still 17 million people voted to leave the EU.

The remainers also tell us that although a majority voted to leave the EU, they did not vote to leave the single market. Let me quote from the Government leaflet again:

“Remaining inside the EU guarantees our full access to its Single Market. By contrast, leaving creates uncertainty and risk.”

That, too, was pretty clear: a vote to leave the EU was also a vote to leave the single market. But still 17 million people voted to leave.

Having lost the referendum, some remainers are attempting to change the rules of the game. They are now saying that the referendum was only advisory. That is twaddle. Let me read another couple of quotes from the Government leaflet. The first is this:

“This is your chance to decide your own future and the future of the United Kingdom. It is important that you vote.”

That is reinforced by a second quote:

“This is your decision. The Government will implement what you decide.”

Voters in the United Kingdom as a whole decided to leave the EU. It is now for the Government to deliver what was promised and get the process started by invoking article 50. They should not be preventing from doing so by those remainers who are unable to come to grips with the result of the referendum.

Some remainers argue that article 50 should not and cannot be triggered without first obtaining the approval of Parliament. I do not remember those people pointing out during the referendum campaign that the Government’s promise to implement any decision taken by voters was illegal. Instead, it is only now that they are trying to subvert the will of the people.

Peter Grant: On a point of order, Mr Bailey. I do not think I have ever raised a point of order since becoming a Member of Parliament. Is it in order for us to comment on the merits of a case that is sub judice before the Supreme Court? Should we not wait for the Supreme Court to decide before we comment on whether or not article 50 needs parliamentary approval?

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I do not really feel legally qualified to give a ruling on that, so I will permit the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) to continue with his contribution.

Gordon Henderson: Thank you, Mr Bailey. My comments were in no way designed to influence whatever the Supreme Court decides, but it is fairly common knowledge that it will give its ruling. My views are irrelevant to it.

The people I was talking about dress up their subversion with weasel words that would do credit to a used car salesman. They claim not to oppose UK exit, but their actions belie those words. I have no respect for those who say they want to abide by the referendum result but are desperately trying to find ways to somehow delay triggering article 50, in the hope that a way can be found to have a second referendum or a general election. As it happens, I think they are clutching at straws if they believe that voters would change their minds. In my view, if there was another referendum, the result would be an even more resounding vote to leave, because the “Project Fear” fox has been well and truly shot. In addition to realising that they were lied to by some remainers, the voting public do not like cheats and whingers, as those with a long political memory will know.

Dr Poulter: There is a point of view—I think a legitimate one—that as it took us passing an Act of Parliament to enter the European Union, Parliament will also legally be required to pass an Act of Parliament to take us out. That does not mean those of us who take that position in any way want to override the desire expressed by the British people to leave.

Gordon Henderson: I welcome my hon. Friend’s intervention, but he will not be surprised to know that I do not agree. I believe that when the Government hold a referendum in which they make it clear, as the then Government did, that the will of the people will be listened to, and when this Parliament—of which he and I were both Members at the time—decides to allow a referendum and for the British people’s view to be heard, we should hear it.

I talked earlier about those of us with a long political memory, and I want to remind people what happened in Winchester at the 1997 general election. The Conservative candidate lost by two votes to the Liberal Democrats, but after a successful petition, there was a rerun of the election, at which the Lib Dems won by a majority of more than 21,000. It is ironic that it is the Lib Dems leading the charge for another referendum. They appear not to have learned anything.

I mentioned the Government’s negotiating position. There are repeated calls from all sides of the House for Ministers to allow Members to scrutinise their plans in advance and vote on them. In my view, that would be quite ludicrous and could only be suggested by people who have little experience of business or absolutely no experience of negotiating. I have experience of both.
I left school at 16 and worked in the real world of business and commerce for almost 50 years before being elected to this House. For some of that time, I worked as a contracts officer for GEC-Marconi Avionics, which was then bought by British Aerospace. In that role, I negotiated with various customers, including the UK Ministry of Defence and McDonnell Douglas in America. There are no circumstances on earth that would have enticed me to reveal to those with whom I was negotiating information in advance about my negotiating stance. To have done so would have been akin to committing commercial suicide, so why should Ministers let our European neighbours know in advance what the Government’s strategy is? That would be stupid.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I am listening carefully to the great detail he is going into and, indeed, to his business experience. Could he tell us whether, in making any business decisions that would mean going through a significant period of change, the companies he worked for consulted the board or its employees? How would he compare that to how the UK Government consulted people on the detail of their plans in the run-up to the Brexit vote?

**Gordon Henderson:** I welcome the hon. Lady’s intervention, and I have a very easy answer for her. My experience in business is that shareholders elect a board of directors. The board of directors then employs people to manage the business, including negotiators, and does not expect to be kept informed of what is going to happen. If a negotiator messes up on a deal, they get the bullet. It is exactly the same thing here: if the Government mess up on this deal, they will not get re-elected at the 2020 election. That is the deal.

One thing I learned as a contracts officer was never to enter into any negotiation without a line beyond which I was not prepared to go, and to be prepared to walk away rather than cross that line. The Prime Minister said yesterday that in her view, no deal is better than a bad deal. I hope our negotiators remember her words and are prepared to walk away rather than accept a bad deal.

We often hear remainers talking about hard Brexit and soft Brexit. No one has explained to me exactly what those terms mean. I am assuming that by “soft exit” the remainers mean we should remain in a single market, even if that means we have to accept the free movement of labour in exchange. I also assume that they are happy for us to continue paying the EU billions of pounds a year for the privilege of having full access to the single market and accepting all the obligations that come with being a full member.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I want to inform hon. Members that I have sought legal opinion on the point of order raised by Peter Grant. The situation is that even if the House sub judice resolution did apply to the case before the Supreme Court, I judge that the risk of any prejudice from this debate be so small that I would waive the sub judice resolution. Members should, of course, refer respectfully to the judges involved in the case.

Two Back Benchers have indicated that they wish to contribute to the debate. Ordinarily, the Front-Bench spokesperson would have five minutes and the Minister would have 10 minutes. If the Back Benchers are so generous as to give a little more time to the Front-Bench spokesperson, I will enable them to have more time.

4.52 pm

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on what is a hugely important issue—the issue of our generation.

It is fair to say that, as the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) said, we should put the various political platitudes and soundbites of hard Brexit, soft Brexit and red, white and blue Brexit to one side and realise they are pretty meaningless to voters and the people who elected us. We must stop patronising the people of the UK and let this Tory Government off the hook by trivialising or minimising this complex issue to pitiful political platitudes. It is hugely important to have debates such as this as we go through the process and to remind ourselves that exiting the EU will be hugely complex and time-consuming; in fact, to quote the now Chancellor of the Exchequer, it could take “longer than the Second World War.”

That is why it still seems to me—and, I am sure, to many people across these islands of the UK—incridible that ahead of the EU referendum vote the Tory Government had no plans and nothing written down about the options and plans.

For a number of years before coming to Parliament, like the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey, I worked in the oil and gas sector, particularly in areas of business change. Like any business, when we embarked on large-scale change we drew up a road map of where we wanted to go. We started with where we were, what we wanted to do and how we would do it. Along with that were extensive details of what departments of the business would be affected, who might lose their jobs and how we could mitigate and protect any threats to our business. I can almost see the coloured Post-it notes and the mind maps.

I am pretty certain that every business person, organisation and individual across the UK looked at the proceedings and the details that came out in the press in the run-up to the Brexit vote—or, it would be fair to say, lack of detail—and assumed that at the very least the Tory Government had a basic analysis of the impact of exiting the EU and what the processes would be. However, it seems that the nation was mistaken. The press reported:

“Civil servants will be secretly working on ‘Brexit’ plans but not writing them down”.

Can anyone imagine a CEO going to the board of a company and saying, “Don’t worry. Our company won’t fail. I have been doing lots of thinking and it’s all in my head. Success means success, it will be red, white and blue and you can all now vote on whether you are with me or against me?” They would be laughed out of the boardroom.

Even the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, thought the former Prime Minister was pulling her leg when he said that he did not have a plan for the UK if it
should vote to leave the EU. However, he was not kidding, and we now know what happens to Prime Ministers who do not have a plan.

By contrast, when we held a referendum on Scottish independence in 2014, we did have a plan. We consulted people the length and breadth of the country. We even wrote things down. We may not have had all the answers, but we engaged and prepared, and presented a pretty extensive White Paper that people could read, digest and consider before they were taken to the polls on such an important issue. We felt that we had set the gold standard for referendums. When the then Prime Minister bumbled into Brexit without any proper forethought, he put the economy of the United Kingdom, people’s livelihoods and our international reputation on the line. I hope that as the Government enter into the process of exit from the EU they will reflect long and hard on how badly they have failed the people of the UK with respect to a proper planning process.

There are questions that are important to people and businesses across the nations of the UK, about the working of the process but also about what it means for their lives and livelihoods. We so often get caught up in technical jargon and doublespeak. Brexit has been the ultimate case in point. People and businesses need to be able to plan for the future, and the Tory Government need to be open and transparent about what they are doing and how they are doing it, and to ensure that, as they promised, they will consult all the nations of the United Kingdom.

To use my own constituency as an example, Livingston was a new town, built in the 1950s and designated in 1962. It attracted significant EU structural funding. I have heard from people in my constituency who came from other parts of Europe to set up homes and businesses in Livingston, where business relies particularly on workers from the EU. The town is Scotland’s third major retail hub, with the McArthurGlen outlet drawing in thousands of shoppers every week. The retail sector employs no fewer than 2 million workers in the UK, many of them in my constituency; and many of them are worried about their status.

My constituents and local businesses are not the only ones with concerns. The report published by the Exiting the European Union Committee earlier this month, entitled “The process for exiting the European Union and the Government’s negotiating objectives”, warns of an urgent need to “provide certainty and reassurance to the individuals, their families and the businesses and services that rely on them.”

JP Morgan commented yesterday, after the Prime Minister’s Brexit speech, that not to have clear details, particularly for trade, was “very dangerous”.

The Prime Minister said yesterday: “Brexit must mean control of the number of people who come to Britain from Europe.”

In Scotland, EU membership supports more than 300,000 jobs directly and indirectly. The Fraser of Allander Institute has predicted that Scotland could lose up to 80,000 jobs.

I know from the cases that come through my constituency office that the Home Office has rules and new regulations coming out of its ears; they change every week. It is so disorganised that there are no proper, efficient systems for dealing with immigration. As the UK sets out the process for exit from the EU, I want to ask the Minister officially, will the Government review the current processes? It is apparent that those processes are not working and therefore, instead of looking to review and improve them, they are going to close the door and not let in anyone else from the EU. The Minister shakes his head, but the fact is that people do not know what their status is going to be.

Just before we returned from the recess, both the CBI and the Federation of Small Businesses expressed serious concern about the lack of clarity as to EU workers, their status, and the impact on business. As we look forward, it is essential that the Prime Minister should stick to the commitment that he gave today in Prime Minister’s questions to work with the devolved nations. She made specific reference to the Scotland plan and gave a commitment to working with the Scottish Government on the way forward. That is welcome news but the process is complex and Scotland’s position and the result of the EU vote in Scotland must be respected.

The Scottish National party strongly believes that the best way to build a more prosperous and equal Scotland is to be a full member of the EU, and certainly advocates staying within the single market, even if the rest of the UK leaves. According to the UK Government’s own analysis, leaving the single market could lower Scotland’s GDP by more than £10 billion. Furthermore, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research suggests that Scotland’s exports could be cut by more than £5 billion if we lose access to the single market. The EU is the main destination for Scottish exports; it receives 42% of Scotland’s international exports. As the negotiations take place, it is vital that there is a more transparent process than we have seen today and that there is greater detail.

Triggering article 50 will directly affect devolved interests and rights in Scotland. The UK’s current constitutional arrangements are underpinned by membership of the EU. Leaving the EU therefore requires reconsideration of the devolution settlement. Critically, the Exiting the European Union Committee report commented on the work that the Government still need to do before triggering article 50. It stated that “it is essential that all the devolved governments, and the different regions of England, are fully involved in the process and have their views taken into account.”

Separately, there is a need to devolve more powers to Scotland, in order to safeguard current EU rights and social protections in areas such as employment and to allow the Scottish Parliament to protect Scotland’s wider interests, including any differential relationship with Europe.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union told me directly in the Chamber yesterday that he wanted to ensure that there was no detriment to workers in Scotland from other parts of the EU. Yet the Tory Government have pursued pernicious and damaging policies such as those set out in the Trade Union Act 2016. Many of us wonder what they will do when the powers are transferred from Europe.

Of course any proposal to remove Scotland from the EU will need legislation from Westminster, but the First Minister of Scotland has made it crystal clear that any such legislation would require the consent of the
Scottish Parliament. The people of Scotland voted, by a majority, to remain in the EU. As we go through the process of exiting the EU, the UK Government must take account of what the people of Scotland voted for. They must not take us off a cliff edge into a hard Tory Brexit. They must do everything they can to accept the will of the people of the devolved nations by considering the plans that have been put forward.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespersons by 5.10 pm.

5.2 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on setting the scene very well. He and I are of a similar mind, as are other hon. Members in this Chamber, but it is always good to give a balance to the debate, which is on a major issue for us all.

I have been vocal in my desire to see our sovereignty restored. I was overjoyed to learn that the Vote Leave campaign had been successful and that the will of the people, as demonstrated in the democratic vote, was to be followed. I have been disheartened by those, most often in the media, who have perpetuated the belief that there is still some way in which that may not happen, as the hon. Gentleman said. All the challenges that have arisen in the law courts are a vain attempt to circumnavigate the will of the people.

The same thing is happening in Northern Ireland at the moment, as Members following events over there will be aware. The will of the people was to elect a strong Democratic Unionist party team, and because the strength of that team was too overwhelming for Sinn Féin, it collapsed the institution, to take power and change that outcome. I do not believe that that should be allowed to happen on the European question: we must stand fast on it. Our leave process must begin. Article 50 should be triggered. I congratulate the Prime Minister on her statement yesterday and on her clear and firm control of the steering wheel, which is in good hands as we move out of Europe.

I am not so simple-minded that I do not understand the massive intrinsic complexities that these steps bring with them. We need to be certain of what is achievable and how we achieve it. The bitter grapes of wrath against people who dare to exercise their democratic right by voting to leave must be put away. We must all work together to secure the best possible outcome for each and every constituent, regardless of how they voted. I have spoken at length to those who are preparing our strategies and policies for Brexit and I have been incredibly vocal about the need to ensure that the needs of Northern Ireland are taken into account, especially in the light of the events of the last week in Northern Ireland that have prevented those in our Assembly from being able to do their job and have input.

I am grateful for our party’s team here in Westminster. My right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) continues to work closely with the Government and with Ministers in a very positive and direct fashion. He recently met Michel Barnier, the EU chief Brexit negotiator, privately in Strasbourg, to ensure that he, too, was informed of the distinctive challenges faced and the special arrangements required by Northern Ireland.

There is a need for flexibility to ensure minimal disruption to existing border arrangements under the common travel area, which predates the EU continuation of trade, with the Republic of Ireland. As my right hon. Friend has said, stability around those arrangements will be key in helping to secure the continuation of good relations and the peace that the EU has assisted in fostering. Article 8 of the Lisbon treaty outlines the European Union’s desire to “develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries” in the interests of “prosperity and good neighbourliness…and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation.”

Being positive about how we are moving forward and taking people with us must be the character of the Brexit process. It must be in the best interests of all the people of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

A withdrawal agreement will set out detailed transition provisions that should state the future relationship with the EU. Despite that, there are particular concerns about the UK’s trading relationship with the EU. My concerns lie in such areas as the agri-food industry. EU exporters have been known to price competitively. Those who depend on imports from the EU face higher costs for some things. Our process and negotiations must ensure that fair costs in the import and export of goods from different countries are maintained. There are negotiations in place to allow New Zealand to supply lamb with zero duty. Those arrangements are in place. They are possible and they must be made available to us. Interestingly, in the news today, we heard the Government’s statement that many countries are queuing up to sign trade contracts with us outside of Europe. That is an indication of the confidence that the rest of the world has, and it shows why we should be confident in what we are doing, too. That was good news.

Fishermen are not able to fish or work in their own waters, but Brexit will enable them to reclaim their rights to fish sensibly under sensible guidelines, with a sound business plan that will increase viability, create jobs and lead to a better future. The fishermen in Portavogie in my constituency and across Northern Ireland and the whole United Kingdom, including Scotland, want to have control. We have to have that.

