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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Wednesday 16 December 2015

House of Commons

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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—

Palestinian Territories

1. **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): How her Department monitors outcomes of its spending in the Palestinian territories. [902748]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Justine Greening): I would first like to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) for all the work he did during his time in the Department, and to welcome the new Under-Secretary of State for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd) who I know will continue in the footsteps of my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield.

The Department for International Development provides assistance and support to poor and vulnerable Palestinians, as well as supporting state building and economic development. Our operational plan for the Occupied Palestinian Territories contains a results framework that is monitored quarterly.

John Howell: I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The Prime Minister has been clear that Palestinian incitement will not be tolerated. As many as 25 Palestinian Authority schools are named after Palestinian terrorists, including Dalal Mughrabi, who killed 37 Israeli citizens. Will the Secretary of State assure me that no British aid goes towards such schools or to support the glorification of terrorism?

Justine Greening: The Prime Minister and I have been very clear that the UK deplores incitement on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We monitor any allegations of incitement closely and raise instances with both the Palestinian and the Israeli authorities. The UK's direct financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority, which provides civil service salaries, goes only to approved individuals through a World Bank trust fund that has an independent audit.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Palestinian refugees from Syria are suffering enormously—both those within Syria and those who have fled the country. What more can we do and what more can DFID do to ensure that the vital work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency has secure funding for the long term?

Justine Greening: I had the chance to meet the head of UNRWA only last week with the Minister of State, Department for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Mr Swayne), and we discussed the need to ensure that its funding is sustained. UNRWA does critical work, and in the context of the need to improve the international response to more protracted crises, we can learn a great deal from its work with Palestinian refugees.

15 [902762]. **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that it would be better if money was put into direct projects rather than through third-party organisations when we cannot really be sure of the outcome?

Justine Greening: I hope I can reassure my hon. Friend that the agencies and organisations with which we work are ones in respect of which we know we can achieve value for money and results on the ground. He knows that I am passionate about being an aid disciplinarian and making sure that we get value for money. Critically, though, we have to work with the organisations that are there. We have a multilateral aid review under way to make sure that improvements in value for money continue progressively over time.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Surely the Secretary of State will be aware of the guidance on the Foreign Office website, which warns UK companies thinking of investing in the Occupied Palestinian Territories of the "legal and economic risks" if they engage in

"financial transactions, investments, purchases, procurements and other economic activities in Israeli settlements or benefiting Israeli settlements"

because of the illegal nature of those settlements and their being an obstacle to peace. Does the right hon. Lady therefore agree that it is perfectly reasonable for both public and private institutions to pay due regard to that advice when they make their own investment and procurement decisions?

Justine Greening: They should do that; that is good Foreign Office advice. We have been very clear that we deplore illegal settlements, because they take us further away from a two-state solution and peace in that part of the world, when we need to be taking what could be final steps and final chances to reach a two-state solution.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): We welcome the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd) to his new Front-Bench position, and on this side we will claim the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) as our first scalp.

Given the worsening situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, how does the Secretary of State justify the decreasing funding to organisations such as UNRWA?

Justine Greening: I do not recognise that statement. The United Kingdom has played a leading role in making sure that we get support to vulnerable Palestinians, not only in Gaza but on the west bank. For example, the Materials Monitoring Unit has helped to support the Gaza reconstruction mechanism. I am sure that the hon. Lady is aware of all that, and it would be helpful to have her support for it.

Gaza: Youth Unemployment

2. **Simon Danczuk** (Rochdale) (Lab): What information her Department holds on the level of youth unemployment in Gaza; and if she will make a statement. [902749]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Mr Desmond Swayne): Gaza has the highest unemployment in the world. The World Bank estimates that youth unemployment had reached 60% by the end of 2014. Extensive restrictions inhibit employment. The UK continues to promote economic development and private sector-led growth.

Simon Danczuk: Gaza still faces restrictions on access to 35% of its agricultural land and 85% of its fishable waters, and Gazans are rarely allowed to travel outside their territory. Until such restrictions are removed, DFID will continue to work with one hand tied behind its back. Does the Minister not agree that the real problem is the blockade of Gaza?

Mr Swayne: As I said, the restrictions inhibit employment, but we will not give up. We have a programme for economic development, and it is making progress—slow and frustrating progress, but progress none the less.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): May I make it absolutely clear that supporting the Palestinian people has nothing whatever to do with anti-Semitism? I wanted to clarify that at the outset.

Does the Minister not agree that the appalling situation in Gaza—and he has given us the figures—shows the need for the developed democracies to do far more? What hope can there be for the Palestinian people when they are faced with so little hope of obtaining jobs and having a decent life? Should we not be far more concerned with the Palestinian tragedy than we are?

Mr Swayne: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We do everything that we can diplomatically to raise the sights of the world community, and we will continue to do so.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Does my hon. Friend not agree that the ill-considered, short-sighted campaign for boycotts and disinvestment is actually leading to more unemployment among the Palestinian people?

Mr Swayne: The problem faced by Gaza is restrictions, and the extension of restriction by any means is a block to peace.

Start-up Businesses

3. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to encourage the availability of low-cost credit for start-up businesses in developing countries. [902750]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr Nick Hurd): May I place on record my personal respect for the work done by my predecessor and friend the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), not least his kick-starting of the Energy Africa campaign?

As the hon. Gentleman knows, small and medium-sized enterprises will play a critical role in creating and sustaining much-needed jobs in poor countries. We have a range of programmes that focus on providing support and finance for microbusinesses, SMEs and, I am delighted to say, social enterprises.

Mr Sheerman: I know the Minister to be an innovator—he has that reputation—but will he consider carefully one way in which the United Kingdom can help? The UK is now the leading financial technology and crowdfunding centre of the world, and crowdfunding can deliver real opportunities to, in particular, women in the developing world to control their lives, finance start-ups, and do well in life. Will the Minister talk to other people, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer, with the aim of getting some real movement behind this?

Mr Hurd: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman, who is a long-term, passionate supporter of the power of the crowd. If we get the regulation and the technology right, the arrangements will be very sustainable. The hon. Gentleman may not know this, but we have a manifesto commitment to develop crowdfunding, and that is exactly what we are doing. We are backing the Global Village Energy Partnership, which will support 10 to 15 crowdfunding platforms in the energy sector in sub-Saharan Africa, and that is just the start.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that businesses that support the conservation of endangered species should be promoted, and will he meet the all-party parliamentary group on endangered species to discuss that?

Mr Hurd: Yes.

Mr Speaker: I am deeply grateful.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My party also welcomes the new Minister to his post. He has said that he will ensure that small local enterprises can flourish in developing countries, but what reassurances can he give us that funds intended for those purposes do not make their way into the hands of larger conglomerates or multinational companies when it comes to, for example, the building of schools or the provision of education?

Mr Hurd: What is important to us is the creation of jobs. Those jobs will be created by a range of companies, and we will work with them to create a better economic environment in the countries in which we work. However, we know that 90% of the jobs will come from the private sector, and we know that most of the sustainable jobs will come from small and medium-sized organisations. We therefore give those organisations priority in respect of a number of the programmes that we are developing.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): How will DFID's work with women and girls drive economic development in poorer countries?

Mr Hurd: As my hon. Friend will know, that issue is enormously important to the Department and the Secretary of State. Inclusive growth and support for women and girls as part of economic development is a central pillar

of our strategic framework for the future. We expect our support over the next seven years to help to mobilise finance for more than 200,000 SMEs, at least a quarter of which will be headed by women.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Small businesses in Rwanda and Burundi face credit costs of up to 20%. I know that DFID's TradeMark East Africa project is trying to deal with that, but small businesses in Burundi now face an upsurge in ethnic violence, with foreign fighters coming in from Rwanda. May I urge the Minister, as he undertakes the bilateral aid review, to look again at our decision to leave Burundi in 2011 and to look carefully at the potential need to go back in there and have a presence on the ground?

Mr Hurd: I share the hon. Lady's concern about the situation. We do not have a bilateral programme there, but we do a lot in terms of humanitarian support. I take on board fully her remark about the costs of capital to small organisations. I refer to my earlier answer: technology can help us to reduce such costs.

Burma

4. **James Berry** (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): What plans she has to provide support for economic development in Burma in response to the recent election result in that country. [902751]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Justine Greening): I congratulate the people of Burma on their historic elections, which were supported by British-funded trained observers. The elections are an important step towards greater democracy. The UK will support inclusive growth in Burma. We will support improvements to the business climate, including the financial sector. We will help to increase agricultural productivity, diversify livelihoods and encourage more private sector investment in infrastructure.

James Berry: In the wake of Aung San Suu Kyi's amazing victory, will my right hon. Friend expand on what her Department is doing to increase the participation of women in Burma's economy, which has been dominated for far too long by men and the military?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Women face specific barriers to participation in Burma's predominantly rural economy, and in access to finance, land skills and credit, so we are targeting those issues through programmes that have helped, for example, to provide affordable credit for over 140,000 women. We are also looking at how we can help women to move into other sectors, such as garments manufacture, where often conditions and pay are better.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In assisting the Burmese nation and the new regime with international development, will the Secretary of State ensure that that regime is aware of the ongoing persecution of minorities in Burma, which needs to be dealt with as the new nation state takes shape?

Justine Greening: We will of course raise those issues. We know from so many other parts of the world that the Governments that are successful are the inclusive

Governments with respect to minorities. One of the pieces of work that will be under way will be to double our support for a governance project that is taking place in the Burmese Parliament. That has seen our House of Commons Clerk go there in recent years. We will be doubling the number of Clerks there to help to ensure that the Burmese democracy can flourish, as ours has.

Gaza: Water and Sanitation

5. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the quality and availability of water and sanitation facilities in Gaza. [902752]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Mr Desmond Swayne): It is completely inadequate. Demand exceeds supply by a factor of four, and 96% of the extracted water fails World Health Organisation safety standards.

Alex Cunningham: It is a terrible situation. Twenty-six per cent. of all diseases in Gaza, ranging from respiratory and gastric to skin and eye diseases, are directly associated with the poor water supply. Clean water is limited to 70 litres per person a day and that figure will fall drastically over the coming years. According to the UN, the underground coastal aquifer will become unusable by 2016. What can be done about that, or is it just a case of lifting the Israeli blockade and getting on with life?

Mr Swayne: We are currently spending some €600,000 on a project to assist with desalination. Funds are available through our climate change fund for a long-term solution to this problem, but the level of investment and the marshalling of the factors of production will require a long-term peace process to be viable.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) speaks about the blockade, but surely if they did not embrace Hamas and continually fire rockets into Israel, there would not need to be a blockade in the first place.

Mr Swayne: We work continually with both sides to ease the economic conditions and to bring about a settlement.

Mr Speaker: Natalie McGarry? Not here.

Yemen

7. **Stephen Phillips** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to tackle the humanitarian situation in Yemen. [902754]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Mr Desmond Swayne): This is one of the world's worst human crises: 80% of Yemen's 21 million people are in need of assistance. The UK is playing its part. We have committed £75 million and are the fourth largest donor.

Stephen Phillips: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. Will he update the House on what role the UK Government are playing to help bring about a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Yemen?

Mr Swayne: Peace talks began today, and yesterday a ceasefire commenced. I would urge all parties to observe the ceasefire. Her Majesty's ambassador and DFID are in the margins of the peace conference affording what assistance they can.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I welcome all the efforts that have been made by the Government, including the ceasefire, but the real problem is getting aid into Yemen. What can we do to raise the blockade?

Mr Swayne: We have invested £1.7 million in the UN vessel investigation mechanism. I hope that that will have a quantum effect on the number of vessels that are able to dock in the ports—60 last month, 55 the month before. It is getting better, but we are far, far short of what is necessary.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): My right hon. Friend will no doubt be aware of the recent report by Save the Children that highlighted the devastating impact of the conflict on medical facilities in Yemen, with some 69 hospitals destroyed or damaged by the end of October. While one wishes the peace talks well, what can the Government do in the interim to ensure the combatants are dissuaded from targeting medical facilities?

Mr Swayne: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That report is being scrutinised and investigated. We call on all combatants to observe international law, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made this point very forcefully on his recent visit.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Following that reply, does the Minister agree that there is an overwhelming case for the United Nations Human Rights Council, which in the last year has referenced international humanitarian law 17 times, to call for an investigation into breaches of international humanitarian law in Yemen?

Mr Swayne: We supported the UN Human Rights Council resolution.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The conflict in Yemen has seen 6,000 dead and 30,000 injured. The World Health Organisation says health services are on the brink of collapse. As it was world universal health coverage day yesterday, will the Minister today commit to help rebuild Yemen's crippled system?

Mr Swayne: We have already committed £75 million to this, the worst crisis in the world, and I do give that commitment. We are already planning for the reconstruction of Yemen.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What discussions has the Minister had with the Foreign Office about concerning reports from Amnesty International and others that British-made weapons sold to Saudi Arabia are being used in the conflict, in breach of human rights laws?

Mr Swayne: The UK has the toughest standards for the export of weapons. The hon. Lady should be aware that the coalition is acting in support of the legitimate Government of Yemen after an illegal coup by an armed—[*Interruption*—]force.

Mr Speaker: For a moment I thought the right hon. Gentleman was going to be inaudible, which is pretty rare.

Topical Questions

T1. [902738] **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Justine Greening): Since the last session of DFID questions, the House will welcome the news that Sierra Leone's Ebola outbreak is officially over, and my thanks go to all those across Government, our armed forces and British non-governmental organisations who helped save an estimated 56,000 lives.

In terms of my written ministerial statement in 2012, we are on track to end our traditional aid programme to India by the end of this year, shifting to a relationship based on technical assistance and investment, and last month I became the first Development Minister ever to chair a meeting of the United Nations Security Council in New York, discussing the crisis in Syria and the importance of development to delivering peace and security.

Mr Hepburn: Britain has a lot to be proud of in its international development spending, but does the Minister agree that some brutal states continue to undermine the UK's good efforts in the third world? With this in mind, does she agree that Qatar should be stripped of the World cup because the number of migrant, third world workers slaughtered there in the run-up to the World cup will be greater than the number of professional footballers playing there?

Justine Greening: I am sure that the people running FIFA will have heard the hon. Gentleman's point very clearly. He will be aware that some of the work we do in DFID involves improving workers' conditions, not least in places such as Bangladesh.

Mr Speaker: I call Kevin Foster. Get in there, Mr Foster—your moment has arrived!

T2. [902739] **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Given the vital importance of a rebuilding process for Syria after the conflict, what discussions is my right hon. Friend's Department having with our international partners and what financial commitments have been made to develop a long-term plan for that process?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend will be aware that, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has signalled, the UK has pledged to commit at least £1 billion to Syria's reconstruction. We are already updating our existing planning for reconstruction, working with donors, United Nations agencies and the World Bank. The expertise of the UN, international financial institutions and the private sector will be essential. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a lot of noise—probably animated discussions about Christmas shopping and the like—but we must hear the questions and the answers.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): How many Syrian refugees will the Government have resettled in this country by Christmas?

Justine Greening: The Prime Minister will be giving an update on that shortly, but I think we can be proud of the role that the United Kingdom has played in leading the humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis, and of all the support we have provided, right from day one, to the refugees affected by the crisis.

T4. [902742] **Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What steps can the Secretary of State take to assist Syrians displaced in neighbouring countries such as Jordan, especially over the coming winter months?

Justine Greening: In this financial year, we have provided nearly £13 million to 11 partners who are helping to prepare for and respond to the onset of winter across Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. That is going to help to provide warm clothing, blankets, fuel and cash to vulnerable families.

T3. [902741] **Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): Two million Syrian children live in areas that are beyond the area of humanitarian assistance. In the light of the recent strikes, what action is the Secretary of State taking to try to reach those desperate children?

Justine Greening: We are constantly working with United Nations agencies and non-governmental organisations to try to improve our access within Syria. We estimate that there are probably around 500,000 people, including children, that we cannot reach, but we will try our level best to ensure that we maintain our existing network and to reach into those areas as the fighting stops.

T8. [902746] **James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that her Department has a vital role to play in delivering on the UK Government's commitments that were signed at the climate change conference in Paris last week?

Justine Greening: Absolutely. In fact, DFID is scaling up our renewable energy work in Africa. We are expanding the provision of climate risk insurance in vulnerable countries, and we are also supporting increased investment in low-carbon technology and clean energy research.

T6. [902744] **Jo Cox** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Given the increasing loss of life in Syria, Iraq and the Central African Republic and the escalating situation in Burundi, does the Secretary of State agree that the Government would benefit from applying a mass atrocity prevention lens in order better to focus their policy?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady might be aware that, in our recently published aid strategy, we committed to investing around 50% of our DFID investment in so-called fragile and conflict states, precisely because we need to recognise that this is not just a matter of dealing with

conflict after it has happened, and that we need to work to prevent it and to deal with fragility prior to issues taking place and causing huge distress.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): How much has my right hon. Friend's Department spent in the past two years on humanitarian assistance in Syria and in the neighbouring countries that are receiving Syrian refugees?

Justine Greening: Over the course of the entire conflict, we have provided around £1.1 billion. That is our biggest-ever response to a humanitarian crisis. About half of that has been provided inside Syria, and around half has been used to support people in the region. There are now 4.4 million refugees outside Syria. It is vital that this work should continue, and we will continue to lead it.

T7. [902745] **Roger Mullin** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Following the report produced by the University of Sussex for the Department, what does the Minister consider to be the main risks posed to most favoured nation low-income countries from the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership?

Justine Greening: Not only is our aid policy helping to improve the prospects and the lives of millions of people in poverty around the world, but it is in our national interest. I have just talked about how what we are doing is important for UK security and international security, but it is also important in terms of prosperity. The international rules that the hon. Gentleman talks about can be a key way of enabling prosperity through allowing freer trade, which can help developing countries to trade their way out of aid dependence.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What is DFID doing to stop the problem with malaria in the north of Uganda, which I am going to visit over the new year? I know that DFID is working hard there, but will she tell the House specifically what it is doing?

Justine Greening: We have a range of programmes, including in Uganda, that have helped with the cheap intervention of providing bed nets. We have seen over the past 15 years that the number of deaths from malaria has fallen by two thirds, which is important because some countries spend 40% of their health budget purely on responding to malaria.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, Deidre Brock.

T9. [902747] **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Is the Secretary of State aware of the recent arrest in Malawi of two men for having consensual sex? Will the Government make urgent representations to the Malawian Government, echoing the calls of the US ambassador, calling on them to live up to their international human rights obligations and ensure that these charges are dropped?

Justine Greening: We will be making representations, and the hon. Lady is absolutely right to flag that up as a key area of human rights that needs to be addressed, wherever it takes place.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [902723] **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 16 December.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing Major Tim Peake well as he begins his six-month stay at the international space station. We all watched his exciting take-off yesterday and as he is the first Briton to visit the international space station it signals a landmark in this country's involvement in space exploration. I am proud that the Government took the decision to fund it, and we wish him the best of luck.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, and in addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Richard Graham: May I welcome today's fall in unemployment to 5.2%, the lowest level in almost 10 years?

Stalking is a horrible crime. Dr Eleanor Aston, a GP in Gloucester and resident of Cheltenham, was harassed for several years by a stalker who slashed her tyres, hacked her water pipe, cut off her gas supply and put foul items in her letterbox. She and her family suffered dreadfully. The judge, in sentencing, said that if he could have given more than the maximum of five years, he certainly would have done. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) has raised the issue of sentencing guidelines with the Justice Secretary. Will the Prime Minister today give his support for greater flexibility and longer sentencing where it is clear that a stalker is a real menace?

The Prime Minister: First, let me say how much I agree with my hon. Friend that stalking is a dreadful crime. That is why we have introduced two new stalking offences during this Parliament. I will certainly make sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham has his meeting with my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary. I cannot comment on the individual case without looking at it in more detail, but we are taking the action necessary and we will continue to do so.

On unemployment, I am sure that the whole House will want to welcome the fact that there are half a million more people in work in our country in the last year alone. We have had wages growing above inflation every month for a year and the claimant count is at its lowest level since 1975. I am sure that will have a welcome right across the House.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): May I start, Mr Speaker, by wishing you, all Members of the House and all staff here, and Major Tim Peake, who is not on the planet at this time, a very happy Christmas and a peaceful new year?

The number of days that patients are being kept in hospital because there is nowhere safe to discharge them to has doubled since the Prime Minister took office. On 4 November, I asked him if he could guarantee

that there will be no winter crisis in the NHS this winter. He did not answer then, so I wonder whether he will be able to help us with an answer today.

The Prime Minister: First, let me join the right hon. Gentleman and be clear that I do not want to wish him the season's greetings; I want a full happy Christmas for him and everyone in the House. He specifically asked about the NHS, so let me give him a specific answer. The average stay in hospital has actually fallen since I became Prime Minister from five and a half days to five days. One reason for that is that we kept our promises on the NHS. We put in an extra £12 billion in the last Parliament, and will be putting in £19 billion in cash terms in this Parliament.

Jeremy Corbyn: For the record, I did say happy Christmas. Perhaps the Prime Minister was not listening at the time. If he is so happy about the national health service, will he explain why he has decided to cancel the publication of NHS performance data this winter? There was a time, not that long ago, when the Prime Minister was all in favour of transparency. It was in 2011 when he said:

"Information is power. It lets people hold the powerful to account, giving them the tools they need to take on politicians and bureaucrats."

Is it because the number of people being kept waiting on trolleys in A&E has gone up more than fourfold that he does not want to publish those statistics?

The Prime Minister: First, the data that the right hon. Gentleman quoted in his first question were not published before this Government came into office. Let me quote some data about the NHS: on an average day, there are 4,400 more operations and 21,000 more outpatient appointments than there were five years ago when I became Prime Minister. Yes, there are challenges in A&E, but there are 2,100 more people being seen within four hours than there were five years ago, and there are more data published on our NHS than there ever were under Labour.

Jeremy Corbyn: There are huge pressures on the NHS, and they are largely due to the pressures on the adult social care system, which is under enormous stress at the moment. Indeed, there have been huge cuts in adult social care because of cuts in local government funding. The NHS chief executive, Simon Stevens, has called for a radical upgrade in prevention and public health. Does the Prime Minister agree that cutting these crucial services is a false economy?

The Prime Minister: We are increasing the money that councils can spend on social care through the 2% council tax precept. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Simon Stevens, but our NHS plan is Simon Stevens's plan. For the first time, the NHS got together and wrote its plan. It asked for £8 billion, and it asked for the money up front. We committed to that plan, unlike Labour at the last election, and we funded it up front, which is why we see a bigger and better NHS. None of that would have been possible, including the action that we are taking on social care through the better care fund, without our having achieved a growing economy and an increase in jobs.

Jeremy Corbyn: The problem is to do with adult social care. This morning on BBC Radio 4, the NHS Confederation said that

“cuts to social care and public health will continue to pile more pressure on hospitals and will worsen deficits in the acute sector.”

What was announced on social care in the autumn statement falls well short of what is needed. The Health Foundation estimates that there will be a funding shortfall of £6 billion by 2020. How will the Government meet that shortfall?

The Prime Minister: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman listens to the “Today” programme. Perhaps he might even bother to go on it one of these days. A bit of transparency and sunlight would be very welcome. If he wants to swap quotations, this is what the chairman of the Local Government Association says:

“The LGA has long called for further flexibility in the setting of council tax... Today’s announcement on council tax will go some way to allowing a number of councils to raise the money needed... The £1.5 billion increase in the Better Care Fund announced today is good news”.

It is this Government who funded the NHS; Labour did not. It is this Government who set up the better care fund; Labour opposed it. It is this Government who have the strong and growing economy. I note that we are on question four and there is still no welcome for the unemployment figures.

Jeremy Corbyn: The issue of adult social care and cuts in local government spending is very much the responsibility of central Government. Will the Prime Minister confirm that NHS trusts are forecasting a deficit of £2.2 billion this year? I understand—and he, as part of the Oxford anti-austerity movement, will be concerned about this—that his own local healthcare trust is predicting a £1.7 million deficit. There is a problem of NHS funding. Has he forgotten the simple maxim that prevention is cheaper and better than cure?

The Prime Minister: How can the right hon. Gentleman possibly complain about NHS funding when his party did not commit to fund the Stevens plan? We are spending £19 billion more on the NHS—money that would not be available if we had listened to the Labour party. Now he says that social care is a responsibility of Government; everything is a responsibility of Government, but in fact, local councils decide how much to spend on social care, and with the better care fund, they have more to spend. But I challenge him again: how do we pay for the NHS? We pay for it by having more growth, more jobs, more people having a livelihood. Is he going to welcome that at Christmas time, or does he not care about the reduction in unemployment?

Jeremy Corbyn: I have a question from Abby, who wants to train to be a midwife, and she says:

“I am 28 years old. This year I left my successful career to go back into university to re-train as a Midwife. I already have a debt of £25,000 from my first degree.

Well over half of my cohort have studied a first degree in another subject and many of my fellow colleagues have children and partners and elderly parents and mortgages.

Many people will be put off by the lack of financial support and massive debts.”

In the spirit of Christmas, will the Prime Minister have a word with his friend the Chancellor, who is sitting next to him—it can be done very quickly—to reverse

the cuts in the nurse bursary scheme, so that we do get people like Abby training to be midwives, which will help all of us in the future?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I want Abby to train as a midwife, and I can guarantee that the funding will be there for her training, because there are thousands more midwives operating in the NHS today than when I became Prime Minister. Now the right hon. Gentleman mentions the question of nurse bursaries. The truth is that two out of three people who want to become nurses cannot do so because of the constraints on the system, and our new system will mean many more doctors and many more nurses. Since I became Prime Minister, we have already got 10,000 more doctors in the NHS and 4,500 more nurses. But all of this is happening because the economy is growing, the deficit is falling, unemployment is coming down, you can fill up a tank of gas at £1 a litre and wages are going up. Britain is getting stronger as we go into Christmas, because our economy is getting stronger, too.

Q5. [902727] Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Yesterday, colleagues from both sides of the House formed a new all-party group on the armed forces covenant, which aims to scrutinise and support the fulfilment of the Government’s pledges to service personnel and their families. Will the Prime Minister join me in praising the incredible dedication of our armed forces and their families, especially those in my constituency at RAF Boulmer, at this festive time, when many are separated from their loved ones? Will he reaffirm his personal commitment to the House to delivering his armed forces covenant in practice and in full?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question; she is absolutely right. As all of us get ready hopefully to spend time with our families this Christmas, there will be many in our brave armed services who cannot because they are serving abroad or at home, so we wish them the very best as Christmas comes. On the military covenant, one of the things of which I am proudest in the last five years is that we put that into law, adding to it every year by giving veterans priority in healthcare, increasing funding for veterans’ mental health services and prioritising school places for children. Every year we have made progress on the armed forces covenant, and every year I stand at this Dispatch Box we will continue to do so.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): The Prime Minister will shortly meet the Heads of State and of Government of the European Union. Will he heed the advice of former Prime Minister John Major and stop “flirting” with leaving the European Union, which would, in his words, be

“very dangerous and against our national interests”?

The Prime Minister: What I will be doing is getting the best deal for Britain. That is what we should be doing. This Government were the first to cut the EU budget, the first to veto a treaty, the first to bring back substantial powers to Britain. We have a great record on Europe and we will get a good deal for the British people.

Angus Robertson: We were reminded this week that there is a very strong majority in Scotland to remain within the European Union, and the Prime Minister has failed—[*Interruption.*] I know his side does not like to hear it, but the Prime Minister has failed to give any guarantees that Scotland will not be forced out of the EU by the rest of the UK. Does he have any idea of the consequences of taking Scotland out of the EU against the wishes of voters in Scotland?

The Prime Minister: This is a United Kingdom and this is a United Kingdom issue. Why is the right hon. Gentleman so frightened of listening to the people and holding this historic referendum, passed through both Houses of Parliament in the past week? I say get a good deal for Britain and then trust the people.

Q6. [902728] **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): The Prime Minister has previously visited RAF Waddington in my constituency and I am sure he will, like me, wish all the service personnel and their families well as they carry out operations during the Christmas period. Given that the United Kingdom is now conducting airstrikes over Syria as well as over Iraq, and in the light of the Leytonstone attack, why is our country still not at the highest level of threat?

The Prime Minister: First, let me join my hon. Friend in praising those at RAF Waddington who work round the clock to keep us safe in our country and are doing such vital work. As he will know, the threat level in this country is set not by politicians but by the joint terrorism analysis centre, JTAC, which currently sets it at “severe”, the second highest level. I can confirm what I said to the House on 26 November: the UK is already in the top tier of countries that Daesh is targeting. I can also confirm that that part of my statement was cleared in advance by the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee. The threat level today is “severe”, which means that a terrorist attack is highly likely; that has been the case since August. The highest level is “critical”, which means that an attack is believed to be imminent. Were we to go to that level, it would be for JTAC to advise, not for Ministers.

Q2. [902724] **Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I am proud to represent a constituency that boasts seven synagogues, four mosques, over 35 churches and two temples. However, last night Donald Trump reiterated that members of one of those communities would not be allowed into America simply because of their religion, seemingly unaware how divisive this is. In our country we have legislation that stops people entering the country who are deemed not to be conducive to the public good. Does the Prime Minister agree that the law should be applied equally to everyone, or should we make exceptions for billionaire politicians?

The Prime Minister: Let me join the hon. Lady in being proud of representing a country which I think has some claim to say that we are one of the most successful multiracial, multi-faith, multi-ethnic countries anywhere in the world. There is more to do to build opportunity and fight discrimination. I agree with her that it is right that we exclude people when they are going to radicalise or encourage extremism. I happen to disagree with her

about Donald Trump. I think his remarks are divisive, stupid and wrong, and if he came to visit our country I think he would unite us all against him.

Q7. [902729] **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): By the time the House next meets for questions, many people will have started their new year’s resolutions. For many, one resolution will be to give up smoking. Given that Public Health England recently stated that e-cigarettes are 95% safer than tobacco and half the population is unaware of that fact, will the Prime Minister join me in highlighting the role that e-cigarettes can play in helping people give up tobacco for good?

The Prime Minister: Certainly, speaking as someone who has been through this battle a number of times, eventually relatively successfully, lots of people find different ways of doing it, and clearly for some people e-cigarettes are successful. We need to be guided by the experts, and we should look at the report from Public Health England, but it is promising that over 1 million people are estimated to have used e-cigarettes to help them quit or have replaced smoking with e-cigarettes completely. We should be making it clear that this a very legitimate path for many people to improve their health and therefore the health of the nation.

Q3. [902725] **Callum McCaig** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): During the referendum the Prime Minister pledged to deliver carbon capture and storage at Peterhead, something he reiterated in the Tory party manifesto, yet on the eve of the Paris climate talks he pulled the plug. Which does he see as the greatest betrayal—that of Scotland, that of his manifesto, or that of the entire planet?

The Prime Minister: Of course the greatest success is the Paris climate change talks. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, who was one of the key negotiators who helped to deliver this global goal, which is so much better than what happened at Copenhagen and better even than what happened at Kyoto.

Let me answer the hon. Gentleman directly on carbon capture and storage. In government you have to make tough choices. You have to make decisions about technology that works and technology that is not working. We are spending the money on innovation, on energy storage, on small nuclear reactors, and on other things such as energy heat systems for local communities that will make a difference. To govern is to choose, and we made the right choice.