There has been talk of changes to workers’ rights due to a change in regulations, but I believe that the small and large businesses in our counties often go further than the European rights, such as by making enhanced and longer periods of maternity leave available. We are doing many things better than Europe intended. I am positive about workers’ rights. I had the opportunity to meet the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland. That was not by my invitation alone, but I was one of those who invited her. We had the opportunity to meet some companies to talk about workers’ rights, some of the problems they have and how the Secretary of State sees the cross-border trade working.

After hearing what the Secretary of State said, I am confident that our agri-food industry will be able to co-operate and do business in the Republic of Ireland. I am also confident about the workers we have in our factories and their futures. Many have married, integrated, bought houses and are living in our areas. I have had
parents express concerns to me about university places in Europe and the availability of placements, but I point to the reciprocal arrangements that countries such as Switzerland and Norway have in place. We are already doing it. People should not get alarmed about what is happening. Arrangements are already in place that we can take advantage of.

I have raised many issues. I put it on record yesterday, and I will do so again today: I have faith and confidence in the Brexit team, in our Prime Minister and in those negotiating to deliver Brexit for us. We must trigger article 50 when our confidence in how we are achieving our goals is strong. I believe that the Secretary of State and the Brexit team are aware of that, and I have faith and confidence in their timing.

The onus on each Member in this House is to respect the democratic will of the people, to get involved in the process and to help to secure the best advantages for this country. They should stop creating roadblocks and putting up legal challenges that go against the will of the people as expressed in the referendum. We need to deliver what the people said, and they want out. They want a constructive relationship with Europe, and that is as it should be. There are advantages to having trading partners, but there are more advantages to being out of Europe, and I look forward to that. We need the knowledge to foresee the bumps in the road and to help smooth the obstacles. We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to improve the economy and expand our trading relationships with other countries. I am very confident about the future, and all those who voted remain are also confident. Many of those who voted remain are also looking forward to those opportunities. Let us get it right and let us do it together.

5.9 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to sum up on behalf of the Scottish National party in this debate, and I commend the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) for securing it.

In his opening speech, the hon. Gentleman reminded us that the requirement of the UK Government is to deliver and implement article 50 in accordance with the United Kingdom’s own constitutional requirements. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for reminding us, among other things, of the very special—indeed, unique—place that Northern Ireland has in the constitutional requirements of the United Kingdom. I hope that, whatever else happens, nothing in the implementation of article 50 will jeopardise in any way the very fragile and tenuous peace process that is still, thankfully, just about in place in Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey quoted some figures and made some assumptions about the percentage of the vote that various MPs received from the electorate. I must say that my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) actually bucked the trend that he referred to, because she got just under 57% of the vote in her election. Modesty forbids me from telling the House that I got just under 60%. Members will have worked out immediately that both those numbers are higher than 52%; indeed, they are also both higher than 55%, which is a number that is quite significant for some of us. Admittedly, though, they are far short of 62%, which is the percentage that matters most to me in this debate, because 62% is how many of my people said they wanted to stay in the European Union.

Gordon Henderson: I will just point out that 62% was also the majority in my constituency here in England.

Peter Grant: I commend the hon. Gentleman for his great persuasive powers in achieving that result. I delicately remind him that I did not say 62% in my constituency; I said 62% in my country. There is an important difference.

The final comment that I will make in relation to the hon. Gentleman is that I share his distaste and despair at the tone of some of the debate before, during and after the referendum, and I certainly completely distance myself from the description that he referred to, which was used against all of the 17 million people who voted to leave the EU. I respect the right of people to take their own decisions. I may sometimes be horrified, dismayed, appalled or disappointed by the decisions that they take, but I will respect the decision that the people of England have taken and I also respect the decision that the people of Wales have taken. I ask Members to respect the views that have been expressed by the people of Scotland.

However, I gently have to remind the hon. Gentleman that it is not the first time in the last few years that opponents of change have told packs of lies to the population during a referendum, and I also have to say that I do not remember him protesting as loudly the last time it happened, which was in Scotland.

The debate is about the process for leaving the European Union, but it would be foolish to try to talk about the process without talking about where we want to be at the end of it, because knowing where we want to be can have a huge impact on the process that we choose to follow, and the way that we implement the process can significantly affect our chances of getting the results that we want.

What are the objectives and how have they been arrived at? Well, we have got some clarity on the first question, but not a great deal of clarity on the second. We now know something about the objectives. We now know that the Prime Minister’s objective is not to have free movement of people, but we do not know exactly what she wants instead. We now know that the Prime Minister does not want to be part of the single market; we just do not know what she wants to be part of instead. And we now know—well, we knew already—that when we negotiate this avalanche of new trade deals with everybody and their dog, who, according to the Foreign Secretary, are queuing to do deals with this wee pocket of land in the north Atlantic, those deals will not be subject to adjudication by the Court of Justice of the European Union; we just do not know whose jurisdiction they will come under. In other words, we know a great deal about what the Prime Minister does not want, but we are not an awful lot further forward in knowing what she does want.

Shortly after the referendum, the Liberal Democrats—yes, they do sometimes have their uses—came up with the phrase that the referendum result told us that people wanted to leave but we did not really have any idea about where they wanted to go, and I am not convinced that things have changed very much since then.
We cannot even get reliable and consistent answers from the Government about how they will decide on their objectives. Yesterday, in answer to my question about the Scottish Government’s paper, “Scotland’s Place in Europe”, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union told the House:

“I gave him”—
That is, Mike Russell MSP—
“an undertaking that we would debate that paper at the next JMC (EN), as it is known in Whitehall jargon, and that is what we will do. I have been very careful not to comment publicly on it”.—[Official Report, 17 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 798.]

He was referring to the Scottish Government’s paper—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. I call Matthew Pennycook.

5.15 pm
Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on securing this important and timely debate, as well as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) on their powerful contributions. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey was forceful and direct in making his argument, and I will try to be the same.

I will start by saying that Labour accepts and respects the outcome of the referendum. It was the largest exercise of direct democracy in our country’s history and more than 33 million votes were cast. It was a lengthy, wide-ranging campaign that culminated in a high public turnout and a clear, but close, outcome. Throughout, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, the public were led to expect that the result would be honoured and implemented, and it should be. Labour accepts that we are exiting the EU and we therefore have no intention, should the Supreme Court uphold the High Court’s November ruling on 24 January, of frustrating the start of that process by voting against the triggering of article 50 out of hand.

However, Labour believes that the Government have approached the matter in the wrong way by arguing, as they have done and continue to do, that Parliament should have no say in the matter. All the effort and cost that will have been incurred by 24 January could have been avoided if Ministers had simply assured the House at an early stage that a plan setting out the Government’s basic negotiating terms would be forthcoming, and had proceeded with a vote on the triggering of article 50 on that basis. That is an approach that we would have welcomed.

Once article 50 has been served there will—I agree with the hon. Gentleman—be a hard two-year deadline within which to conclude a divorce settlement. However, the question of how long reaching that settlement and agreeing a new relationship with the EU 27 will take will be determined by the complexity of the negotiations to come. I agree, in this respect, with the hon. Member for Livingston—I am staggered that the Government did not do even the most rudimentary planning prior to 23 June.

From the speech that the Prime Minister delivered yesterday we do, at last, have some much-needed clarity on how the Government intend to approach the negotiations. I have to say to the Minister, however, that I find it extraordinary that it has taken this long, and that the Prime Minister chose to make her announcement in a speech rather than in a statement to the House. Nor does Labour view that speech as a substitute for a detailed published plan of the kind that would allow parliamentary bodies and devolved Administrations to conduct effective scrutiny. With regard to the substance of the speech, it was disappointing to learn that the Government have walked away from the single market, whatever the cost to our economy, jobs and trade, before the negotiations have even begun and, in doing so, have put at risk our barrier-free trading relationship with the EU. It was also irresponsible and counterproductive of the PM to threaten the EU 27 with the prospect of turning Britain into a deregulated offshore tax haven if she falls short in her negotiations.

However, we acknowledge that the Government have accepted many of the demands that we have been making for months, and will now seek full access to the single market, free of tariffs and unencumbered by impediments, and something short of complete withdrawal from the customs union. They are also working towards a co-operative and collaborative relationship with the EU 27 on a range of issues including security, defence, foreign affairs and science and research. However, let us be clear that in aiming for each of those objectives—the ones that we have been pressing for, as well as her own red lines on immigration and leaving the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice—the Prime Minister has set her Government and the Brexit team a herculean task. It will certainly be far tougher and more complex than the more cavalier Members on the Government Benches would have us believe.

What is more, for all the clarity that the speech did provide, it also had significant gaps. We have no idea, for example, what the basis is for the Government’s conviction that there is a middle way on the customs union that will not fall foul of World Trade Organisation rules. I do not hold out much hope, but perhaps the Minister might like to enlighten us this afternoon. Nor are we any the wiser as to where the Government will come down when confronted with the difficult choices that will inevitably arise in the negotiations. We do not know, for example, whether they will prioritise the reduction of immigration over the economy and jobs, or vice versa. Should the EU 27 not agree to give the Prime Minister the type of single market access that she seeks and we on this side believe is essential for our economic prosperity.

We have made some progress in that Ministers now clearly recognise how complex the negotiations will be and have therefore conceded, contrary to what the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union argued for many months, that an agreement on a new relationship is not likely to be completed before the end of March 2019. As such, as we have long argued, some form of transitional arrangement now looks likely, but we are still none the wiser about precisely how long the Government expect that transitional arrangement to continue. Perhaps the Minister can enlighten us.

5.20 pm
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on securing this
[Mr Robin Walker]

debate and on his excellent speech. He said that he was a simple soul, but he went on to demonstrate a grip of the facts and an erudition that rather belied that comment. He did a good job of not only representing his constituents but sharing the benefit of his commercial and negotiating expertise, which we welcome.

After the Prime Minister’s speech and the Secretary of State’s statement yesterday, I agree with the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) that it is a good thing that we debate these matters and the process of exiting the European Union. This is not the first time that I have stood in this Chamber in a debate while another debate on this process is going on in the main Chamber. That demonstrates the degree of parliamentary attention and scrutiny that the process is receiving.

Hannah Bardell: On a point of clarification, I am pleased that we are now debating the detail, but I hope that the Minister shares the view—I am sure it is held by many people across the country—that it would have been great if we had had that detail in the run-up to the vote so that people had the full information about what this Tory Government are taking us into through this process.

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady expresses an opinion about the past and the arguments that we had during the referendum. I think it is important to focus on the future and the process.

In the time that I have, I will make some brief remarks about the Government’s key objectives. First, in answer to the direct question that my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey asked, I want to clarify that the Government are committed to respecting the will of the British people and delivering on the referendum result. That is why I welcome this debate and the opportunity to focus on the process and how we can get the best deal for the UK. As the Prime Minister has said, we will trigger article 50 and begin the process of leaving the EU by the end of March. That timetable has given us a bit of time to prepare the negotiating strategy and engage constructively with stakeholders. Yesterday’s announcements about our aims were informed by that consultation, which is ongoing.

We want a smooth departure from the EU and a new, positive, constructive and equal partnership for Britain and the EU—a partnership that will be good for Britain and good for the rest of Europe. That is why in her speech yesterday the Prime Minister set out a serious and ambitious vision of a new partnership with the EU for a global Britain, including a comprehensive plan covering our 12 negotiating objectives. I will not repeat them all, because all hon. Members will have followed that speech closely, but it is important that I reiterate their importance and, with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in the room, say that one of the key principles is to maintain the common travel area with Ireland. In answer to the hon. Member for Livingston’s point—[Interruption.] I will not give way, because I have limited time to deliver quite a lot of detail, but in answer to one of the points that the Scottish National party has made regularly, the Prime Minister put an emphasis on protecting the rights of EU nationals in Britain and British nationals in the EU.

To deliver those objectives, officials in my Department and Ministers have carried out a programme of sectoral regulatory analysis and engaged with every devolved Administration and regions across the whole UK to identify the key factors for businesses, communities and the labour force that will affect our negotiations. We are also building a detailed understanding of how withdrawing from the EU will affect our domestic policies to seize the opportunities and ensure a smooth exit process.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey said clearly, the way to start a negotiation is not to tell the people we are negotiating with exactly what we plan to do. Indeed, the House agreed without a Division on 12 October last year that nothing we do or say should undermine the UK’s negotiating position. That was supported by a majority of more than five to one in a Division on 7 December. I welcome the support of my hon. Friend. Friend for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), that it is a Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) that it is a]

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that the final deal that is agreed between the UK and the EU will be subject to a vote in both Houses of Parliament before it comes into force.

Matthew Pennycook: Will the Minister confirm that the vote that Parliament will have will be a take-it-or-leave-it vote, with “leave it” being the hardest possible exit on WTO default terms?

Mr Walker: The Prime Minister has made it clear that Parliament will have a vote. There will be plenty of opportunities during the process for Parliament to exert its views and to influence the process. I want to come on to some of those.

As I have already described, we have had a huge amount of parliamentary scrutiny. I do not have the time to run through all of it, but it is important to reiterate the commitment that the Secretary of State has made to keeping this Parliament at least as well informed as the European Parliament as negotiations progress. He has set out that he will provide as much information as possible, subject to that not undermining the national interest. It is clear that negotiations will be fast moving and will cover sensitive material, so we will need to find ways of engaging with Parliament throughout the process. We are working through the practicalities of that and will say more when the work is complete.

Parliament’s role will not be restricted to scrutiny and making recommendations. Leaving the EU will require legislation. In particular, the Government will be bringing forward legislation in the next Session that, when enacted, will repeal the European Communities Act 1972 and ensure a functioning statute book on the day that we leave the EU. In considering that great repeal Bill, Parliament will have a crucial role to play in determining the future legal framework of our country.

My hon. Friend made a very good point about the slang of Brexit and the fact that it should be “UKexit”, and the Prime Minister was very clear in her speech yesterday that we must deliver for the whole United Kingdom. The Government will continue to engage fully with the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive to get the best possible deal for all parts of our United Kingdom as we leave the EU. We will give the devolved Administrations every appropriate opportunity to have their say, and we will look at any suggestions that they put forward. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union confirmed yesterday, and as the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) said, the Joint Ministerial Committee will be discussing Scotland’s plans and proposals when it meets tomorrow.

The UK Government have made it clear that we intend to fully involve Gibraltar, Crown dependencies and overseas territories as we prepare for exit, to ensure that their interests are properly taken into account. As such, the first meeting of the UK-Gibraltar Ministerial Forum took place on 7 December. My very first debate in this Chamber was on Gibraltar. I have committed to quarterly meetings with the Chief Ministers of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man, and we meet again next week. UK Ministers and leaders of the overseas territories have committed to taking forward future engagement through the creation of a new joint ministerial council. Having those processes in place will ensure that we take into account the views of all parts of the UK and the territories whose interests we represent in the negotiations to come.

It is clear from today’s debate that there remain a wide range of views about the Government’s plans for leaving the EU. However, the process for leaving the EU is clearly set out in article 50. The Government are determined to respect the will of the people by invoking article 50 and beginning the process by March, and we must do that in a way that delivers for 100% of the people of this United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the process for the UK to leave the EU.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered decommissioning of in vitro fertilisation and other NHS fertility services.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mrs Gillan.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate; to the right hon. Members for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), and for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), for their support in securing it; and to the many other Members who are either here today or who have indicated their support for a debate on IVF. Change is urgently needed in this area, and we have broad, cross-party support for such change.

I know that it is not customary, Mrs Gillan, to refer to the Public Gallery during debates such as this one, but perhaps I can just say in passing that I am told that a number of people have travelled here today because of the importance they attach to this issue, and because of their strong feelings that what is going on is not fair and needs to change. It is through listening to their experiences that I have begun to understand the extent to which the present arrangements are not working.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, rather than imposing a postcode lottery on our constituents by withdrawing these services, the areas under financial pressure need to become more efficient and to look at how other areas manage their health systems better to make efficiencies, so that in vitro fertilisation can be provided everywhere?

Steve McCabe: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman about a postcode lottery; there is a massive variation in service, so we must strive to achieve a cost-efficient system that is genuinely national in the way it is delivered. I agree with that absolutely.