Q10. [902732] **Nigel Adams** (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): This Friday sadly sees the closure of Britain’s last deep coal mine at Kellingley in my constituency. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister join me in thanking the hundreds of workers who will be working their last shift this Friday, and praise the thousands of workers whose bravery and hard graft over the past 50 years has helped warm our homes, power our factories, and keep our lights on?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend speaks very strongly for his constituents. I am very happy to join him in thanking people who have worked so hard at that mine and elsewhere. Obviously it is a difficult time.

As part of the closure process, the Government have put in nearly £18 million to ensure that the workers receive the same package as the miners at recently closed Thoresby. That finance has allowed the mine—*[Interruption.]* It is all very well Opposition Members shouting, but may I just tell them something? This is the official policy of the Labour party:

“We must take action...to keep fossil fuels in the ground”.

That is their policy. They have also got a policy, by the way, of reopening coal mines, so presumably what they are going to do is dig a big hole in the ground and sit there and do nothing. What a metaphor for the right hon. Gentleman’s leadership of his party!

Q4. [902726] **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Prime Minister promised during the election campaign that he would not restrict child benefits to two children. Since then, he has not only reneged on that but, as a result, brought in the rape clause for women in order for women to receive child benefits. Since July, I have asked a number of his Ministers a number of times, and nobody has been able to tell me how this will work. Will he now drop the two-child policy and the rape clause?

The Prime Minister: First of all, we have made it absolutely clear, and let me make it clear again, that there is no question of someone who is raped and has a child losing their child tax credits or their child benefit—no question at all. But is it right for future claimants on universal credit to get payments for their first two children? I think that it is.

Q12. [902734] **Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that thanks to the Chancellor’s protection of the police budget, 108 more police officers are being recruited to protect the people of Hampshire? While there is more to do in tackling crime in more rural areas, does he agree that this is an important step in prioritising the frontline, and that the Home Office and the Hampshire constabulary have made real progress in making our police more effective, more efficient, and more resilient?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in saying that it was the right decision to make sure we have this extra funding for the police. By the end of the spending settlement, it is actually an increase of £900 million in cash terms by 2019-20. I am delighted that there will be more officers on the streets in Hampshire. I come back to the same point: you cannot fund the NHS, you cannot fund the Home Office, and you cannot fund the police unless you have a growing economy with more jobs, people paying their taxes, and making sure you have got a strong and stable economy, and that is what is happening in Britain today.

Q8. [902730] **Ms Gisela Stuart** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): In his farewell speech, the outgoing director of the British Museum said:

“The British Museum is perhaps the noblest dream that parliament has ever dreamt. Parliament decided to make a place where the world could be under one roof, where the collection would be free to all native or foreign, where every citizen would have the right to information and where all inquiry would be outside political control.”

Does the Prime Minister agree that the partnership working of the British Museum, such as that with the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery for its multi-faith gallery next year, is important, but that such work will not happen unless our museums and galleries continue to be funded properly?

The Prime Minister: Let me join the right hon. Lady in paying tribute not only to the British Museum, which is an absolute jewel in the British cultural crown, but to Neil MacGregor, who gave it such extraordinary leadership. Given her heritage, perhaps she will be amused by the fact that I took Chancellor Merkel to the museum to show her the brilliant exhibition about Germany—it was fantastic—but the next thing I knew, the Germans had poached Neil MacGregor to run their cultural institute in Germany. None the less, in the spirit of European co-operation, which is going to be vital this week, I am happy to see that happen. I want to see the British Museum complete all its partnerships, not just across the United Kingdom but internationally. The right hon. Lady will have seen in the autumn statement that the British Museum got a funding settlement with which it was, rightly, very pleased.

Q13. [902735] **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): According to Oxfam, the UK has donated a generous 229% of its fair share of aid in support of Syrian refugees—the highest percentage of the G8—yet worldwide only 44% of what is needed by those refugees has been donated. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is critical that other countries step up to the plate, as the UK has more than done, and will he update the House on progress in support of Syrian refugees?

The Prime Minister: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. Britain is doing its moral duty in terms of funding the refugees and the refugee camps. We are going to hold a conference in February, bringing the world together to make sure there is more funding in future. That is going to be absolutely vital. In terms of the number of refugees that we have resettled, I made a promise that we would resettle 1,000 by Christmas and I can confirm today that we have met that commitment. The charter flights that arrived yesterday at Stansted and Belfast mean that over 1,000 have been settled. Another charter flight is coming today. The Government have provided funding so that all those refugees get housing, healthcare and education.

I thank all the local authorities and all those who have worked so hard, including the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), who has led the process so ably. I said that Britain would do its duty, and with those 1,000 we have made a very good start.

Q9. [902731] **Mr Douglas Carswell** (Clacton) (UKIP): Three years ago, the Prime Minister could not have been any clearer: his EU renegotiation would mean returning control over social and employment law. Is he still seeking that?

The Prime Minister: I always find it hard to satisfy the hon. Gentleman: he joined the Conservative party when we were not committed to a referendum and he left the Conservative party after we committed to a

referendum, so I am not surprised that he is giving his new boss as much trouble as he used to give me. With that, I wish them both a very festive Christmas.

Q15. [902737] **Oliver Dowden** (Hertsmere) (Con): The triumphant “Star Wars” saga began life at Elstree studios in my constituency, which continues to produce hits such as “The King’s Speech” and “Suffragette”—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is banging on very eloquently about “Star Wars” and I want to hear him.

Oliver Dowden: Will the Prime Minister join me in pledging support for our thriving British film industry, which makes such a valuable social, cultural and economic contribution in Hertsmere and across the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. This film is not only very exciting for children—I have to say that quite a lot of parents are looking forward to it, too—but it was made in Britain, with many British actors and some brilliant British technicians, showing the strength of the British film industry. I would say this, but it is also backed by the British Government and British taxpayers with the excellent resources we provide. As I have worked with my hon. Friend for so many years and in so many different ways, I know that he will never join the dark side.

Q11. [902733] **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Despite the ongoing efforts of the Scottish steel taskforce, my constituents at the Dalzell steel plant and the neighbouring Clydebridge works are starting to receive redundancy notices. Given the urgency of the situation, will the Prime Minister put pressure on the EU now to reach a quicker decision on permitting the energy intensive industries compensation scheme? If such permission is granted, will he also commit to implementing the scheme as soon as possible to provide a much needed breathing space for our steel sector and to give some hope to my constituents this Christmas?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this. We are working as hard as we can in Europe to try to get the energy intensive industries plan cleared. I can confirm to her that as soon as it is cleared, the money will be available for British steelmaking companies. We expect this to be in place no later than April 2017, but it should be much earlier than that, and we are working round the clock to try to get that done.

Nicola Blackwood (Oxford West and Abingdon) (Con): The tragic stabbing in Abingdon Poundland last week has shocked local residents. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in sending our condolences to the family of father of two Justin Skrebowski, who was killed in the attack, and to honour the bravery of those who overpowered the attacker with no thought of the risk to themselves. In the light of this attack, does the Prime Minister agree that it is now time for the Government and retailers to work together to make it more difficult for offenders to get hold of offensive weapons in the first place?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend’s constituency neighbour, I was very shocked by what happened in Abingdon, and my heart goes out to the family of those who have suffered. She is right to ask the question about offensive weapons and how available they are, and I am very happy to look at that. Given that attack and the, although unrelated, Leytonstone attack, it is right to look at the resources that our police have in terms of their equipment—there is a very different usage pattern for Tasers, for instance, across the country—and this is something that the Home Secretary, the Metropolitan police and I are discussing.

Q14. [902736] **Danny Kinahan** (South Antrim) (UUP): There is nothing I believe in more passionately than the Union. With Scottish nationalism, English votes for English laws, various powerhouses and city deals, and the creation of numerous other measures that may threaten the Union, what is the Prime Minister’s vision of that Union and holding the four countries together? Will he come to speak to the all-party group on the Union at some stage, and even more important, will he help with the campaign throughout the Union because we are better together?

The Prime Minister: Like the hon. Gentleman, I am passionate about our United Kingdom. I believe we can make it stronger by accepting that it is a partnership of nations, and a partnership of nations where we should treat each other with respect. *[Interruption.]* I do not want to listen to SNP Members: they do not want a partnership; they want a separation. Actually, one of the things that is so strong about the United Kingdom—I think other countries, frankly, are quite envious of this—is that we have demonstrated that you can have multiple identities: you can be proud of being an Ulsterman and a Brit; you can be proud of being a Hindu and a Scot; you can be proud of being both Welsh and British. We have solved one of the problems that the rest of the world is grappling with, and that is why we should keep our United Kingdom together.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): As we approach the festival—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. There was some noticeably eccentric gesticulation taking place, Mr MacNeil, but you should desist. Calm yourself, man. Go and celebrate if you wish, but we must hear the hon. Gentleman—and he will be heard.

Sir Gerald Howarth: As we approach the festival marking the birth of Jesus Christ, may I invite the Prime Minister to send a message of support to the millions of fellow Christians around the world who are suffering persecution? May I also invite him once again to remind the British people that we are a country fashioned by our Christian heritage, and which has resulted in our giving refuge to so many of other faiths over so many centuries, but that we will not tolerate those who abuse our freedom to try to inflict their alien and violent fashions upon us, particularly in the name of Islam?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in saying that we should do everything we can to defend and protect the right of Christians to practise their faith the

world over. That is an important part of our foreign policy. Let me commend Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, for the excellent work he does in that regard.

Yes, Britain is a Christian country. I believe that the fact that we have an established faith and that we understand the place of faith in our national life makes us a more tolerant nation and better able to accommodate other faith groups in our country. That is why, as I said earlier, we should be proud that this is one of the most successful multi-ethnic, multi-faith, multi-religion democracies anywhere in the world. That is not in conflict with our status as a predominantly Christian country; that status is one of the reasons why we have done it.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, I call Sue Hayman.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I know that the Prime Minister is aware of the flooding that has taken place in my constituency and the damage to the town of Cockermouth. I had a call from a constituent this morning who said that insurance companies are refusing to help my constituents until they have paid the excess

in full. Does he agree that that is absolutely outrageous? Some of the excesses are up to £10,000. What can be done to ensure that insurance companies fulfil their obligations to my constituents?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that matter. First, the Minister for Government Policy, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin), has had meetings with the insurance companies to make sure that that sort of practice does not happen. Secondly, we have announced that we are putting money into the community funds that will form hardship funds that will potentially help people who do not have insurance. The third vital thing is the establishment of Flood Re, which will mean that, in future, all homes are able to get that insurance. That was a decision made by the last Government and we are putting it in place.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: We will come to points of order, but we have an urgent question and a statement. Thereafter, I will be happy to entertain points of order from the hon. Lady and others.

Victims of Contaminated Blood: Support

12.37 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister responsible for public health to make a statement on Government plans to reform the support for victims of contaminated blood.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): I recognise that I committed in earlier debates to consulting on proposals to reform the current payment schemes before the end of the year. Despite our best efforts to meet that commitment, we are unfortunately not ready to publish the consultation before the recess. However, I confirm today that it will be published in January.

The delay will, I know, be disappointing for many who were anticipating the consultation before the end of the year. I apologise for the delay, in particular to Members of the House who have been campaigning tirelessly for a resolution on behalf of their constituents and to those who are directly affected, who continue to wait patiently for our proposals.

In the Westminster Hall debate in September, I explained that any consultation would happen within the context of the spending review and that payments for the reformed scheme would come from the Department of Health budget. The House will know that the outcome of the spending review was communicated to us only a few weeks ago.

The infected blood tragedy and reform of the payment schemes remain a priority for us. We are assessing what can be allocated above and beyond the additional £25 million to which we have already committed. That, of course, is in addition to the existing baseline spend on the payment schemes, which will remain.

Over my two years as public health Minister, I have heard regularly from those affected by this tragedy. Every week, I read a large number of letters, both to me and to the Prime Minister, from campaign groups, individuals and their families, all of whom have been affected by the tragedy in different ways. While considering our proposals for consultation, I want to ensure that all those views are reflected and that I do not miss the thoughts of those with the quieter voices.

We are currently working towards publication of the consultation, and, as part of that, we arranged an independently facilitated event with representatives of some of the leading campaign groups. The report from that event is available through those groups.

I have worked to keep Members of the House updated—you know how seriously I take my duties in that regard, Mr Speaker—and last month I invited members of the all-party group on haemophilia and contaminated blood to a meeting to discuss this issue. I told colleagues that my intention was to consult as soon as possible, but I said that that could be in January, given the timing of the comprehensive spending review.

As discussed with the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, I am also interested in the opportunities offered by the advent of simpler and more effective treatments that are able to cure some people of hepatitis C, and which present a welcome new opportunity to make some people well. I assure the House that that work continues to establish a

way forward, and a consultation will be published in January. At that time I will seek to make an oral statement.

In conclusion, because my priority is to get this issue right, I have taken the decision to take a little more time and publish the consultation in January.

Diana Johnson: Mr Speaker, your decision to grant this urgent question is recognition of the long campaign for justice for this group of people, and it is appreciated by everyone who has been involved. I am, however, disappointed that I have had to ask for an urgent question. On three occasions, Ministers promised a statement before Christmas, and they should not have been forced to come to the Chamber for the second time this year. When the Minister speaks about a consultation in January, I assume that she means January 2016. I would like clarification on that, because dates always seem to slip, and such action from the Government fuels distrust and resentment among people who have been let down for too long.

I have four questions for the Minister. First, she proposes a consultation that will run for 12 weeks and that she will need to assess before launching a new scheme. Will she explain how that is feasible before the start of the next financial year? Secondly, she claimed that it will be the first full public consultation, but the APPG ran a full consultation—with the same consultees—earlier this year. Can she assure me that she has considered the APPG report and all the evidence presented in it? Thirdly, as she said, the Government delayed making a statement until after the comprehensive spending review, in order to determine the total “financial envelope” available. I understand that the Department of Health currently pays out about £14 million a year, with a total future financial commitment of £455 million. Will the Minister tell the House how much more is now available following the comprehensive spending review?

Fourthly, lump-sum payments were a key issue raised in response to the APPG inquiry, but it now appears that those are off the agenda. That is a major disappointment because lump-sum payments would allow those affected to make real choices about their own lives—something they have been denied for far too long. Will the Minister support a separate request to the Treasury to use funds equivalent to the £230 million raised from the sale of Plasma Resources UK to fund lump-sum payments to those who have been affected?

Jane Ellison: I thank the hon. Lady for her response. Of course I understand the disappointment that we are not able to consult before the end of the year, but I informed her and her colleagues who came to the meeting on, I think, 5 November, that it was unlikely that we would be able to do so. That was recorded in the note made at the meeting, and published through the all-party group. I have tried to keep colleagues informed, and only last night I spoke to a number of campaigners about this issue, including the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney), and informed them personally about the delay. I would, of course, have informed the hon. Lady today or tomorrow, along with the other Members who attended that meeting. I have done my best to keep people informed.

I understand the hon. Lady's point about the consultation. I will consider the issue she raises, but I have always been clear that the transition to a new scheme must be done in a way that does not compromise the safety of payments to people in schemes—again, we discussed that at the meeting in early November. I therefore see no problem with consulting and then moving towards a transition, because that transition will be a gradual process anyway for some people. I want to ensure a safe transfer from the current scheme to any reformed scheme, and I do not see a real problem in that regard.

This will be the first full consultation by the Government, and the hon. Lady is right to say that the all-party group—and others, including my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt)—garnered many views. All views, including those put to the all-party group in its very good report, can be reiterated as part of the response to the consultation.

I made a statement on the issue of money in my response to the urgent question. I understand the point the hon. Lady makes on lump sum payments, but it would not be appropriate for me to comment at this time. I can talk about that more when I make an oral statement at the time we launch the consultation. She reiterated in her questions the principle of individual choice and treating people as individuals. Many Members have stressed to me the importance of that principle. We will very much recognise it in what we bring forward in the new year.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), with whom I co-chaired the all-party group on haemophilia and contaminated blood in the previous Parliament, on securing the urgent question. May I, too, press the Minister to please use the valuable data in the all-party group's report? It has real testimony from the victims on how the trusts and funds—whether the Macfarlane Trust, the Skipton Fund, the Eileen Trust or the Caxton Fund—just are not delivering the day-to-day support the victims need. Will she come back to the House as soon as possible in January and not on the last day, so we do not have to secure another urgent question?

Jane Ellison: My hon. Friend, who has campaigned long and hard on this issue, is right to reiterate the importance of the views given in that report. I confirm that they have already informed our thinking about how we go forward, as indeed have the views of many colleagues on all sides of the House expressed over many months and years. I can assure him that the report will be considered. I have previously committed, and I reiterate the commitment today, to conducting a root and branch reform of the current schemes.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I pay tribute to all the Members of this House who have been a strong voice for the victims of contaminated blood, but in particular to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) who has been tireless in her pursuit of answers.

This scandal saw thousands of people die and thousands of families destroyed through the negligence of public bodies. Over the years, the response of Governments of all colours just has not been good enough. It is a real

shame that we are here yet again wondering why action has not been taken. I do not think anyone doubts the sincerity of the commitment that the Prime Minister made back in April, but does the Minister understand the disappointment that people have felt in recent months as promises to publish arrangements and to make statements have been broken repeatedly? Does she accept that that has only raised false hope among a community that already feels very betrayed?

Given the further delay that the Minister has announced today, what guarantees do we have that the January consultation date will be met? What redress—other than an urgent question through you, Mr Speaker—will there be if it is not? A consultation is fine, but will she say when any new scheme will be implemented? It is important that any new arrangements are properly scrutinised, so will she commit to a debate in Government time to allow that to happen? Finally, does the public health Minister appreciate that the longer this goes on, the longer we leave in place a system that is not working and leaves victims without adequate support?

No amount of money can ever fully make up for what happened, but we owe those still living with the consequences the dignity of a full, final, fair and lasting settlement. This injustice has gone on for far too long. The time for action is now.

Jane Ellison: As I have already said, I of course regret the delay. This is a very complex area. I appreciate the tone with which the shadow public health Minister responded, because, as he said, Governments of all colours have not turned to this issue. We have turned to the issue and we are addressing it in a great deal of detail. It is a complex area. There is a very diverse range of affected groups impacted by this tragedy and we must get the consultation on reform right for all of them. I have been clear, in my response to the urgent question, that we have been considering the funding issue. We are, of course, aware of potential litigation in relation to the scheme as it stands. I cannot comment further on that, but the House will appreciate that that adds a level of complexity to dealing with this matter.

I am always extremely happy to come to the House to explain. The scheduling of debates in Government time is not a matter for me, but it goes without saying not only that I would be delighted to debate the matter but that I am happy to talk to colleagues, including shadow Front-Bench colleagues, privately or otherwise, about this matter. That commitment remains.

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): I echo the spirit of these exchanges; we need to do this job fast and well. May I highlight the tragic circumstances of some of those affected, including a constituent of mine who has sadly got more ill as we have been debating the fine details of the scheme? There is no more time to lose.

Jane Ellison: That point is well made and very much on my mind. When I can say more about the shape of our proposed reformed scheme, I hope my hon. Friend will see that we have tried to respond to her concerns and those of many other right. hon. and hon. Members.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Penrose inquiry was held in Scotland—there has not been a UK inquiry—and, in response, the Prime Minister

[*Dr Philippa Whitford*]

made his statement about the £25 million transitional payment. These people are awaiting a final settlement and compensation for what the NHS did to them, but their suffering goes on. We were told that the transitional payment would be made this financial year to help people get to that settlement. The consultation is on the final arrangement, but we need some action now and people need access to the new hep C drugs. The Scottish Government have written about support for fuel payments, but we need the transitional money now. It should not be kicked into the long grass.

Jane Ellison: This certainly has not been kicked into the long grass. As I have told the House, it is my intention to consult in January. I have said before, but it is worth repeating, that although we are working to establish a fair resolution, liability has not been established in the majority of cases, so it is not appropriate to talk about compensation payments, particularly on the scale that some campaigners and colleagues envisage. I have been open about that for many months. The hon. Lady is right to make the point about treatments, and all those things will be considered. I can confirm to the House that, although the £25 million was allocated to be spent in this financial year, it will be carried forward. The money that the Prime Minister announced in March was to support the transition of the scheme, which we envisaged beginning next spring, following the consultation. The money will support that, and it will be carried forward.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing the urgent question. I speak today on behalf of a constituent, a Mr Steve Dymond, who has hepatitis C as a result of contaminated blood products. Although he is in remission, a normal life for him is impossible. I know that new drugs and treatments are available. Will the Minister assure me that those advanced new treatments will be available to all sufferers without restrictions? I hope that, despite this delay, the closure we need will be delivered very shortly. This is a big subject in my part of Kent. It is trailed massively in the *Kent on Sunday*, which covers it regularly. We need closure and those affected need certainty in their lives. Can the Minister assure me of that?

Jane Ellison: I have corresponded directly with Mr Dymond's partner, so I know the level of suffering he endures. On the new treatments, the drug landscape on hepatitis C infection, which is very different from even a couple of years ago, is uppermost in my mind as I consider how to reform the scheme and support those who suffer.

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): This announcement comes after the shambles of a meeting at the Department last month, when hon. Members from both sides of the House arrived for a stated time, only to be told, after waiting, that the meeting was over. We then received an apology from an official promising further information that was never supplied. Does the hon. Lady understand what being a Minister entails? It means being in charge and only making promises that can be kept. This has been a

travesty, but it would not matter so much were it not for the sick people, including those in my constituency, who are living lives of hell and were looking to the Government, after the promises were made, for some kind of alleviation during their lifetimes. They have not got it.

Jane Ellison: I slightly regret the right hon. Gentleman's tone, and I am totally mystified by his point about the meeting. A meeting was organised with the all-party group and his colleague the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North. I think the meeting might have been moved once, at the request of the all-party group, but the details and arrangements for the meeting with me were circulated by that group, and six right. hon. and hon. Members attended the meeting. I am sorry if there was some confusion, but I do not think it was on the part of me or my officials. A number of colleagues came to the meeting. We had a very useful discussion and I have sought to update others since.

The right hon. Gentleman is right that we need to move towards a conclusion, but it is also a matter of record that he was, at times, a member of the last Labour Government, who, for 13 years, did not move forward on this matter.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): The Minister will be aware of my frustration in dealing, on behalf of a constituent, with the Macfarlane Trust, which she knows, from the weight of evidence in the consultation, is not fit for purpose. Will she confirm that any full and final settlement will not be administered by that trust?

Jane Ellison: I am well aware of the shortcomings of some of the schemes identified by colleagues and those affected by this tragedy, and I have obviously read the details from the all-party group and other Members' communications. I have confirmed before that reducing the number of schemes will be part of the consultation on reforming the schemes, so my hon. Friend's point is well made. For the record, though, I should add that I had a meeting recently with the staff of the schemes—the people who man the phones and deal on a day-to-day, week-to-week basis with sufferers—and I am clear that they, as distinct from the people who head up the trusts, are working hard to offer a service to people in difficult circumstances.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Is this not one of those situations where there is an absolute moral obligation on the Government to act and end the uncertainty and delay? Is the Minister reassured that the spending review gives her the ability to bring a lasting and fair settlement, and will she do everything she can to ensure it is in place by the start of the next financial year?

Jane Ellison: I am happy to assure my former colleague in the Department that the Secretary of State and my departmental colleagues take this matter extremely seriously. It is a matter on which we are seeking to move forward. It will be for those who respond to the consultation on the reformed scheme to give their views, but we are seeking to move towards a reformed scheme that responds to the criticisms of the existing schemes and offers sustainability for people who have suffered for so long. I hope I can satisfy the right hon. Gentleman in that regard, although I will be able to say more in the new year, when we publish the scheme details.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): One of my constituents, Sue Wathen, is trying to access the Harvoni drug, but it is proving incredibly difficult, because she has not developed cirrhosis. She does, however, have an underlying medical condition that is being exacerbated by the contaminated blood. Much is being reported about greater access from February. Is that the case and will Mrs Wathen be able to access the treatment she so desperately needs? I would love a yes or no answer, because it is incredibly frustrating.

Jane Ellison: I would never give a yes or no answer to the individual health problems of a constituent I do not know, and I am not a clinician, but if my hon. Friend would like to write to me, I will certainly make sure I give an individualised response. Ultimately, however, the right clinical route for any one individual would come at the suggestion of their consultant hepatologist. Towards the end of November, NICE published new guidelines on three more drug treatments, so the drug landscape for hepatitis C is changing rapidly, but I am happy to ensure that hon. Members are kept fully informed. As I said in a previous debate, if people are concerned that their constituents are not aware of what is out there or do not feel they are getting the support they need to access treatment in line with the NICE guidance, we can offer advice to Members on how to make sure that happens. However, I am well aware of the general point he makes.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will the Minister clarify whether individuals affected by this terrible scandal will receive individualised letters? How will they know that this consultation is opening next month?

Jane Ellison: My officials have been giving considerable thought to how to do that. A number of people are members of the existing schemes, so we have a means to communicate with them, but it is clear from experience of following up previous inquiries' recommendations—for example, the one recommendation of the Penrose inquiry—that we make exhaustive efforts to inform everybody. In particular, we will want to inform people who have had a lump sum payment but are not members of the current scheme. We will make exhaustive efforts to inform people by every means possible. Members of Parliament can of course be of great assistance in that regard.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Going back to the issue of medication, my constituents want to know the answer to this question: available drugs that have not yet been approved by NICE but that can be prescribed are not being prescribed locally on financial grounds. Is that not wholly unacceptable?

Jane Ellison: The NHS is looking at its response to the most recent NICE guideline—it was very recent, on 25 November, from memory. The NHS has commissioning arrangements in place for previous treatments that met NICE guidelines. It would be useful if my hon. Friend contacted me separately about the particular situation in which his constituents find themselves, and we might be able to provide some helpful support.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her response to the urgent question. Brian Carberry from County Down contracted hepatitis C from contaminated blood in July this year. Compensation is always important, but the really important issue for those affected is that it is not enough when a problem is health related. What discussions has the Minister had with the Northern Ireland Health Minister, Simon Hamilton, to tackle this issue?

Jane Ellison: My officials are working closely with their opposite numbers in all the devolved Administrations. As we move towards publication of the consultation, I will look to communicate directly with my opposite numbers in the devolved Administrations and pick up all these points.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I know from her statement that the Minister will appreciate the frustration that my constituents, some of whom have been waiting for an outcome for some decades, will feel at another delay. Given her comments on the carrying over of transitional funding, will she give me a clear idea of when she expects the new system to be in place?

Jane Ellison: We aim to consult, and we want to make sure that the final shape of the reformed scheme is informed by that consultation. As I have said, we look to start transitioning to a reformed scheme in the spring. At this stage, however, it is a little difficult to be more precise. We are working hard to ensure that aspects of the transition are being planned and thought about, and this will be informed by the final outcome of the consultation.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): The Minister wrote to me on 6 November and stated:

“The shape and structure of a new scheme will be decided following the consultation process that will begin by the end of this year as previously committed”—

as it had been committed in an Adjournment debate on 9 September. I am deeply disappointed today that neither that scheme nor that consultation is in place. My constituent, Brian Carberry from Downpatrick in South Down, whom my Adjournment debate was about, has told me in the last few weeks that he now has a form of cancer, with four tumours identified, as a result of the connection with contaminated blood. Will the Minister give me and the House an undertaking today that a full and final settlement will be in place before the end of this financial year.

Jane Ellison: I have already made my comments about the timing of the consultation, and I cannot add to what I said in response to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who put the urgent question. I have often spoken to the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) about this and I responded to her Adjournment debate. I think that the language she uses is applicable to circumstances before this exchange. I have already explained the issue of compensation and the principles that we shall try to apply to the reformed scheme. I cannot really add to the comments I made in my response to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Let me challenge the Minister on the phrase “quieter voices”, which I have heard her use several times. It seems to be a code for addressing the important but less costly issues of treatment and reform of the current scheme rather than a full and final settlement to what Lord Winston rightly called the

“worst treatment disaster in the history of the NHS”.

We have a moral duty here, so simply saying “the Chancellor will not give me the money” will not wash.

Jane Ellison: Again, I have said here today and previously in Westminster Hall what I believe the position to be with compensation. I accept that the hon. Gentleman has a different view and we had an exchange when he contributed to the discussion in November. I think it would be wrong to dismiss the idea of listening to quieter voices, which I have had the opportunity to do over the last couple of years, and as a result it has become clear that a number of people want a number of different things from a reformed scheme. It will not be possible to do everything that everyone wants. We are going to try to respond as best we can with a scheme that is sustainable, fair to all and responds to many of the points made here today.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for tabling the urgent question. Only this Friday a constituent raised a number of issues about this very topic at my surgery and she will be most disappointed at this further delay. If the Minister has not done so already, will she take up the issue of continuing assessments by the Department for Work and Pensions? My constituent feels it is extremely strenuous that she has to continue to prove her case to qualify for benefits. She also found—she cannot be unique in the country—that the NHS treatment she received was not the most sensitive, and she would like to see some guidance issued for healthcare professionals.

Jane Ellison: I thank the hon. Lady for those comments and I will reflect on them. The DWP matters are outside the remit of the Department of Health, but I will take on board the general issues she raises and refer them to colleagues. As I have said, we continue to work with the devolved Administrations on NHS matters; if her constituent is being treated in Scotland, it is a devolved matter for the Scottish NHS.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I appreciate the contrite tone of this question, but this is so very disappointing. My affected constituent simply wants to be able to buy a home and provide security to his family, but that is not available to him at present. Can I tell my constituent that next year a new scheme will be in place and that he will be eligible to receive support from it?

Jane Ellison: It is clearly my intention to have a reformed scheme in place next year. I do not know the circumstances of his constituent, so I cannot make that individual commitment. I have said that we want to move to a reformed scheme next year. I understand the frustration of Opposition Members, but, as the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne)

acknowledged, Governments of all shades and descriptions have not stood up to tackle this issue. We are going to try to do something; it will not satisfy everyone, but I hope we will be able to come forward with a scheme that will respond to many people’s concerns.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for raising this question. The Minister will recall a meeting I attended on 5 November, in which two main issues were discussed. The first was the setting up of a contingency fund, rather than having to rely on the spending review every year. Will the Minister confirm that she has written to the Treasury about that? Secondly, will the consultation consider the issue of family members who have lost loved ones as a result of contaminated blood?

Jane Ellison: I covered the issue of funding in my response. The hon. Gentleman attended the meeting, at which a number of matters were discussed. I do not think I can add much to what I have already said. This is a priority for the Department of Health, and we are seeking to identify the amount of money, on top of the transitional £25 million and the baseline spend on the current scheme, that we can use to support the reformed scheme.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Six thousand infected, 2,000 dead, a 30-year struggle—this delay is just one part of the continuing nightmare that victims face. Can the Minister tell my constituents Fred Bates and Peter Mossman when the nightmare will come to an end?

Jane Ellison: I cannot right the wrongs of 30 years; I can only try to do what I can in the circumstances, and with the money that we will allocate. We will present plans for a reformed scheme, and I invite the hon. Gentleman and his constituents to respond to them. In developing those plans, I must look to the future, and ask what we can do to support people with a reformed scheme. In particular, I must ask how we can respond to some of the ways in which the circumstances in which we address this terrible, difficult tragedy have changed, and ensure that our response reflects those new circumstances.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The Minister may recall that when the all-party group met her in early November we warned her that any slippage would be greeted as slipperiness by people who had suffered delays for too long. Does she appreciate that people will worry about the possibility that the extra time has been taken to ensure that the consultation is more controlled and options are sealed off? Will she also address the underlying question that people want to ask? Why, if liability could be admitted by the Irish health service on the basis that the risk was known, can liability not be admitted by the NHS, and why cannot compensation be forthcoming?

Jane Ellison: Payments made by the Republic of Ireland are a matter for the Republic, and they were made in response to circumstances in Ireland relating to the use of blood products. We have covered that before, in debates.

Of course I understand the hon. Gentleman's frustration—I spoke to him informally last night to alert him to the fact that there was some delay—but I reiterate that it is better for us to produce a scheme into which we have had a chance to put more effort and a little more detail than, for the sake of a few weeks, to rush out something that would not give people any real sense of what was being consulted on. Although the delay is frustrating, as I have acknowledged a number of times, I think that it will give rise to a better and more meaningful consultation.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The victims are clearly identified, and a final settlement is well overdue. Weeks ago, in the Chamber, I asked the Government whether they would provide additional support for victims during the coming winter. It may be mild here, but it is not mild everywhere, and many of them are suffering from fuel poverty. It is Christmas. Given the ever-stretching time that it is taking to resolve this matter, will the Minister commit herself to providing the additional support? The Scottish Government have already asked her to do so, but will she make that commitment now?

Jane Ellison: The matter has been raised with me by Shona Robison, the Scottish Health Secretary, and I intend to respond to her in the next few days. The Northern Ireland and Wales Administrations are still considering the matter, and have not fed anything back to me about Shona Robison's proposals. I did raise them with the Members who attended the all-party parliamentary group meeting in early November, but there was relatively limited interest at that time.

Daesh: Syria/Iraq

1.13 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement updating the House on the campaign against Daesh in Iraq and Syria.

Two weeks ago, the House voted for the extension of UK airstrikes against Daesh in Iraq into Daesh's heartland in Syria. As the Prime Minister and I explained during the debate that preceded the vote, the extension of military strikes is just one part of our strategy to bring stability to Syria and Iraq by defeating Daesh, working towards a political transition in Syria, and supporting humanitarian efforts in the region. It has been welcomed by our international partners, including the United States, France, and other partners in Europe and the Gulf. During that debate, we committed ourselves to giving the House quarterly updates on the progress of our strategy, but, given the high level of interest expressed by Members during the debate, I decided to offer an early first update before the House rises this week.

Let me deal first with the military strand of our strategy. As is well known, the first RAF airstrikes against Daesh in Syria were conducted just a few hours after the vote in the House, successfully targeting oil facilities in eastern Syria which provide Daesh with an important source of illicit income. Since then, RAF aircraft have conducted further strikes against Daesh in Syria, targeting wellheads in the extensive Omar oil field, as well as conducting reconnaissance and surveillance missions. To make that increased tempo of activity possible, a further two RAF Tornados and six Typhoons have been deployed to RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus, bringing the total number of manned aircraft conducting strikes from Akrotiri to 16—in addition to our RAF Reaper unmanned aircraft which are also deployed in the region.

During the debate on 2 December, a number of right hon. and hon. Members expressed concern about the possibility of civilian casualties resulting from British military action. Of course there is a risk involved in any kind of combat strike activity, but I am pleased to inform the House that it continues to be the case that we have had no reports of civilian casualties as a result of UK airstrikes in either Iraq or Syria, and I pay tribute to the precision and professionalism of our RAF pilots in conducting those operations.

In Iraq, Government forces continue to make progress against Daesh. The coalition began operations in Iraq in the autumn of 2014, and since then the strategically significant towns of Tikrit, Baiji and Sinjar have all been retaken. Ramadi, to the west of Baghdad, is now surrounded by Iraqi forces supported by US mentors, and its Daesh occupiers are being steadily squeezed, including by RAF close support operations. Importantly, work is well advanced in the building of a Sunni local police force, supported by local tribal forces, to hold and police the city once it is liberated. In total, RAF Tornados and Reaper drones have flown more than 1,600 missions over Iraq, conducting over 400 strikes.

In Syria, the situation is more complicated. The majority of Russian air strikes continue to target Syrian opposition forces rather than Daesh. In the last two weeks, the Russians have attacked opposition forces

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between Homs and Aleppo and in the far north of Syria, and in doing so have allowed Daesh to seek advantage on the ground. Along with our coalition partners, including the United States, we will continue to urge the Russians at every opportunity to focus their fire solely on Daesh. It is unacceptable that Russian action is weakening the opposition, and thus giving advantage to the very Daesh forces against which they claim to be engaged.

Let me now turn to the campaign to disrupt Daesh's finances and stop the flow of foreign fighters. Experts estimate that the oil assets that have been targeted account for about 40% of Daesh revenues, and tomorrow my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will attend the first ever meeting of Finance Ministers at the Security Council in New York to agree a further strengthening of the UN's sanctions regime against Daesh. It is, of course, also crucial that countries enforce sanctions strictly with appropriate investigations and prosecutions. To ensure that we have our own house in order, we have begun the review of funding of Islamist extremist activity in the UK which was ordered by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and which will report to him in the spring. We continue to work with Turkey and others to build an increasingly sophisticated network to interdict foreign fighters seeking to enter Syria.

As well as relying on money, Daesh relies heavily on propaganda to attract financial support and new recruits, so we have stepped up our effort to counter its messaging. The UK has created a coalition communications cell which is working to combat and undermine the Daesh "brand", ensuring that no communications space currently exploited by Daesh is left uncontested. The coalition cell will generate a full range of communications at the pace and scale that will be necessary to highlight Daesh's cruel and inhumane treatment of individuals under its control, its failures on the battlefield, and its perversion of Islam. The cell has already received staffing and financial contributions from coalition partners, and others have expressed strong support and an intention to contribute.

At the heart of our comprehensive strategy is a recognition that, to defeat Daesh in its heartland, we need a political track to bring an end to the civil war and to have in place a transitional Government in Syria. The world could then, once again, support a legitimate Syrian Government so that the Syrian army, Syrian opposition forces and Kurdish peshmerga could concentrate their efforts against Daesh, liberating their own country from this evil organisation.

Diplomatic efforts to deliver a negotiated end to the civil war and a transitional Government are continuing apace. The International Syria Support Group, bringing together all the major international players, has agreed the need for a ceasefire, humanitarian access and an end to attacks on civilians. In its communiqué of 14 November, the ISSG set out its goals: a transitional Government within six months, a new constitution and new, internationally supervised elections within 18 months. A further meeting of the support group is expected to take place in New York on Friday, which I shall attend. In preparation for that meeting, I met the Foreign

Ministers of like-minded members of the ISSG in Paris on Monday, including the US, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Separately, in Riyadh last week, Saudi Arabia brought together well over 100 representatives from a wide range of Syrian opposition groups to agree an opposition negotiating commission and a negotiating policy statement ahead of talks between the Syrian opposition and the Syrian regime, convened by the UN, which we hope will begin in January. The conference committed to Syria's territorial integrity, to the continuity of the Syrian state and to negotiations under the framework of the Geneva communiqué. The participants also committed themselves to a

"democratic mechanism through a pluralistic system, representing all spectrums of the Syrian people, men and women, without discrimination or exclusion on a religious, sectarian or ethnic basis, and based on the principles of citizenship, human rights, transparency, and accountability, and the rule of law over everyone."

Given the diversity of the Syrian opposition, I regard that as a significant achievement and I congratulate Saudi Arabia on it. The UK will continue to provide full support to intra-Syrian negotiations.

In Iraq, we continue to support Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to deliver the reform and reconciliation needed to unite all Iraq's communities in the fight against Daesh. I also welcome the recent announcement of the formation of an Islamic military coalition to fight terrorism, bringing together 34 Muslim countries to partner with the rest of the international community. I have discussed that initiative in detail with my Saudi counterpart, Foreign Minister Al-Jubeir. Its clear intention is to create a coalition that is flexible, contributing on a case-by-case basis and defending moderate Islam from the forces of extremism.

On the need for continued humanitarian support and post-conflict stabilisation in both Syria and Iraq, as the Prime Minister outlined to the House again today at Prime Minister's questions, the end of the civil war in Syria and the defeat of Daesh in both Iraq and Syria will present the international community with an enormous and urgent stabilisation challenge. Building on our humanitarian support during the Syria crisis—we remain the second largest bilateral donor—we have committed a minimum of £1 billion to Syria's reconstruction in the long term. In February, the Prime Minister will co-host, with Germany, Kuwait, Norway and the UN, an international conference in London, focused on meeting both the UN 2016 appeal to support refugees from the civil war, as well as longer-term financial commitments for Syria and its neighbours.

Since the House took the decision two weeks ago to extend our military effort into Syria, the Government have taken forward, with our coalition partners, our comprehensive strategy to degrade—and ultimately to defeat—Daesh. We are making steady progress in both Iraq and Syria. We are targeting Daesh's finances through military action and through action with international partners. We are disrupting the flow of foreign fighters. We are fighting Daesh's ideology and propaganda. We are a leading player in the diplomatic effort to deliver a political settlement to end the Syrian civil war, and we are preparing for the day after that settlement and the defeat of Daesh so that we can ensure the long-term future stability and security of Iraq and Syria.

The fight against Daesh will not be won overnight but, however long it takes, it is in our vital national interest to defeat that terrorist organisation and the direct threat it poses to our national security. Failure is not an option. I commend this statement to the House.

1.25 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I begin by passing on the apologies of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the shadow Foreign Secretary, who is unable to respond to the statement because he is visiting the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel. On behalf of the Opposition, I thank the Foreign Secretary for the courtesy extended to me by his office, for advance sight of his statement and for updating the House before the recess.

The scale of the humanitarian catastrophe stemming from the civil war in Syria is almost too great to comprehend. The death toll is well over 250,000 people. Millions of men, women and children will spend this Christmas as refugees living in tents in Lebanon and Turkey, and in Europe in Greece, Serbia and Calais. Even after all the brutality we have seen over the past four years, the situation continues to deteriorate. This week there were the appalling reports that Daesh will murder children who have Down's syndrome. The international community has failed the people of Syria and we must now do everything we can to address the situation.

On the military aspect of the UK's strategy, I note that UK military action up to now has focused, first, on economic infrastructure, particularly oil, which is so key to financing Daesh and, secondly, on alleviating the pressure on Kurdish peshmerga forces operating in Syria. It is notable, however, that the Foreign Secretary did not mention action to support other moderate forces in Syria. Can he update the House on what progress the Government have made in identifying and co-ordinating with such forces?

I note that the Foreign Secretary stated that there had been no civilian casualties resulting from UK military action in Iraq and Syria. Can he outline to the House the steps taken before a strike is authorised to minimise civilian casualties and then after a strike has occurred to ensure any possible civilian casualties are investigated?

I pay tribute to the outstanding bravery and professionalism of the British military personnel who have carried out these early missions. When we all return to our constituencies over the Christmas break, and return to our families, these very brave men and women will be continuing to serve our country in difficult and dangerous circumstances. For this, they deserve our unflinching admiration and respect.

Of course, as the Opposition have consistently argued, military action could only ever be a part of the package of measures needed to defeat Daesh and end the Syrian civil war. The UK's overriding priority has to be supporting a diplomatic agreement that unites the elements opposed to Daesh within Syria and paves the way for the departure of Assad. The first step to this is an agreement between the Sunni factions opposed to both Assad and Daesh.

I note the progress towards that achieved in Riyadh. There has been a lot of speculation about those talks, so can the Foreign Secretary inform the House how the groups that were invited to attend the talks were selected?

Did the UK make representations to the Saudis as to who should be invited? In particular, were key Kurdish groups such as the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Democratic Union party present at the talks?

It was reported that the Salafist group Ahrar al-Sham pulled out of the Riyadh talks last week and was opposed to any peace talks with Assad. It was later reported that it had signed the agreement, so will the Foreign Secretary confirm the correct position? That group has an estimated 20,000 fighters. Will he also confirm whether those 20,000 formed part of the 70,000 figure the Government cited as being moderate forces opposed to Assad and Daesh?

The key test for the Riyadh agreement will be whether it facilitates meaningful peace talks and a ceasefire, as outlined at the second Vienna conference. I am pleased that the Foreign Secretary is optimistic about the possibilities for these talks. Will he confirm whether, following the Riyadh agreement, the Syrian opposition will have a common position and a single representative at these talks, or whether there will be distinct factions represented at the talks?

The original timetable was for a possible cessation of hostilities to coincide with the start of peace talks from 1 January. Does the Foreign Secretary still think this is achievable? Was there a clear commitment to this timetable from all the parties present at the Syria talks in Paris on Monday?

With so many different parties to the Syrian civil war, maintaining a ceasefire will be extremely complex. Have the Government explored the possibility of a UN resolution reinforcing the outline agreement, including the ceasefire, agreed at the second Vienna conference? Can the Government confirm whether they will seek a UN resolution to support any agreement that is reached between Syrian opposition forces and Assad?

Finally, I want to return to the humanitarian response and the millions of refugees in tents this Christmas. In Lebanon, nearly one in four of the population is a recent refugee from Syria. Jordan is hosting more than 1 million Syrian refugees. Around 340,000 refugees have been resettled in Germany. Just this week we saw Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau welcoming the first of 35,000 refugees to be resettled in Canada by next October. And I was pleased to hear in Prime Minister's questions today that the 1,000 refugees the Government had promised to resettle will be here in the UK by Christmas.

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and she is right to highlight yet another recent example of Daesh's cruelty. I do not think there is anything that this organisation is not capable of.

The hon. Lady asked about the focus of UK military activity. It is important that I emphasise that we do not do this independently as a national contingent. We are operating as part of a coalition. Our aircraft are assigned to CAOC—the combined air operations centre—which tasks them with whatever needs doing at the time, and this can literally be aircraft in the air being diverted to provide close air support to forces on the ground who are engaged in an action.

The hon. Lady asked about UK support for moderate forces. I am slightly confused by her question because the proposition put before this House two weeks ago was clear and narrow: it was about conducting airstrikes

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against Daesh in Syria. It was not about intervening in the civil war between the moderate opposition and regime forces. Different Members may have different views about the wisdom of taking such action, but at the moment we are very clear that that is not what the UK is engaged in doing.

I should also just clarify: the hon. Lady said I had said in my statement that there had been no civilian casualties. I cannot, of course, make that statement. What I said was that we have had no reports of civilian casualties arising from UK airstrikes.

The hon. Lady asked what steps we take to minimise the risk of casualties. The RAF has, of course, very strict rules of engagement—among the strictest of any air force in the world. The Defence Secretary explained to the House that he has created structures that give a high degree of direct control over targeting decisions, and we use standard NATO procedures for analysing battle damage and dealing with any allegations of civilian casualties or collateral damage.

I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her acknowledgement of the commitment of our 800 military personnel in theatre and her recognition of the sacrifice that their families in particular will be making this Christmas, spending it without their loved ones who are on active service.

Of course, this military action is part of a comprehensive strategy. I think we all understand in this House that we are not going to resolve this problem by military action alone. The Riyadh talks were an important step forward. It was the Saudi Arabians who brought the opposition together, using their convening power—the convening power of the King of Saudi Arabia as the guardian of the two holy mosques. No one else could have done that. What we have now is a new opposition grouping that includes a large number of representatives of the armed opposition on the ground, and it is a significantly more legitimate body than previous representatives of the opposition, which have tended to represent oppositionists who are outside the country and not directly engaged in the fighting.

In answer to the hon. Lady's direct question: yes, the UK and other coalition partners provided the Saudis with lists of suggestions about who should be included. Ultimately, who was included in the invitation was their decision.

The hon. Lady asked me about the curious question of Ahrar al-Sham, and she is right to do so because there is a little ambiguity about its position. It attended the conference, it signed the declaration, but it did leave the conference before the end of it. But it has signed the declaration and we take it as bound by the commitments made in that declaration. For clarity, the figure of 70,000 opposition fighters that we have used does not include the Ahrar al-Sham forces. While not extremists like al-Nusra or Daesh, they are clearly not democrats in the sense that Free Syrian Army supporters are, so we do not include them in that figure.

The hon. Lady said I was optimistic about talks. I have to tell her that I am under no illusion that we still have a huge distance to go. We still have a chasm to bridge between ourselves on the one hand and the Russians and the Iranians on the other about the future

of Bashar al-Assad, and that will be an issue for many of the oppositionists who are now engaging in this process.

In terms of Syrian opposition unity, the convening power of Saudi Arabia can do a great deal to deliver that. The conference last week was a great step forward, but I do not think anyone should imagine that there will not be disagreements within the Syrian opposition even as they confront the Syrian regime in face-to-face talks, and it will not be a single negotiator; a negotiating panel will be selected.

The hon. Lady asked about the ceasefire. It remains the clear intention of US Secretary of State John Kerry to try to get agreement on Friday in New York to a ceasefire. Frankly, that will be highly challenging, but I commend him for his ambition.

We are also holding this meeting on Friday in New York rather than Vienna specifically to be able to go immediately to the United Nations Security Council if it becomes clear during the morning that it is possible to reach an agreement that the Russians will not veto in the UN Security Council. So there is a possibility—I put it no higher than that—that Friday's meeting will end with a UN Security Council resolution.

Finally, may I join the hon. Lady in commending the extraordinary effort and sacrifice of the people of Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey in providing refuge to so many of those fleeing the chaos in Syria, and taking this burden on unasked and without fanfare not just over the past few months, but for many, many years?

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): May I join the Opposition in welcoming the Foreign Secretary's update to the House, and join him in congratulating the Saudi Arabians on success last week in assembling that opposition group?

In relation to Ahrar al-Sham, what progress is there on the Jordanian task of identifying those Islamist groups that are going to stand outside the whole negotiation process between the Syrian Government and opposition forces? There have been long-standing disturbing reports of Turkish action, or inaction, on the Turkish-Syrian border that has served to aid Daesh. Now that the Foreign Secretary has identified Turkey as a like-minded member of the coalition, what reports does he have that action on that border is now firmly not in the interests of Daesh? Finally, turning to Iraq, he referred to the preparation of a Sunni police force for Ramadi; what progress is there on a Sunni national guard force around Anbar and on the national guard Bill in the Iraqi Parliament?

Mr Hammond: On the Jordanian process, and the strand that is attempting to identify who should be considered terrorists, I spoke with my Jordanian counterpart on Monday evening. That work is progressing and all parties have fed in their views on the vast number of different groups. The Jordanians are currently seeking to distinguish those groups that have a significant number of fighters from those that comprise only one or two dozen people, and cross-referencing the views of the different coalition partners. That is work in progress.

On the question of the Turkish-Syrian border, I had a meeting yesterday with the US President's special envoy, Brett McGurk, the successor to General John Allen,

and we talked about this issue. He told me that there were clear signs on the ground that the Turks were moving to close the border along the 60-odd mile gap that remains open. That is very good news. On the question of the Iraqi national guard, the legislation to create a national guard, which we regard as important, is bogged down in the Iraqi Parliament. It is precisely for that reason that the rather pragmatic approach of creating an armed local police as a ground-holding mechanism in the absence of the ability to create a national guard has been taken.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for giving me early sight of his statement. UK forces in theatre carry the admiration and support of those on these Benches.

I would like the Foreign Secretary to tell us more about three aspects of this issue. First, I welcome the new initiatives on finance and on information and propaganda. He said that the Chancellor would be going to the first ever meeting of Finance Ministers in the Security Council to pursue the Security Council resolutions. Does it not speak volumes that that is the first meeting to tackle the flows of finance, the financial institutions and the arms dealers without whom Daesh could not move a muscle or fire a shot? Will the Foreign Secretary assure the House that, after waiting so long for initiatives in this direction, these will be pursued as vigorously as are other elements of the tactics?

Secondly, the Foreign Secretary announced that a communications cell had been established. Can he tell us how many people—and how much money—have been devoted to intercepting, interrupting and counteracting Daesh propaganda? Given the extraordinary financial cost of military action, it would be of interest to the House to have that comparison between what is spent militarily and what is spent on countering Daesh's poisonous propaganda.

Finally, on the subject of civilian casualties, I welcome the fact that the Foreign Secretary said that there had been no reported casualties as a result of UK action in Syria. However, he also knows that the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has reported in the last few days that 26 civilian casualties have resulted from the action of the coalition of which we are part, including the reported deaths of seven children and four women. As the bombing moves into urban areas and city centres such as Raqqa, where I understand there has been no bombing by UK forces as yet, will he tell us by what means we will take forward the NATO protocols on investigating reports of civilian casualties, and how that will be reported timeously to this House and elsewhere?

Mr Hammond: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, particularly for his comment on the commitment of UK forces to their task. This will be the first meeting of Finance Ministers in the Security Council, and I think that sends a very clear signal about the importance with which we regard the issue. It does not mean that no steps have been taken; many measures have been taken already. Financial sanctions are in place, and a financial flows working group, led by Bahrain, has been operating for a year now, but the fact that Finance Ministers of the key countries in the world are going to New York tomorrow to sit in the forum of the Security Council to pass further sanctions measures is an important symbol of our commitment to shutting down this channel of

Daesh's lifeblood. We regard it as extremely important. We saw, in relation to sanctions on Iran, that getting the financial sanctions right was at least as important as getting the sanctions on flows of physical goods right.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about the communications cell. The operation of the cell necessarily encroaches into the area of the secret intelligence agencies' work, so I cannot give him details of the resources available to it or of the number of people deployed in it, but I can tell him that it is already having a visible and measurable effect on Daesh's communication channels. He also asked me about deaths resulting from coalition action. Of course, any civilian death is deeply regrettable. I was referring to deaths attributable to RAF action, and I believe that while the House will obviously be concerned about civilian deaths more widely, it will be on the question of RAF-caused civilian casualties that hon. Members will want to focus, and I intend to ensure that the House remains updated if the situation changes in respect of any reports of any RAF-caused civilian casualties.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman asked me about the protocols for investigating civilian casualty reports as the campaign moves on. NATO has well-established protocols for investigating any incidents where CIVCAS are estimated to have occurred or where imagery suggests that there could have been collateral damage to civilian buildings, and it routinely publishes the outcome of those investigations.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Recent discussions with Government officials on a visit to countries in the region confirmed that key questions remain unanswered about the Government's strategy on combating Daesh, which remains the best-funded terrorist group in history. On the non-military side, why are hard questions not being asked of regional allies about the funding of donations to Daesh from within those countries? When it comes to oil, why are we not asking our regional allies not only to disrupt the flow of stolen oil heading north but to combat the end customers of that oil? Without a market, there can be no cash flow.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right. We are focusing on all channels of funding to Daesh. He asserts again that it is receiving funding from within the region, and of course I cannot be certain that there are no channels of funding remaining open to Daesh from the region, but I am confident that none of the Governments in the region either contribute to or condone any such funding. On the question of the flow of oil, he well knows that that oil is being sold into a black market, and I am afraid that black markets are an inevitable consequence of any kind of embargo on the sale of goods. We are doing everything we can to interdict and disrupt the flow of oil and indeed to disrupt the flow of the proceeds of the sale of that oil. He will know that the scale of that production is small and that the means of transport are crude and sometimes even primitive, so it is difficult to disrupt that process to the extent that we would like. Bombing the wellheads so that the stuff cannot be produced in the first place is likely to be the most efficient way to do it.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Following on from the comments of the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), is not the crucial difference that the

[Mr Ben Bradshaw]

RAF goes out of its way to avoid civilian casualties, while Daesh goes out of its way to destroy, kill and maim as many innocent civilians as it possibly can? As well as commending the professionalism and dedication of the RAF staff on the mission in the field, will the House also remember their families back home at RAF Marham, and at RAF Lossiemouth in Scotland, who will be without their loved ones this Christmas?

Mr Hammond: I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman; he is absolutely right. The training and doctrine of the RAF and other NATO air forces are built around minimising the risk of civilian casualties. I am afraid that that is not the case with all air forces in the world and it is certainly not the case with Daesh.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I warmly welcome the broad-spectrum initiatives that the Foreign Secretary has announced, all of which are designed to degrade and eventually destroy Daesh. Outstanding among them is the Saudi Arabian initiative relating to an Islamic military coalition, which seems to me to be the basis for a very good ground force for the future. It is quite right that we should not be involved in that in any shape or form, but does my right hon. Friend agree that we have some capabilities to offer, perhaps in the form of command and control, training or other things which would not involve British troops being on the ground in Syria but which could none the less make a useful military contribution to the success of that coalition?

Mr Hammond: We have ruled out the use of UK combat forces in Syria, and indeed in Iraq, but we have not ruled out the provision of UK capabilities in support of combat forces provided by others. UK command and control, logistics, surveillance, and intelligence gathering and analysis could all provide a very substantial reinforcement to any troops that were deployed on the ground.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, I met people from the Waltham Forest Council of Mosques to discuss Daesh. They share the concern to tackle the threat it poses, but do have questions about the strategy. The Secretary of State said that failure was not an option, but will he set out for my constituents a bit more about what he means by either failure or success in our operations in Syria?

Mr Hammond: For me, success is the destruction of Daesh. As I have said many times in this House, I do not delude myself into thinking that destroying Daesh will end the threat of Islamist extremism, but this particular iteration of it as a military force occupying territory has to be ended. The struggle to defeat the perversion of Islam that the Daesh ideology—the extreme Islamist ideology—represents will take much longer. It will be the struggle of a generation, and it is a struggle that must be led by Muslims themselves, reclaiming their religion from the extremists.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I very much welcome the Foreign Secretary's briefing and look forward to similar such briefings in the new year. As chairman of the all-party group on Kurdistan, I was wondering

what feedback or briefings the Foreign Secretary has had, and what effect there has been on the morale and military capability of Kurdish peshmerga forces following these targeted UK airstrikes on both sides of the Syria-Iraq border.

Mr Hammond: The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), was in Kurdistan yesterday and he reports that our action has boosted morale among Kurdish forces, as we would expect. In particular, what has been happening around Sinjar has considerably boosted morale and the strategic position of Kurdish forces. They are extremely delighted—there is no other word for it—about the decision this House made two weeks ago.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): In his statement, the Secretary of State said, "The majority of Russian air strikes continue to target Syrian opposition forces rather than Daesh." Is it not clear that Russia's priority is to protect the Assad regime? Does it remain the position of the British Government that Assad cannot be part of any solution to the Syrian crisis?

Mr Hammond: I long since gave up using the word "clear" to describe anything about Russian policy, because it is anything but clear—it is always opaque. We simply do not know what the Russian strategy is. We do not know what Russia's objectives are, and my assessment is that most people in the Russian system do not either; perhaps Mr Putin has in his head an idea about what the end game is. What I do know is that some 75% of Russian airstrikes are being conducted against people whom we believe have to be part of the solution to the Syrian problem, not against Daesh, which we are very clear is the enemy.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I welcome the emphasis on a political solution and possible ceasefire in Syria. Given the growing strength of Daesh in Libya, can my right hon. Friend tell us how we might get political progress in Libya? Are there military consequences of that growing concentration?

Mr Hammond: As they say, I am glad that my right hon. Friend asked me that question, because it just so happens that a signing ceremony is planned for tomorrow in Morocco, at which it is hoped by the UN special representative, Mr Martin Kobler, that a majority of the House of Representatives and a significant number of members of the General National Congress will sign an agreement creating a Government of national accord. If that happens tomorrow, the western countries and the Gulf countries will swing behind that Government of national accord and will look to build their capability as soon and as quickly as possible, so that we can start to work in Libya to contain the threat that Daesh now clearly represents in that country.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): With the escalation of the UK's role in the conflict, the Department for International Development should form a central part of the planning processes to ensure that the humanitarian situation in Syria does not deteriorate. How will the Government

ensure that coalition military operations do not worsen the conditions faced by civilians in Syria or negatively affect DFID's capacity to deliver humanitarian assistance?

Mr Hammond: DFID does do precisely what the hon. Lady has suggested, but of course the lion's share of DFID work is concentrated on supporting refugees who have left the country. We face issues associated with getting supplies into Syria to support refugees, and one crucial strategic area is the relatively small corridor along the Turkey-Syria border that still remains open to international traffic. Securing that and making sure it remains open is a key objective of coalition forces, for humanitarian reasons.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): May I warmly applaud the new impetus that has been given to the diplomatic approach and say how delighted I am that the UK is playing such a prominent role, led by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to boot? The role being played by Saudi Arabia is also to be welcomed. In his statement, he set out the details of the strikes by the RAF that have taken place in Iraq, but he did not mention what has happened in Syria. Given that the application of the dual mode Brimstone was such a key difference between us and other coalition partners, can he set out how many strikes have taken place in Syria with the dual mode Brimstone or give us more detail on other strikes that have taken place?

Mr Hammond: As my hon. Friend well knows, those are operational details that I cannot give more detail on. As I said in response to the Opposition spokesman, the UK forces are committed to the combined air operations centre, which tasks aircraft from coalition countries with whatever task is in hand. The analysis of strikes carried out by the coalition is done by CAOC and in due course—in the new year, I believe—it will release those figures.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State ever tune in to the Airwars website? If he does, he will see its estimate of between 660 and 970 civilian casualties in the last 15 months of operation in Iraq and Syria. Will he please send an official from the Foreign Office to discuss with people from that website the definition of a “non-combatant”—a civilian—casualty and work that out, so that this House may know the truth about how many civilians are dying in Iraq and Syria as a result of our actions?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman put a slight caveat in his question in the last few words when he said “as a result of our actions”. Of course he is absolutely right to say that civilians are dying in Iraq—they are dying at the hands of Daesh and they are dying as a result of ongoing conflict across the country. Our commitment is to ensure that civilian casualties arising from the operations of the RAF are minimised or, ideally, avoided altogether, and I am sure that we are doing an excellent job.

Mr Allen: Will you send an official?

Mr Hammond: I do not know the website that the hon. Gentleman is talking about and I cannot commit a Foreign Office official to go to talk to a website. We have to use proper, official definitions of civilian casualties, co-ordinated through CAOC.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I join my right hon. Friend in welcoming the 34-nation coalition formed by Saudi Arabia to defeat terrorism. Will he urge all middle east states, whether Shi'a or Sunni, to get behind this military Islamic alliance to defeat Daesh, because stability in the region also requires bold but much-needed steps towards a Sunni and Shi'a reconciliation?

Mr Hammond: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend on that. The Sunni-Shi'a division in the middle east, which is a relatively new phenomenon to the politics of the region, is unhelpful and, ultimately, destabilising. I am assured by my Saudi Arabian counterpart that the initial 34 nations that have announced their membership of this coalition is not an exclusive list and that other countries are considering joining. I very much hope that further countries will join, giving it the broadest base and the greatest legitimacy possible.

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I remain deeply concerned about the lack of progress on civilian protection inside Syria, much of which is being perpetrated by the Assad regime. Does the Secretary of State agree that ending Assad's indiscriminate use of barrel bombs is a key confidence-building measure that should be prioritised alongside efforts towards a formal ceasefire? Should a ceasefire not be delivered on Friday, may I urge him to look again at other measures to protect civilians, including putting in place no-bombing zones. Will he also reconfirm the Government's unequivocal commitment not to have truck with anyone—including the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)—who says that working with Assad's forces is a compromise that we should be willing to make? That would be not only morally wrong, but counter-productive given that Assad is Daesh's biggest recruiting sergeant.