This debate is about IVF and related services. At a time of so much concern about the NHS generally, the debate could easily drift towards becoming a series of questions about other aspects of the NHS, but I am clear that we asked for this debate to raise concerns associated with those who need treatment for infertility issues.

Infertility is a problem that does not get a lot of Government or parliamentary attention; in fact, it was not debated at all in the previous Parliament. Yet we know that it is an issue that affects one in six couples in the UK and is the second most common reason for a woman to visit her GP. The problems of infertility are recognised by the World Health Organisation as a condition for which medical treatment should be provided, but that is not how we approach the matter today in England.

I am immensely grateful to my constituent Louise Jackson for bringing this issue to my attention and for giving me permission to share some of her experience with people today. Louise and her partner have been together for more than 13 years and have been trying for a baby for nearly six years. After tests confirmed that they would need IVF treatment, they were refused it because Louise’s partner already had a child, as a result of a previous relationship in 1975. That child is actually older than Louise herself, who has said:

“Anyone who is experiencing fertility problems will understand the agonising pain and upset it brings on a daily basis. The fact that we have been refused treatment on the NHS just adds to the anguish. We cannot express enough how hard it is to not be able to have children naturally, never mind being faced with the fact we’ve been saving for years for the thousands needed for this treatment. I hope one day these laws will be changed for couples like us and others in the near future.”

My information is that four clinical commissioning groups in England—Mid Essex, North East Essex, Basildon and Brentwood, and South Norfolk—have already decommissioned their assisted conception services, essentially as a cost-saving measure. Also, more than one in 10 CCGs in England are currently consulting on reducing or entirely decommissioning NHS fertility treatment. That means that more than 60 Members of Parliament represent seats where the provision of IVF services is at risk.

The guidelines produced by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence are fairly clear on the provision of IVF services. NICE recommends that all those women who are eligible for IVF should have access to three full cycles of IVF if the woman is aged under 40, and in 2013 it updated its guidance to recommend that further women aged between 40 and 42, and who meet some additional criteria, should have access to one full cycle.

Fertility Fairness is an umbrella body that has the support of several organisations, including the Royal College of Nursing, the Association of Clinical Embryologists, the British Fertility Society, the National Gamete Donation Trust and the Miscarriage Association.

In 2016, it undertook an audit of every CCG in England and found that only 16% of CCGs offer three cycles of IVF, which is the NICE recommendation. That was down from 24% in 2013, while the number of CCGs offering just one cycle of NHS-funded IVF treatment has leapt to 60%. The Minister is on record as saying that she finds the decommissioning of such services “unacceptable”, so she will not be surprised if I ask her what she plans to do in response to these figures.

According to NICE, a full cycle of IVF treatment should include one round of ovarian stimulation and the transfer of all resultant fresh and frozen embryos, but only four out of 209 CCGs comply with the NICE definition of a “full cycle”. As a result, in many parts of England, these efforts to provide IVF on the cheap are—perversely—wasting resources, because this incomplete offer is rarely successful and compromises the cost-effectiveness of IVF as a treatment. It is a bit like giving less than the recommended dosage of any other drug or treatment.

As I have said, NICE offers guidance on age appropriateness for IVF. However, without being required to offer any kind of explanation, some CCGs have lowered the maximum age for IVF to 35; others have introduced non-medical criteria, such as refusing couples...
We assumed that the law in this country would support us and the lottery. It's not a lifestyle choice. It's a medical condition."

In Birmingham, CCGs justify their approach by testing their proposals via public consultation, and in 2014 a consultation covering the criteria for eight CCGs across the west midlands was undertaken. Of the 351 people who responded, 40% were against providing IVF to a couple where one party has a child from a previous relationship; 40% disagreed with that view; and 20% did not know. Nevertheless, those proposals are now the criteria that must be met. I cannot imagine such a crude approach being adopted for determining treatment eligibility for any other medical condition, but that of course is part of the problem.

Too many people think, in defiance of the World Health Organisation, that it is a lifestyle issue and not a medical condition. That is not helped by the fact that the Department of Health merely asks that CCGs “have regard to” the NICE guidelines. This recognised medical condition can have a number of related impacts. If left untreated, it can result in stress, anxiety, depression and the breakdown of relationships. A recent survey of almost 1,000 people with infertility problems conducted by Middlesex University found that 90% of respondents reported feeling depressed and 42% reported feeling suicidal, which was up from 20% when a similar study was conducted in 1997. Some 70% reported a detrimental impact on their relationship, and 15% said that it had led to the break-up of their relationship.

The debate is not about statistics, though; it is about real people and the devastating impact that being denied treatment for infertility problems can have on their lives. On Monday afternoon, I took part in a digital consultation with many members of the public, and they helped contribute to our debate today. Hundreds of people shared their experiences. I cannot name them all, but I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their contributions. I want to briefly share just a few examples that illustrate the kind of problems that mean we need to see some significant change in the delivery of this service.

Kelly Da Silva from south Derbyshire said:

“This is such an important issue for me, the anxiety and depression caused as a direct result of infertility and involuntary childlessness has affected every aspect of my life and caused me to leave a successful 12-year teaching career. The emotional and social impacts are absolutely devastating.”

Becky Thomas is from Hertfordshire, and comes under the direction of a Cambridgeshire CCG. She said:

“My local CCG cut the amount of cycles they offer from three down to one and are considering getting rid altogether. I live in one area that actually offers three full cycles however I come under a completely different CCG. It shouldn’t be a postcode lottery. It’s not a lifestyle choice. It’s a medical condition.”

Erin Nina Desirae from Sheffield said:

“I am in a same-sex marriage. My wife and I have been together for six years and have always talked about having children. We assumed that the law in this country would support us and enable us to try for a family with help from the NHS. Unfortunately, we were surprised and hurt to find that same-sex couples are not offered fertility treatment on the NHS until we have first self-funded at least six cycles ourselves. Whilst a heterosexual couple can receive NHS treatment after two years of trying to conceive. This feels like discrimination. Why should we be treated differently?”

What of the costs? Evidence suggests that many of the decommissioning and service reduction decisions are driven largely by budget considerations. Reports show that the cost to CCGs of commissioning one cycle of IVF can range from £1,300 to £6,000. It varies dramatically across the country. For example, it is much cheaper in Newcastle than it is in Birmingham, without any obvious explanation. What kind of way is that to run a health service and provide a vital treatment? Is it not a classic example of the fragmentation of the NHS that many predicted would follow the Lansley reorganisation?

In England, more than 200 CCGs are responsible for setting their own criteria and commissioning their own IVF services. To make matters worse, research suggests that the high cost of IVF in the private sector is forcing people to travel to such countries as the Czech Republic, where IVF treatment is far cheaper. The problem is that IVF is not anywhere near as well regulated as it is in the UK. As a direct result of reducing services in the UK, the NHS is being saddled with the high cost of complicated multiple pregnancies and births and other postnatal issues. There is also the additional cost to mental health services, which I touched on earlier.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Mr McCabe, this sort of thing happens to people all the time. We will bear with you.

Steve McCabe: I cannot believe I have done it, but I am extremely grateful for your patience.

As I was saying, the costs of people having to go abroad fall on the NHS, and that leads to further complications that may impact on our mental health services.

In the course of my speech, I have concentrated on the impact on women, but the issue does not solely affect women. It affects couples, same-sex couples and men. I understand that CCGs that are cutting back on IVF generally are also cutting back on ICSI—I am told that it stands for intracytoplasmic sperm injection and is the most common treatment for men with infertility problems—and I worry that men's experiences of infertility are not fully appreciated. They may also suffer hidden trauma and stress as a result of their problems. I am grateful to Richard Clothier from Dunstable who said:

“The emotional strain served to us when our infertility was confirmed was absolutely horrific and debilitating. However, this does not touch the sides when compared with the mental health deterioration we endured from the precise point at which we learned our entitlement has been slashed by two thirds. Luton, in the same county, has three cycles, the rest of us in Bedfordshire get just one cycle.”

What do I hope to get from this debate? I hope that the Minister, by the time she has had a chance to reflect on all the contributions and the terrible experiences of so many people, will have heard enough to be convinced that she should set up an investigation into the provision
of IVF services in England. I hope she will be persuaded to offer much stronger guidance to clinical commissioning groups that in all normal circumstances they should be expected to comply with NICE guidelines and at the very least offer a clear and unambiguous explanation for their reasons when they choose not to follow NICE guidelines. I hope she will be persuaded to look again at the case for setting a national tariff for the provision of IVF. It is simply ludicrous that when NHS resources are so stretched, as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said earlier, the same treatment can vary in price between £1,300 and £6,000. Those who have suffered with this condition feel they have been ignored and mistreated for far too long. They are entitled to expect that we will now act to address the problem.

1.49 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for securing it. I appeared with him in front of the rather intimidating Backbench Business Committee, but thanks to his eloquence and advocacy we now have time to raise this issue in the House. Hon. Members frequently table questions about IVF, but I do not recall when we last had a debate on the subject. It is right that we have the chance to raise the issue, which has frequently crossed my desk since I was lucky enough to be elected to represent the Wantage constituency. Like the hon. Gentleman, I will talk about some of the cases that have come across my desk. They will sound very similar to those that he raised, because couples not being able to have children and not being able to access the treatment that can help them have children has a huge emotional and health impact on them.

As the hon. Gentleman said in his eloquent opening speech, which covered all the issues, it is important to stress that infertility is a disease. Choosing to have children—I hate to put it like this—is not a lifestyle choice; it is a fundamental choice that many people are lucky enough to be able to make. People who are not able to conceive children suffer from a disease, and I think it is therefore incumbent on the national health service to help combat the impact of that disease, as it does for many other diseases. This issue is much more prevalent than people realise: it affects one in seven couples in the UK. I am sure everybody in this House knows people who have been affected directly, and our constituents contact us about it. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, it is the second most common reason why women visit their GP.

We have also heard how more and more clinical commissioning groups are now disinvesting in NHS fertility services. The signals from NICE, the Government and the CCGs themselves clearly show that fertility services are seen as second-class NHS services that do not rank alongside other, more important services. We in this House know from the many debates we have had, and not least from the huge increase in the profile of and focus on mental health services, that treating something as a second-order issue stores up significant problems. We can reverse that attitude through sustained campaigning. As has been pointed out, in 2016 North East Lincolnshire, Somerset, Wiltshire, Herts Valley, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and Bedfordshire CCGs all cut their fertility services and now offer the bare minimum: one funded IVF cycle. Approximately 10% of CCGs are currently considering disinvestment.

The NICE clinical guidance has been around for more than 10 years. It is important to remember that this is not a static issue: the cost of infertility treatment has fallen dramatically and its effectiveness has increased. The second or third cycle tends to be the one that helps a couple to conceive, so I think NICE was visionary and right to say that three full cycles should be offered to women under 40. It is important to remember that CCGs restrict fertility services not only through the front door by making it clear that they will offer only one cycle, but through the back door by restricting the age at which women can access them. In Oxfordshire, for example, the age limit is 35, not 40.

There is also the issue of how a cycle is defined. In Oxfordshire, one fresh cycle is offered to those under 35, and no frozen transfers are allowed. Other definitions of a cycle allow frozen embryos that have been created from the first cycle to be used, so Oxfordshire does not comply with what I understand to be NICE’s definition of a cycle.

Going back to fertility services being seen as second-class services, Oxfordshire CCG’s response to me when I asked it to comply with the NICE guidelines was, “How are you going to fund it? What other services are we going to have to cut to fund fertility treatment?” It was clearly posited as an either/or, and the undercurrent of the message was, “We are funding the important services.” Additional fertility services are a luxury. You are asking us to spend £5 million on a luxury.

To defend Oxfordshire CCG, it uses the NICE cost guidelines when it works out what the additional costs would be. It claims that they would be £2.5 million in year 1, four-and-a-bit million pounds in year 2, £5 million in year 3 and just under £5 million in years 4 and 5. What depresses me about that is the fact that it simply took the off-the-shelf guidance from NICE, which gives the game away: it is simply a desktop exercise by a CCG that is not really interested in addressing the issue. It should be possible for it to investigate with a range of different providers how it can potentially reduce the cost. The cost variation in fertility treatment can range from something like £2,000 to up to £8,000 for a cycle, so it is possible to at least engage with providers to investigate how one can provide a cost-effective service.

I also challenged the CCG on how rigorous it is in stopping services that are out of date and past their usefulness. My understanding—I am sure the Minister will confirm this—is that CCGs should be carrying out an ongoing process of reviewing all the services they are currently funding, because there are probably many services that are out of date or falling into misuse but are still being funded.

I pay tribute to Fertility Fairness, which campaigns assiduously on this issue. It made the point that treatment can cost about £2,000 in the north of England, £6,500 in the south and £3,500 across the UK as a whole. One of its asks, which perhaps the Minister can respond to, is this. CCGs can take refuge by charging the highest cost possible, which acts as a barrier to what we want to achieve. If there were a national tariff, more CCGs might be tempted to come to the table and increase what they are doing to support fertility services.
The Minister is not only a fellow Oxfordshire MP but an absolutely brilliant Health Minister. I know that to a certain extent I am knocking at an open door, because she has spoken very strongly about this issue in public. She said:

“Fertility problems can have a serious and lasting impact on those affected. It is important that the NHS provide access to fertility services for those who need clinical help to start a family. I am very disappointed to learn that access to IVF treatment on the NHS has been reduced in some places and it is unacceptable that some Clinical Commissioning Groups have stopped commissioning it completely. I would strongly encourage all CCGs to implement the NICE Fertility guidelines in full, as many CCGs have successfully done. The Department of Health, NHS England and professional and stakeholder groups are working together to develop benchmark pricing to ensure CCGs can get best value for their local investment.”

That is very welcome news indeed.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak pointed out that there are knock-on costs to not providing fertility treatment in the UK. We know, for example, that many couples understandably go abroad to fund and access fertility services, but different regulations apply abroad. Often, many more embryos are implanted in treatment abroad, which can lead to multiple pregnancies. Multiple pregnancies can lead to greater complications, so paradoxically that can lead to increased costs for the NHS. We would all much prefer people living in the UK to be able to access more familiar services, instead of having to go abroad and take those risks.

I mentioned that all of us speaking in the debate will have real stories to tell. We are speaking not in a vacuum about some impersonal procedure, but about a disease that affects the lives of our constituents significantly. The reason why I supported the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak in securing the debate, and the reason why I am present, is the letters I receive as a Member of Parliament from my constituents.

One 33-year-old constituent wrote to ask how the situation was fair given that in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, people are entitled to three full cycles of IVF—I understand that the Scottish Government are moving to three full cycles early this year. For four and a half years she and her husband have been trying to conceive. They have been through every test, but all the results have come back as normal, so they have what is called unexplained fertility. They pinned all their hopes on a single funded cycle of IVF, although that was difficult to accept. She points out that infertility is not a choice made by women; they have no control over it. Her first cycle, in August, failed and she went on to a frozen egg cycle, but unfortunately miscarried. Her emotional status is now such that she sees her GP regularly, has been referred to TalkingSpace, an NHS service, and awaits counselling. She was quoted £6,000 for a private cycle—her parents helped with the cost of the treatment—although it transpired that the overall cost was about £8,000. That second cycle failed, too, and the couple will now remortgage their property to fund a third cycle.

Those who think of infertility as a second-order issue should consider that some people will mortgage their financial future to treat the disease, as people might do for other diseases. The idea that infertility is something that one can simply put to one side is absolutely ludicrous. Another constituent wrote about having to go to Barcelona for treatment, which cost about £12,000. A third constituent, at the age of 36, was again refused IVF treatment, and she is now funding her treatment privately.

Infertility is clearly a disease, and one that affects many couples throughout the UK, and some of the devolved Administrations are moving forward on it. I respect the difficult choices that clinical commissioning groups have to make, but the NICE guidance is crystal clear and fair. The guidance sanctions not unlimited cycles but only three, recognising that the first cycle often fails. The technology continues to advance, prices continue to fall and there is little evidence from my CCG or, I suspect, many others of active engagement on the issue, such as research on the ground in real time into what it might cost to procure fertility services, as opposed to simply using off-the-shelf NICE cost guidance to rebut my constituents’ concerns.