Mr Hammond: As I said in my statement, the US Secretary of State aspires to deliver a ceasefire as an outcome of Friday's meeting, but even he recognises that that is ambitious. We are also very focused on confidence-building measures, which do not go as far as a ceasefire, but are likely to be more readily achievable. They include an end to the use of indiscriminate weapons in civilian areas, an end to the bombing of hospitals and medical facilities and a guarantee of humanitarian access to besieged areas on both sides of the conflict. The hon. Lady asked me whether we would consider alternative methods of protecting the civilian population, with specific emphasis on no-bomb zones. We have looked extensively at that, and much military effort has gone into analysing what is and what is not possible. I am afraid that the analysis is that it will not be something that is practical to deliver in the absence of forces on the ground, and, as she knows, we have no intention of committing forces on the ground.

I want to pick up on the point that the hon. Lady made about Assad. The reason we say that Assad can play no part in the future is not just to do with a sense of moral outrage about what he has done. We all want to end the killing and, despite what has happened in the past, if I thought that that would bring an end to the killing more quickly, I would look at it, but it will not. We will not get a ceasefire, an end to the civil war and all the guns in Syria turned on Daesh until Assad has gone.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that when one sups with Vladimir Putin, one needs a very long spoon? It is very dangerous for some of our European colleagues to say that his involvement in this battle is somehow helpful and that we should reconsider sanctions against him. Will he confirm that that is not the view of the Government?

Mr Hammond: The Government have been clear that anyone who genuinely wants to take part in the fight against Daesh is welcome to join the coalition and to do so, but what the Russians have done so far is, at best, ambiguous. Yes, they have bombed Daesh positions. Although the percentage of Russian airstrikes targeting Daesh has increased since the loss of the Russian aircraft over Sinai—which was almost certainly due to a Daesh-inspired or planned bomb attack—they are still only about 25% of the total of their airstrikes. The remainder are targeted at the moderate opposition, and that is, to put it mildly, deeply unhelpful.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister referred in his statement to a coalition of 70,000 troops to defeat Daesh. The coalition is very diverse, with groups having different goals, ambitions and strategies. Will he update the House on how that coalition army is coming together? Who will lead it? How is its training going, and has it got the crucial equipment?

Mr Hammond: As we covered quite extensively in the debate two weeks ago, this is not a single army; of course it is not. There are diverse groups fighting the opposition. We have identified approximately 70,000 fighters whom we regard as within the pale in the sense that they have objectives with which we can broadly associate and that they are people with whom we are broadly prepared to work. As I set out in my speech closing that debate two weeks ago, the way we envisage this working is through an end to the civil war, thus creating a legitimate Government in Syria, which the international community can support with training, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, weapons, ammunition and command and control support. The Syrian army, thus legitimised, will work alongside these various other militias going after Daesh to finish the job of reclaiming the territory of Syria. That is the outcome that we seek.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): Daesh is on the back foot in Iraq. Sinjar has been liberated and, as we speak, Iraqi forces are fighting street by street in the liberation of Ramadi. There have been some very good and positive outcomes with the return of the Sunnis to Tikrit, but there have been some greater challenges around Diyala, and there is a real need for a strong political push for post-conflict co-ordination in that country. We have a strong ambassador who is respected by all parties. Will the Foreign Secretary commit to us taking a lead on that post-conflict co-ordination in Iraq to safeguard the Sunni return?

Mr Hammond: We have been doing just that. As my hon. Friend says, we have considerable influence in both Baghdad and Irbil. The problem is that some of the steps that need to be taken to create an environment in which the Sunni population in Iraq feels comfortable and as if they are fully fledged citizens of the country are blocked in the Iraqi Parliament. They are being

blocked for a variety of reasons, some of which are to do with the basis of power politics rather than issues of high principle.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that Vladimir Putin must choose whether he wants his country to remain a respected member of the UN Security Council, or to continue down the road towards being an international pariah and rogue state? If Russia chooses the latter path, do the UK and coalition partners have the steel to ensure that it does not profit in any way from its flagrant abuses in the region?

Mr Hammond: I want to answer that question carefully. I have said before in this House that, while I deplore many things that the Russians do, I do not believe that Russia is soft on Daesh. Russia and President Putin recognise a threat from Daesh to Russia, which is at least as great as the threat from Daesh to the west. Russia has 13 million Sunni Muslims living inside the borders of the Russian Federation. What we disagree about is methodology. Mr Putin would say, if he were here to answer the question, that he is going about defeating Daesh in the way that he believes will be most effective. We fundamentally disagree with him for the reason that I explained to the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox), which is that unless and until Assad is gone, we will not get a reconciliation in the Syrian civil war and we will not get all Syrians turning their guns on Daesh.

Mr Speaker: The fellow may have some difficulty securing election in a UK constituency by the recognisably democratic methods that we favour, but I know what the Foreign Secretary was saying. I call Mr David Tredinnick.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): My right hon. Friend has referred at some length to the challenges presented by Russia, but does he not agree that there are now also huge opportunities? A very good example is the co-operation we saw yesterday with Tim Peake going into space. Does he recall that, 24 years ago, another British cosmonaut, Helen Sharman—she was known as the woman from Mars, because she worked for the Mars confectionery company—went up in space, and the former Member for the Western Isles, Calum MacDonald, and I were there to see it at the Baikonur cosmodrome? Does my right hon. Friend not agree that, overall, it is now in the British national interest to have better relations with Russia, and that if he wants more co-operation at the UN, it would be a good idea to look again at the Russian-Ukrainian situation?

Mr Hammond: Yes, clearly those are two separate situations, and we are not trading them off. Russia must comply with its international obligations in relation to Ukraine. It must remove its troops from the territory and comply with its obligations under the Minsk agreement. It must also decide whether it wants to be part of the international coalition against Daesh, or whether it is pursuing other objectives by its own methods.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is right that the Foreign Secretary has come to the House to make his statement today, and it is right that hon.

Members across the House pay tribute to the inspiring commitment of our armed forces and their families; but on the subject of commitment, does he think it a little strange that we keep hearing the Government berate other countries for their lack of commitment on aid for Syria, when our commitment to refugees has been so very poor? Does he think that it would improve our diplomatic commitment if we gave a little more sanctuary to just a few more people?

Mr Hammond: No. As I have said before, we are clear that the best way to support most refugees is by providing the aid that they need for the food programmes, healthcare, shelter and education for their children, to enable them to remain in the region until the conflict is over and then to return to their homes to rebuild their country and be part of Syria's future. We have said we will accept for resettlement those who are especially vulnerable, as defined by the UN. They are the most vulnerable refugees, requiring extensive support once they arrive here, and we are proud to have resettled 1,000 of them by Christmas.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): My right hon. Friend has reassured us that President Assad cannot be part of the long-term solution. Will he advise us whether all necessary parties, including the Assad regime, are co-operating with the political process, which is so important alongside military action?

Mr Hammond: The Assad regime has said that it has selected its negotiating team and is ready to meet the Syrian opposition on a no-preconditions basis. Of course that assertion remains to be tested, but the regime has indicated that it is willing to engage in those discussions. As in many things around the conflict, in the end the attendance of the Syrian team at the talks will depend, I am sure, crucially on a phone call from Moscow.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I was going to call the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones), but I wish to be assured that he did not leave the Chamber at any stage.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I just nipped to the gentleman's—

Mr Speaker: Very well; I will not inquire further into the hon. Gentleman's domestic arrangements.

Graham Jones: I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for a welcome statement. He talks about defeating Daesh and, of course, all the financial implications, but as we see in Afghanistan, ISIS is now recruiting in 24 of the 39 states. It is transferring money clearly from the oilfields of Syria and Iraq to fund that campaign and paying some of its soldiers—the foreign fighters—\$600 a month, and it has now got trained divisions in Afghanistan and has declared war on the Taliban. What is the Government's assessment of the situation in Afghanistan, and what does he think ought to be done to defeat Daesh?

Mr Hammond: Whatever the hon. Gentleman's issues, after the 11-and-a-half-hour Syria debate, it is not a problem that any of us think you share, Mr Speaker.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. There is evidence of Daesh penetration in many countries, including Afghanistan. What we have to do in Afghanistan is to continue to support the Government, as we and the international coalition have done, to fund the Afghan national police and the Afghan national army to resist the attempt to create a new caliphate, and we will find that happening elsewhere. We need to be clear about this; it will pop up in other countries as well, and we need to be ready to respond to it, wherever it arises.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly the remarks about humanitarian support and his answer on humanitarian corridors. Can he tell the House any more about the ongoing discussions on securing access across Syria for humanitarian support and whether there has been any progress in meeting the resolution?

Mr Hammond: That will be one of the issues on the table on Friday. I mentioned earlier an end to the indiscriminate use of weapons in civilian areas and to the bombing of medical facilities and humanitarian access to besieged areas—the three early confidence-building measures that the UK in particular is promoting and will be promoting at the conference on Friday.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Prime Minister has been clear in telling us that there have been no civilian casualties as a result of our actions in Iraq or Syria, and the Foreign Secretary has clarified today that there have been no reports of civilian casualties as a result of RAF action, so I was surprised to read yesterday that, when asked how many people had been killed by UK airstrikes, the Ministry of Defence responded, "What do you mean by 'people'?" Will he clarify what the Ministry of Defence means by "people"?

Mr Hammond: No; that is a question for the Ministry of Defence. Clearly, people will have been killed as a result of airstrikes, but we have no reports of civilian casualties. I cannot, I am afraid, tell the hon. Lady anything further than that.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I very much commend the update and briefing that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has given us. I was privileged last month to visit the Kirkuk region and meet the peshmerga, who were extremely grateful for the RAF air support that we have been giving; Daesh has been curtailed in more than a third of the territory that it once held in the region. May I have assurances that we will continue to work directly with the Kurds, both in the autonomous region of Iraq and in Syria, to ensure that we press the fight further to Daesh?

Mr Hammond: As my hon. Friend is well aware from his visit, we are providing direct support, training and mentoring to Kurdish forces in Iraq. At present, we do not carry out that kind of activity with the Kurdish forces in Syria. Frankly, Kurdish forces in Syria have demonstrated their fighting capabilities and the adequacy of their supply lines and training arrangements.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Is the Foreign Secretary not concerned that the further involvement of tribal groups and others such as the

[Mr Khalid Mahmood]

Muslim Brotherhood and some al-Qaeda groups will lead to further conflict, as we have already seen in Libya? Is not the best way forward to engage with the 34-member group that Saudi Arabia is putting together, with our coalition, to have the people and troops to deal with this problem properly and realistically, rather than by using wishful thinking?

Mr Hammond: I do not think that the two are mutually exclusive. It may be possible in the future, once we have established a transitional Government in Syria, to rally diverse opposition forces against Daesh, alongside what is left of the Syrian army—possibly supported by specialist interventions from members of the 34 Muslim nation coalition, special forces, logistics, targeters, military intelligence analysts and so forth. That is probably the most effective model that we can put together.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement to the House today and his ongoing commitment to continue to make such statements. The crisis in Syria has truly become a regional conflict, not just because of the impact of Islamic State, but because of the increasingly concerning refugee crisis. Does he agree that we must continue to support the authorities in Jordan and Lebanon, which have been so greatly impacted by the influx of refugees from Syria?

Mr Hammond: Yes. We are working with all three countries—Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey—but particularly closely with Jordan, in trying to produce an innovative scheme that will allow refugees in Jordan to access the labour market and to support the Jordanian economy in a way that allows them to engage with that programme.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): In parallel with military action against Daesh—I support such action—the UK Government must work harder to support Syrian refugees. Will the Foreign Secretary set out the UK Government's position on the private sponsorship of vulnerable refugees? Such sponsorship, which is supported by a range of organisations from Churches to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, would allow more vulnerable refugees, beyond the 20,000 already agreed by the Government, to find sanctuary in the UK. Will the UK Government support that?

Mr Hammond: The right hon. Gentleman has asked that question of the Prime Minister. While being clear that we think that our position is right on admitting 20,000 vulnerable refugees, the Prime Minister has said that he will look further at the question of orphaned children, and I will remind him of that commitment.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): I join other Members in welcoming the statement. I welcome the news that Ministers have been urging the UN special envoy to involve Syrian women's groups in the peace process. Can my right hon. Friend update the House on the response to those representations?

Mr Hammond: I am afraid there is not such great news to report on that front. The gender balance at the Riyadh meeting was disappointing. Given that it was

happening around the time that Saudi Arabia itself was taking a historic step forward in women's participation in its political system, that is disappointing. We have fed back our concern about that, and the UN special representative, as my hon. Friend said, is particularly focused on this issue.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Should we ponder with some scepticism the apparently ever more pivotal role that is accruing to Saudi Arabia, not just because of the provenance of some of the issues now being faced in this conflict and the Saudi role in Yemen, but because the precepts and principles which the Foreign Secretary quoted that were brokered by Saudi Arabia for the opposition negotiating commission are broken every day for Saudi Arabian citizens? Will the UK Government and others be trying to shepherd the opposition contribution to the negotiations planned for January, or will they leave that shepherding role to Saudi Arabia?

Mr Hammond: As I have already said, we have provided support to the Syrian opposition in logistical terms in trying to prepare its role as a negotiating convention, and we will continue to do so. Nobody should underestimate the power that Saudi Arabia has because of the position of the King of Saudi Arabia as the custodian of the two holy mosques. That creates a unique convening power which allows Saudi Arabia to bring together people who do not particularly want to sit in a room together and force them to engage with each other. Frankly, in a storm we need to work with partners who have the capabilities that we need, and Saudi Arabia has that capability.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Syria needs political stability so, although we may have to deal with the Assad regime in the short term, does my right hon. Friend agree that the Assad regime cannot be part of the long-term solution, even if other regional partners support his continued dictatorship?

Mr Hammond: Yes, as I have already said, our position is that for both moral and practical purposes we will not get a solution that involves Assad as a long-term part of the political structure in Syria.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I welcome the early reporting on this subject, which is very important to many in the House. I welcome all the political and diplomatic efforts that the Government are clearly undertaking, and I agree that in those diplomatic efforts the involvement of Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Muslim world is crucial. There are two points that we have to acknowledge, the first being that many of those Muslim countries themselves are under attack from Daesh or other terrorists. Secondly, many Muslims across those countries in the Muslim world do not acknowledge the Daesh ideology as being anywhere near Islam, and we have to stress that point. I urge the Government to continue those conversations, because if Daesh is to be defeated properly, we must defeat not only the body known as Daesh, but the evil ideology. That is where Muslim world co-operation will be necessary. On the important issue of civilian deaths, tens of thousands of civilians lost their lives in Iraq and in Afghanistan. What assurances can the Foreign Secretary give me that the same will not happen in Syria?

Mr Hammond: Hundreds of thousands have lost their lives in Syria and people are continuing to lose their lives in Syria, both as a result of Daesh's systematic murder and as a result of Assad's indiscriminate barrel bombing and chemical attacks on civilian populations, so I am afraid I can give the hon. Gentleman no assurance whatsoever that we will not see similar levels of casualties in Syria. The only way we can seek to prevent them is to bring the bloody civil war to an end and then bring the rule of Daesh over a third of Syria's territory to an end as quickly as possible.

On the first part of his question, the hon. Gentleman is right. This group of 34 countries is, of course, committed to the challenge of defeating Daesh in Iraq and Syria, but it is at its heart a self-help group—34 countries coming together, recognising that any one of them can be attacked by Daesh or Daesh-affiliated groups, and allowing them to call on each other to provide mutual assistance in responding to such an attack. Of course the hon. Gentleman is right that we have to destroy not only the manifestations of this organisation, but the underpinning ideology. That will be a much longer task and I do not expect it to be completed in my lifetime.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I am pleased that we are finally targeting the oilfields in an attempt to cut off Daesh's illicit funds, but can my right hon. Friend tell the House why it is only now that we have joined the coalition for airstrikes that we are hitting these oilfields and trying to cut off that source of income? Are there any other places that we should be hitting which form a greater part of our overall strategy?

Mr Hammond: Maybe I missed something in my hon. Friend's question. The simple answer is that it is because they are in Syria and until 14 days ago we were not authorised to strike at targets in Syria. A crucial part of our argument was that we needed to take the fight to Daesh in Syria—its command and control headquarters, its supply lines and its sources of economic support.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): In the debate just two weeks ago we were told that Daesh in Raqqa represented the head of the snake, and that Daesh posed a real and imminent threat to the security of the United Kingdom. Given that, can the Foreign Secretary tell us what action has been taken by the RAF to diminish Daesh in Raqqa? If no action has been taken by the RAF in Raqqa, why not?

Mr Hammond: As I made clear earlier, I cannot talk about individual targets and individual attacks. The hon. Gentleman is right. That focus in the debate was on the command and control headquarters in Raqqa and that has to be the target if we are to destroy Daesh, but we have to go about that deliberately. Rushing to strike Daesh in its headquarters is not necessarily the best way to go about the task. I am not a military strategist and I do not think it would be sensible for politicians, least of all in open session, to try to set the military plan. What I do know is that targeting the leadership of Daesh in a heavily populated city such as Raqqa will require extremely careful planning, the acquisition of a great deal of intelligence and surveillance data, and the proper analysis of those data.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's continued commitment to a political solution and to further peace talks, but does he agree that it is important to include and involve as wide a range of countries as possible, including Iran, in order to ensure that all parties get round the table in Syria?

Mr Hammond: Yes, and one of the great achievements of the Vienna process is that Iran, along with Saudi Arabia, is engaged, so two countries that have not been conspicuous by their ability to talk each other are now talking to each other across a table in Vienna or this week in New York. That is a positive achievement.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I hear what the Foreign Secretary says about civilian casualties, but the effect of bombing—any bombing—is to maintain the flow of refugees, including into Europe. What are the Government doing to get the UNHCR into camps from Lesbos to Calais? Will they offer refugee status to refugees in those camps whose primary family connection is with Britain?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman has asked a specific and detailed question. I would be chancing my arm to give him a precise answer. If I may, I will write to him and place a copy of my letter in the Library. I will want to talk to my right hon. Friends the Home Secretary and the International Development Secretary before answering.

Martin John Docherty (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): This week the *Financial Times* reported that even in Daesh-controlled Syria and Iraq two certainties of life exist: death and taxes. Given that the collection of the zakat is now reported to equal the sale of oil revenue, what impact are our airstrikes having on Daesh's continued worrying economic growth, which has been built on the backs of the rural poor of Iraq and Syria?

Mr Hammond: I suspect that those two eternal inevitabilities, death and taxes, are rather more immediately unavoidable in Daesh-controlled territory than they are in most other places. There are some signals—this was set out in the debate two weeks ago—that Daesh is facing some financial stress. Stipends paid to fighters have been cut. There are many reports of fighters being unpaid and payments to fighters being delayed. This is still a very well-funded organisation, but the huge one-off bonanza that it acquired in the early days of its surge into Iraq, where it was capturing hundreds of millions of dollars in cash in banks and simply taking it away, has ended. I think it is facing a little more pressure financially than it was then, and we intend to keep tightening the screw.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State say more about what is being done in relation to the position of the Iraqi Government on the Sunni community, who are a mainstay of Daesh in that area and are enabling it to run an effective economy and to pay wages to civil servants, soldiers and others because of the technical expertise of many of the people who have gone from Iraq into the area? If we are going to

[Clive Efford]

deal with Daesh in the long run, what pressure can be put on the Iraqi Government to deal with that fundamental problem?

Mr Hammond: We are working very closely with the Iraqi Government, and we are supporting Prime Minister al-Abadi, who remains committed to the programme of outreach to the Sunni community in Iraq but is facing significant challenges in delivering it. His immediate predecessor is opposed, and a significant bloc in Parliament is making it impossible to progress with two key pieces of legislation: on the creation of a national guard, which would see regionally based forces composed of groups that reflected the ethnicity and the confessional allegiance of the regions; and on repealing the de-Ba'athification legislation passed in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime, which has driven many capable Iraqis who were associated with the Ba'ath regime into the arms of ISIL. Many of the military brains behind ISIL's initial success were former Ba'athist military officials from the Iraqi regime.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): If use of the Brimstone missile was such a key part of the Government's argument for extending the bombing campaign to Syria, does the Secretary of State not think he should inform the House of how many Brimstone missiles have been used in operations over Syria, and will he commit to doing so in future statements?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces tells me that there is a certain amount of operational information available on the gov.uk website on a daily basis, and the hon. Gentleman may find information there that at least partly answers his question.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox), the Foreign Secretary set out the complexities of establishing a civilian safe haven on the ground in Syria. Notwithstanding that, given the intensification of the civil war and our own battles against Daesh, will he enter into dialogue with Syria's neighbours to see whether they or the Islamic military coalition that he described would be willing to provide the ground support that is needed to create that safe haven for civilians?

Mr Hammond: I regularly talk to my Turkish colleagues, in particular. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Turks have long promoted the idea of creating safe havens in the north along the border with Turkey. However, all such previous proposals have foundered on the question of who will provide the defensive air cover, given the presence of a very sophisticated Syrian air defence system, and now the presence of Russian air-to-air offensive capability in the area.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The MOD has confirmed that the RAF Typhoons operating in Syria have, on occasion, not only carried air-to-surface missiles for attacking targets on the ground but have been armed with air-to-air missiles designed to shoot down enemy aircraft. The Government have said that the only enemy we have in Syria is Daesh. There is no indication

whatsoever that Daesh has any aircraft. Will the Foreign Secretary tell us which specific countries' aircraft the RAF thinks it might have to shoot down in the skies over Syria?

Mr Hammond: The posture that we adopt to protect our aircraft is a matter of operational security and I cannot comment on it in the House.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Following the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), is not the reason we have not attacked Raqqa, the so-called head of the snake, that, as I have said, the snake is instead a hydra? We read in the weekend papers that the Government are now giving serious consideration to stretching their operation against Daesh into Libya, which will inevitably lead to our doing so in other parts of the region and in north Africa. We have a plan to attack Daesh, not a plan to defeat it. When will the Foreign Secretary get round to giving us a proper plan for dealing with the problem in the context in which it actually exists?

Mr Hammond: First, I would say to the hon. Gentleman, do not believe everything you read in the papers, especially at the weekends. As I have said before, this is a complex military task that requires careful planning and careful execution. I am sorry if it does not suit him that we have a debate and 14 days later he has not seen the level of attack in a particular spot that he, as a military strategist, would like to see, but I have to defer to the military strategists in the Ministry of Defence and in the combined air operations centres and let them execute the objectives that this House has clearly endorsed.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary was right to highlight the importance of Syria's neighbours, particularly Arab states. I am sure that he will be aware of this comment by the US Defence Secretary:

"Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states joined the air campaign in the early days but have since been preoccupied by the conflict in Yemen."

Is he concerned by that, and has there been a decrease in sorties by Arab allies?

Mr Hammond: Yes, there has been a decrease in air sorties by Arab allies. Of course, we recognise the challenges of the conflict on their southern border. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear, and I am sure the House will be pleased to hear, that talks are currently going on between the two sides in the Yemeni civil war. A ceasefire of sorts has been in place over the past couple of days, and although there have been violations, I understand that it is broadly holding. We are therefore hopeful that we are seeing the beginning of the end of the military phase of the conflict in Yemen.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): In his previous statement the Prime Minister mentioned the memorandum of understanding regarding communication between the coalition and Russia, which is hugely important. We need only look at the shooting down of a Russian jet by Turkey to see how crucial it is that those communications are going on daily at an operational level. The House has heard loud and clear about the difficulties in dealing diplomatically with Russia, and we must continue to

endeavour to be more successful in doing that. How well is the memorandum of understanding working, given that it is for the safety of our troops as well as Russia's that it is working?

Mr Hammond: This is about de-confliction. It is about ensuring that we are not flying our aircraft in the same bit of airspace where, inadvertently or by accident, they might come into conflict with others. That has been working well. In fact, coalition aircraft and Russian aircraft are generally operating in different areas. Of course, the situation with regard to Turkey is different. The Turkish aircraft in question in the incident that the hon. Gentleman refers to, which tragically led to the death of a Russian lieutenant colonel, the pilot, were defending Turkish airspace. It was a routine air defence patrol of the type that we fly in the UK, and we would be in the same position if our airspace was threatened or challenged. The de-confliction of airspace for operations between the coalition and Russia is working well, but the conflict—the tension—remains along the border, where Turkish aircraft are flying in their airspace and Russian aircraft are flying in Syrian airspace. We are all extremely keen to see any risks in that area de-escalating, and we are working hard to achieve that.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary says that a minimum of £1 billion has been put aside for reconstruction. Is that a blank cheque, and, if so, what alternatives is it at the expense of? What needs analysis is that figure based on? What plans exist for spending it, and over what timescale?

Mr Hammond: I do not think it is a blank cheque: it says on the top line, "People of Syria", and on the next line, "£1 billion", so it is clearly not a blank cheque. The Prime Minister has made it clear that we are going to remain committed to the Syrian people through this conflict, through the formation of a transitional Government and in the rebuilding of their country after the creation of that transitional Government and the end of the conflict. He made it very clear in the debate two weeks ago that £1 billion is not the limit of our support for the Syrian people; it is a first instalment to which we have committed.

Points of Order

2.40 pm

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: A veritable feast of points of order.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am starting to panic. You will recall that on 2 December the Prime Minister, in response to a question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), the leader of the Liberal Democrats, said:

"I am very happy to look at that issue again"—

the issue being the 3,000 unaccompanied children—

"to see whether Britain can do more to fulfil our moral responsibilities."—[*Official Report*, 2 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 339.]

The Prime Minister has been silent on the matter ever since. Can you, Mr Speaker, clarify whether the rules of the House require, when matters of moral responsibility are in play, the Prime Minister to return to this Chamber urgently to set out how he intends to fulfil those moral responsibilities?

Mr Speaker: The matter that the right hon. Gentleman raises is certainly important, but I am bound to tell him that it is treated of neither in "Erskine May", which, of course, is the bible of parliamentary precedent and procedure, nor in Standing Orders. Therefore, although it may seem imperative in the mind of the right hon. Gentleman and, indeed, in that of his leader that the Prime Minister should return to the House to satisfy them on this matter before the Christmas recess, there is no procedural imperative to that effect.

Tom Brake: Shame.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman mutters "Shame" from a sedentary position, and I feel sure that it is a matter to which he will return, quite possibly before the Christmas recess. We shall wait to see.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD) *rose*—

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I think we shall have a change of party for a moment, but we will return to the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland).

Hannah Bardell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is my first point of order, just in time for Christmas. On a very serious point, it has come to my attention recently that the Department for Work and Pensions plans to operate "business as usual", as it did for the first time last year, in the run-up to Christmas. That basically means that people will be sanctioned up until and on Christmas eve. How can I hold the Secretary of State to account on this matter and have it dealt with, hopefully positively, so that we do not have a Scrooge-like approach in the run-up to Christmas?

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Lady has just done it, although there is one further parliamentary day. Of course, the scheduled debates for tomorrow are what they are and I am not at all sure that either of them would facilitate her in that respect, but there are other opportunities on every parliamentary day and she will

[Mr Speaker]

have to use her ingenuity, which is not inconsiderable, to see if she can refer to the matter again and extract some sort of ministerial response in the Chamber.

Greg Mulholland *rose*—

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Member for Leeds North West is going to think he is always left until last if I do not call him now. Members do develop persecution complexes from time to time. We will come to the hon. Gentleman, who is a hardy fellow and will not mind waiting.

Patrick Grady: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The last question at today's Department for International Development Question Time was asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). It concerned a very serious matter regarding reports that two men from Malawi—Cuthbert Kulemela and Kelvin Gonani—have been arrested in the capital city for having consensual sex together. Essentially, it appears that they have been arrested for being gay. This is probably as much of an issue for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as it is for DFID, so I am glad that there are FCO Ministers present. I hope the Government will respond in the same way as the Secretary of State for International Development did by condemning the action.

My point of order is that the question asked by my hon. Friend could barely be heard because of the noise that always rises in the prelude to Prime Minister's questions. What advice can you give to Members, Mr Speaker, about noise levels during Question Time, and what opportunities are there for us to ask the Government to look at rotating the questions and when they are heard?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The news that he reports on a very serious matter is, frankly, horrifying—it is absolutely horrifying news indeed. Of course, there is a direct locus for the Secretary of State and the Department for International Development in view of our continuing commitment to Malawi, with which country I know the hon. Gentleman, from his personal experience, is intensely familiar, so, I think probably on behalf of the House, I can empathise with what he has said.

The noise at Question Time is very disturbing. I do often say to the House that we are dealing with extremely important matters. In some cases they are important matters not only from our point of view, but to people elsewhere in the world who are in very much more vulnerable situations than we are, so common courtesy would dictate that there should be a civilised atmosphere and that questions and answers should be heard. The hon. Gentleman knows, to be fair, that it is ordinarily not a calculated insult; it is that colleagues are very excited and animated about the upcoming Prime Minister's questions and are engaging in often protracted and noisy private conversations. I can only exhort colleagues to remember their responsibilities to each other and to people whose concerns we are discussing.

More widely, the hon. Gentleman makes quite an important point about possible rotation. There is no procedural bar to rotation. If there is a significant body of Members who feel that it is wrong that one Department should have to occupy that very difficult slot for an extended period, they can make representations—I am trying to be helpful to the hon. Gentleman; I cannot solve the problem overnight—to the Leader of the House and, indeed, if I may say so, to the Chair of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), who is, in my experience, unfailingly helpful to, and courteous in his dealings with, Members of the House.

Greg Mulholland: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not at all mind waiting to seek your advice or to share some very good news. I know that you will be delighted, as will the House, with today's news that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has approved the drug Vimizim for sufferers of Morquio disease. That is life-changing news for the 88 people and their families, and it is the result of a large campaign.

I seek your advice, Mr Speaker, because this is a hugely important matter that has exercised considerable time and a number of questions in this House. Given that there will be no pre-recess Adjournment debate tomorrow, and given the very limited time available for a statement from the Department of Health—which would be very welcome, particularly because it is such good news—I seek your advice on how the issue might be raised in the time remaining to us, considering not only its importance, but the importance of the ultra-rare diseases that have not received this news, such as tuberous sclerosis and Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

Mr Speaker: There are two points in response to the hon. Gentleman's point of order. First, I am absolutely delighted to hear that excellent news. Although the hon. Gentleman was too modest to draw direct attention to his own work on the subject, I think Members across the whole House know just how indefatigable he has been in his efforts on behalf of those very vulnerable people, so I would like to congratulate him and other Members on their persistence. It is absolutely magnificent news. We are here to serve other people and this is a very good example of where that has been done, not least due to the prodigious efforts of Back Benchers such as himself and a number of his colleagues.

Secondly, there is every opportunity for statements to be made tomorrow. Ministers will have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said. Whether a Minister wishes to come to announce and elaborate on the good news, and potentially to answer queries about other categories of people who might also be helped, I do not know. The hon. Gentleman also knows that, whether or not a statement is offered, there is an opportunity for Members to submit urgent questions. The hon. Gentleman has done it many times himself, sometimes with success. I cannot possibly give a commitment in advance, because we do not deal with the matter in that way. One thing the hon. Gentleman knows is that if he does not extract a commitment by a Minister to make an oral statement tomorrow and he chooses to submit an urgent question, I will see that question and read it in full, and it will be considered and adjudicated on at the morning meeting at 8.45 am tomorrow. I hope that that is helpful to him and, indeed, to other Members of the House.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In that context, have you received any indication from the Government that a Minister intends to make a statement tomorrow about the outcome of their consultation on cutting the solar feed-in tariff, which I understand they will announce tomorrow. This is a matter of huge public and industrial concern, with 37,000 jobs—87% of the jobs in the solar industry—at risk if the Government do not change their proposals. It would be completely unacceptable for this announcement to be sneaked out on the last sitting Thursday before Christmas when, with a one-line Whip, many Members will not be in Parliament. I hope that you will take up that matter with the Government on our behalf.

Mr Speaker: I am not aware of any intention on the part of a Minister to make a statement on that subject tomorrow, although I must say to the right hon. Gentleman, who is extremely experienced in the House, that the fact that I am not aware of any such intention at this point is itself unexceptional. There is no particular reason why I would have been notified. I have not been notified, but that does not mean that the Government are not planning to make a statement. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, that is little comfort to him. There might be an oral statement or there might not be. It is perfectly possible that there might be a written statement, which I suspect would satisfy him even less.

I cannot do anything about the point we have reached in the timetable. Tomorrow is the last day and some Members may not be present. That is unfortunate, but I can do nothing about it. However, just as I said to the hon. Member for Leeds North West that there is the opportunity of an urgent question for him and for other Members on matters of concern to them, it is perfectly open to the right hon. Gentleman to submit an urgent question. I simply inform colleagues that on a Thursday such applications must be in by 8.15 am. I feel sure that the hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Gentleman are both eager beavers and early birds.

If there are no further points of order—the appetite has been satisfied, at least for today—we come now to the ten-minute rule motion, for which the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) has been so patiently waiting.

Representation of the People (Proportional Representation) (House of Commons)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.52 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Representation of the People Acts to provide for the introduction of proportional representation as a method for electing a certain number of Members of the House of Commons; to make provision about changing existing constituencies and reducing their number; and for connected purposes.

It is said that in 1830, the Duke of Wellington, as Prime Minister, declared himself opposed to any reform of Parliament on the basis that the state of the representation of the people had been designed by providence and therefore “cannot be improved”. He was of course deeply wrong, as just two years later the Great Reform Act of 1832 was passed. However, that attitude—that the means of representing the people at Westminster cannot be improved—is one that has lived on and remains strong to this day. Indeed, many Members of the House can find no reason to question a system that has had the infinite wisdom to elect each and every one of us who sits in the House today.

I put it to the House that the means of electing the House of Commons—namely, the first-past-the-post electoral system—is no longer fit for purpose. It has led to a narrow and unrepresentative politics, increasingly poor decision making, poorly conducted elections and, at times, poor government. Moreover, it now threatens the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom and the cohesion of the constituent nations of the UK, by failing to produce representation that truly reflects the diversity of political views contained therein.

My Bill, which is modestly entitled a representation of the people Bill, seeks to correct these failings by introducing for the House of Commons the same electoral system used in Scotland and Wales, and in Germany—the additional member system. I believe that that system delivers the best of both worlds: a local MP with a constituency link, and a representative election that successfully reflects the intentions of the electorate. There would still be constituency MPs, but there would also be representative elections. There would still be strong one-party Governments if the public wanted them, but not if they did not.

I will set out why I believe the change to be so desirable. I believe our current voting system is bad for politics in the UK. It forces the major parties to devote their resources overwhelmingly to just a handful of constituencies that they regard as swing or marginal seats. That fails to treat voters equally, regardless of where they live, which creates a two-tier system of political engagement. As we all know, in some parts of the country the opposition parties put up nothing more than a token effort at election time. Most worryingly, it creates false electoral deserts, where whole regions of the country are dominated by one party despite its opponents recording substantial numbers of votes.

First past the post has been a huge contributing factor in how remote people feel from politics. As vote share for the major two parties has declined, it is a fact

[Jonathan Reynolds]

that our general elections have become less and less representative. If winning an argument with the British public becomes a different task from that of winning the votes required to form a Government, something has gone terribly wrong. It should be a source of national concern that there have been three general elections in history in which the party with the most votes has actually lost the general election. If that were to happen in the modern day, we would legitimately face a constitutional crisis.

I wish to stress that none of this is a means to dispute the formation of the new Conservative Government. No electoral system would have produced a Labour Government in 2015, because people simply did not trust Labour sufficiently. However, the result of the last election should concern anyone with an interest in democracy, or simply a desire for national unity. In the south-east, the Tories got 51% of the vote, but took 93% of the seats. In the south-west, they got 47% of the vote, but took 94% of the seats. In the north-east, the situation was reversed: Labour took 47% of the vote, but won 90% of the MPs. In Scotland, the SNP won an impressive 50% of the vote, but a thoroughly disproportionate 95% of the seats. The Lib Dems actually got 1 million more votes than the SNP, but are treated as though they got less. Four million people voted for the UK Independence party to get just one MP. That is simply not conducive to a representative Parliament.

As much as I wish the whole country would simply elect Labour MPs like me, if they do not do so, they should—as best we can deliver—get the MPs they did vote for. Moreover, the electoral system should not write off large parts of the country to one party or another, because that forces those parties to behave rationally and devote their scarce resources to areas where they are competitive. That then creates a perpetual cycle of disengagement, rather than the challenging and robust competition of views on which democracy thrives.

Because of the unrepresentative nature of modern elections, the Governments that are formed after them are prone to make poor decisions or to govern inequitably. At times, the British people have given a clear, decisive mandate for change—1905, 1945, 1979 and 1997—but that has not been their verdict at other times, when they have been unwilling or reluctant to hand one party exclusive access to Downing Street. If that is the British people's verdict, there should be coalition or minority Governments. Using the electoral system to create an artificial mandate for one-party rule is not conducive to good government. The argument that proportional voting unfairly empowers smaller parties does not stand up when one considers that exactly the same charge could be levelled at the recent functioning of first past the post, be that the coalition Government in the last Parliament, the Lib-Lab pact in the 1970s, Sir John Major's deal with the Democratic Unionist party, or the historical example of the Irish nationalists. The status quo does of course produce absurdities. During the last Parliament, a coalition Government in Westminster were elected under first past the post, and a one-party majority Government were elected in Holyrood under the proportional system that I am proposing we introduce via this Bill.

I know that some people will say to me that they do not wish to change the voting system for fear of seeing more UKIP or other minority parties elected. I share their disdain for some of those parties, but I would say to them that if people vote for those parties, that is surely what they should get. Parties defeat their political opponents by debate and campaigning, not by rigging the rules in their favour. Ultimately, the alienation caused by rigging the rules in their favour will create the resentment that means those minority parties actually win under first past the post, as we saw just over a decade ago when the British National party won substantial numbers of council seats in the north-west.

I may be this Parliament's pre-eminent Jonny, but I am no Jonny-come-lately to this cause. In fact, I am prepared to admit to the House that, as a young man, I travelled the long journey from Sunderland all the way to Newcastle to hear the late Roy Jenkins address a public meeting as part of his Jenkins commission. However, I believe that the issue has now assumed a much greater urgency. That has been produced not just by the declining vote share of the two major parties, but by the consequences of further constitutional change in Scotland, be it in the form of independence, as the SNP would like, or the much greater devolution that the Unionist parties favour. Such developments have profound implications for the rest of the Union.

I do not believe that the cohesion of England can be maintained by retaining the first-past-the-post electoral system. In all honesty, Labour Members ignored the consequences of devolution for England for far too long, simply because we did not want to admit that, under first past the post, Labour has historically rarely won a majority in England alone. A fairer and more competitive system would be better for everyone, because it would render such narrow calculations redundant and create a one nation political system for a country that sorely needs it.

I am extremely grateful for the cross-party support I have achieved for the Bill, which includes support from hon. Members from political parties, such as the Greens and the Lib Dems, that have positions in favour of a different type of electoral reform, such as the single transferable vote. However, we are as one on the need for change. If there is one thing that my time as a Member of this House has genuinely taught me, it is that the stereotypes of different political parties and the people who represent them in this place are unhelpful and unfair. The basis exists for us all to work together in the national interest and it would be better if we were part of a political system that placed on us an obligation to do so. Therefore, I make a plea today for not just a proportional voting system, but a patriotic voting system, in which all parts of the country and all shades of opinion are treated equally and fairly, and the functioning of which brings the whole country together. I commend the Bill to the House.

3.1 pm

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I am slightly surprised to be congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds)—and he is a friend—on his honesty in admitting that he once sat at the feet of Roy Jenkins. That is not something to which people are normally prepared to admit.

I find it astonishing that, in a month when the Front National in France has made considerable advances, someone in this House should argue for changing the electoral system. I do not want to detain the House for too long, so I will not go into detail about how damaging this proposal would be to effective government; how it would transfer power away from constituents and local parties to party leaders, kitchen Cabinets and bureaucrats; how it would empower fringe parties at the expense of parties that are fit for government; how it would damage the direct link between many MPs and a constituency; and how, interestingly enough, countries that have such systems always have to amend them as those problems start to come through.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Germany?

Mr Spellar: Germany has changed the system. It has introduced thresholds and it regularly changes the thresholds to deal with exactly the problems I am describing.

The proposal flies in the face of British public opinion, which was made absolutely clear in the referendum by more than two to one. In fact, 68% of people voted no and 32% voted yes. Of the 440 counting areas, only 10 recorded yes votes: the inner-London boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark, Camden, Hackney, Haringey and Islington—all those boroughs that used to feature in national headlines in the days of the loony left councils; Oxford, which has a great university and was described once as the city of lost causes; Cambridge; and Edinburgh Central and Glasgow Kelvin, which I think—SNP colleagues will correct me if I am wrong—are the seats of the universities in those two cities. Interestingly, in the seat of my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde, the borough of Tameside voted more than two to one against, with 72% against and 28% for. To my chagrin, that was a bigger margin than in my borough of Sandwell, which managed a mere 71% against to 29% for.

I merely ask those who are considering voting for this proposition a simple question: what part of “no” is it that you don’t understand?

Question put (Standing Order No. 23).

The House divided: Ayes 27, Noes 164.

Division No. 152]

[3.4 pm

AYES

Allen, Mr Graham	Lucas, Caroline
Barron, rh Kevin	Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Mulholland, Greg
Brake, rh Tom	Reynolds, Jonathan
Burden, Richard	Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Saville Roberts, Liz
Carswell, Mr Douglas	Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Creasy, Stella	Streeting, Wes
Cruddas, Jon	Twigg, Stephen
Davies, Geraint	Umunna, Mr Chuka
Dowd, Jim	Williams, Mr Mark
Durkan, Mark	
Edwards, Jonathan	
Flynn, Paul	
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret	
Lamb, rh Norman	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Helen Goodman and
Daniel Zeichner

NOES

Afriyie, Adam	Amess, Sir David
Aldous, Peter	Ansell, Caroline
Allen, Heidi	Argar, Edward

Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baron, Mr John
Bellingham, Mr Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, James
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Borwick, Victoria
Bridgen, Andrew
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Cash, Sir William
Chalk, Alex
Churchill, Jo
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Costa, Alberto
Cryer, John
Danczuk, Simon
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Evans, Chris
Evans, Mr Nigel
Farrelly, Paul
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Nusrat
Glendon, Mary
Grant, Mrs Helen
Green, Chris
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hanson, rh Mr David
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Herbert, rh Nick
Hoare, Simon
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John

Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Jackson, Mr Stewart
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyins, Andrea
Johnson, Boris
Jones, Graham
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Lee, Dr Phillip
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lucas, Ian C.
Mackinlay, Craig
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Marris, Rob
Matheson, Christian
Mathias, Dr Tania
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McDonagh, Siobhain
Mearns, Ian
Menzies, Mark
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Paisley, Ian
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pow, Rebecca
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Rimmer, Marie
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smith, Royston
Spellar, rh Mr John
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Stuart, Graham
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Michael

Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Twigg, Derek
Vickers, Martin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela

Whately, Helen
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr Peter Bone and
Mr Philip Hollobone

Question accordingly negated.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I have now to announce the result of the deferred Division on the question relating to petroleum. The Ayes were 298 and the Noes were 261, so the Question was agreed to.

[The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.]

ARMED FORCES BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Ordered,

That the Order of 15 October 2015 (Armed Forces Bill (Programme)) be varied as follows:

(1) Paragraphs (4), (5) and (6) of the Order shall be omitted.

(2) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House on re-committal shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion, at today's sitting, three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this Order.

(3) Any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken in one day in accordance with the following provisions of this Order.

(4) Any proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after their commencement on that day.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Bill on that day.—(*Mark Lancaster.*)

Armed Forces Bill

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill on 18 November 2015, HC 618, and Proceedings of the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill on 24 November 2015.]

Considered in Committee

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

DURATION OF ARMED FORCES ACT 2006

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

3.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

The primary purpose of the Bill is to provide for the continuation in force of the Armed Forces Act 2006, which would otherwise expire at the end of 2016. Clause 1 provides for continuation of that Act for a year from the date on which the Bill receives Royal Assent. Thereafter it allows further renewal by Order in Council for up to a year at a time, but not beyond the end of 2021.

The 2006 Act provides nearly all the provisions for an armed forces system of command, discipline and justice. Crucially, it confers powers and sets out procedures to enforce the duty of members of the armed forces to obey lawful commands. The central effect of the expiry of the 2006 Act would be to end the powers and provisions to maintain the armed forces as disciplined bodies.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

I think this is my third Armed Forces Bill, and it is a minnow compared, for example, with the 2006 Act. However, it covers important issues that affect not only the operation of Her Majesty's armed forces, but the discipline needed to ensure their effectiveness. As the Minister has outlined, it is an important constitutional Bill because it reaffirms the need for a standing Army to protect the freedoms that we have all come to rely on in this country. I look forward to the progress of the Bill and of the amendments in my name.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The SNP fully supports the Bill. We appreciate the requirement that Parliament's consent is given to maintain an Army, as well as the significant contribution made by members of our armed forces. As such, one of the Bill's most important functions is to provide the legal basis for the armed forces to continue to exist as a disciplined force, and we must continue to develop and support our armed forces as they undertake their difficult jobs. We support progressive change such as that found in the amendment that calls for a review into compensation for veterans who are suffering from mesothelioma, and that on the publication of statistics on sexual assault and rape. We want robust legislation that is fit for our dedicated armed forces.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

COMMANDING OFFICER'S POWER TO REQUIRE PRELIMINARY ALCOHOL AND DRUGS TESTS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mark Lancaster: Currently, a commanding officer may require a member of the armed forces, or a civilian subject to service discipline, to co-operate with a preliminary test for drugs or alcohol on suspicion of a relevant offence. Clause 2 extends the circumstances in which a commanding officer may require co-operation with such a test. It provides for post-accident preliminary testing without the need for suspicion that the person to be tested may have committed an offence. The new powers to require co-operation with such tests apply only after accidents involving aircraft or ships, or after other serious accidents.

The powers will apply in the event of any maritime or aviation accident and other serious accidents that result in, or have created the risk of death, serious injury to any person, serious damage to any property, or serious environmental harm involving prescribed or other safety critical functions. The results of preliminary tests can be used in support of any type of investigation arising from the accident. The new powers are similar to those provided to the civilian police by the Railways and Transport Safety Act 2003 in relation to aviation and maritime accidents, and the Road Traffic Act 1998 in relation to road traffic accidents, but apply to a wider range of accidents.

Mr Kevan Jones: We support clause 2. As the Minister has outlined, it brings into line the legislation that covers our armed forces and gives commanding officers the tools to investigate accidents in which drugs or alcohol may have played a part.

Kirsten Oswald: It is appropriate to enable commanding officers to require testing for drugs and/or alcohol after incidents associated with personnel carrying out safety critical duties. We support the ability of the commanding officer to deal with these matters. It is for them to consider and to proceed with the most appropriate action in relation to the requirement for testing.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3

DUTY OF SERVICE POLICEMAN FOLLOWING INVESTIGATION

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Temporary Chair (Mr Peter Bone): With this it will be convenient to consider clauses 4 and 5.

Mark Lancaster: Clauses 3 to 5 relate to investigations and charging. They make a number of changes to provisions in part 5 of the 2006 Act, which deal with the process of deciding whether a person is to be charged with a service offence under that Act. The changes simplify the process. For example, currently some cases that cannot be dealt with by the commanding officer must none the less be referred by the investigating service police to the commanding officer and then from the CO to the Director of Service Prosecutions for a decision on the charge and prosecution.

Clause 3 provides that where the service police consider there is sufficient evidence to charge an offence that the commanding officer cannot try summarily, the case must be sent to the Service Prosecuting Authority for a decision on charging. The Director of Service Prosecutions is responsible for decisions on the charge and prosecution in all cases that cannot be dealt with by the commanding officer. However, currently some of those cases have to be referred by the investigating service police to the commanding officer, and then, as I have said, from the commanding officer to the Director of Service Prosecutions. This adds unnecessary delay and bureaucracy to the process, which the clause seeks to remove.

The other main change made by clause 3 intends to deal with the problem that the 2006 Act currently requires some cases to be sent to a commanding officer to deal with, although they are closely connected with a case that must be sent to the director—for example, where separate offences occurred during the same incident. This can result in separate decisions on whether to prosecute, and separate trials. Clause 3 amends the 2006 Act so that the service police will also be able to refer a case to the Director of Service Prosecutions if, after consultation with the director, they consider it appropriate to do so because of a connection with another case that has been referred to the director.

Clause 4 makes a minor technical clarification to the procedure for the referral of linked cases from the commanding officer to the Director of Service Prosecutions. Currently, if the commanding officer is required to transfer a linked case to the director, the transfer is deemed to take place. Under clause 4, the commanding officer will actually have to make the transfer.

Clause 5 provides for the Director of Service Prosecutions to bring charges himself. Currently, where the director decides that a charge should be brought in a case, he cannot bring the charge directly but must direct the suspect's commanding officer to bring the charge, and the commanding officer must then bring the charge.

The changes have the support of the Director of Service Prosecutions and the Judge Advocate General. No change is proposed to the circumstances in which the commanding officer is under duty to ensure that the service police are aware of an allegation.

The Temporary Chair: We are debating clauses 3, 4 and 5 together if any Member wants to speak on them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Bone, for clarifying the process. I have put this all together, if the Minister could just bear with me.

The Minister referred to investigation and charging in relation to clauses 3 to 5 and I want to ask a question about that. We see a simplification of the process relating to service personnel charged with offences. I assume the Minister is saying that that will be achieved by reducing the number of stages required for the decision to bring charges. Not only will the provision make it easier to bring charges where appropriate, and ensure discipline and order are maintained in our armed forces, it will streamline the process and reduce bureaucracy so that commanding officers are free to go about other duties essential to the smooth running of all aspects of our armed services. Will the Minister clarify the role of the commanding officer in an investigation?

[Jim Shannon]

If the Minister will bear with me, clause 2 related to alcohol and drugs. As we are talking about investigation, I want to comment on that. The new rules on drug and alcohol testing are similar, but not identical, to the provisions under the Railways and Transport Safety Act 2003. The 2003 Act provides for an alcohol and drug testing regime that is applicable to both the maritime and aviation environments, but the armed forces have Crown exemption. Will the Minister clarify this matter in relation to the new rules on drug and alcohol testing and investigations?

The Bill will remedy that and strengthen the approach to alcohol or drug misuse within the armed forces, as well as being more specific about what grounds justify a drug or alcohol test. It will make it easier for those in charge of an investigation to order a drug or alcohol test when needed, which can only make our armed forces safer and more secure, while simplifying the process to make it easier for commanding officers to secure a drug or alcohol test.

The new statutory framework for immunity from prosecution will give the Director of Service Prosecutions and service courts powers that may assist investigators and prosecutors in cases where it may otherwise be difficult to persuade service personnel to co-operate with the service police and to give evidence. The Minister will be aware of a specific case in Northern Ireland where investigations are ongoing. I believe the provisions are a positive development that will improve transparency across our armed forces and improve the security of individuals. Of course, this could be particularly important to Northern Ireland where there have been continuous attempts, through spurious allegations, to drag the names of former soldiers through the mud. We must never let the legitimate forces of law and order be equated with cold-blooded murderous terrorists. I hope that this aspect of the Bill can ensure that the brave service personnel who fought terrorism in Northern Ireland will never be dragged through the courts by those who terrorised our state, or by their sympathisers and supporters.

On investigation and prosecution in relation to this particular issue, what role will the Minister play? I am sure we are keen to put in place a transparent method of investigation and prosecution. There has to be protection for our brave service personnel. Where we can, we should give them immunity, but we must always give them our full and unreserved legal support and aid, should they need it.

I hope that was clear for the Minister. I have raised several issues about investigation that have to be addressed.

The Temporary Chair (Mr Peter Bone): As it is coming towards Christmas, we let the hon. Gentleman go back slightly to clause 2. [HON. MEMBERS: "And forward!"]. And forward, yes. But we have been moving rapidly, and he was seeking advice as he went.

Mr Kevan Jones: Thank you, Mr Bone. I will aim not to go backwards or forwards.

We support these common sense and proportionate clauses. As the 2006 Act beds in, they will improve the investigation and charging system by making it as efficient as possible.

3.30 pm

Mark Lancaster: Thank you, Mr Bone, for allowing me to go back, very briefly, to clause 2.

The new powers in clause 2 reflect the range of duties undertaken in the military environment—for example, diving, driving and commanding a mechanically propelled vehicle—not covered by road transport legislation. The use of firearms would not be covered either, and neither would other duties considered to be safety critical, such as running adventurous training. So there are some extra duties not covered by other legislation, which is why these provisions go slightly further.

On clause 3 and the question of whether we are effectively reducing the powers of the CO, the change to the procedure followed by the service police after an investigation relates only to cases where the CO does not have jurisdiction over the recommended charge. Such a case could still be referred back to the CO by the Director of Service Prosecutions if an alternative charge within his powers was considered appropriate. The uncertain power of the CO to wait and see and do nothing will be removed, but it is, in any event, vulnerable to attack, particularly given that it applies to serious cases in relation to which the service police have determined there is sufficient evidence to charge an individual with an offence that can be tried only by court martial. The change to the process of charging means that the DSP will have the power to bring a charge, whereas currently only the CO has the power, although he might be directed by the DSP to do it. I realise it sounds complicated, but actually it simplifies the process to avoid having to refer cases to the CO over which he has no power anyway. In more than 90% of cases, the CO will still be involved.

I am sure that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will remain in his place for the duration of the Committee, so I will deal with the other points he raised when we get to those clauses.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 3 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 4 and 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 6

PERIOD FOR WHICH SENTENCE OF SERVICE DETENTION
MAY BE SUSPENDED

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mark Lancaster: The clause increases from 12 to 24 months the maximum period for which the sentence of service detention may be suspended by a court martial. The civilian courts and courts martial can already suspend sentences of imprisonment for up to 24 months, but service detention is a unique military system offering greater rehabilitation arrangements. This measure would provide a court martial with greater flexibility in appropriate circumstances. Guidance on sentencing in a court martial sets out the relevant factors for the award of suspended sentences: whether the offender can retrieve his or her good name without undergoing a committed sentence—for example, if there has been a significant delay between the offence and trial, during which period the offender has performed

his or her duties well and effectively rehabilitated him or herself; whether the offender has shown genuine remorse and voluntarily made reparation for any damage caused; whether the offender is young and inexperienced and it is clear that the offence is an isolated occurrence; whether the offence does not involve serious violence or violence towards a superior officer; and whether the offender is required for more important operational duties.

Mr Kevan Jones: Again, I think these are sensible proposals that give courts martial the flexibility to award suspended sentences where appropriate. It is a tidying-up exercise in terms of the 2006 Act.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 6 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 7

IMMUNITY FROM PROSECUTION

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Temporary Chair (Mr Peter Bone): With this it will be convenient to discuss clauses 8 to 12 stand part.

Mark Lancaster: For the convenience of the Committee, I shall discuss together clauses 7 to 12, which deal with offenders assisting investigations. In overview, clauses 7 and 8 allow the Director of Service Prosecutions, in return for assistance provided by a person to an investigation or prosecution, to enter into an agreement with the person giving them immunity from prosecution or an undertaking that information will not be used against them in proceedings. Clauses 9 to 12 make provision with respect to reduced sentences for those who provide such assistance.

The provisions closely follow those in the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005, which apply to civilian prosecutors and courts. Under these provisions, an immunity notice or restricted use undertaking must be in writing and will normally include conditions, breach of which would lead to the immunity or undertaking being revoked.

The Director of Service Prosecutions will, as a matter of good practice, consult the Attorney General in relation to any offer of immunity. The DSP will engage with the Director of Public Prosecutions and devolved Administrations in the event of concurrent jurisdiction. Immunity notices and restricted use undertakings can be provided only if the DSP considers it appropriate in relation to the investigation or prosecution of a criminal conduct service offence, where the equivalent civilian offence is capable of being tried in the Crown Court, or a disciplinary offence, for which the maximum sentence is more than two years imprisonment.

Jim Shannon: I have one quick question for the Minister. He mentioned contacting the devolved Administrations, and I am wondering what credence is given to those Administrations in respect of decisions made by Ministers in the Ministry of Defence. In other words, if there is a disagreement between the devolved Administrations and the Ministry, which takes precedence?

John Howell (Henley) (Con): As a member of the Select Committee, let me add that when we looked into these provisions and interviewed the relevant official, I was impressed with two things. The first was the need to

refer to the Attorney General. The link between the DSP and the Attorney General is a good one. I have to say that I have forgotten what the second one was, but let the first point stand as the major point I wanted to make.

Mr Kevan Jones: With the assurance that the Attorney General will be consulted only in very rare cases—I am not sure that the provisions will need to be used on many occasions—we support the clauses, which bring service law into line with best practice in civilian law.

Mark Lancaster: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; it is anticipated that the provisions will be used only on very rare occasions and in the most serious cases. In response to the question asked by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the process has not yet been tried, but it is hoped that there will not be any conflict between the various jurisdictions. If I may, I shall write to the hon. Gentleman with further detail in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 7 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 8 to 12 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 13

AFA 2006: ISLE OF MAN AND BRITISH OVERSEAS TERRITORIES

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Temporary Chair (Mr Peter Bone): With this it will be convenient to consider the schedule to the Bill.

Mark Lancaster: The clause and schedule provide for the Armed Forces Act 2006, as it currently has effect in the United Kingdom, to come into force in the Isle of Man and the British overseas territories, except Gibraltar, although we are consulting the Government of Gibraltar about extending the provisions of the 2006 Act to that territory. I should make clear at this point that, as a matter of UK law, the 2006 Act will continue to apply to service personnel wherever in the world they are serving. We have consulted the Isle of Man and the British overseas territories, and they are content with our approach. We are discussing with Gibraltar whether it would be best to provide for the 2006 Act and the Bill to extend to it as well, and if Gibraltar considers that to be the case, we will introduce an amendment to that effect.

Jim Shannon: I welcome the Minister's commitment to ensuring that the 2006 Act will come into force in the Isle of Man and the British overseas territories, with the exception of Gibraltar, and that there will be the option of extending it to the Channel Islands. We too often forget those from the overseas territories and those who serve there. I am pleased to note that this is a truly British Bill which recognises our devoted armed services throughout the globe. This move is, I believe, long overdue.

I should like to ask the Minister two questions. First, will he give us some idea what is meant by "the option of extending it to the Channel Islands"? Secondly, is he able to give a commitment—I am not sure whether he is—that, as I hope sincerely to be the case, the exemption of Gibraltar is not due to any Spanish intrusion or interference? The sovereignty of Gibraltar is down to its

[Jim Shannon]

people, and we should firmly uphold their right to remain British, no matter what actions or words may come from Madrid.

Mr Kevan Jones: We support clause 13 and the accompanying schedule. It makes sense to extend the Act to the overseas territories.

May I ask the Minister what the timescale is for the negotiations with Gibraltar? I realise that the elections there may have interfered with the process. May I also ask what mechanism would operate if Gibraltar accepted that the legislation should extend to it? Would we have to wait for the next Armed Forces Bill to introduce any changes that were necessary?

Mark Lancaster: Let me deal first with the question of Gibraltar. I can tell the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that this has absolutely nothing to do with the Spanish. In 2005 Gibraltar received a new constitution, which gives it wider legislative responsibilities. As I have said, we are discussing with its Government whether it would be best to provide for that through the 2006 Act or through its own legislation.

As the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) said, there has been a delay. That is simply because, as the House knows, Gibraltar was holding elections, which have now ended. I am keen to conclude the matter with Gibraltar as quickly as possible, and, if it wished to be included in the provisions of the Bill, the intention would be to introduce amendments in the other place at that point.

On the wider impact, the fact that the 2006 Act has not been in force in the British overseas territories—including the Isle of Man—since 2011 has not, to our knowledge, created any difficulties. The rationale for extending the Act to those jurisdictions includes ensuring that actions that might be taken by members of our armed forces would be lawful there, not only as a matter of United Kingdom law but as a matter of their own law. For example, service police would have powers of arrest, entry and search in those jurisdictions as well. Equally, the civilian authorities in those jurisdictions can do things that they might not otherwise have powers to do under the law there. Including them in the Act gives them extra powers as well.

All in all, we feel, having consulted, that this is a positive step.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 13 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 14

POWERS OF MINISTRY OF DEFENCE FIRE-FIGHTERS IN AN EMERGENCY

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Temporary Chair (Mr Peter Bone): With this it will be convenient to discuss clause 15 stand part.

3.45 pm

Mark Lancaster: These clauses give MOD firefighters the same powers to act in emergencies as employees of civilian fire and rescue authorities. Those powers include powers to enter premises by force if necessary, to close

roads and to regulate traffic. Clause 14 also makes it an offence to obstruct an MOD firefighter who is acting in an emergency.

Clause 15 gives MOD firefighters the same exemptions from provisions in certain Acts—for example, rules on drivers' hours—as employees of fire and rescue authorities.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I ask the Minister for clarification? If an MOD firefighter is on a base and sees a farm, say, afire, can they go straight to that and deal with it, or do they have to wait for civilian firefighters to come, if it is off the base?

Mark Lancaster: I will come to that, but protocols are in place between MOD firefighters and local fire authorities and there have been occasions when MOD firefighters have supported local authority fire and rescue services. However, it is important that that is done in a combined and controlled way.

The Defence Fire Risk Management Organisation provides fire and rescue operational services and support across defence at airfields, specified domestic establishments and deployed locations in the UK and overseas. DFRMO falls outside the ambit of the primary legislation that governs local fire and rescue authorities in the UK. Contractors providing fire and rescue services for defence are also present at the Atomic Weapons Establishment, QinetiQ, Babcock and Serco. They operate at sites such as Aldermaston, Burghfield and Boscombe Down. DFRMO currently has 320 fire and rescue service contractors, out of a total strength of more than 2,000 personnel. Contractor firefighters, now and in future, should also be able to deal with an emergency in the same way as MOD firefighters. We are not aware of local fire and rescue authorities using or planning to use contractor firefighters. However, there are other private and specialised fire and rescue services at other sites such as ports and airports, power stations, industrial sites and some state properties.