The lack of infertility treatment has hidden costs, as the hon. Gentleman said, in mental health and emotional issues and the ongoing costs when people go abroad for treatment that might have an impact back home. A great step forward would be if the Minister were to bring forward a national tariff, or if research were commissioned into some of the ongoing costs of not providing infertility treatment. I encourage the Minister to continue to hold CCGs to account for not complying with NICE guidance.
only 10 weeks later they endured a devastating and heartbreaking miscarriage. The almost one and a half years that followed the miscarriage were punctuated by a continued inability to conceive, further visits to their GP, more tests and, ultimately, referral back to the hospital. The couple were eventually told in November of last year, nearly five years after starting their journey, that their last, best hope of conceiving was through IVF treatment.

More devastating news was to follow, however, because the couple were told that, despite having a clear clinical need for treatment, they were ineligible to access IVF on the NHS in their area. The reason: their local CCG uses arbitrary access criteria that are not applied in other areas of the country in order to ration access to treatment for financial reasons. A miscarriage in the previous three years is one of the criteria used to deny funding—in essence penalising our couple for experiencing a tragic event over which they had absolutely no control.

The unfairness of the situation is further exacerbated by the knowledge that were the couple to live in a different part of the country—my own area of Coventry, for example—they would be eligible for at least one fully funded cycle of IVF on the NHS. In other areas, they would be eligible for three fully funded cycles. That inequality for IVF adds insult to injury for a couple who, like many others, are already trying to cope with the distressing effects of infertility. The couple are now faced with a situation in which their only opportunity for treatment comes with an enormous financial outlay. Therefore, treatment is reduced to a simple financial decision: those who can afford it have the treatment they need, and those who cannot do not—a hardly a just system.

That couple, like many other couples throughout the country who are experiencing fertility problems, deserve fair and equal access to treatment. They deserve an NHS that fulfils its guiding principle of delivering care and treatment free at the point of delivery and according to need. To achieve that, the Government must act to eliminate the regional variations in IVF treatment provision, including the use of arbitrary access criteria, and ultimately seek to ensure that all CCGs routinely commission fertility treatment in line with NICE guidelines. That would mean eligible couples having access to three full cycles of IVF, which would significantly increase the chance of successful conception. I hope that the Minister will make such a commitment.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair):** As no other Members are seeking to catch my eye, I will now move to the winding-up speeches. I call the Opposition spokesman, Mr Justin Madders.

2.10 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey)—they both made excellent contributions—and the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing this extremely important debate. My hon. Friend has been a keen campaigner on this issue, and his expertise and passion were clear when he described the urgent need for change. This is a huge issue that affects many couples up and down the country.

My hon. Friend described the rationing that CCGs are undertaking as crude and based on pseudo-moralistic prejudice. He rightly said that, in other areas of the health service, we would not base decisions on allowing access to treatment on such prejudices. He highlighted well the human aspects of this issue with personal accounts that I do not think any of us could have failed to be moved by, and he rightly highlighted the additional burden on the NHS of having to deal with complications from births resulting from treatments received abroad, where regulatory regimes may be less strict. I do not know whether the Minister is able to examine the cost of that for the health service, but that may be one way to build a financial argument for not rationing treatment. The moral argument has already been put extremely well.

The right hon. Member for Wantage also spoke in a measured and knowledgeable manner. He summed up the issue when he said that signals are being sent that the fertility service is a second-class service. He rightly pointed out that the cost of treatment has come down and its effectiveness has increased. In those circumstances, one would expect availability to improve, but that is clearly not the case. He spoke about the personal experiences of his constituents, one of whom said that infertility is not a choice. That is the perfect riposte to those who argue that IVF treatment is a lifestyle decision.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) spoke about her own friends’ experience. She conveyed clearly how their hope evaporated as time went on, and how after five years that hope was finally dashed on the cruel and inhumane ground that they had suffered a miscarriage in the last three years. We know from other debates how hard it is for a couple to lose a child in that way, so it is surely unconscionable that we allow that to be a factor in denying people access to fertility treatment.

Since being appointed to the Front Bench, I have been involved in several debates about issues that traditionally have not received the attention that they deserve, perhaps because they have been seen as too difficult to discuss or seemed taboo. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak said, this issue was not debated at all in the previous Parliament, so we clearly do not talk about it enough, despite the fact, as Members have said, that it is the second most common reason for women to visit their GPs. As we have heard, one in seven, or one in six couples are affected by infertility. Whichever of those figures we want to stick with, that means that millions of people face a serious and lasting impact on their lives. Sadly, that results in stress, anxiety, depression and relationship breakdown. In some cases, infertility is the result of another serious condition, the impact of which couples are already having to deal with. I therefore welcome the opportunity to give a voice to people who often struggle silently with this disease and increasingly face the additional frustration of an unfair and unjustifiable postcode lottery.

Before I talk about the rationing and decommissioning of infertility treatment, I, too, want to talk about the human impact to put into context what we are talking about. Like other Members who have spoken, I have been contacted by constituents who have been affected by a condition. Her name is Zoey Evans, and she was denied IVF treatment by NHS West Cheshire clinical commissioning group, despite the fact that her infertility was caused by
gynaecological treatment, part of which was undertaken without her express consent. The reason the CCG gave for her ineligibility is one that we have heard given by other CCGs—that her partner had a child from a previous relationship. The exceptional circumstances of her case and the cause of her infertility do not appear to have been adequately considered. I know from talking to Zoe’s how devastating the decision to refuse her the opportunity to become a mother has been for her, and the fact that she finds herself in that position only because of previous treatment on the NHS has made it even more difficult to deal with. Every avenue has been explored. I do not mind saying that I know that Zoe would make a great mum, and it is hugely frustrating to know that, if she had lived in a different area, she might have been given that chance.

Zoe’s situation, like many of the other personal tales we have heard today, demonstrates the point that has been raised already that infertility, as defined by the World Health Organisation, is a disease with an identified treatment—a treatment that is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. We are in a situation where, in some parts of the country, the NHS is allowed to ignore an individual’s healthcare needs as well as the NICE guidelines and effectively add another barrier to treatment by introducing further arbitrary criteria.

In the run-up to this debate, I was contacted by another individual, Richard, who also contacted my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak. As we have heard, Richard lives in Dunstable, and as such, he and his partner were entitled to only one cycle of NHS-funded treatment, which sadly was unsuccessful. He emailed me and described what it is like to deal with infertility. My hon. Friend read one quote, but I picked out another, about the human impact, that I thought was equally powerful. Richard said:

“It is very hard to explain to someone who has not experienced infertility the mental health struggle that you go through. If I had to describe our feelings with one statement, I would liken them to the emotion and turmoil that one goes through when a relative dies, the difference being with infertility, the feelings experienced do not slowly ease over time—they intensify.”

He told me of his anger about the fact that, if he lived just one mile from his current address, he would fall into the Luton CCG area, where he would have been entitled to three cycles of treatment rather than the one he received, which might have helped him to become a parent. That illustrates the perverse and cruel nature of the postcode lottery for treatment, which I will now address.

As we know, the NICE clinical guidance on infertility issued in 2004 is extremely clear. It says that

“all eligible couples should have access to three full cycles of IVF where the woman is aged below 40.”

Further guidance was issued in 2013, which recommended that women aged between 40 and 42 should have access to one full cycle. NICE, which was founded in 1999 to end the postcode lottery in prescribing, made those recommendations after deeming such interventions to be a reasonable cost and a clinically effective use of NHS resources. Incredibly, as we have heard, the charity Fertility Fairness found that, of the 209 clinical commissioning groups in England, just four follow the NICE guidance in full, despite CCGs having a legal duty to have regard to NICE guidelines when commissioning treatments. Again, the words of the right hon. Member for Wantage about a second-class service ring true.

When the previous public health Minister, the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), was challenged on that in a written question, the response we got was:

“NHS England expects that all those involved in commissioning infertility treatment services to be fully aware of the importance of having regard to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence fertility guidelines.”

The reality is, as we have heard, that there are enough caveats in that statement to render it meaningless. In another response, she went further and said:

“Blanket restrictions on procedures that do not take account of the individual healthcare needs of patients are unacceptable.”

We all agree with that. However, she stopped short of saying what the Government planned to do about the fact that 98% of CCGs are failing to apply the NICE recommendations in full. We know that at least 45% of them do not offer a full cycle and that more than 80% do not meet the recommendations on the number of cycles. If those restrictions are unacceptable—I think there is general agreement on that—we need to know what Ministers will do to change the situation. What is the point of having NICE recommendations if CCGs, facing huge financial pressures, can disregard them without any penalty?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak said, access to treatment is being reduced, and about 10% of CCGs, including my own, West Cheshire, are consulting on that. What can we ask from the Government to stop the further slide away from recommending treatments? Does the Minister accept that something needs to be done? The impression given is that the guidelines can be routinely ignored. Does she accept that the impression can be given of an abrogation of responsibility? Does she accept that that raises real issues about accountability and legitimacy? It is called local decision making, but I do not think people on the receiving end feel that decisions are being made locally in their interests at all.

If the Government do not take a more robust stance when NICE guidance is being ignored by CCGs, they are not only accepting but entrenching the notion of a postcode lottery. We therefore need to look again at whether to strengthen NICE’s case in cases where there is clearly stated treatment that is affordable and effective but we see CCGs failing to implement that advice. I hope that the Minister will reflect on what has been said by me and other Members about how we can move that issue forward.

As we know, infertility treatments are far from the only example of NICE-recommended treatments not being commissioned. Postcode lotteries exist for a whole range of medical interventions such as hernia repair, hip and knee replacements, cataracts and varicose vein surgeries. Further rationings of treatments are being proposed by CCGs across the country as they struggle to cope with finances that simply are not keeping up with demand.

I have mentioned my CCG several times already. I do not wish to be over-critical of it because it is in a difficult position: its core funding allocation for the
year is £9 million less than the funding formula says it should be. That gap is projected to close slowly in the next five years, but there will still be millions of pounds of shortfall every year over that period. At a time of increased demand, inevitably, it is being forced into this position, as are many other CCGs. Clearly, financial pressures are driving those decisions not just in my CCG but across the country. That does not chime with the claims we have heard that the health service has been given everything it has asked for.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak and the right hon. Member for Wantage said, the postcode lottery is exacerbated by the huge variance in the amounts that CCGs pay for a single cycle of IVF, from as low as just over £2,000 to possibly three times as much in other parts of the country. In response to a written question on 21 April 2016, the previous public health Minister said that “the Department and NHS England are considering options for addressing variation in the prices that CCGs are currently paying for in vitro fertilisation treatment.”

A report by an expert group on commissioning NHS infertility provision identified that “a lack of knowledge and expertise in commissioning fertility services was a barrier to compliance with NICE guidelines”.

How close are we to a national benchmark on price? What support can be put in place to assist CCGs when they are commissioning fertility services?

I bring my remarks to a close by reminding us of the founding principles of the national health service: good healthcare, available to all and free at the point of use. Those founding principles came some 30 years before the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who is not in his place, on securing this important debate. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss NHS fertility services. This has been a moving debate and, on behalf of the Government, I recognise at the outset that infertility is a serious condition, affecting a growing number of people: women and men and same-sex couples. I personally thank all of those who have allowed their stories to be shared today. They remind us powerfully of the distress that infertility causes. The value of their being shared in the debate cannot be overstated.

It is important to remember that those stories are not isolated cases. As hon. Members are well aware, fertility problems are estimated to affect one in seven heterosexual couples and, for couples who have been trying to conceive for more than three years without success, the likelihood of pregnancy occurring in the following year is 25% or less. We should keep those figures in our minds.

As my right hon. Friend said, infertility can and does have a powerful and lasting impact on the quality of life of those affected. Research has shown that there can often be psychological effects, as powerfully described in the debate, for both men and women suffering from fertility problems. It can cause stress and it puts pressure on relationships, primarily between the couple themselves but also on relationships with family and friends. It is therefore important that the NHS provides access to fertility services for those who need clinical help to start a family.

The availability of NHS fertility treatment is and always has been a matter for local determination. As my right hon. Friend said, these are not easy decisions to make, but we expect them to be made fairly. Decisions on the level of service provision are underpinned by clinical insight and knowledge of local healthcare need. That has been the case since the introduction of the purchaser-provider split in the 1990s, and today that determination is, as we all know, made by CCGs, which are clinician-led and have a statutory responsibility to commission healthcare services that meet the needs of their whole population, reducing inequalities and improving care quality.

While provision of services will, by necessity, vary—for example, the health needs and priorities of the population of Birmingham will not be the same as that of Bournemouth—it is right that those difficult prioritisation decisions are led by clinicians who know their patients and local areas best rather than being made centrally. The Government have made it clear that blanket restrictions on any healthcare treatment—including fertility services—are unacceptable. Where a service is not routinely commissioned, clinicians can still make individual funding requests for their patients when a clinical case can be made and if treatment is likely to provide significant benefit. It is the role of NHS England to ensure that CCGs are not breaching their statutory responsibility to provide services that meet the needs of their local population and to take action if such breaches do take place.

**Steve McCabe:** I recognise what the Minister says about this being an issue for local determination. However, does she agree that it does not make sense to use moralistic criteria to ration the provision of services, which—as in the example I cited in Birmingham—is then put to a public poll that produces an inconclusive result on a very low turnout? Surely that is not the kind of local determination we want. Is that not something that NHS England should act on?

**Nicola Blackwood:** The hon. Gentleman gave a very good opening speech in which he raised some points that I will comment on. The quality of commissioning of fertility services is one of those points, and having regard for guidance already in place to guide local commissioners in commissioning fertility services is a point on which I am about to comment. He has anticipated my speech as only a seasoned politician can.

NICE first introduced its fertility guidelines in 2004. As with all clinical service guidelines, they have never been mandatory. Successive Administrations have supported the principle of locally determined implementation of key recommendations of the guidelines, because decisions about local services should be made as close to patients as possible by those best placed to work with patients and the public in their area to understand their needs. However, it is sadly the case that implementation has
been variable over the years, particularly with the provision of three IVF cycles for qualifying couples, as we have heard. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak and the shadow Minister rightly said, the 2016 Fertility Fairness survey showed that just 16% of CCGs provided the recommended three cycles of IVF, with 22% providing two, 60% providing one and 2% providing no IVF funding at all.

I understand that commissioners in some areas are undertaking their own evidence reviews, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak said, to determine whether their CCG should offer IVF. I take this opportunity to say that that is unnecessary. NICE was established for the specific purpose of reviewing the available clinical and scientific evidence of a treatment’s effectiveness and, working with a wide range of stakeholders, to make recommendations based on that evidence about services that should be available to all within the NHS. NICE guidelines for fertility services are robust and fit for purpose; and there is no need for them to be second-guessed by commissioners.

The hon. Gentleman also raised NICE guidelines for same-sex couples. NICE guidelines seek to offer heterosexual and same-sex couples the same access to investigation and treatment for fertility problems, the criterion for which is a failure to conceive over a set period of time. NICE sets that criterion to ensure that NHS funding is available for donor sperm for female same-sex couples, or surrogacy arrangements for male same-sex couples, on the basis that they are medically sub-fertile, not that their childlessness is owing to the absence of gametes from the opposite sex—sperm or eggs.

Access to NHS-funded investigations is commissioned in female same-sex couples who fail to conceive after six cycles of artificial insemination within a 12-month period. NICE recognises that same-sex couples could be disadvantaged, because they may have to pay for artificial insemination before they can be considered for NICE assessment and possible treatment. NICE considers six cycles to be equivalent to the 12-month period of unprotected intercourse required of heterosexual couples before they are offered investigation for fertility problems. Same-sex couples are offered access to professional consultation and advice in reproductive medicine before they embark on attempts to conceive, to ensure that they are informed about appropriate and safe self-funding attempts. I can tell the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak that NICE is due to review its fertility guidelines this year, and he may wish to write to NICE’s guidelines review team to offer his views on the issue. The Department of Health will certainly be doing so.

On the implementation of NICE guidelines, I commend CCGs, such as Camden, Oldham and others that have been mentioned, that have implemented the NICE fertility guidelines in full and continue to offer three IVF cycles to qualifying couples. That shows it is entirely possible for CCGs to implement NICE’s IFV provision recommendations. It was disheartening to learn from the Fertility Fairness survey that access to IVF treatment on the NHS has been reduced in so many places, and it is deeply disappointing that some CCGs have stopped routinely commissioning it. I strongly encourage all CCGs to implement the NICE fertility guidelines in full, as some CCGs are successfully doing.