The clauses constitute a simple, sensible change that gives MOD firefighters the same legal protections as their civilian counterparts.

Jim Shannon: The Minister referred to the legal protections that are provided. Is insurance protection provided as well? I am conscious that with firefighters' extra responsibilities come the possibility of someone being hurt as a result. I would like to check that point.

Kirsten Oswald: We appreciate the work of MOD and other firefighters. It is important that we have in mind some of the concerns that the Fire Brigades Union has raised about the potential unintended consequences of the Bill. It has concerns about the impact of deploying MOD firefighters at fires and other incidents normally dealt with by local authority firefighters. However, there is clearly a need to deal with the issue that is at hand today and to streamline things. That is dealt with by the clause. We agree that it is important that we take the action suggested to close this loophole, as the clause does.

Mr Kevan Jones: Again, this is a practical and sensible measure that closes a loophole that exists at present. Again, I pay tribute to MOD firefighters for the job that they do. I hope that these changes will ensure that they have the full protection of the law.

Mark Lancaster: Simply to answer the question from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), we will of course ensure that all our firefighters have appropriate protection.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 14 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 15 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 16

MEANING OF "AFA 2006"

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Temporary Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clause 17 stand part.

Clause 18 stand part.

Government amendment 1.

Clause 19 stand part.

Clause 20 stand part.

Government new clause 1—*War pensions committees and armed and reserve forces compensation schemes.*

Government amendment 2.

Mark Lancaster: I am delighted to be able to speak to these amendments today. New clause 1 acknowledges the importance that the Government place on the work of the veterans advisory and pensions committees in supporting our armed forces community. The new clause would amend section 25 of the Social Security Act 1989 to allow the Secretary of State to make regulations enabling the VAPCs to provide advice and deal with complaints in relation to the armed forces compensation scheme 2005 and future compensation schemes enacted under the Armed Forces (Pensions and Compensation) Act 2004.

The VAPCs already have certain functions and procedures, as described in section 25 of the 1989 Act and the war pensions committees regulations. This amendment would expand that remit, providing a legislative basis to underpin their broader role and functions. I should, however, say a bit more about the committees.

The committees were first established as the war pensions committees in 1921. Generally, we now refer to them as the veterans advisory and pensions committees. There are 13 such committees whose members I, as Minister responsible for defence personnel and veterans, appoint. There are about 223 members, all unpaid volunteers working within their regional committees to help ex-service personnel and their families, in particular those who are vulnerable. In exercising their statutory functions, the committees carry out a range of activities principally in relation to the war pensions scheme which until 2005 was the main scheme for payment of compensation to members of the armed forces and their spouses and dependants for injuries or death caused by service. These functions include providing local consultation with the MOD on issues concerning war pensioners and war widows or widowers; raising awareness of the war pensions scheme and the veterans welfare service; supporting and monitoring the work of the veterans welfare scheme to ensure the best possible

service to war pensioners and war widows and widowers; and helping individuals in representing their difficulties or in making a complaint in relation to the war pensions or war widowers application or review process.

However, there are new armed forces compensation schemes that were not in existence when section 25 was enacted. These include the armed forces compensation scheme and further compensation schemes that have been enacted under the 2004 Act. The new clause, with its proposed amendment to section 25 of the 1989 Act, will enable the committees to be given comparable functions relating to those new schemes too. We want the good work of these committees to continue, helping to enhance the local services delivered by ex-service personnel and their families, giving local support in promoting the armed forces covenant and the development of local community covenants, providing independent opinion on policy changes that may affect veterans, and championing individual cases. New clause 1 proposed by the Government today is for the benefit of our veterans and their families, who deserve the best.

While discussing this new clause, I should also mention amendments 1 and 2, because they make small changes that are consequential to the new clause. Amendment 1 provides that the new clause does not extend to the Isle of Man or the British overseas territories. Section 25 of the 1989 Act, which would be amended by the new clause, extends only to England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and this will remain the case. Amendment 2 simply changes the long title of this Bill to include reference to the new provisions for the war pensions committees. These amendments would give the VAPCs, as the war pensions committees are known now, a statutory basis to continue their good work. With the consent of Parliament, our intention would be to make regulations to set out their new statutory functions at the earliest opportunity.

Kirsten Oswald: We welcome all progress in supporting our military veterans, and we are supportive of this measure and how it moves things forward. It is important that we do all we can to uphold our obligations under the military covenant and to consider how we can continually facilitate the development of services for our ex-service personnel and their families.

John Howell: I do not want to intervene on the substance of this debate, but since this is the last grouping of such amendments, it is appropriate to offer my appreciation—I am sure the Minister would agree with me on this—to my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), who chaired the Select Committee that looked at this Bill in an excellent fashion. The Select Committee showed a tremendous degree of cross-party agreement on the Bill, and I thank the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for his involvement. The Bill is a direct result of that process.

Jim Shannon: I commend the comments that the Minister has made on this subject. I am keen to see the full implementation of the military covenant and the council community covenants across the whole of Northern Ireland, from county to county and council to council, with everyone getting involved. I am also keen to hear the Minister's ideas on how to ensure that that happens in its totality in Northern Ireland.

Mr Kevan Jones: I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) about the work of the Chair of the Committee.

The new clauses contain sensible proposals. When I was a Minister, I had the pleasure of meeting many of the individuals involved in the war pensions committees, and the Minister is quite right to pay tribute to the work that they do. They do not get paid for it, but they are committed to ensuring that the veterans get advice and, on occasions, to highlighting issues that might not have been relevant when legislation was being passed but that came to light afterwards, and ensuring that practical action is taken. They provide an important mechanism for supporting veterans. Perhaps I should not say this, but I am sure that the Minister is already aware that many of them have already given advice on other compensation schemes, so it is sensible to make what they are doing legal, in effect. We will be supporting the new clause.

Mark Lancaster: The hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) is right, as he so often is. I am well aware that those people are already offering advice, but it would not be for me to condone from the Dispatch Box any activity that was technically illegal in any shape or form. However, they do fantastic work.

I also echo the comments of other hon. Members who have thanked my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopreski) for his chairmanship of the Committee. We have not quite reached the end of these discussions, however, and I would not want to take it for granted that consensus is breaking out just yet. We still have a few more new clauses and amendments to go, but I hope that we will continue in the vein in which we have started.

In response to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), of course we want to see the military covenant progressed in Northern Ireland in the best possible way. Major progress has been made in recent months, not least when the first two local authorities signed the community covenant. I am looking forward to going to Northern Ireland shortly to do what I can to promote the covenant in the Province. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree that these provisions are a major step in the right direction.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 16 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 17 and 18 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 19

EXTENT IN THE CHANNEL ISLANDS, ISLE OF MAN AND
BRITISH OVERSEAS TERRITORIES

Amendment made: 1, page 17, line 1, after “5(3),” insert—

“(War pensions committees and armed and reserve forces compensation schemes).” —(Mark Lancaster.)

This amendment provides that NC1 does not extend to the Isle of Man or the British overseas territories. Like section 25 of the Social Security Act 1989, NC1 is to extend to England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (see clause 18).

Clause 19, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 20 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 1

WAR PENSIONS COMMITTEES AND ARMED AND RESERVE
FORCES COMPENSATION SCHEMES

“(1) Section 25 of the Social Security Act 1989 (establishment and functions of war pensions committees) is amended as follows.

(2) After subsection (1) insert—

“(1A) The regulations may give the committees functions relating to one or more of the following—

- (a) war pensions;
- (b) war pensioners;
- (c) AFCS benefits;
- (d) AFCS benefit recipients.”

(3) In subsection (2)—

- (a) omit the words from the beginning to the second “and”,
- (b) for “it shall be their function” substitute “it is a function of a committee”,
- (c) in paragraph (a), for “connected with war pensions or affecting war pensioners in their area and, where they think” substitute “connected with war pensions or AFCS benefits or affecting people in its area who are war pensioners or AFCS benefit recipients and, where it thinks”,
- (d) in paragraph (b), for “to them by persons receiving or claiming war pensions and, if they think” substitute “to it by people receiving or claiming war pensions or AFCS benefits and, if it thinks”,
- (e) in paragraph (c)—
 - (i) for “them” substitute “it”, and
 - (ii) for “they” substitute “it”, and
- (f) in paragraph (d), for “war pensioners in their area” substitute “people in its area who are war pensioners or AFCS benefit recipients”.

(4) After subsection (3) insert—

“(3A) The regulations may provide for the committees to have names specified in the regulations (as well as being known as war pensions committees).”

(5) In subsection (4), before the definition of “war pension” insert—

““AFCS benefit” means a benefit payable under an armed and reserve forces compensation scheme established by order under section 1(2) of the Armed Forces (Pensions and Compensation) Act 2004;

“AFCS benefit recipient” means a person in receipt of an AFCS benefit, in the person’s capacity as such;.” —(Mark Lancaster.)

War pensions committees established under section 25 of the Social Security Act 1989 may be given functions by the Secretary of State by regulations. This new clause provides that the functions include functions relating to armed and reserve forces compensation schemes established under the Armed Forces (Pensions and Compensation) Act 2004.

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 2

VOLUNTARY DISCHARGE OF UNDER-18S

“(1) The Armed Forces Act 2006 (c. 52) is amended as follows.

(2) In section 329 (Terms and conditions of enlistment and service), after subsection (3) there is inserted—

“(3A) The regulations shall make provision that any person under the age of 18 shall be entitled to end their service with a regular force by giving not less than 14 days’ notice in writing to their commanding officer, and shall ensure that any person enlisting under the age of 18 is informed of this right when they enlist.” —(Liz Saville Roberts.)

This amendment ensures that those under 18 years of age are to discharge themselves from the Armed Forces should they so wish.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Liz Saville Roberts (Gwynfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I beg to move, that the clause be read a Second time.

The Temporary Chair (Mr Peter Bone): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 3—*Enlistment of minors*—

‘(1) The Armed Forces Act 2006 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 328(2) (c) (Enlistment) the words “without the consent of prescribed persons” are omitted.”

This amendment ensures that only those above 18 years of age are able to enlist in the Armed Forces.

Liz Saville Roberts: I rise to speak to new clauses 2 and 3, which stand in my name and those of several hon. Members from various parties across the House. First, I wish to say that these are probing provisions and I do not intend to press them to a Division. Although the Bill does not contain provisions on the recruitment age, it is entirely appropriate that we consider this important issue within the context of this Bill. I should state at the outset that I am a great supporter of the work that the women and men who serve in the armed forces do daily, and that their honour and sacrifice knows no bounds; they are a credit to the communities they serve. Before turning to the new clauses, I would like to put on record my respect for the sterling work they do.

4 pm

What I am concerned about, as are others from across the House, given the signatories to the new clauses, is the UK’s continued policy of recruiting children to the armed forces. As politicians, we have a duty of care to those we ask to serve on our behalf. The UK is one of only 19 countries in the world that recruit minors to the armed forces. It is the only member of the UN Security Council, the only member of NATO and the only European country that recruits children, and the policy needs to be changed to bring the UK into the modern world. I note that, to the UK Government’s great shame, even countries such as Zimbabwe, Iran and North Korea do not enlist minors.

While we are rightly saddened and repulsed by examples of child soldier recruitment in far-flung countries, some of which have experienced decades of civil war and economic turmoil and strife, we often forget that the UK’s whistle is not entirely clean when we inspect to see whether our own house is in order.

I am grateful to predecessors in all parts of the House who have campaigned on this issue down the years, seeking to get successive Governments of all colours to change policy on the recruitment of minors. Those with a keen eye and knowledge of this matter will probably recognise that these new clauses are not all that new and have been tabled before under various guises down the years. I am grateful to Members of the House past and present who have pressed this matter in years gone by, and I acknowledge their efforts. This a matter of a wren rising from the wings of eagles.

I am aware that recruits under the age of 18 are not required to fight in active combat roles. There may well be an argument in favour of allowing those with a

calling—a vocation—to serve in the armed forces where they do not possess the drive or desire to pursue an otherwise academic route, or have a vocational route into other employment. For them, joining the armed forces provides focus and allows them a route to fulfilment. I am not opposed to children of 16 and 17 years of age being able to demonstrate their interest in the armed forces, or to their joining groups that can help them prepare for a career in the armed forces if that is what they wish to do upon reaching adulthood and the age of consent. What I am opposed to is the recruitment of minors into the armed forces, and the potential for such young people to make binding commitments at an unacceptably early age. I believe the Government should end this anomaly, live up to the standards they claim to demand from others and end the recruitment of minors.

At the very least—this is the thinking behind new clause 2—those under the age of 18 should be freely able to discharge themselves from duty should they so wish and not have to give three months’ notice, during which time they may very well be pressurised to change their minds. Three months is too long a period to have to wait having made that decision. They should also be robustly informed of the right to withdraw with a shorter period of notice—14 days—when they enlist.

The “Duty of Care” report emphasises that the youngest recruits, particularly those under the age of 18, who are legally children, were the ones who presented greatest concern in relation to duty of care. The report’s recommendation for a review has since been followed by a number of similar calls from national and international bodies. In 2008, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child asked that the UK

“Reconsider its active policy of recruitment of children into the armed forces”.

It also recommended that the Government ensure that recruitment

“Does not occur in a manner which specifically targets ethnic minorities and children of low-income families,”

and that

“Parents are included from the outset and during the entire process of recruitment and enlistment.”

This policy has been called into question by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and many other respected bodies, including children’s commissioners.

The welfare of young recruits has been in sharp focus since the tragic events at Deepcut barracks, which is in the news again with the announcement of the inquest early next year. Indeed, it is hard to believe that a decade has passed since those tragic events, yet the Government have still not implemented the recommendations of the Defence Committee’s crucial “Duty of Care” report, which recommended that the MOD examine the potential impact of raising to 18 the recruitment age for all three services, and ensure that those under 18 do not undertake armed guard duty. It also recommended a review of material, setting out rights, responsibilities and the nature of commitment in the sort of language that potential recruits will understand.

All four deaths at Deepcut involved a young recruit on guard duty, and two were just 17, yet the practice of under-18s taking part in armed guard duty continues to this day, despite the “Duty of Care” report. The MOD is prioritising operational effectiveness over the rights

and welfare of young people in its care. It is high time that the UK moved into line and adhered to international norms on the military recruitment age.

It is also a matter of concern that the youngest recruits are most likely to be enlisted into roles that, when they do come of age, are potentially the most dangerous. I understand that that is particularly true of the infantry, which is concerned about bringing in more recruits. Young people will find themselves committed to a particularly dangerous role at an early age.

I have deep concerns about the armed forces and, as I have said, about the infantry's recruitment practices of targeting schools while masquerading as educational visits, as well as frequenting poorer areas where other economic opportunities are fewer compared with those in wealthier areas. That is particularly true in areas of Wales and in my own constituency. However, those are matters for another time.

Mark Lancaster: Has the hon. Lady visited the Army Foundation College at Harrogate? If not, may I invite her to do so?

Liz Saville Roberts: I have not visited the college, but I would be delighted to do so. My background is in further education, and I have taught public services courses where boys and girls—young men and young women—were actively targeted, so I have some experience in this matter.

As I have just said, the matters that I have just raised are perhaps for another time. Today, we are concerned with the specific need to change the law, so that recruitment in the armed forces is in line with international and developed world standards and norms. I urge the Government to consider the proposed new clauses. If they are not minded to accept them, perhaps they can bring forward their own proposals.

Jim Shannon: I rise to endorse the status quo. I am sorry that I cannot agree with the new clauses proposed by the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), for whom I have the greatest respect.

Training starts at an early age. It starts with the cadets for a great many of our young boys and girls who go on, in the greater spectrum of life, to become the men and women in uniform. That introduction and early training at cadet level gives young people a chance to show their potential and an interest in the armed forces. It also enables them to go further with the training if that is what they wish to do. I am keen to see that training encouraged and retained. I am also conscious, as I know the Minister is, of the fact that a level of training needs to be achieved before a person reaches the age of 18. If we can start from the age of 15 or 16, or even earlier, we will have young soldiers—male and female—equipped and trained to the highest standard and with the necessary experience. With great respect, I feel that what we have at present is perfectly acceptable.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) spoke eloquently and sincerely, but I am afraid that I disagree with her. Many young men and women in my constituency, St Helens North, join the armed forces for the benefits of a constructive education, training and employment, and for those young adults serving their country drives social mobility.

Recruitment at 16 is fully compliant with the UN convention on the rights of the child. As the hon. Lady recognised, soldiers are not deployed until they reach the age of 18.

I caution against the use of the word “children” and particularly the term “child soldier”, which is not only incorrect but somewhat offensive. Indeed, it belittles the trauma and plight of those children across the world who are forced into war and soldiery. For all those reasons, I am afraid that, despite the hon. Lady's forceful argument, I cannot support new clauses 2 or 3.

Kirsten Oswald: The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) makes her points regarding service personnel aged under 18 well. However, my hon. Friends and I think it important that young people have the opportunity to have as many career options and life choices as possible at that stage in their lives.

I echo the hon. Lady's words when she said that it is our responsibility to remember the duty of care for service personnel young and old. In particular, we have a duty of care for younger members of our armed forces. We do not support the new clause, which would prohibit those who are under 18 from joining the armed services, and we note that they are not deployed at that age.

Young people who join the armed services have the opportunity to change career paths, and it does not seem unreasonable for them to do so by giving less notice, so we support the hon. Lady's suggestion of their having additional opportunities to change their career paths if they so wish after a short period of notice.

Mr Kevan Jones: The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) rightly raises recruitment to the armed forces at 16, and, as she says, this is not the first time that the issue has been addressed. It was discussed when I served on the Committee that considered the Armed Forces Act 2006. Like my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), I think that it does us no service trying to draw an analogy between the recruitment of youngsters in the UK at 16 and those who are forced to join up to fight in wars, for example, in west Africa and other parts of the world. The contrast could not be starker, and, as my hon. Friend said, it does no good to our cause of trying to eradicate the practices that take place in other parts of the world.

Youngsters recruited from the age of 16 cannot be deployed until they are 18, and the activities that those individuals undertake are a force for good. I have visited Harrogate, and one of my most inspiring days as a Minister was spent at HMS Raleigh, taking a passing out parade. When talking to the individuals who had completed their basic training there, the changes that had taken place were clear, as was not only their pride but that of their families who attended the event. Some of the parents told me afterwards that the changes that they saw in the short time—10 weeks—that those individuals had been in the Navy was nothing short of remarkable.

On the tragic circumstances at Deepcut, I served on the Defence Committee, along with you, Mr Crausby, when we did a major investigation into the duty of care.

Not only the last Government but this Government are committed to the changes proposed not only in the Select Committee report but in that of Mr Nicholas Blake QC on the tragic events at Deepcut. Is it right to say that there were problems? Yes, there were problems, and we referred to them in our report. Many of them have been addressed, including guard duty, which was used to occupy people's time between phase 1 and phase 2 training.

The work that all three services do with the individuals who join up at 16 is certainly important. All three services do remarkable work correcting the problems that some of those individuals have had in the education system. Work such as that done at Harrogate and Catterick with Darlington college, for example, to try to raise literacy rates is not only helpful to the individual, but remarkably successful.

4.15 pm

I see no problem with the recruitment of young people at 16. The involvement of parents has been mentioned. As far as I am aware, they are fully involved in the process before people agree to join the armed forces, and their involvement is ongoing. All three services work closely with parents and guardians. One aspect that we covered in the report by the Defence Committee was the case of young people coming out of care and joining the armed forces. I know that the MOD has put in place clear protocols for dealing with individuals in that situation.

An issue that requires attention, which I struggled with and which I think the Minister will struggle with as well, is early service leavers—people who leave not after basic training, but shortly after joining the armed forces. Such cases raise difficult questions about how the armed forces can help those young people in their transition back to civilian life, and how civilian life can address some of the problems that those young people have, not necessarily as a result of their career in the armed forces, but deep-seated problems that were present before they joined.

Anyone who meets recruits at our basic training facilities cannot fail to be impressed by the transformation of those individuals. We sometimes concentrate on the negative aspects of being a member of our armed forces. I have always been proud to say that in most cases being a member of the armed forces is life changing for those individuals, and has a positive impact on their career choices, their lives in the armed forces and subsequently, when they leave and become Ministers, like the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster).

Mark Lancaster: I am delighted to be joined by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice who, I hear, joined the Army at the age of 16 years and two days—[*Interruption.*] A long time ago, yes.

I recognise that there are a variety of views across the Committee and I am grateful to be able to debate the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). The MOD sees junior entry as offering a range of benefits to the individual, the armed forces and society, providing a valuable vocational training opportunity for those wishing to follow a career in the armed forces. We take our duty of care for

entrants under 18 extremely seriously. Close attention has been given to this subject in recent years, especially after the tragic deaths at Deepcut. We have robust, effective and independently verified safeguards in place to ensure that under-18s are cared for properly.

The provision of education and training for 16-year-old school leavers provides a route into the armed forces that complies with Government education policy and provides a significant foundation for emotional, physical and educational development throughout an individual's career. There is no compulsory recruitment into the armed forces. Our recruiting policy is absolutely clear. No one under the age of 18 can join the armed forces without formal parental consent, which is checked twice during the application process. In addition, parents and guardians are positively encouraged to be engaged with the recruiting staff during the process.

Service personnel under the age of 18 are not deployed on any operation outside the UK except where the operation does not involve personnel becoming engaged in, or exposed to, hostilities. In July 2015, the High Court dismissed a judicial review brought by the organisation Child Soldiers International, alleging that the enlistment of Army recruits aged 16 to 18 was in conflict with the equal treatment directive. All service personnel have a statutory right to claim discharge up to their 18th birthday, and the right of discharge is made clear to all service personnel on joining the armed forces. There is a long-standing legal right of all new recruits, regardless of age, to discharge within their first three to six months, depending on their service, if they decide that the armed forces is not a career for them.

Under armed forces regulations, everyone under the age of 18 serving in the armed forces has a further right to claim discharge up to their 18th birthday. For the first six months of service, this is achieved by giving not less than 14 days' notice in writing to their commanding officer after an initial period of 28 days' service. At any other time after six months' service, those under the age of 18 who wish to leave must give notice in writing to their commanding officer, who must then discharge the under-18 within the next three months. For those who give notice just prior to their 18th birthday, this means that the latest they will be discharged is at 18 years and three months of age. These three months represent a cooling-off period to avoid the unintended consequence of a decision made in the heat of the moment. A shorter period may well be agreed with the commanding officer, but three months provides the under-18 with a period of due reflection and the right to rescind their request for discharge. This process ensures that individuals under the age of 18 have an appropriate period of time to consider their decision to leave, and offers flexibility depending on individual circumstances. Ultimately, all service personnel under the age of 18 have a statutory right to leave the armed forces up until their 18th birthday.

All recruits aged under age 18 receive key skills education in literacy and numeracy, should they need it, and all are enrolled on to apprenticeships. The armed forces remain the UK's largest apprenticeship provider, equipping young people with valuable and transferable skills for life. Over 95% of all recruits, no matter what their age or prior qualifications, enrol in an apprenticeship each year. The armed forces offer courses in a wide range of skills, such as engineering, information and communications technology, construction, driving, and

[Mark Lancaster]

animal care. Ofsted regularly inspects our care of newly joined young recruits, and we are very proud of the standards we achieve. We welcome this specialist confirmation that we treat our young recruits well. In the Select Committee, the Chief of the General Staff, Sir Nick Carter, described the process of recruiting young people, treating them in the right way, and providing them with new opportunities as “incredibly positive”. I take pride in the fact that our armed forces provide challenging and constructive education, training and employment opportunities for young people while in service.

I take on board the point made by the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), and agree with him, about his concerns for early leavers. I am focusing on that area, and I am delighted that it is addressed by the new career transition partnership that was introduced on 1 October.

Liz Saville Roberts: I thank everybody who has taken part in the debate. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 5

REQUIREMENT TO PUBLISH STATISTICS ON SEXUAL ASSAULT AND RAPE

“(1) Each service police force must collect and publish annually anonymised statistics on the number of allegations of sexual assault and rape made by and against members of the armed forces.

(2) The Director of Service Prosecutions must collect and publish annually anonymised statistics on the number of cases involving allegations of sexual assault and rape made by and against members of the armed forces, including but not necessarily limited to—

- (a) the number of cases referred from the service police forces;
- (b) how many of these cases were prosecuted; and
- (c) how many convictions were secured.”—(Mr Kevan Jones.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr Kevan Jones: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Temporary Chair (Mr David Crausby): With this it will be convenient to discuss new clause 6—*Removal of Commanding Officer’s discretion to investigate allegations of sexual assault*—

“(1) Schedule 2 of the Armed Forces Act 2006 [Schedule 2 offences] is amended as follows.

(2) In sub-paragraph (12)(at), leave out “3, 66, 67 or”

New clause 7—*Civilian investigations and prosecutions relating to murder, sexual assault, and rape*—

“(1) The Armed Forces Act 2006 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 118 [Duty of service policeman to notify CO of referral to DSP] insert—

“118A Civilian investigations and prosecutions relating to murder, sexual assault, and rape

(1) Criminal investigations into allegations of murder, sexual assault, and rape by and against members of the Armed Forces shall be undertaken by the relevant civilian police authorities.

(2) Criminal prosecutions of charges involving murder, sexual assault, and rape by and against members of the Armed Forces shall be undertaken by the Crown Prosecution Service.”

Mr Jones: It gives me great pleasure to speak to new clauses 5, 6 and 7. I apologise to members of the Select Committee who are here, because they have heard many of these issues discussed before. In the replies that we got in Committee, undertakings were given that some of those issues would be looked at. These are mainly probing amendments, but I will wait to see what the Minister brings forward.

New clause 5 is about the service police gathering statistics on serious sexual assaults and rapes. For the civilian police, there is no statutory obligation to do this, but it is now best practice, and individuals are able to look at trends in different police forces. In Committee, we were told by the hon. Member for Keighley (Kris Hopkins) that the service police already collect such statistics and that they can be obtained through the use of parliamentary questions or freedom of information requests.

I give credit both to the Ministry of Defence and to General Sir Nick Carter, who gave evidence to the Select Committee. I think he is genuinely committed to changing attitudes in the Army, to ensure not only openness and transparency, but, as he has outlined in his introductory leadership guide, zero tolerance of anyone who steps outside of the law. He has also been commended for his efforts not only to recruit more women to the Army, but to ensure that they progress through the armed forces to more senior positions.

Evidence in the 2005 report shows that 39% of servicewomen questioned said that they had faced harassment, and that cannot be right. It also notes that 33% said that they had faced unwelcome attempts to talk about sexual matters or had felt uncomfortable in some conversations. Why is it important to publish such statistics? Clearly, they have already been collated. I know that the Ministry of Defence moves at a snail’s pace and occasionally needs a push to come up with best practice, but I cannot see any reason why the statistics should not be produced annually, given that they are already available. Doing so would enable us to look at trends—that has been important in civilian police forces—and at whether the initiatives to bear down on unacceptable behaviour in all three services are actually having an effect.

Members should not have to ask a parliamentary question or have to make a freedom of information request in order to get that information. I cannot for the life of me understand the reluctance towards making it available, apart from the usual conservatism—with a small “c”—and snail’s pace of the Ministry of Defence. Let us be honest: if the statistics are published annually, I assure anyone who is watching that the sky will not fall in. I think it would send a proper and clear message. It is important that what General Carter and others are saying about advancing and promoting women, and about bearing down on unacceptable behaviour, is scrutinised properly.

New clause 6 relates to the commanding officer, who is in the unique position of being able to decide whether an allegation of sexual assault should be referred to the military police or to the civil police for investigation. The Select Committee had a long discussion about this

issue and I certainly feel that it puts a commanding officer in the position of making judgments when he or she might not be in full cognisance of the facts, so a referral to the police would be a better approach. However, General Carter indicated to the Select Committee that commanding officers are recommended to take legal advice before deciding how to deal with such cases. One way to reach a compromise would be to codify an obligation on commanding officers to take legal advice in all instances before taking such a decision.

4.30 pm

New clause 7 deals with the serious issues not only of violent crime, but of rape. I tabled the new clause to raise the question of whether the military police have the capacity or expertise to deal with serious rape or murder cases. I accept what the Minister said in the Select Committee about the great advances made in training and support for the military police, as well as the techniques available. There has been some movement on things that are done as a matter of course by the civilian police.

We discussed the matter in the Select Committee, but I repeat that some of the cases, especially rape cases, are complex. Civilian forces have developed techniques, such as the use of rape suites for victims. The volume of cases dealt with by civilian forces means that they are more capable not only of supporting victims when they come forward, but of investigating such serious sexual assaults or rape. Thankfully, the number of instances dealt with in the armed forces is low. The Metropolitan police and other large forces clearly deal with a large number of cases, and they have both expertise and officers who have dealt with different types of sexual assault and rape. Such individuals or police forces would be better placed to ensure that a victim in the military received the same high standards and support that we would expect for the victims of such crimes in civilian life.

Jim Shannon: I wish to ask a question about new clause 7. I agree with the shadow Minister, who has very carefully and cautiously outlined the issues. In the past, there have been examples of women who have been abused and raped, which has led to suicide, trauma or depression. These are very important matters. Will the Minister confirm that, as part of an investigation within the existing process, an investigating officer has the power to call any soldiers whatever, male or female, who may have been present when something took place, and that none of them can say, "No, we won't do that"? I want to make sure that there is a full investigation, and that the person assaulted is given the necessary protection.

Kirsten Oswald: It is vital that all matters relating to allegations of or concerns about serious and complex crimes, including sexual assault, rape and murder, are handled with the utmost seriousness, so it is important that such cases are dealt with by the appropriate authorities and with the benefit of the best legal advice. Commanding officers in our armed forces are men and women of skill, professionalism, grit and integrity, but it may simply not be fair to expect them to possess the same level of specialist investigatory skills as those with a professional background in such skills. We would not expect that of any other group. If the victims and

alleged perpetrators are dealt with by specialist authorities, everyone will be aware that such matters are handled, as we would all hope, with the appropriate structure, uniformity of approach, transparency and professional best practice.

The maintenance and publication of statistics on sexual assault and rape are key. It is simply not possible or desirable to make assumptions about the level or severity of allegations, prosecutions or convictions. We can only know such details via robust, consistently formatted and regularly produced statistics that are put in the public domain. We would wish to see improvements in the 2017 survey relating to sexual harassment, compared with 2014.

Releasing such statistics is part of our duty of care towards service personnel. It was interesting and heartening to hear in the Select Committee that some of that happens anyway, but it is not approached in a uniform or consistent manner across all services. Without a uniform approach that has the same definitions, frameworks and publication dates, we cannot reasonably keep this matter under review, which we absolutely should do to ensure that we continue to work towards transparency, clarity and improvement for the benefit of all service personnel.

Mark Lancaster: I am pleased that the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) has returned to these proposals and I welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters before the Committee.

Allegations of sexual assault and rape should never be treated lightly. It is important to us that members of the armed forces are treated well and that we foster an environment in which people have confidence that unacceptable behaviour is not tolerated and that allegations of such behaviour are dealt with. It is important that we are active in driving that forward.

The hon. Member for North Durham is right to raise the publication of statistics. During the Select Committee consideration of the Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Kris Hopkins) set out the current arrangements in the service justice system for the collection and publication of crime statistics. I will repeat them for the benefit of the Committee.