[Nicola Blackwood]

Justin Madders: The Minister has correctly identified that some CCGs are not providing any treatment at all. Does she think that blanket policy should be dealt with?

Nicola Blackwood: I am about to go on to work that we are doing to assist CCGs with better commissioning, including giving them advice on pricing, which the shadow Minister mentioned. Perhaps he will allow me to do that; I think it will be enlightening for him.

Work is under way to assist CCGs in better commissioning fertility services for their local community. It is right that we do that. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage was correct—the cost of IVF is falling, but not all CCGs are benefiting from that. We know that the prices that fertility clinics charge CCGs for an IVF cycle vary, and that some CCGs are not contracting in the most effective way.

The Fertility Fairness survey reported that the price being charged by service providers for an IVF cycle varied across the country, from around £2,000 at the bottom end to more than £6,000 at the top, although it is not clear what all of those treatment cycles involve. The Department of Health, NHS England and professional and stakeholder groups are working together to develop benchmark pricing for fertility services to ensure that CCGs get the best value for their money. That is obviously the first step to be taken before NHS England’s longer term work towards developing a national tariff, which my right hon. Friend called for.

In addition to that initiative, the national fertility regulator—the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority—is developing commissioning guidance that aims to improve the quality of commissioning, for example by encouraging greater use of single embryo transfers where appropriate for a patient. That does not reduce the chance of a woman having a baby but significantly reduces the incidence of multiple births, with their attendant risks and complications for mothers and their babies. NHS England has agreed to disseminate and promote that guidance to all CCGs in England.

Those approaches are intended to raise the level of knowledge and expertise within CCGs to ensure that they are able to commission services appropriately in what is a specialist area, exactly as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous)—who is no longer in his seat—called for. It would also be helpful for CCGs to pool their resources and expertise and collaborate more with each other to get a better deal for their patients. That has happened in the north of England, where members of two commissioning collaboratives are able to offer three IVF cycles to qualifying couples.

As I hope has been clear, it is the Government’s view that infertility is a serious medical condition. Those suffering from infertility who meet the criteria in the NICE fertility guidelines for NHS-funded treatment should be able to seek that treatment. We do not agree that clinical infertility should not be part of a comprehensive national health service. Reflecting on the strength of feeling expressed today, I will be writing to NHS England to ask that it communicates clearly to CCGs the expectation that NICE fertility guidelines should be followed by all.

The Department of Health, NHS England and professional and stakeholder groups will redouble efforts to develop the benchmark pricing for fertility services,
which, as I have said, is a precursor to NHS England introducing a national tariff. NICE will continue with its review of fertility guidelines this year. I hope that series of actions demonstrates just how seriously the Government take this situation, and leaves all those watching the debate confident of our commitment to finding practical solutions to this serious problem.

2.37 pm

Steve McCabe: I thank the various Members who have taken part in this debate: the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who has now left. It is never easy on a Thursday afternoon, but I really felt we had to have some focus on this issue in this place today.

I am extremely grateful to the Minister for the tone she adopted in her response. One reason why I asked her to instigate an investigation into what is happening is that I understand, from a parliamentary question I submitted, that the Government do not, as a matter of routine, centrally collect information on the provision of infertility services. While I acknowledge her point about provision being locally determined, the extent of the disparity has been a revelation to me. It is difficult to believe we are talking about a national health service when we see that level of disparity. I gently say to her that there would still be some merit in a further investigation into the extent of the variation in England at present.

I am extremely pleased to hear that the Minister plans to write to NHS England. I interpret that as meaning she will put pressure on NHS England to put pressure on the CCGs that are not complying with the NICE guidelines. I will certainly take the opportunity to write to NICE about the experience of same-sex couples, as she suggested, although the key here is obviously that the NICE guidelines have to be followed. That is the central problem.

I was extremely pleased to hear that the Minister is taking steps on benchmark pricing, which may well lead to the construction of a national tariff. All I will say on that is: the sooner, the better. If she were able at some stage to offer us a realistic timescale for that, it would be some comfort to the very many people who have contacted all of us to explain the pain and anguish they have suffered as a result of this condition. I am grateful to Members for their contributions and to the Minister for a thoughtful response.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): This has been a very valuable and important debate.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,

That this House has considered decommissioning of in vitro fertilisation and other NHS fertility services.

2.41 pm

Sitting adjourned.
The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I would like to update the House following today’s announcement made by the Prime Minister about this Government’s plans to reform mental health services in this country.

For too long those suffering mental illness in England have experienced a hidden injustice. Mental illness has been shrouded in stigma and the needs of those with mental health problems have been neglected compared to those with physical illness. An estimated one in four people in the UK will experience a mental health problem at any one time and the economic and social cost of mental illness is estimated to be £105 billion a year. Left unaddressed, mental illness can destroy lives, cause untold pain to families and prevent people from fulfilling their potential at work, school or in society.

This Government are determined to address the historic failure—over successive generations and Governments—to tackle mental illness. We are grateful to the Independent Mental Health Taskforce for publishing the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health last year, which set out a clear roadmap for the NHS, our arm’s length bodies and Government. In February, the Department for Health supported their recommendations with an additional investment of £1 billion per year by 2020.

NHS England accepted the recommendations for the National Health Service in full and have published an implementation plan. Today the Prime Minister announced that the Government accept all the recommendations made to it by the Independent Taskforce on Mental Health and are publishing an update on our progress against these recommendations. The Government’s response to the Mental Health Taskforce can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-01-09/HCWS397.

But we must go further still. The challenge of mental illness is growing and we must all—at every stage of life and every level in society—take steps to tackle it.

First, because we know that children and young people are most susceptible to mental illness and most disorders originate in childhood, we must make mental health a priority in our classrooms and in our families. The Government have therefore announced a series of steps to ensure children and young people get the support they need. We will:

- Commission a major thematic review of children and adolescent mental health services across the country, led by the Care Quality Commission with assistance from Ofsted—the first of its kind.
- Bring forward a new Green Paper on children and young people’s mental health later this year, to set out plans to transform services in schools, universities and for families.
- Introduce new support for schools with every secondary school in the country to be offered mental health first aid training and new trials to look at how to strengthen the links between schools and local NHS mental health staff.
- Develop peer support for children and young people’s mental health and emotional wellbeing—confirming a programme of pilot activity on peer support, as outlined earlier in the year, along with £1.5 million in funding.
Second, we must work with employers to ensure better mental wellbeing in the workplace. Because we know that there are important steps businesses can take to support their workforce, and those that do see benefits in higher productivity and lower absence. The Prime Minister has therefore appointed Lord Dennis Stevenson, the long-time campaigner for greater understanding and treatment of mental illness, and Paul Farmer CBE, CEO of Mind and Chair of the NHS Mental Health Taskforce, to drive work with business and the public sector to support mental health in the workplace. These experts will lead a review on how best to ensure employees with mental health problems are enabled to thrive in the workplace and perform at their best. This will involve practical help including promoting best practice and learning from trailblazer employers, as well as offering tools to organisations, whatever size they are, to assist with employee wellbeing and mental health. We will also review recommendations around discrimination in the workplace on the grounds of mental health.

Third, we need to offer alternatives to hospital to support people in the community. We recognise that seeing a GP or going to A&E is not or does not feel like the right intervention for many people with mental ill-health, the Government will build on their initial £15 million investment to provide and promote new models of community-based care such as crisis cafes and community clinics. The initial £15 million investment led to 88 new places of safety being created. Since 2011-12, there has been an almost 80% reduction in England of people experiencing a mental health crisis being taken to police cells, utilising health-based place of safety, rather than being held in a cell, ensuring people get the best support—in the right place, at the right time, in the right way. The Government now plan to spend up to a further £15 million to build on this success.

Fourth, we will expand treatment by investing in and expanding digital mental health services. Digitally assisted therapy has already proved successful in other countries and the Government will speed up the delivery of a £67.7 million digital mental health package so that those worried about stress, anxiety or more serious issues can go online, check their symptoms and if needed, receive clinically-assisted therapy over the internet, when this is clinically appropriate for the person rather than waiting weeks for a face-to-face appointment—with face-to-face sessions offered as necessary. We will:

- Introduce a major £60 million investment, £30 million from Government and £30 million from trusts, of digitally assisted mental health services in six mental health trusts, badged Global Digital Exemplars for mental health. Global Digital Exemplars will be expected to make a step change in their use of digital technology, informatics and data to improve value overall by improving the processes of care, using information to better inform decision making about care, improving the levels of safety and effectiveness of care, improving the ability to sustain continuous quality improvement and improving patient access to appropriate evidence based care.
- Pilot digitally-assisted therapy for the NHS’s talking therapies programme. This £3 million pilot will trial existing treatments and offer patients faster effective therapy for illnesses such as anxiety and depression and involve working with NICE to establish a new accelerated accreditation process, to ensure mental health patients can access treatments that take full advantage of changing technology which have been properly tested and accredited, with products becoming part of the mainstream offer to people if meeting NICE standards.
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- Strengthen the mental health content of the clinical triage platform for NHS 111 with a £3.3 million investment, ensuring improved wording of those experiencing mental ill-health using the NHS’ online platforms, as well as allow self-referrals online.
- Pilot and further roll out the health based place of safety capacity management app at a cost of £900,000 to help police and health services manage places of safety spaces in real time.
- Develop a set of apps and resources for £500,000, which will be included on an online digital health tools library, and rolled out on commercial platforms like the Apple App store.

Fifth, we must right the everyday injustices that those with mental health problems face. We will:

- Work with money and mental health policy institute to undertake a review of the mental health and debt form and agree an approach that will end this unfair practice.
- Support NHS England’s commitment, made this year, to eliminate inappropriate placements to inpatient beds for children and young people by 2020-21.
- Publish the refreshed Government Suicide Prevention strategy a copy of which can be viewed at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-01-09/HCWS397.

Suicide Prevention

The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics show that 4,820 suicides were registered in England during 2015—equivalent to 13 people per day. Self-harm is also on the rise, with up to 300,000 hospital attendances per year in England categorised as resulting from self-inflicted injury.

We are already taking steps to help reduce suicide. The £247 million investment in mental health liaison services will see trained psychiatrists and counsellors made available in emergency departments to assess, counsel and refer patients on to other mental health services if they present with signs of self-harm or other psychological distress.

Local authorities will also be expected to strengthen local suicide prevention plans, and there is an explicit focus on improving how services respond to cases of self-harm, which is the biggest single indicator that a person may be at increased risk of suicide.

It is hoped that the new strategy, which sets out how local areas should do more to support those at high risk of suicide, will also encourage local authorities strengthen efforts to reach other groups known to be at increased risk.

These include young men—who are three times more likely to die by suicide than women—those in contact with the criminal justice system and certain occupational groups.

Many parts of the country already have established preventative plans. These vary by area, but have included: stronger outreach and liaison services, dedicated services for young people who self-harm and training programmes to help health professionals, police and other community services to understand how to identify and respond to people in acute distress.
All local authorities will now be expected to develop strong, multi-agency suicide prevention plans by the end of 2017, ahead of these being checked and approved by the Department of Health.

In addition, NHS England will develop a new care pathway for self-harm, which will provide greater consistency in how those groups are cared for across the NHS, with consistent treatment guidelines for the recognition, treatment and management of self-harm.

There will also be an increased focus on ensuring those who have been recently bereaved—which are another group at increased risk of suicide—receive information and follow-up support to help them cope with their loss.

[HCWS397]

**Transport**

**Safe Use of Drones: Consultation**

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): My noble Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) made the following ministerial statement on Wednesday 21 December 2016.

Today, I am pleased to inform the House that the UK Government have launched a consultation “Unlocking the UK’s high tech economy: consultation on the safe use of drones in the UK”.

Drone technology represents a great opportunity for the United Kingdom, but it is crucial that we strike a careful balance in our approach to drones—a balance between pushing their commercial uses and ensuring safety considerations.

The Government’s industrial strategy will support our ambition for Britain to become the global go-to place for scientists, innovators and tech investors, and the development of new technologies such as drones is key to that. We are already well-placed: alongside the Government’s support for trials and projects, the Civil Aviation Authority has granted over 2,000 commercial drone operator permissions. But we want to further drive forward progress in the UK drones industry by fostering the right supportive environment.

In the UK, drones are already being used by the police, fire services and search and rescue in emergency situations, by energy, road and rail providers to inspect and maintain our key infrastructure, and by conservation organisations to monitor natural environments. Drones are saving time and money, improving delivery of services in these areas, improving safety and even helping to save lives. As the technology develops, we will see drones being used in other fields to achieve similar results. There are also many leisure users of drones, who must follow the strict laws in place, such as keeping their drone within their sight. With the photographic and videography opportunities drones present, sales of drones to this audience are increasing at pace.

But like many other technologies, drones can also be misused and challenge safety, security and privacy. While the vast majority of drone users are law-abiding and have good intentions, it is likely that some are not aware of the rules that apply and inadvertently break them, risking safety, privacy and security. It also cannot be ignored that there will be some who will purposefully break the laws on drones, and potentially use drones to cause harm.

The Government’s vision is for a society and economy in the UK where drones are safely and properly used in ways that improve the delivery of public and commercial services, where all leisure drone users are aware of the rules and adhere to them, and where flourishing drone service businesses are contributing to the UK economy, creating jobs and encouraging the development of important new skills in the UK. We want to create the right conditions for new uses of drone technology to emerge and grow, placing the UK at the cutting edge of new technologies and capturing a significant portion of the global drone applications market. We will not do so unless we take the safety, security and privacy challenges and our duties to the general public extremely seriously.

This consultation sets out some of the next steps under consideration for doing so. These proposals aim to keep pace with this fast emerging market, balancing the challenges appropriately without restricting the opportunity drones present. They are intended to ensure the global competitiveness of the UK as a home for innovation and technological investment while providing the assurance the public need. As the technology and market opportunities develop, we want to proactively address these challenges, and support the growing and changing UK drones services industry.

The consultation is published on gov.uk and the deadline for responding is 15 March 2017.

Responses are encouraged from drone operators (commercial and leisure), the aviation industry, drone manufacturers and other companies involved in the drone market, model aircraft associations and their members, the insurance industry, members of the public and relevant NGOs, higher education institutions and research and development institutions, local authorities, and Members of both Houses.

[HCWS395]
Written Statements

Tuesday 10 January 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

UK HPR1000 Reactor

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): I have today asked the UK’s independent nuclear regulators, the Office for Nuclear Regulation, and the Environment Agency, to begin a generic design assessment of the UK HPR1000 reactor.

This is the nuclear reactor design by China General Nuclear which General Nuclear Services (a subsidiary of Électricité de France SA and China General Nuclear) propose to use at a prospective new nuclear power station at Bradwell in Essex.

In September the Secretary of State confirmed that the Government had decided to proceed with the first new nuclear power station for a generation at Hinkley Point C. This will see the start of a new nuclear programme that will help provide the energy security we require as we move to a low-carbon energy future.

The investment by General Nuclear Services (GNS) in committing the resources required for the UK HPR1000 reactor (Hualong reactor) to go through the generic design assessment underlines the fact that international companies continue to view investment in the UK’s low-carbon energy future positively.

The Government welcome such investment. The nuclear industry in the UK is subject to a stringent regulatory regime to ensure safety, security and mitigation of any potential environmental detriment. Generic design assessment is now an established feature of the regulatory regime and is a respected process for rigorous and transparent nuclear regulation. I am therefore pleased to be asking the regulators to begin to assess the UK HPR1000 reactor through GDA.

As with previous such assessments, the full cost of the GDA will be charged to the requesting party (in this case GNS) which submits the design for assessment. This process is independent of any final agreement to commission a reactor of the relevant type.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The eighth review conference to the biological and toxin weapons convention held in Geneva concluded on 25 November 2016.

At the review conference, states parties agreed a final declaration reaffirming their continued commitment to the convention’s objectives and their determination to exclude completely the possibility of the use of biological weapons. States parties reviewed the operation of the convention and expressed views on its articles. States parties agreed that the prohibitions in article I, defining the scope of the convention, apply to all scientific and technological developments in the life sciences and in other fields of science relevant to the convention that have no peaceful purpose.
The conference also agreed to:

Hold meetings of states parties of up to five days every year before the next review conference in 2021. The first meeting in December 2017 will seek progress on issues of substance and process, aiming to agree a substantive programme of work up to 2021.

Renew for five years the mandate of the three-person implementation support unit, which serves as a focal point and support for states parties' work under the convention.

Continue to seek improvements to the convention's assistance and co-operation database and to ensure specific, timely and concrete offers to states parties seeking assistance under the convention.

Renew the sponsorship programme to support participation by states parties otherwise unable to attend key meetings, funded by voluntary contributions.

The United Kingdom worked closely with other European Union member states and like-minded partners in preparatory meetings and at the review conference to secure an outcome which strengthened implementation of the convention. Despite our best efforts and the support of an overwhelming majority of states parties, a more ambitious work plan proved impossible to secure.

The UK will continue to support work in this field, addressing substantive issues with like-minded states parties and others; where necessary, we will do so outside the formal framework of convention-sponsored meetings. The UK will engage constructively in future annual meetings of states parties to support and strengthen the convention which remains a foundation stone of the international non-proliferation system.

[HCWS400]
Written Statements

Wednesday 11 January 2017

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Leveson Inquiry and its Implementation

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): The consultation “The Leveson Inquiry and its implementation” closed on 10 January after running for 10 weeks. We know there is a significant level of interest in the consultation and we are grateful for all the responses submitted. The total number of individual responses to the consultation received is estimated to be over 140,000 and a petition estimated to have over 130,000 signatures has also been received.

[HCWS401]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): On 16 October 2014 the then Home Secretary announced in Parliament, via a written statement, the commencement of the triennial review of the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC). I am now pleased to announce the completion of the review.

The OISC is an independent body that regulates immigration advisers throughout the United Kingdom, ensuring they are fit, competent and act in the best interests of their clients.

The review concludes that the functions performed by the OISC are still required and that it should be retained as a non-departmental public body. The review looked at the governance arrangements for the body in line with guidance on good corporate governance set out by the Cabinet Office. The review also examined value for money, performance, engagement with the regulated sector and efficiency. The report makes 19 recommendations; 10 for the OISC and nine that will be the responsibility of the Home Office to take forward.

The full report of the review of the OISC can be found on the gov.uk website and a copy will be placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS402]
Hendry Review (Tidal Lagoons)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): In February 2016, the Government commissioned an independent review into the feasibility and practicality of tidal lagoon energy in the UK. The review has been led by the right hon. Charles Hendry, who was appointed in May. The purpose of the review was to assess:

- whether, and in what circumstances, tidal lagoons could play a cost-effective role as part of the UK energy mix;
- the potential scale of opportunity in the UK and internationally, including supply chain opportunities;
- a range of possible structures for financing tidal lagoons;
- different sizes of projects as the first of a kind;
- whether a competitive framework could be put in place for the delivery of tidal lagoon projects.

Charles Hendry will publish the report today. I am grateful to Charles and his team for the hard work that has gone into the review and for the time and care he has taken over this important commission.

The issues considered by the review are complex, as they relate to an untried technology in the marine environment. As the review notes, tidal lagoons face considerable challenges in relation to their role in the UK’s energy mix and their potential environmental impact. The Government will now require a period of time to assess the recommendations set out in the review, and to consider the issues which would arise from a broader lagoon programme. A Government response will be published in due course.

The Government’s energy planning is focused on ensuring secure, affordable, low-carbon energy. Any decisions arising from the review will, therefore, need to balance the priorities for security of supply, low-carbon generation and affordability. The Government will consider the review’s recommendations and determine what decision is in the best interests of the UK energy consumer in the long term.

It is this Government’s job to consider both the advantages and the disadvantages of tidal lagoons, to scrutinise the evidence carefully, and to take measured decisions where there are a wide range of issues to consider and significant uncertainties over what is, in the case of this technology, a long period of time.

The Hendry review report can be found at: https://hendryreview.wordpress.com/.

[HCWS404]
situation, including the growing restrictions on civil society. Ministers are also likely to discuss how the EU can best help strengthen Egypt’s internal security, co-operate on bringing stability to Libya, and work together on combating illegal migration in the region.

**Libya**

Discussions will cover the latest developments in the Libyan political process. We will encourage the EU to consider how it can best continue to support the Presidency Council and Government of National Accord.

**Middle east peace process**

Ministers will discuss progress on the middle east peace process (MEPP) and may reflect on obstacles to peace including incitement, terrorism, demolitions and settlement expansion, as highlighted in the recent UN Security Council resolution 2334. Ministers may also consider the outcomes of the Paris conference on the MEPP which takes place on 15 January.

[HCWS405]

**JUSTICE**

Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): The optional protocol to the convention against torture (OPCAT), which the UK ratified in December 2003, requires states parties to establish a national preventive mechanism (NPM) to carry out visits to places of detention in order to prevent torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The Government established the UK NPM in March 2009 (Official Report, 31 March 2009, column 56WS).

I am informing the House that the following is formally designated as an additional member of the UK NPM: The Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation (IRTL).

[HCWS408]

**Prison Service Pay Review Body**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I am pleased to announce that the Prime Minister has reappointed Peter Knight as the chair to the Prison Service Pay Review Body for 12 months, commencing 18 March 2017. The appointment has been conducted in accordance with the Commissioner for Public Appointments’ code of practice on appointments to public bodies.

[HCWS407]

**TRANSPORT**

Night Flights

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) has made the following ministerial statement.

In July 2014, the Government announced the current regime for night flight restrictions at the designated airports Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted. These restrictions are due to expire in October this year.

Today this Government have launched a consultation on our proposals for the next night flight regime at these airports. We are proposing to set these restrictions for a period of five years to 2022, so this will not therefore cover the period in which a proposed new runway at Heathrow would be operational. Any ban on night flights at an expanded Heathrow would be consulted on separately.

We will continue to balance the economic benefits night flights offer with the cost they have on communities. We therefore want the next night flights regime to maintain the status quo in terms of the number of flights, but also give the industry incentives to continue the improvements in noise performance that are already taking place. The Government therefore proposes an environmental objective to encourage the use of quieter aircraft to limit or reduce the number of people significantly affected by aircraft noise at night, while maintaining the existing benefits of night flights.

Our consultation includes proposals on how we intend to deliver this objective, including limits on the number of flights and new noise quotas for each airport and adjustments to the structure of the regime to ensure it keeps up with changes in aircraft technology. This consultation is seeking views and evidence relating to these proposals and is accompanied by an impact assessment exploring the costs and benefits of our proposals.

We will publish a final decision on night flights later this year after we have carefully reviewed the responses to this consultation.

[HCWS403]

**WORK AND PENSIONS**

Bereavement Support Payment Regulations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): I am pleased to announce that today I intend to lay regulations to provide some of the detail of the new bereavement support payment. These are affirmative regulations which will be debated in Parliament shortly. It is intended that the changes detailed in these regulations will come into force on 6 April this year.

Bereavement support payment is a new benefit which replaces the current suite of bereavement benefits (bereavement payment, bereavement allowance and widowed parent’s allowance) for those whose spouse or civil partner dies on or after 6 April this year. These changes will not affect those already in receipt of bereavement benefits. These people will continue to receive their current benefit for the natural lifetime of the award.

The design of bereavement support payment reaffirms the Government’s commitment to provide financial support to people whose spouse or civil partner has died. The new benefit modernises and simplifies the current complex system of bereavement benefits.

It shifts the focus of bereavement benefits from replacing the deceased spouse or civil partner’s earnings to helping with the additional and more immediate costs of bereavement.

Bereavement support payment will not be taxable, will not be included in the assessment of benefit income which will be subject to the household benefit cap, and will also be subject to a disregard in the calculation of income-based benefits. Additionally, bereavement support payment will not affect the bereaved person’s concurrent entitlement to contribution-based jobseeker’s allowance or contributory employment and support allowance, where appropriate. Also, unlike the current bereavement benefits, a bereaved person who remarries or re-partners will be able to keep their bereavement support payment.
To allow people to better understand their entitlements and plan accordingly, the new benefit is simpler, introducing a uniform payment structure with a single national insurance contribution condition. There is a higher rate of payment for pregnant women and people with dependent children in recognition of the greater costs borne by these families.

Having considered representations from the Social Security Advisory Committee, the Work and Pensions Select Committee and groups supporting bereaved people, we have decided to extend the duration of the benefit from 12 months to 18 months.

Recipients with children can receive an initial larger payment of £3,500 and up to 18 subsequent monthly payments of £350, and those without children can receive an initial payment of £2,500 and up to 18 monthly instalments of £100.

[HCWS409]
Written Statements

Friday 13 January 2017

DEFENCE

Defence Infrastructure Reform

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): Defence infrastructure is a vital component in enabling the armed forces to train and prepare for operations and for the Ministry of Defence (MOD) to deliver its outputs. The MOD spends nearly £5 billion each year operating, maintaining, constructing and disposing of its extensive infrastructure base, which represents 1.8% of the UK land area.

In November, we announced a long-term programme to invest £4 billion over the next decade in an estate that will help deliver strategic defence and security review 2015’s ambitious plan for joint force 2025, enabling savings in running costs of £140 million over 10 years, while releasing 91 of our most expensive sites by 2040. This will help to deliver the MOD’s contribution of land sufficient for 55,000 new homes towards the Government’s housing target.

In parallel, we have reviewed how our estate is managed and infrastructure decisions are approached, taken, and implemented across the whole of defence. This includes the role of the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO), the Royal Navy, Army and Air Force commands and MOD head office. The aim has been to ensure that every pound we spend on our estate represents optimum value for money.

We have reached two principal conclusions from this review. First, we will achieve improved allocation of available funding if infrastructure decisions that bear on the work of the military commands are taken by them rather than by the DIO. The commands are better placed to balance infrastructure requirements against other enablers of military capability such as equipment and trained personnel for which they already hold the funds.

Secondly, we will restructure the DIO to operate more effectively in the new delegated environment. This means making it more customer facing at both the strategic and operational level, improving its internal operation so that it can work better with and deliver better value from infrastructure providers, and also strengthening its abilities to act to assure that appropriate standards are being met across the defence estate and to provide Ministers with advice on the long-term affordability of the estate and the strategic implications for the estate of decisions taken by the commands. Since 2014 a strategic business partner contract has been in place with Capita, under which they lead and manage the DIO. Capita have been instrumental in helping us deliver the Better Defence Estate strategy and in sustaining specialist capability. We are reviewing with Capita how their continued support can be adapted to the new infrastructure model we now envisage.

[HCWS410]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

OSCE Ministerial Council, Hamburg

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I represented the United Kingdom at the 23rd Ministerial Council meeting of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), held in Hamburg, Germany on 8-9 December 2016 and hosted by German Foreign Minister and OSCE Chairman-in-Office Frank-Walter Steinmeier. The Council is the top decision-making body of the OSCE and was attended by Ministers from across its 57 participating states.

The Council took place in the final month of a year when the OSCE has continued to be at the centre of the international response to the Ukraine crisis, via its special monitoring mission, its observer mission to two Russian checkpoints on the Ukrainian-Russian border and through its membership of the trilateral contact group. Ukraine remained the core element of many statements in plenary by participating states including by US Secretary of State Kerry, German Foreign Minister Steinmeier, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Klimkin and EU High Representative Mogherini among others. In my interventions in the discussions that took place on 8 December I repeated our strong support for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity and expressed deep concern at the ongoing situation in eastern Ukraine and Crimea.

A number of other important issues were also discussed. The UK used the event to highlight the need to resolve other protracted conflicts and to minimise the risk of new conflict, including by reducing military risk through conventional arms control. I joined Georgian Foreign Minister Janelidze and other Friends of Georgia, including US Secretary of State, John Kerry in expressing our support to Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and calling on Russia to reverse its recognition of Georgia’s regions as independent states. I also underlined the UK’s ongoing support for the OSCE’s autonomous institutions and its field missions including in my bilateral discussions with Michael Link, Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and Dunja Mijatovic, the representative on freedom of the media.

Behind the scenes, the UK delegation continued to negotiate a range of declarations and decisions for adoption by the Ministerial Council. These negotiations made progress in a number of areas, resulting in a declaration welcoming the broad range of the OSCE’s project assistance in the field of small arms and light weapons and stockpiles of conventional ammunition. A declaration on the OSCE framework for conventional arms control was also agreed, signalling approval for a structured dialogue between participating states on the...
current and future challenges and risks to security in the OSCE area. Declarations and decisions were also made on migration, on reducing the risks of conflict stemming from the use of information and communication technologies, on enhancing the use of advance passenger information, and on strengthening good governance and promoting economic connectivity.

Divergent approaches limited the scope to reach consensus on a number of proposed declarations. It was particularly disappointing that disagreement from certain participating states to the inclusion of a reference to Crimea meant that a declaration on the OSCE’s role in, and support to, Ukraine could not be agreed, despite 56 of the 57 participating states agreeing the text. It was also disappointing that, despite the best efforts of the UK and other states, attempts to agree decisions in the human dimension failed, primarily due to further Russian obstructionism. However, the UK was instrumental in securing the agreement of 42 participating states to a joint statement on human rights which was delivered by the Ambassador to Norway to the OSCE during the closing session.

I met Irish Foreign Minister Dara Murphy and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu on non-OSCE business.

A copy of the UK plenary intervention can be found online on the gov.uk website:

[HCWS411]
Written Statement

Monday 16 January 2017

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Winter Flooding

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): I would first like to thank all of those who supported local communities in the wake of the flooding in December 2015 and early January 2016. It is important that we recognise the enormous amount of effort that has gone into supporting households, businesses and communities repair and recover from these floods.

In the days that followed those storms, the Government very quickly identified that the immediate priority was to respond to the urgent needs of those affected and we have paid out almost £300 million to help householders, communities and businesses to get back on their feet. Furthermore, we have supported repairs to vital transport links, including getting the A591 in Cumbria open ahead of schedule, as well as improving flood defences and providing match funding for charity appeals.

Alongside this early response, Ministers informed the House of our intention to apply to the European Union Solidarity Fund. We submitted our initial application on 26 February 2016. The application was made within the 12 week deadline and included a provisional estimate of the cost of direct damage incurred by the floods in December 2015 and early January 2016.

The European Union Solidarity Fund is limited in principle to non-insurable damage and does not compensate for private losses, such as damage to private property. Long-term action—such as lasting reconstruction, economic redevelopment and prevention—are not eligible for support. In the case of a regional application, the Solidarity Fund retrospectively reimburses member states for 2.5% of the direct costs associated with the damage incurred. As the assistance received is therefore dependent on the extent of the costs incurred, it has been important that we ensure the application represents our best estimate of the damage. Subsequent to the initial application, my Department continued to work extensively with devolved Administrations, local authorities and other Government Departments to refine and update our cost analysis and comply with the complex rules of the Fund. As a result of that work, the Government finalised the UK’s application to the European Union Solidarity Fund in September 2016.

The Commission has now completed its assessment of our application and has proposed to the European Parliament and Council that the UK receives a notional €60 million in assistance (subject to approval by the two bodies). However, owing to the costs involved in making an application and the effect of clawback through the UK rebate, the overall net benefit to the UK is only estimated to be €17 million (circa £15 million). This will be further offset by a payment of £14.5 million that the UK is legally obliged to make to the EU in respect of the UK’s 2007 application (by the then Labour Government) for Solidarity Fund assistance following the serious floods that year. The Commission carried out an assurance review in 2010 and 2011 to verify that all of the expenditure incurred was eligible. The UK Government are obliged to repay funding where there was ineligible spending under the Labour Administration. Consequently, this funding does not offer additional support, but is only eligible to reimburse a small portion of the extensive financial support that has already been given by the Government to the areas affected.

The UK Government continue to stand squarely behind those flooded, working with local authorities to ensure households and businesses receive all eligible support. Furthermore, we are focused not only on ensuring the recovery from these floods, but also on preventing future damage—we are exceeding our manifesto commitment by building 1,500 new flood defence schemes that will better protect 300,000 more homes.

[HCWS412]
The results are highly sensitive to these assumptions, assumptions are subject to a high degree of uncertainty. Stylised assumptions, and as they note, many of these will happen—but an illustrative projection of what may happen, if the Government did not take action.

They are therefore not the OBR’s predictions of what will happen, but an illustrative projection of what may happen, if the Government did not take action.

In producing these projections the OBR must make stylised assumptions, and as they note, many of these assumptions are subject to a high degree of uncertainty. The results are highly sensitive to these assumptions, and this is particularly the case over the 50 year horizon in the FSR. For example, the OBR project that debt to GDP by 2066-67 could be between 40% of GDP higher or 101% of GDP lower than the central projection, depending on which assumptions are used to underpin projected growth in healthcare spending.