The service police crime bureau keeps records for all three services of allegations of rape and sexual assault that are made to the service police. That information is released regularly in response to parliamentary questions and freedom of information requests. In the case of the latter, the information is uploaded to the MOD's online publication scheme, where it can be freely accessed. Let me be clear that I want to explore how we can be more proactive in releasing this information.

The service police crime bureau has been liaising with the Home Office police forces to analyse crime recording practices and rules to identify methods of improving crime recording. As a result, the bureau is working to establish a post of crime registrar, similar to that found in all other police forces, with a remit to scrutinise and audit the recording of crimes on the service police investigation management system. That will lead to further improvements.

The Service Prosecuting Authority records, for each year, the number of cases referred to it, the number of cases in which charges are preferred and the number of cases in which a conviction is secured. The Military

[*Mark Lancaster*]

Court Service publishes on the internet, on a regular basis, details of every case that is heard at the court martial, including offences, outcomes and punishments. There is, therefore, a clear picture of the extent of this type of offending within the services, giving a strong indication of the proportion of cases referred from the service police to the Service Prosecuting Authority that were prosecuted and of the conviction rate in such cases.

As General Sir Nick Carter, the Chief of the General Staff, said when giving evidence to the Select Committee on the Bill:

“In terms of publishing facts, figures and statistics, I am very solidly behind trying to do that.”

He said that the legislation goes far enough at the moment, but that we must do more, and I agree. Although I am not convinced that it is necessary or appropriate to set out requirements in legislation for the publication of such data, I am determined to make the data that we publish robust, consistent and accessible. To that end, I am actively considering how best to publish the data as an official statistic.

Turning to new clause 6 on the commanding officer's discretion to investigate, I reassure the Committee that the armed forces already have procedures in place to ensure that allegations of sexual assault are handled appropriately. The commanding officer's duties in that respect are clear. The starting point is that if a commanding officer becomes aware of an allegation or evidence that would indicate to a reasonable person that a service offence may have been committed by someone under his command, he must ensure that it is investigated “appropriately”. That is a specific statutory duty under the Armed Forces Act 2006. The commanding officer must therefore refer the matter to the service police if it would be appropriate.

The service police can, and do, act on their own initiative, even if a commanding officer does not think it appropriate to ensure that they are aware of the case. For example, the service police could be approached by a victim or a witness, they could come across an offence while patrolling, or the civilian police could become involved and pass them the case.

Almost all of the large number of sexual offences under part 1 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, including rape and assault by penetration, are already schedule 2 offences. If a commanding officer becomes aware of an allegation, or of evidence that would indicate to a reasonable person that one of those offences may have been committed by someone under his command, he must report that to the service police. We must consider whether a commanding officer should have any discretion over whether to report an allegation of sexual assault, exposure or voyeurism to the service police, in circumstances where a victim or witness does not report the matter to the service or civilian police, and when the service police are not otherwise aware of it.

Importantly, before a commanding officer takes command, he receives training in how to exercise his powers under the Act, and he has access to legal advice 24 hours a day, seven days a week. As the Chief of the General Staff, Sir Nick Carter, made clear, there is a specific requirement in the manual of service law that a commanding officer is to take legal advice when sexual

assault, voyeurism or exposure have been alleged. The manual has been amended to make specific mention of those offences in the section on “deciding how to investigate”, and it states that there should be a presumption that the commanding officer will normally ensure that the service police are aware of an allegation of such an offence.

Crucially, although it will rarely be appropriate for the commanding officer not to refer an allegation of sexual assault to the service police, the offence is so wide that I consider it right for the commanding officer to have some discretion, taking into account the wishes of the victim. I fear that an unintended consequence of the new clause may be to discourage some victims from coming forward, since the matter of reporting to the police will be taken out of their hands. The victim, of course, retains the ability to report directly to the service police. I believe that there is already a robust framework and that it is not necessary to impose on commanding officers a statutory duty—which does not apply to any other employer—to refer every allegation of sexual assault and the other offences covered by the new clause to the service police, regardless of what the victim may want.

New clause 7 deals with civilian investigations into serious offences, and would require all investigations into allegations of murder, rape and sexual assault by and against service personnel to be undertaken by the civilian police, and all prosecutions for such offences to be undertaken by the civilian Crown Prosecution Service. The service police and prosecuting authority have the necessary expertise and independence to investigate effectively and prosecute serious offences, including murder, rape and sexual assault by and against service personnel. The service justice system has been scrutinised by the UK courts, and in Strasbourg, and has been held to be compliant with the European convention on human rights for investigations and prosecutions in the UK and abroad where the civilian police do not have jurisdiction.

The service police have been held by the courts to be structurally, and in practice, independent from the chain of command, and they are trained and able to carry out investigations into the most serious offences at home and abroad. All prospective members of the special investigation branch, which investigates serious crimes, must pass the serious crime investigation course before being selected for that unit. Officers receive specialist training on the handling of sexual offences, investigative techniques, forensic awareness, dealing with witnesses and suspects, the preservation of evidence, and interaction with victims.

Selected members of the service police attend a range of specialist and advanced detective training at the Defence College of Policing and Guarding, or externally with the College of Policing or training providers accredited by that college. At the Service Prosecuting Authority, prosecutors are trained to prosecute serious cases effectively. For example, prosecution of serious sexual offences requires attendance on the CPS rape and serious sexual offences specialist training course, and the SPA ensures that decisions on charging are taken only by prosecutors who have completed that training.

The prosecutors protocol of 2011 between the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Director of Service Prosecutions, and the Defence Secretary, recognises that any offence can be dealt with by the service authorities. The main

principle in deciding who acts is whether the offence has any civilian context, especially a civilian victim. The protocol provides that cases with a civilian context are dealt with by the civilian criminal justice system.

4.45 pm

I should also say something about independence, both of the service police and the Director of Service Prosecutions. This is important, because I want to make clear that there is no room for interference in investigations. The service police have been held by the courts to be structurally, and in practice, independent from the chain of command for investigative purposes. Like any police force, it is recognised that there is a need for arrangements to be in place to ensure that the independence of an investigation is not compromised, or perceived to be compromised. For example, it is recognised there are times when a particular service police force should not investigate. There is a tri-service investigations protocol, which provides for another service police force to carry out an investigation where a service police force would otherwise be investigating its own personnel.

The Director of Service Prosecutions is an independent civilian office-holder exercising statutory powers under the superintendence of the Attorney General. The Service Prosecuting Authority is created by statute, with three main elements. The first element is the creation of the office of Director of Service Prosecutions and his appointment by Her Majesty. The director is appointed on the basis of fair and open competition. The second element is the provision for who may act on his behalf. The Director specifies the lawyers who may act on his behalf. The third element is that the necessary statutory powers in relation to prosecutions in service courts are given to the Director personally, and not to the chain of command.

I believe that the service police and the Service Prosecuting Authority have the necessary expertise and independence to investigate effectively and prosecute the full range of offences. It is crucial to remember that, given that service personnel are subject to the provisions of the Armed Forces Act wherever they serve in the world, service police remain able to investigate in these areas where their civilian counterparts may not. This ensures that our personnel are dealt with fairly and consistently. I am confident that we do not need to legislate further on these matters. On that basis, I hope the hon. Member for North Durham will withdraw his amendments.

Mr Kevan Jones: I thank the Minister for his reply. I was not wanting to question the independence of the military service police, but there is ongoing concern about its capacity and expertise. One way forward, on which the Ministry of Defence is moving very slowly, is the independent inspection of that force.

On the commanding officer, I hear what the Minister says. When General Carter came before the Committee, people were reassured that in practice allegations are taken very seriously and that when victims come forward legal advice is not only available but referred to. In saying that, if it is not going to be in the Bill that commanding officers should take legal advice before deciding on whether to take forward or dismiss a complaint, the services perhaps need to consider whether it should be codified through some kind of internal process.

On the publication of statistics, it is welcome that common sense has finally blossomed. The Minister is right that statistics are available. I cannot think he has anything to hide by not publishing them. I respect his commitment to come up with a system to publish them annually. I accept that perhaps more work needs to be done on the format and where they are produced. With the passage of the Bill I will be looking, as I am sure will fellow members of the Committee, to see how that advances. If I may give him a word of advice, in my experience he should insist on a timeline. Otherwise—no disrespect to some very able civil servants in the MOD—it might get pushed off into a siding and, if he leaves his post, might not be picked up by his successor. This is important. Neither the military nor the MOD has anything to fear from producing these figures, and it would add to the good work being done by the MOD and the three services to address these issues. With those comments, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 8

REVIEW OF COMPENSATION AVAILABLE TO VETERANS SUFFERING FROM MESOTHELIOMA

Within 12 months of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must commission a review of how former members of the armed forces who have contracted mesothelioma as a result of exposure to asbestos in the course of their military service are compensated, and must lay the report of this review before both Houses of Parliament.”—(*Mr Kevan Jones.*)

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr Kevan Jones: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

The new clause, which is similar to one I moved at an earlier stage, would affect veterans who have the misfortune to suffer from mesothelioma. You will know, Mr Crausby, from your engineering background, how debilitating this terrible condition is and the death sentence it imposes.

In 2014, the Government set up the diffuse mesothelioma payment scheme under the Mesothelioma Act 2014 to pay lump sum compensation to civilians who contracted mesothelioma in cases where former employers or insurance companies could not be traced. Under the Crown Proceedings (Armed Forces) Act 1987, many veterans are not covered by the scheme and so do not have the option to sue the MOD over this death sentence.

Great strides have been made to improve health and safety in handling asbestos, not just in civilian life but within the MOD, but we are talking here about cases that go back 30 or 40 years, if not further. Mesothelioma is one of those terrible conditions that affects people at random. In a previous life, when I was legal officer for the GMB, I saw old shipyard workers with asbestos scars on their hands who did not suffer from any other conditions, while some people exposed to quite low levels of asbestos developed mesothelioma and other asbestos-related cancers.

Under the current provisions, affected veterans can apply for a 100% war pension, if it is agreed that their diagnosis is related to their service. The Royal British Legion, which has campaigned on this, estimates that the option to claim compensation would affect 2,500 personnel, mainly—not surprisingly—naval veterans who handled asbestos in the course of their work. It tells me

[Mr Kevan Jones]

that asbestos has some peculiar effects for single individuals and widowers. The proposal is that the Secretary of State come forward with a scheme for veterans similar to the one outlined by the Government in 2014. It would also continue their work of supporting veterans, irrespective of where they served, and bring the law for veterans suffering from mesothelioma into line with that for civilians, who are covered by the 2014 Act. That is what organisations such as the Royal British Legion have been campaigning for.

Kirsten Oswald: I support the view of the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) that this matter must be dealt with. There is an urgency to it, because veterans suffering from mesothelioma simply do not have time for us to delay any further. We have heard about the campaign of the Royal British Legion, which calls on the Government to find fairer ways of compensating veterans suffering from this devastating condition. It has been an effective campaign, and it is right to highlight what a terrible disease mesothelioma is.

It is an unimaginable tragedy for veterans and their families to receive this diagnosis. We cannot imagine the enormous impact it has on their lives. To be clear, rectifying this unfair treatment will not make anybody suffering from the disease any better, but it might improve the quality of the period of life they have left and it might mean less anxiety about those they leave behind them.

Thousands of people serving in our armed forces prior to 1987 were exposed to asbestos while under military orders and have subsequently been diagnosed with mesothelioma. As the hon. Member for North Durham said, approximately 2,500 ex-service personnel are affected in this way. They clearly lose out very significantly when compared with civilians in the same position. For instance, while the civilian population suffering from mesothelioma is eligible for up to £180,000 in compensation, our ex-service personnel are eligible for only £31,000. Our veterans are clearly being treated less well than their civilian counterparts. This is a very significant difference, and it is no way to support our service personnel. I hope to hear some positive words from the Minister about this.

The military covenant commits the Government to removing disadvantages to service personnel—and this is most certainly a disadvantage at a very difficult time in people's lives. We need to be able to deal with this—and quickly. The Royal British Legion summarises the situation very well when it says that it is “unfair and has to change!”.

It is unacceptable to treat our terminally ill veterans in this way; the hon. Member for North Durham is correct in his call for urgency.

My concern is that this matter was already being discussed and highlighted as urgent when the Mesothelioma Act 2014 was being reviewed as a Bill in July 2013, yet so far this issue has not been resolved—despite assurances on many occasions that action was imminent. It is our duty to deal with it now before other ex-service personnel have their final months blighted by this financial worry and inequity. I hope that the Minister can allay these concerns today, so that we can see some positive progress made and deal with our veterans as we should.

Jim Shannon: I endorse the comments of the shadow Minister once again. As the Minister will know, we have had some fringe discussions on this issue in the Defence Committee. Furthermore, the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson), who usually sits behind me but is not in his place, has tabled an early-day motion to highlight the issue. The Royal British Legion, as the hon. Members for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) and for North Durham (Mr Jones) have said, has been part of the campaign and has lobbied hard.

We are all aware of some constituents who have this problem, but if I can be forgiven for saying it, the longer this goes on, the more the guys who would probably qualify for any agreed compensation are likely not to be here any more. That may sound cynical, but it crosses the minds of the potential recipients of the compensation and those of elected representatives who want to reflect the opinion that they are given by such people.

I and the shadow Minister both want to see a fair and equal distribution coming out of the compensation process—as it is for civilians, so it should be for those who have served in uniform. As the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire said when she dealt with the military covenant, these things should really happen normally, without any need for requests from this Chamber. The military covenant is clear; the negative obstacles should be taken away. Members should be able to express their opinion here on behalf of their constituents. There is an urgency about this matter because we need to put right an injustice. I just want to add my support to that of the shadow Minister and other Members who are not in their places today but would love to be here to support this request.

Martin John Docherty (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for tabling the new clause. I wish to associate myself with what he said, and with what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I also congratulate the Royal British Legion on the campaign it has been conducting over the past few months.

5 pm

I believe that the Members who have already spoken have conveyed to the Minister the depth of feeling about mesothelioma and the impact of asbestos-related conditions on our service personnel. My constituency has a clear, direct link with mesothelioma through shipbuilding. We see the daily impact of asbestos on the lives of communities, not just the people who were in contact with it in the shipyards—both men and women—but their families.

It is inexplicable to me that we might not wish to provide equal support for our armed forces personnel. I think particularly of naval personnel who have been involved in the lagging of ship hulls during tours of duty, but I think also of Army personnel who have been based in premises that were built with asbestos cement, and mechanics who have dealt with vehicles that were insulated with asbestos. They will have not only come into contact with blue or white asbestos dust during their working lives, but brought it into their home lives.

I hope that the Government will recognise the intentions of the hon. Member for North Durham, and will seek to ensure that at least some cross-party work is done to

enable us to bring this to a conclusion. Enough is enough: asbestos-related conditions form a major part of my constituency work. I am grateful to Clydebank Asbestos Group, which for many years, and with the support of many of my predecessors, has continued to work with other asbestos-related groups.

The Government really must listen to what the hon. Gentleman has said. Let us get this done.

Mark Lancaster: The new clause would impose an obligation on the Defence Secretary to instigate a review of compensation for veterans with mesothelioma. My view is that such a step would not require legislation, and has been overtaken by events.

As I said on 19 November during the Adjournment debate on compensation for our military veterans who have been diagnosed with mesothelioma, we recognise that it is a devastating disease that changes the lives not only of the people who are diagnosed with it but of those who care about them: their families and loved ones.

Veterans with mesothelioma caused by their military service are entitled to make a claim for no-fault compensation from the Ministry of Defence. The war pensions scheme provides a tax-free pension and supplementary allowances, along with dependants' benefits. The Government ascribe great importance to the health and well-being of our veterans, and we are clear about the fact that they should not be disadvantaged as a result of their service. We are absolutely committed to supporting them and the wider armed forces community.

Mesothelioma is a cancer caused by exposure to asbestos, and 40 years or more can often pass before it manifests itself and an individual is diagnosed, tragically with a short life expectancy thereafter. That is why it is so important to ensure that we provide the right support for those who are affected by the disease. We owe them all a debt of profound gratitude. I am therefore pleased to announce that any veteran who is diagnosed from mesothelioma from today will be offered a choice between receiving a lump sum of £140,000 and receiving the traditional war pension payments. It is currently proposed that the necessary legislative changes will come into force on 11 April 2016, but I am keen to consider options for bringing the date forward. Claimants choosing the option of a lump sum will continue to receive a monthly payment until the lump sum is paid. The Veterans Welfare Service will be on hand to help claimants to understand the new option.

As my hon. Friends will know, the policy of no retrospection has been maintained by successive Governments. Whether it should be applied to this group is a complex issue that has been the subject of much discussion within the Government. However, I have directed my Department to continue to review the options to support these claimants in a similar manner. I have received a great deal of correspondence, and I intend to write to the Members who have contacted my Department with a full update.

On that basis, I urge the hon. Member for North Durham to withdraw his motion.

Mr Kevan Jones: I think it would be rather churlish if I did not! I thank the Minister. What he has said shows his determination to put this wrong right, and, as with many issues, he approaches it not only with compassion

but with the aim of ensuring that we do the right thing. This is doing the right thing by these veterans, to whom we owe a huge debt. I congratulate him on his stance and I will look with hope at the other work he is doing on retrospection. I accept that there are difficulties with that and I would not expect solutions tomorrow, but I take his commitment at least to look at retrospection. On the happy note that this is moving in the right direction, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 9

HOMOSEXUAL ACTS NO LONGER TO CONSTITUTE GROUNDS FOR DISCHARGING A MEMBER OF HM ARMED FORCES (No. 2)

'(1) The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 146(4), omit the words "discharging a member of Her Majesty's armed forces from the service or" and the words "or, in the case of a member of Her Majesty's armed forces, where the act occurs in conjunction with other acts or circumstances,".

(3) In section 147(3), omit the words "discharging a member of Her Majesty's armed forces from the service or" and the words "or, in the case of a member of Her Majesty's armed forces, where the act occurs in conjunction with other acts or circumstances,".—(*Mr Kevan Jones.*)

This amendment removes the provisions applying to the armed forces from sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr Kevan Jones: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

New clause 9 attempts—I referred to this in the Select Committee—to remove redundant legislation from the statute book. Sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 contain provisions relating to a homosexual act constituting grounds for discharge from the armed services. The Act repealed a provision relating to male homosexual acts and the armed forces in the Sexual Offences Act 1967.

Clearly, that has been superseded by the fact that homosexuality in itself is not now grounds, thankfully, for being dismissed from the armed services, but the legislation referring to the armed forces remains on the statute book. I am not for one minute suggesting that anyone involved in a homosexual or heterosexual act in the course of their service should not be disciplined or could not be dismissed, but people think that it is discriminatory, and I agree, that the Act refers to homosexual acts, and not heterosexual acts in any way.

That legislation is redundant because we have moved, rightly, to ensure that members of our armed forces are not judged by their sexuality. My aim in the Select Committee and today is to find a mechanism—and I accept what the Minister said about the way forward—to take the provision off the statute book. It clearly discriminates against homosexuality, has no place on the statute book and serves no useful purpose.

Martin John Docherty: I associate SNP Members with the comments of the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) about the redundancy of this provision. On a personal level, I am shocked that it is still there

[*Martin John Docherty*]

and that homosexual members of the armed forces should be seen differently from heterosexual members of the armed forces who might be having sexual relations. Strangely enough, that seems to be a human element of sexual relations: they happen to people, whether they be homosexual or heterosexual, and no law is going to prohibit that. I want to ensure that the hon. Gentleman recognises that those on the SNP Benches fully support the new clause. We hope that the Minister will again reflect on what has been said and seek a way to take this forward.

Kirsten Oswald: I agree entirely with the comments of my hon. Friend. It was positive in the Select Committee to hear the universal support for the repeal of this archaic and discriminatory provision. I understand that the current law has not actually been enforced for many years, and I realise that repealing the provision is out of scope for us today. However, I join my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) in urging the Government to find a way to deal with the issue, and to do so with some urgency. It is unacceptable that, albeit unused, this provision remains. In 2015, we are better than that as a society, and our armed forces deserve the framework they operate within to reflect that and the fact that the provision is unacceptable and derogatory.

Mark Lancaster: I have much sympathy with the basis for this new clause. Sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 are clearly redundant. They have no practical effect and their existence is inconsistent with the Department's policy on homosexuality within Her Majesty's armed forces and the Government's equality and discrimination policies more generally. We are very proud in the MOD of the significant progress that has been made over a comparatively short time in respect of support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender staff. Since changes were made to the law in 2000 to allow homosexual men, lesbians and transgender personnel to serve openly in the armed forces, we have taken many positive steps. All three services now feature in Stonewall's top 100 employers list.

We continue to engage widely to benchmark our activities in support of our LGBT staff, to ensure that

we are doing as much as we can. In celebration of this year's London Pride, the rainbow flag was flown over the MOD main building for the first time, while over 200 service personnel and MOD civil servants marched together.

It is clear, therefore, that this redundant piece of legislation in no way reflects the position of today's armed forces, or indeed the position of the merchant navy, which is also included in those provisions. We would wish to repeal the legislation for both groups, but that is not possible in this Bill as the merchant navy falls under the auspices of the Department for Transport.

I am keen to repeal this legislation as soon as possible, and will undertake to update the House on this matter on Report. I have also discussed this with my colleagues in the Department for Transport, who echo the intent to review this legislation with regard to the merchant navy as soon as possible. On that basis, I urge the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) to withdraw his new clause.

Mr Kevan Jones: What we have had today is what we had in the Select Committee: universal agreement that this is not only redundant legislation, but is discriminatory and should not be on the statute book. I welcome the Minister's commitment to look at finding a way to remove this. He has said he will report back on Report, and that will stop people pushing it off into a siding. I look forward to the Minister coming back with a way of changing this not only for the armed forces but, through the Department for Transport, for members of the merchant navy. With those comments, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule agreed to.

Title

Amendment made: 2, line 2, after "discipline;" insert "to make provision about war pensions committees established under section 25 of the Social Security Act 1989;".—(*Mark Lancaster.*)

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill, as amended, reported.

Bill to be considered tomorrow.

Welfare Cap

5.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Work and Pensions (Mr Shailesh Vara): I beg to move,

That, pursuant to the Charter for Budget Responsibility: Summer Budget 2015 update, which was approved by this House on 14 October 2015, under Section 1 of the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011, this House agrees that the breach of the Welfare Cap in 2016-17, 2017-18, and 2018-19 resulting from the decision not to pursue proposed changes to tax credits, as laid out in the Autumn Statement 2015, is justified and that no further debate will be required in relation to this specific breach.

The motion is about the Government accounting to Parliament and the public for decisions about welfare spending. It is something we on this side of the House take very seriously. That is why in 2013 the Chancellor announced we would be bringing forward a welfare cap to control welfare spending in a way that has never been done before. The cap would be set shortly after each new Parliament and assessed each year by the independent Office for Budget Responsibility. Any breach of the cap requires my Department to come to the House to set out one of three courses of action. The first would be to propose measures to reduce welfare spending to within the level of the cap. The second would be to seek the approval of the House to increase the level of the cap. The third would be to explain why a breach of the cap was justified. The House will be aware that, following the Chancellor's autumn statement, the cap is forecast not to be met in the short term. The motion seeks agreement that this is justified.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Even this early in the debate, the Minister is saying that he is going to justify breaching the cap. Is he not somewhat embarrassed about that?

Mr Vara: Not at all. If the hon. Gentleman will give me time, I will explain the justification. He will be aware that there has been a huge amount of debate on this issue, and that the Chancellor has listened.

Ian Lavery: I must have missed that.

Mr Vara: The hon. Gentleman obviously did.

In making our case, I want to set out the circumstances that have led to this forecast. The cap was initially set in line with the OBR's March 2014 forecast. In the summer Budget, the Chancellor set a lower welfare cap to help to reflect our move to a lower tax, lower welfare and higher-wage economy. Since then, as part of the autumn statement, the Chancellor took the decision not to pursue proposed changes to tax credits. This will give families longer to adjust as we make work pay and provide better support for people in work.

This change has been possible partly because of improvements in the nation's finances, including improved tax receipts and lower debt interest payments. These are not free choices, however, and as a result of this change, we will be spending more in the shorter term than had been forecast in the summer Budget. That means that, based on current forecasts, the cap will not be met for the next three years: 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19.

Ian Lavery: The Chancellor stood up and said that he was proud to have these targets set in stone. He tried to set a trap for the Labour party on this issue, but he wanted the benefits cap set in stone. The Minister is now explaining that, for the next two or three years, there is no chance of meeting those targets. Please tell us that you are slightly embarrassed or concerned.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am not embarrassed or concerned. The Minister might be, but I am not.

Mr Vara: If we are talking about embarrassment, perhaps it is the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), along with those on the Opposition Front Bench, who ought to be embarrassed. They ought to be embarrassed about the millions of people who lived in misery because they were forced to become unemployed. They ought to be embarrassed because, under Labour, the welfare cap was out of control. They ought to be pleased that this Government have the guts to take the difficult decisions to bring the welfare cap back under control.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is Christmas, and I think the Minister would like to know that his Government have won first prize for being the first Government ever to breach £1 trillion in welfare spending over five years. That is £130 billion more than the Labour Government spent in their last five years. You have won the prize!

Mr Vara: The hon. Gentleman speaks of Christmas spirit. In that spirit, perhaps he would like to apologise to the House on behalf of his party for the mess that it left us. Perhaps he would like to apologise to the people out there—yes, the public—who endured misery and ended up being unemployed under Labour's policies. Perhaps he would like to apologise to the taxpayers for letting the welfare budget get completely out of control. As a result, we are having to take the tough decisions. *[Interruption.]* I am happy to give way to the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) if he would like to apologise. *[Interruption.]* I have given him the opportunity to apologise but he would rather not do so.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): On the subject of Christmas, I would just encourage all of us, please, to remember that there are people at the heart of these decisions, and this should not be the moment for political footballs. We are here to say that things have changed and that our view, policies and outlook have changed. I implore every Member in this House to remember that we are speaking on behalf of people, not our own personal political agendas.

Mr Vara: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and let me put on the record the fact that it is our welfare programme that is improving people's lives. It is no bad thing occasionally to ask the people who created the mess to apologise. I think the public outside would welcome an apology, because they have had to endure quite a lot of misery as a consequence of the people who took the decisions earlier on. She makes a good point when she says that people are watching, but I would also say to her that those people want an apology. I make no apology to the House for requesting that apology from the Opposition.

Owen Smith *rose*—

Mr Vara: I will give the hon. Gentleman an opportunity to apologise. He needs to apologise and I will give him that opportunity.

Owen Smith: I rise in the spirit of the intervention made by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and to say that I absolutely welcome the decision by the Government today to breach the welfare cap in order to reverse-ferret on the cut for 3 million recipients of tax credits—low-wage workers right across Britain. It is an excellent thing the Government have done and we will be fully supportive of it. I hope that she will be supportive of us when we call for a similar reversal on universal credit work allowances.

Mr Vara: The House will have noted, as will the people who are watching at home, that still we have no apology.

The Government are determined to continue the work that we have done to date and to honour the mandate from the British people at the general election, so that we can tackle welfare dependency and fix the nation's finances. Despite this short-term additional spending, we have made sure that, through our welfare reforms, the cap will be met later in this Parliament—by 2019-20. Let me be clear: the Government are committed to the welfare cap, and the Office for Budget Responsibility has confirmed that the cap is met in the medium term. The OBR also forecasts that welfare spending within the cap will fall as a proportion of GDP from 6% to 5% over the welfare cap period. That is a fall of 1%, in line with the 1% fall forecast at the summer Budget. By 2019-20, therefore, we will still achieve the £12 billion a year welfare savings that we said we would achieve—

Owen Smith *rose*—

Mr Vara: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman. I have given him plenty of opportunity to apologise, and he is not doing what the nation wants. If he is not going to do that, he needs to sit quietly and contemplate what policies his party is going to produce. On policies, it is worth noting that he, along with the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), actually supported the measure that introduced this cap, as did several other welfare Cabinet Ministers when Labour was in government, so it is ironic that they now seek to make cheap political points. As I say, by 2019-20 we will have achieved our £12 billion welfare savings. That is what we pledged at the election, that is what the public gave us a mandate for and that is exactly what we will deliver. We can do this because of the permanent savings that we have already made and the long-term reforms that we are making.

The simple fact is that Labour completely overspent on welfare during its 13 years in power. Under Labour, welfare spending went up by almost 60% and the benefits system cost every household an extra £3,000 a year. Spending on tax credits increased by 330%. That is £24 billion—

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): You are still spending more than us.

Mr Vara: The Labour party is a little slow in hearing, so I will repeat the figure for the Opposition's benefit: £24 billion. We had a welfare system that did not incentivise work and left some people getting more in benefits than they would in work. That was not fair to the hard-working taxpayers who paid for it and it certainly was not fair to those who had become dependent on the state, with no hope for a brighter future. What did Labour have to show after all that spending? Nearly one in five households had no one working. The number of households in which no one had ever worked had nearly doubled. Some 1.4 million people had been on benefits for most of the previous decade, and close to half of all households in the social rented sector had no one in work. Ever more spending on welfare just is not the answer.

We were right to bear down and get a grip on a welfare bill that was simply out of control. The introduction of the cap has brought greater scrutiny and challenge around welfare spending, and that is the way forward. The Chancellor said that he would listen on tax credits, and he has. This one-nation Government are determined to move to a lower tax, lower welfare and higher wage economy. We are doing so in a way that ensures families have more time to adjust to the changes. I commend the motion to the House.

5.25 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Let me start by wishing a very merry Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara) and all the Ministers on the replete Front Bench, especially the Secretary of State who I had hoped would lead the debate today. Indeed, I had hoped that it might be the Chancellor, because I seem to recall—

Mr Vara *rose*—

Owen Smith: I will certainly give way. I had not really started, but the hon. Gentleman can carry on.

Mr Vara: For the record, the reason I am addressing this debate is that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was chairing a Cabinet meeting, and he arrived after I had started speaking, and the record will show that.

Owen Smith: I was here in the Chamber, and I saw the Secretary of State arrive just before the Minister rose to speak. While we are on the subject, perhaps the Minister can clear up this matter. He said to us on Monday at Department for Work and Pensions questions that the Secretary of State had visited a food bank. We submitted a parliamentary question to the Minister asking when that had taken place. The interesting answer—in truth it was a slightly slippery answer—was that Ministers, not the Secretary of State, have attended lots of things, including food banks. I gather there is another question. Perhaps he could tell us when the Secretary of State went to a food bank. [*Interruption.*] Clearly, he does not want to say.

As I was saying before the Minister intervened on me, it was a year ago when, to a packed House, the Chancellor unveiled his latest wheeze, the welfare cap. He had a

mile-wide smirk on his face like one of the famous cats from his Cheshire constituency. He was positively purring as he laid down what he thought would be a trap for a future Labour Chancellor. He said:

“The welfare cap marks an important moment in the development of the British welfare state...and ensures that never again can the costs spiral out of control”.—[*Official Report*, 26 March 2014; Vol. 578, c. 374 and 381.]

He wanted Labour Members to stand up

“and say exactly what they think of the welfare cap, and tell us that they support it, and that they should have introduced it when they were in office. They look such a cheery bunch.”—[*Official Report*, 26 March 2014; Vol. 578, c. 380.]