Their findings must be interpreted in this context. However, the FSR’s underlying conclusion is clear: fiscal sustainability will come under increasing pressure from both demographic change and the need to improve efficiency and productivity over the next 50 years. It is important that action continues to be taken to address demographic pressures and improve efficiency, particularly in the health sector.

While the FSR's fundamental message is unchanged from previous reports, changes to the assumptions underpinning this year's projections drive higher projected spending than in previous reports. Higher projected spending, alongside higher initial borrowing and debt, feeds through, in turn, to higher projected borrowing and debt by the end of the projections.

In terms of specifics, the FSR projects that spending on the state pension will rise from 5.0% of GDP in 2021-22 to 7.1% of GDP by 2066-67, putting significant pressure on taxpayers. To ensure that the state pension remains sustainable and fair across generations, the Government are carrying out their first review of state pension age. The Government will consider all the evidence—including an independent report by John Cridland—before formally responding by publishing their review by 7 May 2017.

The FSR also projects that health spending will rise from 6.9% of GDP in 2021-22 to 12.6% of GDP in 2066-67, due to the inclusion of non-demographic cost pressures in the OBR’s analysis for the first time. As the OBR note, there is significant uncertainty around this long-term projection, and it does not take into account the impact of any Government action to address projected cost pressures in future Parliaments. We are taking steps over this Parliament to improve the efficiency of the NHS. This includes funding for the NHS’s five year forward view plan, which sets out its vision for a sustainable long-term future for the NHS, and its proposals for reforms to help it meet future challenges. Decisions on funding in the longer term will be for future Governments to take.

Overall, the FSR demonstrates that the situation would be far graver without the significant progress made by this Government since 2010. The deficit the Government inherited in 2010 stood at 10% of GDP. We have now brought down the deficit by almost two-thirds of GDP and, by 2021-22, the OBR forecast that borrowing will have fallen to its lowest level in two decades. In 2018-19, the OBR forecast debt to fall as a share of GDP for the first time since 2000-01. The magnitude of the long-term fiscal sustainability challenge faced by the UK is similar to many other advanced economies, according to international institutions. Debt is projected to reach 141% of GDP in the US by 2046, and could reach over 180% of GDP in Germany by 2060. This compares to about 125% of GDP in the UK by 2046-47 and rising to about 200% of GDP by 2060-61 as projected in this year’s FSR.

Nonetheless, despite significant progress made to repair the public finances since 2010, today’s OBR projections suggest that, without further policy change, debt will
reach over 234% of GDP by 2066-67 and continue on its upwards trajectory thereafter, driven by increased age-related spending.

Clearly, this would not be a responsible course of action. This provides the motivation for the fiscal framework that the Government set out at autumn statement 2016. We must continue to reduce the deficit and get debt falling over the medium term. And we must bring the public finances to balance at the earliest possible date in the next Parliament. The debate and vote on the new fiscal framework will take place next week, enshrining these commitments to fiscal responsibility into law.

As we look towards the next Parliament, ensuring that the public finances remain sustainable will continue to be one of this Government’s key priorities. In consideration of this fact, at autumn statement 2016, the Chancellor announced his intention to review public spending priorities and other commitments for the next Parliament in light of the evolving fiscal position at the next spending review. Fiscal discipline today will help us tackle any future economic shocks and reduce the burden of debt on future generations. Increasing life-expectancies and other economic trends will continue to pose challenges for the public finances. In response, we will continue to control public spending and grow the potential of the UK economy, including by targeting increased investment in infrastructure to increase the UK’s long run productivity challenge.

The FSR is yet another important example of the credibility and transparency that the independent OBR brings to the public finances, as recognised recently by the IMF’s fiscal transparency evaluation.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Homelessness Reduction Bill

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I am today updating the House on a commitment I made at Second Reading of the Homelessness Reduction Bill—the private Members’ Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—to fund the costs of the Bill in line with the new burdens doctrine.

I can confirm that the Government will provide £48 million to local government to meet the new burdens costs associated with the Bill over the course of the spending review. It is estimated that offsetting savings to local authorities will mean there are no costs thereafter. This reflects the cost of the Bill in its current form. I will continue to monitor the Bill as it proceeds through the House and will update the new burdens assessment as appropriate once the Bill is in its final form.

The Government have been working with local councils and the Local Government Association to test the methodology behind the estimated costs, as well as the core assumptions within it.

We will continue to work with local councils and the Local Government Association to develop the distribution model for the funding. This will reflect differing need in different authorities.

I also intend to consider the case for making available a small amount of further funding for local authorities in high-pressure areas to manage the transition to the new duties in the Bill.

This would be in addition to the level of funding provided to meet our commitment to fund new burdens.

[HCWS418]

DEFENCE

Phalanx Availability Contract: Contingent Liability

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): The Secretary of State for Defence has retrospectively laid before Parliament a Ministry of Defence (MOD) departmental minute describing the contingent liability within the Phalanx close-in weapons system availability contract with Babcock Marine.

The departmental minute describes the contingent liability that the MOD will hold as a result of placing the new Phalanx availability contract, which will provide continuous support to the Navy’s operational fleet of ships. The maximum contingent liability against the MOD is therefore £268 million over the two-year life of the contract.

It is usual to allow a period of 14 sitting days prior to accepting a contingent liability, to provide Members of Parliament with an opportunity to raise any questions. I apologise but on this occasion it was not possible to do so.

However, a break in the contract with Babcock Marine would have resulted in potential severe operational impact to the support of Phalanx, particularly those on-board ships deployed on operations and requiring contractor support to repair them. As such, and by exception, I approved the awarding of the new support contract with Babcock Marine from 22 December 2016, to come into effect from 31 December 2016. This ensures that support provided to Phalanx was not interrupted.

In accordance with the procedures established for cases of special urgency, the Department wrote to the Chairs of the Public Accounts Committee and the Defence Committee on 23 December 2016, in advance of incurring this liability, inviting them to respond with any objections. No such objections have been received.

I apologise that the Ministry of Defence did not allow 14 sitting days for Members of Parliament to signify an objection. Contracts of this type do not normally fall within the parliamentary notification requirement, and it only became apparent that this contract was different late in the process. I have asked Ministry of Defence officials to ensure that these exceptions are identified earlier in future.
The Treasury has approved the proposal. If, during the period of 14 parliamentary sitting days beginning on the date on which the minute was laid before Parliament, a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or by otherwise raising the matter in Parliament, I undertake to examine the objection and respond to the Member concerned.

[HCWS415]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

International Whaling Commission: 66th Meeting

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I was unable to attend last year’s meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC66) on 24-28 October 2016 in Slovenia but there was a strong UK delegation present.

This meeting marked the 70th anniversary of the international convention for the regulation of whaling and the 30th anniversary of the global moratorium on commercial whaling. I am happy to report that all UK objectives for this meeting were achieved and, as always, the UK worked tirelessly behind the scenes to influence and support crucial decisions intended to improve the conservation and welfare of cetaceans. The UK also ensured its long standing opposition to commercial whaling and whaling under special permit (scientific whaling) was made clear at every appropriate opportunity. Ensuring its long standing opposition to commercial whaling (including the three killer whale stocks, small cetaceans and the critically endangered Vaquita) remains important for the conservation and welfare of cetaceans globally. The UK also supported both of these proposals. This was aligned with the agreed position of EU member states, the UK will continue developing and delivering tangible improvements to the conservation and welfare of cetaceans globally.

I was pleased that a number of important resolutions were adopted. In particular, IWC adopted a resolution on the need for action to address the alarming decline in the critically endangered Vaquita. In line with the agreed position of EU member states, the UK voted in support of the proposal. This was aligned with the UK’s negotiating position and represents a good outcome. The Vaquita, a small cetacean found in Mexico, is under significant pressure from bycatch driven by the illegal trade in the Totoaba. With an estimated population size of only 59 individuals, action is needed now and so I was encouraged that parties were able to put aside their disagreements on whether the scope of the IWC extended to small cetaceans in order to make this important statement.

I was also encouraged to see decisions taken on further modernisation of the organisation through institutional and governance improvements agreed by consensus, and the expansion of research efforts into important threats to cetaceans such as contaminants passed by a vote. These are important steps forward. In line with the agreed position of EU member states, the UK supported both of these proposals. This was aligned with the UK’s negotiating position and represents a good outcome.

Reflecting on previous unsuccessful proposals for “small-type coastal whaling”, Japan proposed a process for intersessional dialogue to address issues relating to fundamental differences of positions within the IWC. An informal process to discuss such issues was established. The UK will maintain a careful watching brief on this matter.

I was disappointed that Japan announced its intention to begin a new 12 year programme of whaling under special permit in the North Pacific. In collaboration with other EU member states, the UK will ensure a strong co-ordinated statement is made in response to this announcement. The UK will continue to oppose the issuing of special permits on the basis that there is no justification for lethal scientific research on whales. I was, however, pleased that a resolution was passed that should help strengthen the role of the IWC in considering special permits, albeit not by consensus. In line with the agreed position of EU member states, the UK voted in support of the proposal. This was aligned with the UK’s negotiating position and represents a good outcome.

A proposal brought forward by Japan, Cambodia and Ghana to create a fund to strengthen the capacity of Governments of limited means to participate in the IWC did not achieve consensus. Because consensus could not be reached with parties, EU member states were instructed to abstain from the vote. A number of other anti-whaling countries also abstained. The resolution passed which is an acceptable outcome for the UK; although we will keep the development of the fund under close scrutiny to ensure appropriate safeguards and restrictions are in place.

Once again I am pleased to report that the UK, in line with the agreed position of EU member states, voted in favour of establishing a South Atlantic whale sanctuary. Unfortunately the proposal failed to gain the three-quarters majority required for adoption. This will be re-tabled at the next meeting in 2018, which was announced as being hosted by Brazil.

Finally, I was pleased that the UK-led work to progress the consideration of non-hunting threats to cetacean welfare was well received. A number of important recommendations were proposed to allow this important and ground-breaking work to continue. These were agreed by consensus meaning the UK can continue working closely with NGOs and academia to move this to the next stage.

In conclusion, this was a successful meeting and the UK made clear its continued strong opposition to commercial and scientific whaling. We now turn our attention to building for the 2018 meeting in Brazil, and will be working very closely with civil society in order to continue developing and delivering tangible improvements to the conservation and welfare of cetaceans globally.

On 23 June, the EU referendum took place and the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Until exit negotiations are concluded, the UK remains a full member of the European Union and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. Within IWC, until exit is concluded, the UK will continue to operate as part of the EU. Once we leave the EU, we will regain the ability to speak and vote independently at IWC and will be able to form broader coalitions to promote the conservation of whales and cetaceans.

[HCWS414]
TRANSPORT

High Speed 2, Phase One: Government Response to the Lords Select Committee Report

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):
I am today publishing the Department’s response to the special report from the House of Lords Select Committee for the HS2 Phase One hybrid Bill that was published on 15 December 2017.

The Lords Select Committee was tasked with considering petitions from those specially and directly affected by the Bill and subsequent additional provisions to the Bill. Their first special report concludes the Committee deliberations which began in May 2016. The Lords Select Committee considered 822 petitions lodged against the HS2 Phase One hybrid Bill. Of these, the locus of 278 petitions was successfully challenged. Of the remaining 544 petitions the Select Committee heard 314 petitions in formal session, with the remainder withdrawing, or choosing not to appear before the Select Committee, mainly as a result of successful prior negotiation with HS2 Ltd.

The Select Committee’s recent report summarises their hearings and contains modifications to the Bill powers, directions for action by the promoter in a number specific cases and more general recommendations on what actions the promoter should take on a range of other issues.

In responding to the Select Committee we have confined our response to those areas of the report where the Select Committee has requested the Government take action or where we believe a further clarification would be beneficial.

Alongside the response to the Select Committee report, we are also publishing the Statement of Reasons Command Paper. The Statement of Reasons is required by Parliamentary Standing Order 83A in order to assist the House of Lords during the Third Reading of the HS2 Phase One hybrid Bill. This document summarises the work that has already been done to assess, control and mitigate the environmental impacts of HS2 Phase One, and explains why the Government continue to take the view that the HS2 Phase One project is worthy of Parliament’s support.

Copies of the response to the Select Committee can be found on the www.gov.uk website. Copies of the Statement of Reasons will be made available in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS413]
Written Statements

Wednesday 18 January 2017

CABINET OFFICE

Contingencies Fund

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): In the autumn statement, the Chancellor announced that additional funding would be made available to the Department for Exiting the European Union for the 2016-17 financial year. However, as is normal in machinery of government moves, full legal and financial responsibility does not transfer between Departments until the legislation related to the relevant Supply estimates receives Royal Assent. Until then the main exporting Department for the function, the Cabinet Office, must seek an advance on behalf of the new Department.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £42,700,000 for this new expenditure will be sought in a supplementary estimate. Pending that approval, expenditure estimated at £42,700,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Hillsborough

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): In April 2016, at the conclusion of the fresh inquests into the deaths which resulted from the Hillsborough stadium disaster on 15 April 1989, Bishop James Jones was commissioned by my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), to produce a report on the Hillsborough families’ experiences. Since then Bishop James has met many of the Hillsborough families and discussed his review. Those discussions have helped shape the terms of reference for the review, which I am publishing today.

It is envisaged that Bishop James Jones will complete his review and produce his report in spring 2017. This report will then be published.

The Terms of Reference can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-01-18/HCWS419/.

[HCWS419]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): The Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme (Levy) regulations 2014 require active employers’ liability insurers to pay an annual levy based on their relative market share for the purpose of meeting the costs of the Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme (DMPS). This is in line with the commitment by the insurance industry to fund a scheme of last resort for sufferers of diffuse mesothelioma who have been unable to trace their employer or their employer’s insurer.

I can announce today that the total amount of the levy to be charged for 2016-17, the third year of the DMPS, is £40.4 million. This includes £5.2 million to accommodate a levy shortfall last year. The amount will be payable by active insurers by the end of March 2017.

Individual active insurers will be notified in writing of their payment amount (i.e. their share of the levy), together with how the amount was calculated and payment arrangements. Insurers should be aware that it is a legal requirement to pay the levy within the set timescales.

I am pleased that the DMPS has seen two successful years of operation, assisting many sufferers of diffuse mesothelioma. The second annual report for the scheme was published on 29 November 2016 and is available on the gov.uk website. I hope that members of both Houses will welcome this announcement and give the DMPS their continued support.

[HCWS420]
Written Statements

Thursday 19 January 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Overseas-owned Plutonium

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): The Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has agreed to the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA):-

Taking ownership of 600 kg of material previously owned by a Spanish utility.

Taking ownership of 5 kg of material previously owned by a German organisation.

These transactions, which have been agreed by the Euratom supply agency, will not result in any new plutonium being brought into the UK, and will not therefore increase the overall amount of plutonium in the UK.

The Department has agreed to these transactions on the grounds that they offer a cost-effective and beneficial arrangement, which allows the UK to gain national control over more of the civil plutonium located in the UK, and facilitates conclusion of outstanding contracts with the Spanish and German counterparties. The revenue from the transaction is also expected to be of significant benefit to the UK and sufficient to cover the cost of the long term management of the additional plutonium.

The UK has committed to publish annual figures for national holdings of civil plutonium at the end of each calendar year to improve transparency and public confidence. The most recently published data for 2015 can be found at the following link, published on the 14 November 2016:

http://www.onr.org.uk/safeguards/iaeauk.htm

This data will be updated in due course to reflect the changes described above.

[HCWS422]

WALES

Wales Bill: English Votes for English Laws

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I am pleased to announce the publication of analysis of English votes for English laws in relation to Government amendments to the Wales Bill during its passage through the House of Lords.

The English votes for English laws process applies to public Bills in the House of Commons. To support the process, the Government have agreed that they will provide information to assist the Speaker in considering whether to certify that Bill or any of its provisions for the purposes of English votes for English laws. Bill provisions that relate exclusively to England or to England and Wales, and which have a subject matter within the legislative competence of one or more of the devolved legislatures, can be certified.

The memorandum provides an assessment of tabled Government amendments to the Wales Bill, for the purposes of English votes for English laws, ahead of Commons consideration of Lords amendments (CCLA). The Department’s assessment is the amendments do not change the territorial application of the Bill.

This analysis reflects the position should all the Government amendments be accepted.

The memorandum can be found on the Bill documents page of the Parliament website at: http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2016-17/wales.html and I have deposited a copy in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS423]
The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Agriculture and Fisheries Council will take place on 23 January in Brussels. I will represent the United Kingdom.

As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus will be an exchange of views on agricultural products in free trade agreements.

There will also be an information item on the dairy market and milk package report. This will be followed by a Council discussion.

The Maltese presidency, whose presidency term commenced on 1 January, will present their six-month work programme to the Council.

There is currently only one item scheduled under “any other business”: Conclusions of the 40th Conference of Directors of Paying Agencies (tabled by the Slovak delegation).

Until exit negotiations are concluded, the UK remains a full member of the European Union and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. The outcome of these negotiations will determine what arrangements apply in relation to EU legislation in future once the UK has left the EU.

I am grateful to those who have brought this matter to the learning and action that follows.

The ambitious transformation programme that has been put in place to ensure that children and young people receive the support they need is designed to improve in the future. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I would like to update the House following a point of order on this issue on 12 April 2016 (Col 183) made by my predecessor, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), former Minister of State for Community and Social Care, who met the voluntary and community sector organisation that brought this issue to light with the BBC. He was able to have a useful discussion with them on the key problems and potential solutions. He made the commitment to look into this issue and set out how this will be improved in the future.

Deaths in children’s in-patient mental health services are rare events. Every preventable death, especially in young people, is a tragedy and it is important that they are properly recorded so that lessons can be learned and action taken where necessary. There can be particular challenges in the way deaths are registered and classified. There can be a time lag before an inquest concludes on the cause of death and where a young person is concerned; there may be a lack of clarity around intent, so that the cause of death may not be classified as suicide.

Officials have now made a detailed assessment of the available data. I can confirm that there have been 11 deaths of patients under the care of mental health in-patient services, both inside and outside of the premises since January 2013. It is not possible to provide an accurate figure on the number of deaths prior to this time period, due to the commissioning arrangements and data collection methods which were in place at that time. It is with regret that I cannot provide a figure for this earlier time period. However, I am fully committed to making sure that we are able to improve on this in the future.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I would like to update the House about the European semester and health, and a number of other items as part of the “any other business” section of the agenda.

A report by the National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicide on Suicide in Children and Young People, which was published on 26 May 2016, shows that 60% of those who had died had not been in contact with mental health services at all. This illustrates the urgent need to make sure that children and young people can access mental health services to prevent such tragedies in future. The ambitious transformation programme that has been put in place to ensure that young people receive the support they need is designed to do just that.

We know that we need to improve the system of investigating deaths of mental health patients. The Government and local providers are working hard on the implementation of the Mental Health Taskforce report which will address these issues, and the House will be kept informed. Also, the Secretary of State recently announced a series of measures in response to the Care Quality Commission’s report “Learning, candour and accountability” that will require NHS trusts and foundation trusts to improve their understanding of deaths arising from problems in care and demonstrate the learning and action that follows.

On behalf of both previous and current Ministers, I am grateful to those who have brought this matter to our attention in the House.
the involvement of Health Ministers in discussions about the
semester, the UK stated that it had no objection to
focused discussions, although added that Health Ministers
are already engaged through national co-ordination.
Discussions about this issue will continue under the
Maltese presidency.

Under the AOB part of the agenda, the UK presented
on the candidacy of Dr David Nabarro for Director-
General of the World Health Organisation (WHO).
The UK emphasised Dr Nabarro’s UN experience—including on cholera, food security and sustainable
development—and stressed that he has demonstrated a
reform-minded approach and is committed to transforming
organisational effectiveness. The UK stated that he had
the backing of the Prime Minister and chief medical
officer.

On antimicrobial resistance (AMR), the UK stressed
the importance of keeping up momentum following the
recent agreement of a declaration on AMR at the UN
General Assembly, and outlined areas where work needed
to be focused; including on research and innovation, the
development of new products, on implementing national
action plans and on benchmarking.

There were also discussions on alcohol, about the
production of paediatric medicines, and about follow-up
work relating to Council conclusions on pharmaceuticals.
The EU Commission provided an update on European
reference networks, as well as feedback about the report
“State of Health in the EU”, which it has jointly published
with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and
Development. There was also an update about the
discussions held at the recent conference of the parties
to the WHO framework convention on tobacco control.

Finally, there were updates about recent conferences,
and Malta provided an overview of priorities for its
presidency, commencing on 1 January.

[HCWS425]

Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health
(Nicola Blackwood): On 23 December 2016, the
Government published the level of payment due from
members of the Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme
(PPRS) in 2017 to keep health service spend on branded
medicines within the levels agreed under the scheme.

The Department of Health and the Association of
the British Pharmaceutical Industry have agreed in
principle to amend chapter 6 of the 2014 PPRS in
accordance with paragraph 3.4 of the scheme in order
that the scheme continues to deliver its agreed objectives
of predictability and stability to Government and industry,
and to ensure that the cost of branded medicines to the
NHS stays within affordable limits. The effect of the
changes is that the payment percentage for 2017 is to be
set at 4.75% for 2017, and the 2018 PPRS payment
percentage will be determined by reference to the existing
PPRS payment mechanism, provided that the resulting
percentage falls within the lower and upper limits of
2.38% and 7.80%. The Government recognises the
additional contribution being made by the pharmaceutical
industry in acknowledgement of the financial challenges
facing the NHS.

The Department has published a document setting
out further details entitled “Pharmaceutical Price Regulation
Scheme (PPRS) 2014: revised payment percentages at
December 2016”.

Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme (PPRS) can
be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/
publications/written-questions-answers-statements/
written-statement/Commons/2017-01-20/HCWS426/.
Further that the private landlord who has recently acquired St Michael’s Gate has entered into agreement with Peterborough City Council to house homeless people at the properties; further that as a result of this agreement, all current longstanding tenants will be evicted, and some former tenants, including families, have had to declare themselves homeless; and further that Peterborough City Council should be doing more to support residents against their eviction by the private landlords.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to put pressure on Peterborough City Council to ensure that residents of St Michael’s Gate in Parnwell, Peterborough, are protected from eviction by their landlords.

The Government therefore urge the House of Commons to put pressure on Peterborough City Council to ensure that residents of St Michael’s Gate in Parnwell, Peterborough, are protected from eviction by their landlords.

We know that Peterborough Council has issued a statement committing to support the residents of St Michael’s Gate if they require help finding alternative accommodation, and stating that households who are unable to secure alternative accommodation without support can contact the council’s housing needs team.

The decision to gain possession of St Michael’s Gate is a private matter for the landlords and our understanding is that the offer of the properties to Peterborough Council as temporary accommodation was made following this decision.

As regards the use of St Michael’s Gate as temporary accommodation for homeless families, the sourcing of such accommodation is for local authorities to decide on, depending on availability and household need in the area (subject to the statutory guidelines requiring the accommodation to be suitable). However, our understanding is that the properties in St Michael’s Gate are being taken by the council on three year leases, understanding is that the offer of the properties to Peterborough Council as temporary accommodation was made following this decision.

Private Sector landlords play an important role in meeting the housing needs of many households. The Housing Act 1988 enables a landlord to regain possession of their property at any time after any fixed term comes to an end or at any time during a contractual or statutory periodic tenancy, provided it is at least 6 months since the start of the original tenancy. The landlord must also give the tenant at least two month notice that he or she requires possession.
Without the certainty that landlords can seek repossession when required, landlords would be reluctant to let their properties. We believe that more restrictive and excessive legislation would mean that fewer homes would be available to rent. This would not help landlords or tenants.

The Government are committed to building a bigger, better private rented sector which provides security and stability for both tenants and landlords. We know how important housing affordability is and believe that increasing supply is the best way of improving quality, choice and affordability for tenants. We have introduced several initiatives to tackle this, including a £630 million fund providing equity finance to house builders and developers to stimulate building for private rent, and a debt guarantee for up to £10 billion for private rented and affordable housing schemes.
Petition

Wednesday 11 January 2017

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

A509 Development Ashton Grove

The Humble Petition of Ashton Grove, Northamptonshire and the surrounding area,

Sheweth,

That the petitioners believe that the development of the A509 as currently proposed should not go ahead due to reduction in safety, the increase to noise and air pollution, and the privacy concerns that raising the road and removing the trees would cause to residents of Ashton Grove.

Wherefore your petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Department for Transport to encourage Northamptonshire County Council to reassess their plans for the A509 and amend them in consultation with local residents.

And your petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.—[Presented by Mr Peter Bone, Official Report, 12 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 588.]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

The Government note the concerns expressed by your petitioners regarding consultation associated with the Wellingborough North development also known as Upper Redhill. As you will be aware, responsibility for consultations associated with planning applications rests with the local planning authorities; in this case the Borough Council of Wellingborough. I understand that the Borough Council consulted interested parties on the planned development at the time.

In view of this the Government have no powers to intervene in this matter, but we have made Northamptonshire County Council aware of the petition and the Parliamentary concern.

In this particular case the development was originally refused by the Borough Council but then considered and permitted by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government via a Public Inquiry in 2009. While the plans have been modified, there has been no change to the proposed access arrangements at Gleneagles by way of a traffic signal controlled junction.

The junction was proposed and designed by the developer and found to work appropriately based on the transport assessments associated with the planning applications. The junction design also provides greater connectivity for pedestrian and cycle movements from the development into the existing network.

The Department for Transport has been advised by Northamptonshire County Council that the design complies with national standards and has been subject to an independent road safety audit. Once complete a further road safety audit will be carried out and any further works or alterations arising from that will be undertaken.

Environmental and noise issues arising from the development are matters for the Borough Council as local planning authority to consider. I understand that the Borough Council and Northamptonshire County Council have been in touch with your constituents to discuss their concerns and I would encourage your constituents to raise any remaining concerns with those organisations.
Petition

Thursday 12 January 2017

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Post Office Closure in Tonbridge

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,
Declares that the proposed closure by Post Office Ltd of the existing stand-alone post office on Tonbridge High Street is unacceptable; and further that the post office should not be relocated within another existing local business.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to note their objections to the proposed closure by Post Office Ltd of the existing stand-alone post office on Tonbridge High Street and its proposed relocation within another existing local business.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tom Tugendhat, Official Report, 17 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 491.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James):

The Post Office operates as an independent business and the Government do not play a role in the day-to-day operational responsibilities of the company, which includes decisions on the provision and location of individual post offices.

The Post Office’s proposal to relocate its Tonbridge branch into the local WHSmith store is part of the company’s ongoing plans to ensure its branch network is sustainable and profitable in the long term and fits the future needs of the business and its customers. Changes to its Crown network, such as the hosting or franchising of existing branches, have been undertaken previously in many locations across the UK and are a successful way of sustaining Post Office services in these locations and bringing in further investment.

In line with the Post Office’s code of practice, Government are aware that the Post Office undertook a six-week local consultation on the planned relocation, to make customers and the community aware of the details of its proposal and to seek feedback. The Post Office considers all feedback carefully before reaching a final decision, which it will do in due course.
Petition

Tuesday 17 January 2017

OBSERVATIONS

TREASURY

Bank services in Corwen

The petition of residents of Corwen,

Declares that the loss of local branches of national banks is having a dramatic effect on local communities; further that it is leaving towns and villages cut off from local financial services; further that the loss of banking services in Corwen is forcing people to travel to other towns to use their banking services; and further that this is resulting in the reduction of visitors to Corwen and a decline in income for local retail businesses.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to develop a community banking system incorporating local government legislation in order to ensure residents of local villages and towns such as Corwen continue to have access to a bank or financial services.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Susan Elan Jones, Official Report, 16 November 2016; Vol. 617, c. 355.]

Observations from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby):

The Government thank the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) for her petition on bank branch closures.

The Government are sorry to hear about the disappointment of the residents of Corwen at bank branch closures in their local vicinity. Although we can understand their concerns, decisions on opening and closing agencies are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis. Banking service providers will need to balance customer interests, market competition, and other commercial factors when considering their strategies and the Government do not seek to intervene in these decisions.

However, the Government believe that banks should act in the best interests of their customers and continue to serve the needs of the consumer as well as the wider economy. In March this year, the major high street banks, consumer groups and the Government signed up to an industry-wide agreement to work with customers and communities to minimise the impact of branch closures and put in place alternative banking services. This protocol commits the banks to:

- find suitable alternative provision to suit individual communities
- put satisfactory alternative banking services in place before a branch is closed. Options for this will include free to use cash machines, the proximity of alternative branches, and Post Office branches and mobile banking arrangements.

The British Bankers’ Association appointed Professor Russel Griggs to carry out an independent “one year on” review of the protocol. The review was published on 10 November and made a number of recommendations to improve how the Protocol operates. The Government welcome the review and are pleased to see the industry commit to further improvements to protect those affected by closures. While the decision to close a branch remains a commercial judgement for banks, the impact on communities must be understood, considered and mitigated where possible.

Corwen residents may find it helpful to know that many bank account providers already have an arrangement with the Post Office to provide access to their bank accounts. The arrangement allows customers to withdraw money, deposit cash and cheques and check balances at all 11,500 Post Office branches in the UK. While the range of services offered by the Post Office may be more limited than that offered in a traditional bank branch, the services provided through the Post Office’s extensive network ensures that essential banking facilities remain available in as many communities as possible.

The Government recognise that more can be done to improve the consistency of banking services that are available to customers at Post Office branches. In 2014, the British Bankers’ Association and the Post Office began negotiations to agree a standard set of services. The agreed services will be made available to banks’ personal and business customers at Post Office counters across the country. The negotiations are ongoing, but the Government consider completion of that work to be a priority.

If other banks in the wider local area have more extensive facilities, residents may wish to consider moving to an alternative bank; if so, they may be interested in using the Current Account Switch Service (CASS). The switch service is free to use, comes with a guarantee to protect customers from financial loss if something goes wrong, and redirects any payments mistakenly sent to the old account, providing further assurance for customers. This means that customers are more able than ever to hold their banks to account by voting with their feet, and that banks are incentivised to work hard to retain their existing customers and attract new ones. There is more information about CASS at: www.currentaccountswitch.co.uk.
Ministerial Correction

Monday 9 January 2017

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION
Exiting the EU: Science and Research

The following is an extract from the debate on Exiting the EU: Science and Research on 19 December 2016.

Mr Robin Walker: The Government have also reassured organisations that structural and investment fund projects signed before the UK withdraws from the EU will be guaranteed by the Treasury after we leave, up to 2020.—[Official Report, 19 December 2016, Vol. 618, c. 1280.]

Letter of correction from Mr Robin Walker:

An error has been identified in the speech I made in the debate on Exiting the EU: Science and Research on 19 December.

The correct statement should have been:

Mr Robin Walker: The Government have also reassured organisations that structural and investment fund projects signed before the UK withdraws from the EU will be guaranteed by the Treasury after we leave.
Ministerial Correction

Monday 16 January 2017

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Broadcasting (Radio Multiplex Services) Bill
The following is an extract from the Second Reading of the Broadcasting (Radio Multiplex Services Bill on 13 January 2017.

Matt Hancock: There have been some big changes in the past couple of years, including in the car market. Nearly 95% of new car radios are digital. The change is happening and it is a good thing, but we must do it sensibly and carefully, and the Bill has no impact on those plans.

The correct statement should have been:

Matt Hancock: There have been some big changes in the past couple of years, including in the car market. Nearly 85% of new car radios are digital. The change is happening and it is a good thing, but we must do it sensibly and carefully, and the Bill has no impact on those plans.
Ministerial Correction

Thursday 19 January 2017

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Dorset Combined Authority

The following is an extract from topical questions to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government on 16 January 2017.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Last summer, the nine Dorset councils submitted a proposal to my right hon. Friend to establish a combined authority. Will he ensure that the order establishing that authority is brought forward in sufficient time to enable the authorities to be set up on 1 April this year?

Sajid Javid: We have only just received the proposal to which my hon. Friend refers. We want to make sure that we take the right amount of time to consider it carefully. Whatever the result, we will make sure that enough time is allowed for this House to do its business.

Letter of correction from Sajid Javid:

An error has been identified in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope).

The correct response should have been:

Sajid Javid: We have received the proposal to which my hon. Friend refers. We want to make sure that we take the right amount of time to consider it carefully. Whatever the result, we will make sure that enough time is allowed for this House to do its business.
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