Well, we are cheery this afternoon, as we look for the soles of the feet of the Cheshire cat Chancellor who has carelessly and ignominiously fallen into his own welfare cat trap. It is less a case of being hoist by his own petard, as slipping on his own smirk. Where is he today to answer these questions? A year ago, he was insistent that it would be he who would be called to account in this House for the breach in the welfare cap. He said in the same debate:

“The charter makes clear what will happen if the welfare cap is breached. The Chancellor—

not the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions or one of his Ministers, but the Chancellor—

“must come to Parliament, account for the failure of public expenditure control, and set out the action that will be taken to address the breach.”—[*Official Report*, 26 March 2014; Vol. 578, c. 380.]

But cometh the hour, there is no sign of the cat. He has disappeared. Even the smirk has disappeared.

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman enlighten us about where the shadow Chancellor is—or does he disagree with him?

Owen Smith: I am sure that the shadow Chancellor is up to some extremely important business. Ostensibly, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is meant to account for this on behalf of the Chancellor—talk about adding insult to injury or rubbing salt in the wounds, not only has his budget been raided to pay for the embarrassing reversal on tax credits and the breach of the welfare cap, but he was asked to come here to explain it to the House. I do not blame him for one minute for deciding to attend a really important Cabinet Committee instead of coming to the House to explain about the welfare cap.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Iain Duncan Smith) *rose*—

Owen Smith: Oh, I am delighted.

Mr Duncan Smith: As it is Christmas and I want to help the hon. Gentleman out as much as I can, because he is clearly floundering—[*Interruption.*] Well, he is floundering, and I do not want him to, because it would be bad for his reputation. I actually trust and support my Ministers. I believe that every one of them is capable of doing the debate better than the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps he would like to trust his shadow Ministers as well sometime.

Owen Smith: I would trust my shadow Ministers with my life. However, I thought that this was a very important subject. I thought that the welfare cap was one of those

things that—what did I say earlier on?—was a great step forward in the British welfare state. I thought that the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions should respond, and I cannot understand for a minute why the right hon. Gentleman wanted his junior Minister to do this belittling debate. The shadow Chancellor is not here. He has disappeared, much like the Cheshire cat—better than that, like Macavity the cat.

Mr Vara: You mean the Chancellor.

Owen Smith: I know, okay, the Chancellor: the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), in Cheshire—the Cheshire cat—and given that he is rather like Macavity, rather than the Cheshire cat, I thought that I would give the House a treat. I read that there were no Etonians on the Front Bench among the new intake, and I was worried that the lack of classical education from which the Treasury Bench normally benefits might mean that the Macavity reference went over Ministers’ heads, so I brought a little book with me, and I shall read a section from it. [*Interruption.*] It is not Mao; it is T.S. Eliot’s collected poems. It gives us Macavity the mystery cat, who is, of course, the Chancellor:

there’s no one like Macavity...

he’s very tall and thin;

You would know him if you saw him, for his eyes are
sunken in—

I think that is the 5:2 diet—

He’s outwardly respectable

although

(They say he cheats at cards.)—

I bet he does—

And when the larder’s looted, or the jewel-case is rifled...

He always has an alibi, and one or two to spare:

At whatever time the deed took place—MACAVITY
WASN’T THERE!

Macavity is not here today, is he? And the deed that he is ducking, of course, is this embarrassing, humiliating U-turn. The cap has been breached, and the Government have done it, of course, because of the spectacular, screeching U-turn on tax credits.

Ian Lavery: If my hon. Friend—he is a really good friend of mine—had done what the Chancellor has done in promising that the welfare cap would not be breached, would he have sat there and done nothing? I am sure that he would have been prepared to stand at the Dispatch Box, have the courage of his convictions and perhaps apologise.

Owen Smith: I would have been mortified had I been the Chancellor responsible for such a terrible U-turn and such an extraordinary, humiliating, screeching U-turn.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Again, in this great spirit of festive tidings, let me say that if that is really the best that the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman can do on such an important issue, he and his party really have not got a cat in hell’s chance of ever being back in government.

Owen Smith: I thought I was doing rather better than that. I thought the House might enjoy a bit of Christmas spirit.

[Owen Smith]

The real crime that Macavity is hiding from today is not the breach of the welfare cap, however embarrassing that may be. The real larder that has been looted is universal credit. Opening the debate, the Minister said several times that the Government would meet the welfare cap in 2019-20 and he is right that the OBR confirms that, but he signally failed to tell the House how they would do it. I suspect that that is because of the other reason that the Secretary of State did not wish to address the House today. We know precisely how he will meet the cap: through the £10 billion cut to the work allowance that we will see by 2020; a cut of £3 billion a year, nearly making up for the £3 billion that was to be taken away in tax credits, butchering the work incentives that are supposed to make universal credit worth while.

Who are the victims of this crime? The Secretary of State is for one, because he has had his budget raided once more—the seventh time, I believe. However, the true victims are the millions of constituents in Labour and Tory seats who will still lose thousands of pounds as a result of the Chancellor's cut to universal credit. Some 500,000 people will be on UC by next April, and according to the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2.6 million households will lose £1,600 by 2020. They are the victims of this crime, the people who are paying for the Chancellor's hubris with £3 billion of their own money in 2020 and every year thereafter. They are the people being fleeced by the postcode lottery that is being created in support for low-wage workers, whereby those lucky enough to stay on tax credits will be massively better off than their neighbours on universal credit.

A single mother working full-time on the new national minimum wage with two children will be £2,981 worse off than another mother, perhaps living next door in precisely the same circumstances but still on tax credits. [Interruption.] The Secretary of State says from a sedentary position, "What about child care?" Yes, if that mother has children who are three or four, she may be better off, but if her children are one, five, seven or 12, they will not be. That is the reality and we should not be misleading the House, from a sedentary position or otherwise.

That disparity cannot be fair and cannot be right. It may not even be legal. We are seeking advice as to the legality of that move. I suspect that is not what the Chancellor told the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) or other Tory Back Benchers when he reassured them that he was making good the tax credit cut, even if it meant breaching the welfare cap.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making some important points. Is it the case—I have seen the suggestion that it may well be—that the small number of people who are currently receiving universal credit will see the enormous reductions in their income that were to have been imposed on tax credit recipients? There has been a U-turn on tax credits, but is it the case that those who are getting universal credit will be hit?

Owen Smith: I think that is precisely the case. My right hon. Friend is right. There are currently around 140,000 recipients of tax credits, not all of whom get the work component; we do not know that precise

number—it may be around 40,000. There are predicted to be 500,000 people, on the Government's own numbers, in that circumstance by next April. When I put it to the Secretary of State at Work and Pensions questions last week that those people would lose out precisely as my right hon. Friend suggested, he said that the flexible support grant would more than make up for those losses.

I have looked at the flexible support grant and, as far as I can see, it is a £69 million grant that is available to local Jobcentre Plus managers to help people who are close to the workplace, perhaps for a new suit or a ticket to get on the bus to the interview. Even if it were permissible to use the money in that way, £69 million would in no way make up for the £100 million shortfall next year, the £1.2 billion shortfall the year after, and certainly not the £3.2 billion shortfall in 2020. It is impossible, and I fear it is also misleading for the public.

I will bet a pound to a penny that the Secretary of State and the Chancellor did not also mention that offsetting the cuts to universal credit will hit precisely the same Tory and Labour constituents just before the next election, in 2019-20. I would also wager that they still do not appreciate that the Chancellor cannot U-turn on this issue. The reverse-ferret is not available any longer, because if he does not make good his promise to make those cuts to universal credit, he will not be able to keep the promise that the Minister just made again on maintaining the welfare cap in 2020, and he will certainly not be able to deliver his other promise of a £10 billion budget surplus in the same year.

Perhaps the lesson we should all take from today's U-turn on the welfare cap, snuck in shamefacedly at the fag end of the Parliament, is that no one should take this Chancellor's traps and tricks, his games and gimmicks, terribly seriously any more. He can meet them or breach them—he does not mind which, because what he is really about is not sound management of the public finances but the political games of public schoolboys. That is why he cut universal credit seven times before it had even started, making a mockery of any claims to make work pay or support for the low-paid. That is why he continues with his fantastical claims, repeated by the Minister, that welfare spending is under control, even as the housing benefit bill went up by £30 billion in the previous Parliament, and even as Ministers breached £1 trillion on welfare spending for the first time.

We will back the Government in voting to secure Labour's demand to reverse the tax credit cuts, and we will continue to press them for the same reversal for the victims of universal credit. But we should not pay too much attention to the Chancellor's tricks and traps in future, because his flagrant breach of the welfare cap, deemed so essential just a few months ago, has exposed the true extent of his stunts. The welfare trap has caught him. Eliot's detectives could not catch Macavity, but he has been rumbled.

5.42 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): In the spirit of the season, let me congratulate Tory Front Benchers on recognising the futility of having passed legislation a year ago and now agreeing with the SNP's position that the benefits cap was wrong.

The breach of the welfare cap prompts the question of what is the point of it if it can be exceeded within its first year. I remind the House that in 2014 the Chancellor of the Exchequer said:

“The welfare cap brings responsibility, accountability and fairness...From now on, any Government who want to spend more on welfare will have to be honest with the public—honest about the costs—and secure the approval of Parliament in order to breach the cap.”—[*Official Report*, 26 March 2014; Vol. 578, c. 381.]

He will have to eat his own words. To save his blushes, he should abandon this inflexible, unworkable, draconian policy and focus on tackling the root causes of welfare dependency at source.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The hon. Gentleman knows full well that this is an example of the cap working. The Government have had to explain why they have had to do this, and explain the context of the changes announced in the autumn statement. That is absolutely right and proper, and he should support the Government.

Ian Blackford: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. Of course we will support the Government tonight, but the fact remains that we should not be having this debate because the cap should not have existed in the first place.

We have to recognise that social security protects the poorest and the vulnerable in our society, but we do not do that through these false measures, which is exactly what this is.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): In his festive mood, the hon. Gentleman has perhaps forgotten what the good people of Scotland said earlier this year, so it is worth reminding him. A Survation poll in Scotland said that a majority of its people, just like those in my constituency and across the UK, support efforts to reduce the cost of welfare, so are not he and his party out of touch with the people of Scotland?

Ian Blackford: I am truly grateful to the hon. Gentleman for asking that question. Of course the Scottish National party wants to reduce the cost of welfare, but we will do that by fixing the economy, driving up productivity and creating jobs. What we should not do is punish people. While we are on the subject of the election, let me take this opportunity to remind the House that we won 56 of the 59 seats in Scotland, and we did that while standing on a platform of investing in our communities and in job creation, making sure that we did not punish people with a failed austerity programme, and arguing for investment of an additional £140 billion throughout the whole of the UK over the next five years. That responsible position would have led to the financial deficit coming down to 2% of net national income by the end of this Parliament. The people of Scotland were very happy to support that much more responsible approach, and I commend it to this House.

Although we welcome today's decision to breach the cap, it is apparent that the Chancellor cannot even stick to his own targets. When will this Conservative Government realise that the inflexibility of the welfare cap is unworkable and that the fact that they will breach the cap illustrates the need to abandon the policy?

We are calling on the Chancellor to abandon the cap and instead to focus on welfare dependency by tackling the structural drivers of higher welfare spending, such as rising rents, low pay and worklessness, as well as the barriers to work. That is a much more progressive way of dealing with the problems we face in the United Kingdom. We agree that it is sensible to control welfare spending, but the Government are simply not doing that with their continued focus on the austerity agenda. The welfare cap is simply not the correct approach.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has chosen not to be here today. I am grateful to the Minister for speaking earlier, but he is here, cap in hand, to seek our support for the Government breaching their own rules and missing yet another target.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that, given that the Chancellor is absent and the Work and Pensions Secretary was late, perhaps they ought to be sanctioned?

Ian Blackford: Indeed. Perhaps Opposition Members could handle the appeal—let us see how they would get on in such circumstances. I have some sympathy for the Minister, though, because it is the Chancellor of the Exchequer who ought to be answerable to the House on this issue.

Of course, the Chancellor has form when it comes to missing targets. Let us remind ourselves that the Government have spectacularly missed their targets for the budget deficit and for net debt. We were supposed to be in the black by now, but with growth and tax receipts in particular consistently coming in below target, the deficit and debt have remained above target. We must pose the question: when will the Government learn that their false optimism has a price, and that price is the cuts to budgets as they seek to balance the books?

On the autumn statement, the Office for Budget Responsibility managed to magic up an additional £27 billion of forecast revenues—talk about a sleight of hand to dig the Chancellor out of another hole of his own making. We know that the OBR has a history of over-estimating tax receipts. The respected Paul Johnson, director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, said of the Chancellor's plans:

“If he is unlucky—and that's almost a 50-50 shot—he will have either to revisit these spending decisions, raise taxes, or abandon the surplus target.”

Talk about having form. If I may use some football terminology, I would not want the Chancellor to take a last-minute penalty for my team in a cup final—he would only miss the target. Own goals are much more the Chancellor's speciality.

Why am I raising these matters? It is because social security spending is linked to the failure to deliver a robust economy, drive up tax receipts and limit the need for the safety net that social security provides. That is why the welfare cap is wrong: it does not deal with the cause of, or the need for, welfare.

The disastrous policy—made in No. 11 Downing Street—of punishing millions of hard-working families by reducing tax credits and thereby dramatically cutting the income of lower-paid workers has, thankfully, been reversed. If the benefit cap is breached as a consequence of sense prevailing, we should be grateful. We are mindful, however, of the fact that although the vindictive

[*Ian Blackford*]

impact of the tax credit cuts has been avoided, there will be pain in years to come because the Government are still wedded to reducing the social security budget by £12 billion, with universal credit bearing the brunt.

We are not fooled by the Chancellor's words that this is a reversal of the Tory ideological assault on the most disadvantaged. He announced that he would, in effect, spend £3.4 billion in 2016-17 to reverse the changes to the threshold and the taper rate, but it is important to note that the planned reductions in tax credits for families with more than two children will still apply. Ian Mulheirn of Oxford Economics said that

"this may be a U-turn in April 2016, but it doesn't look like a U-turn by 2020."

I want to point out that the IFS estimates that cuts in universal credit will mean that 2.6 million working families will be an average of £1,600 a year worse off.

The continued lack of ambition by the Tory Government to take fiscal responsibility means that alternative action must be taken in Scotland to put off the impact of the austerity we are now facing. I am glad that the Scottish Government have taken measures, as they have in their budget today, to protect the people of Scotland. The Institute for Public Policy Research, an independent think-tank, has found that low-income families in Scotland will face a reduction in income of more than £800 by 2020 as a result of UK Government cuts, but the richest 40% will see an increase in income as a result of the tax cuts.

We are in this situation not because of structural issues with social security, but simply because we have not been able to drive sustainable growth to a level that would drive job creation and, crucially, raise real wages, which is the best way of curtailing the demand for social security. We cannot fix the problem of poverty in our country by cutting social security, particularly in-work benefits, but we can do so by creating the circumstances that allow people to find meaningful employment, and in doing so work the hours that will assist them to put food on the table and to heat their homes.

Heidi Allen: Will the hon. Gentleman reflect on one of the elements of universal credit, which is that it is not just an IT system but an entire way for people to work with a mentor and somebody in the jobcentre who will assist them to build a life of better employment and higher wages? That is what he should be talking about if he wants to get people out of poverty.

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. We fully support that: we want people to be able to move out of poverty and into meaningful work that is well paid, where the social security system will support them. We would happily support some reforms, but problems remain in relation to the level of sanctions and the cuts to universal credit that will happen over the next few years.

Ian Lavery: The real issue concerns in-work benefits and people who are in work. The Sports Direct model is failing, but the Conservatives are not prepared to get stuck into the likes of Sports Direct and of Mike Ashley. They believe that that is a fantastic model of employment, but it is not acceptable.

Ian Blackford: I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman. We need to deal with low pay in our economy. The only way to do so is to have a real debate about how to drive up productivity in this country, and about how to tackle companies that are abusing the minimum wage. Such companies must be held to account for what has happened.

We often hear from the Government and their myriad Back Benchers about a mythical long-term economic plan. I say "mythical" because it is a meaningless soundbite, and we are left asking, "Where is the detail? Where is the substance?" If there is a long-term economic plan to benefit workers, a core theme must be a rise in productivity that will help to drive up wages and living standards sustainably. The hon. Gentleman has just made that point.

Let us look at what the OBR said in its publication on the day of the autumn statement:

"Although actual productivity growth has picked up in the latest two quarters, some of this has been cyclical or reflects broader temporary factors... But since it is difficult to explain the abrupt fall and persistent weakness of productivity in recent years, it is also hard to judge when or if productivity growth will sustainably return to its historical average."

It is well worth dwelling on that. It can be paraphrased as the OBR saying that it has not got a clue why productivity in the UK has been so weak in the past few years. It is certainly the case that the Government do not have a clue. I would suggest that they have no clue and no strategy for driving up productivity in the UK economy and for dealing with our social security bill.

The hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) famously quoted from his little red book and then tossed it at the Chancellor during the autumn statement. However, it is not that red book that should concern us, but the stark reality of what is contained in the OBR Blue Book that offers little comfort for many in this country. We will support this motion, but we should not be having this debate because we should not have a benefits cap. We need a meaningful long-term economic plan, not Government gimmicks and soundbites.

5.54 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I welcome this U-turn. Sometimes, it is right to accept that one is wrong and has made a mistake. I commend the Government for doing so on this issue.

I also commend all those who took part in what was very much a cross-party campaign, in which all the Opposition parties and some Government Back Benchers worked together. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) for the courageous way in which she spoke out, which was noticed around the country and did this place a real service.

I also pay tribute to the other place. Although I will always campaign for that House to be abolished in its current form and replaced, finally, with a wholly elected Chamber, which is what we should have in this country and is the only justifiable way to run a modern democracy, it did show that it has a role to play in this Parliament. I commend my Liberal Democrat colleagues in the other place, who made it clear that they would speak and vote against the tax credit cut. That was crucial in leading to the U-turn.

As a liberal as well as a Liberal Democrat, I will always be extremely proud that it was the great, reforming Liberal Government of 1906 to 1914 that brought in

the very welfare state that we are discussing. That is a great achievement of my party.

However, we accepted in our five years in coalition, in difficult financial circumstances, that the welfare state had got out of control and was no longer sufficiently focused on those who needed it. I was a member of the Work and Pensions Committee for five years and that Committee, which had members from all parties, was entirely clear that there was a disincentive to work and that too many people were incentivised to be on benefits, rather than to work. I am very proud that, in the five years of the coalition, we did a lot to tackle that.

Ian Blackford: Will the hon. Gentleman remind us how the Liberal Democrats voted when the welfare cap came before Parliament last year?

Greg Mulholland: I am very happy to. As usual, the contribution from the SNP Benches contained the usual milk and honey, promising everything to everyone and not taking any difficult decisions. In the end, even in Scotland, the shine will come off and people will start to see the reality of the false veneer of the Scottish National party. That is something that the rest of us will welcome.

I am not even sure that the hon. Gentleman knows what he is talking about. There are two different issues: the household benefit cap and the welfare cap. He seemed to confuse and conflate the two things. We absolutely supported the household benefit cap, which was brought in under the coalition, because it is entirely right and all our constituents support not having a situation in which a single household can take an unlimited amount in benefits, when hard-working families are unable to raise the same amount. The welfare cap is an entirely different thing. It seeks to control the amount of money that the Treasury allocates to welfare as a whole. He does not seem to understand the distinction, which is worrying, given his position.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): There is increasing evidence that this policy will cost the public purse more. Is it not a false economy?

Greg Mulholland: I am absolutely clear that there have been changes to the benefits system that were mistaken, including under the last Government, and I said so at the time. However, I absolutely support the household benefit cap. I do agree, however, that we need a sensible approach, and we must incentivise work and focus social security on those who need it. Those of us who believe passionately in the welfare state—I am sure the hon. Lady does, as do I—must be able to justify it and show that it is helping people who cannot work or are unable to find work. That must be the focus, but it has not been previously.

I am sure the hon. Lady will agree that some of the changes brought in by this Conservative majority Government, without the Liberal Democrats to restrain them, have been mistaken and ideological, particularly the cap on child benefit on the basis of the number of children that someone has, regardless of circumstance. We opposed and stopped such measures, but now people are seeing what a Conservative majority Government with an ideological policy, as opposed to a pragmatic one, will do.

We welcome the fact that the right decision was made on tax credits, and on this occasion it is right to be prepared to breach the welfare cap. In other years we would like that cap to be adhered to, but given current circumstances and the projections for what the change to tax credits will do, this is the right decision, and those on the Treasury Bench should not be criticised for being prepared to breach the welfare cap for that reason in this financial year. That would be playing politics with this issue in the way that the Chancellor did with his ideological nonsense of the fiscal charter, when he sought to stop the Treasury having the flexibility that any Chancellor—and in this case the Secretary of State—must have.

We welcome this U-turn and fully accept the need to breach the welfare cap this year. We hope that the Government will live within their means in future years, but not by balancing the budget on the backs of the poor. We will continue to take a pragmatic approach and oppose anything that we believe is draconian, ideologically driven and unfair. At the same, we hope that the Government will continue in the same vein as the coalition Government, by incentivising people to work, and by getting more people into work with fewer people on benefits. As a civilised society we must ensure that our welfare state continues to help people who are unable to work or who genuinely cannot find it. That is our position and we will continue to make that case.

6.2 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): As someone who voted against the welfare cap when it was introduced and whenever it was reset, I am happy that the Government are trying to relax the original level of that cap. During the Budget statement in July, the Chancellor revised the welfare cap figures that he announced in the spring. He reduced that cap over four financial years by £46 billion, to include changes to tax credits and some of the other changes to universal credit that have been mentioned, and for that reason we would have opposed the measure.

As we have heard, the welfare cap is a fairly political argument. It has its origin in the opposition of Labour Members to the benefit cap in the Welfare Reform Act 2012, and they came under some pressure for that. At one point, the then Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), announced that he would do better than a benefits cap and introduce a welfare cap on the overall budget. We could see the lights go on for the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who decided, "That will do nicely. We'll go for a welfare cap as well." He proceeded to set up his working group to consider that, on the basis, he said, that annually managed expenditure is not managed but needs to be in future. That is how the welfare cap was introduced, and that is why the then Opposition were trapped into voting for it, whereas some of the smaller parties—and some Labour Back Benchers—felt free to vote against it.

When the welfare cap was introduced it was bubble-wrapped as a neutral budgetary tool, but many of us recognised that it would end up being brandished as a weapon for cuts, and that is exactly how the Chancellor used it this year in the July Budget. Of course, he was forced to revise his propositions on tax credits by a combination of opposition from right hon. and hon. Members right across the House. In fairness, some

[Mark Durkan]

Government Members did not just vote against the measures but spoke against them too, making valid and pointed arguments about just some of the difficulties caused by the Chancellor's plans. It is good that, with the range of consideration and argument outside and inside this House and in the other place, that the Chancellor had to revise his position. That is now reflected in the adjusted proposals for the welfare cap.

The Chancellor, in his autumn statement, made it clear that he will still get to the quantum of cuts he wants to achieve. The issue is how far the welfare cap will, in itself, be used as an instrument for forcing some of those cuts. We have also yet to hear from Ministers exactly how they are going to get to that quantum. Will they need to table amendments to the Welfare Reform and Work Bill currently going through Parliament to deliver the cuts within the time the Chancellor has projected, or do they feel that they will be able to arrive at the same cuts using existing legislation? There are powers of regulation under the 2012 Act and provisions in the Bill, not least the sweeping provisions in clauses 13 and 14 that could see significant benefits—universal credit, employment and support allowance, and the work-related activity group—disappear or be very heavily eroded. If the Government still intend to arrive at the quantum of £12 billion of cuts in terms of the welfare cap, how do they propose to deliver it?

That matters in the context of Northern Ireland. If the cuts are to be delivered under existing legislation or the Bill, the fact that direct rule powers are in the hands of Department for Work and Pensions and Northern Ireland Office Ministers means that the cuts will be put through under the sunset clause which will be exercised here up until the end of the next calendar year. We have the right to ask: what future cuts will go through under existing legislation and the Bill, and what would require further reductions in future?

We did not get clarification on welfare measures during the passage of the Scotland Bill, or on other occasions when we have asked Ministers about this more informally. Will the Minister clarify whether the welfare spending that can be undertaken by the Scottish Government of £2.7 billion—the last figure I heard—will count as part of the UK welfare cap, or is that absolutely outside the UK welfare cap? Is that a precedent for other factors? Ministers have been unable to address that point.

In welcoming the Government's position today, I take no comfort from it. Their original intent to use the welfare cap as a cuts weapon is still there. I want clarification on their plans for the Bill. Will they table amendments to achieve further cuts, or do they believe that they can achieve the full £12 billion as the clauses currently stand?

6.8 pm

Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): The 1997 to 2010 Labour Government paid off more debt than any previous Government on record—debt left by the Conservative Government. We always know when Conservative Members' arguments are weak, because they come out with the mantra about the financial mess left by the Labour Government. The financial mess was created and started in America with Lehman Brothers.

They use that—[*Interruption.*] This really doesn't bother me, because I don't hear what they've got to say.—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order.

Mr Duncan Smith: It's Christmas.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. It would appear that it is Christmas. I hope the House has not been attending too many Christmas parties. We behave in a reasonable and polite fashion. If anybody needs to be told to be quiet, I can do that.

Marie Rimmer: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marie Rimmer: No. The hon. Gentleman will wait until I have had my say.

The financial crisis was caused by Lehman Brothers in America and started in 2008. Had Labour been returned to power—had someone not been greedy for power—we would not be in this mess today because the Conservatives would not be in power. Our strategy was actually working. [*Interruption.*] I am sorry that Conservative Members do not like the truth.

Several hon. Members rose—

Marie Rimmer: I will not give way until Members start to behave and listen to me.

Several hon. Members rose—

Marie Rimmer: Sit down! I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We always know when the Government are at their weakest, because they go on and on about the financial crisis. But let us get to the welfare cap. Of the two major cuts to in-work support in the summer Budget—to tax credits and its replacement, universal credit—only the tax credits element has been reversed. The reason we are in this state is that the Chancellor originally set the cap at a level that, in the first instance, simply tracked the Office for Budget Responsibility's projections for spending on those benefits and tax credits that were in scope—as one of my colleagues mentioned, tax credits are in scope, which is unacceptable. The cap started in 2015-16 and extends for the next five years, meaning that, for now, the cap has no policy effect whatsoever. The Government are simply committed to operating future policy on the basis of not overshooting the current estimate of financial spending over the coming years. We could be in this position next year and the year after, because there are no real policy decisions. It is short term. It is nothing else.

As predicted, that led to the announcement of emergency cuts, including those to tax credits, but they were resoundingly kicked out by the Lords—the Conservatives at prayer, as someone described them. Although I am not in favour of an unelected second Chamber, I applaud them for taking that action. Only the tax credits element was reversed, however, and working families remain on the front line of further assaults, such as the cap and the universal credit cuts. The latter will affect many people—more than 200,000, I think—from April 2016, and the majority of those on universal credit are in the north-west.

They are the ones who suffer the most from unemployment and financial deprivation—much of which is caused by zero-hours contracts, insecure employment, low pay and part-time work—which is why they are on benefits.

Chloe Smith: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marie Rimmer: No, I want to carry on.

Owen Smith: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Marie Rimmer: Not at the moment. Hon. Members will hear what I have to say.

We need reforms that address the structural drivers of social security spending. We need good, secure employment; we need to get rid of zero-hours contracts and low pay; and we need to ensure an adequate supply of affordable homes.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marie Rimmer: No. Hon. Members need to learn that I will not give way until I have had my say. *[Interruption.]* Yes, the House needs to know what type of woman I am.

We need to shift the balance of expenditure from the cost of failure towards investment. As my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) has said, the large rise in housing benefit expenditure in the 20 years before the financial crisis came at a time when the number of households receiving help to pay their rent stayed broadly flat. That should have triggered a major focus on those trends and led to serious reform of policy and spending, but it did not. As a consequence, the benefits system was extremely vulnerable to economic shocks, as large numbers of people were in more expensive private rented accommodation. When the crisis really hit in 2010-11—it came a couple of years later—housing benefit shot up, and in response we have seen a series of arbitrary attempts to hack back the costs. We have seen 14 changes to housing benefit, including the bedroom tax, which was entirely unrelated to the causes of the rising expenditure. We need to get down to the policy and the causes.

Ministers are leaning too heavily on the political dividing-line and not enough on designing a cap that would advance structural reforms. Although it is set over five years on a rolling basis, the Government's cap will bite on an annual basis. With the Office for Budget Responsibility warning about the overshooting of the autumn statement, we call today for compensating action in the next Budget.

We have had emergency cuts, not long-term saving. The cap has been set in nominal cash terms. Higher expenditure, driven by inflation, will trigger policy action, which risks locking in lower living standards for those reliant on benefits. General price rises feeding through into uprating decisions do not count as a structural divide in spending. In line with consumer prices index forecasts for the coming years, the Chancellor set out a margin of error of 2%, which will not trigger action.

The cap makes no distinction between contribution-based and income-based benefit spending, consistent with the drift of social security policy over decades, but they are different, and should be treated as such. Entitlement to

contributory benefits, which are financed by national insurance contributions, should stand outside the mainstream of Government revenue and be taken out of the cap, strengthening the integrity of the national insurance fund.

I urge the Government to backtrack on the political ideology-driven trajectory that they are on, with 80% of cuts coming from public spending and welfare and 20% from tax, and with tax cuts being provided to people who do not need them and will not spend the extra money, so it will not go into the economy and will not feature in the drive for more jobs. The Government should invest in proper affordable housing for those who need it. Never mind all these dressed-up schemes—let us have some honesty in this place and address the issues for the public out there. I think the Government are living in a virtual world; it is certainly not the world that I move in.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That, pursuant to the Charter for Budget Responsibility: Summer Budget 2015 update, which was approved by this House on 14 October 2015, under Section 1 of the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011, this House agrees that the breach of the Welfare Cap in 2016-17, 2017-18, and 2018-19 resulting from the decision not to pursue proposed changes to tax credits, as laid out in the Autumn Statement 2015, is justified and that no further debate will be required in relation to this specific breach.

RIOT COMPENSATION BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Riot Compensation Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act by local policing bodies, by way of compensation for damage, destruction or theft occurring in the course of riots, out of money so provided.—(*Mike Penning.*)

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I want to raise the modest question of why this Bill has not been introduced under Standing Order No. 50, as it seems to me that the primary purpose is a charge. For a Bill of this kind, Standing Order No. 50 is the usual process. I know it has the Government's support, but I am puzzled that that approach has not been taken.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The hon. Gentleman raises an excellent point, which I am sure has been taken on board by those on the Treasury Bench.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order 119(11)),

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 17228/13, a Commission Communication: Towards the elimination of female genital mutilation.—(*Guy Opperman.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Climate Change

6.18 pm

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): I rise to present a petition from students at Notre Dame high school in Norwich, which includes many signatures from across Norfolk. It contains 1,127 signatures in total.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the UK should show leadership internationally to secure fair and ambitious agreements on tackling climate change and poverty; and further that the petitioners are inspired by their Catholic faith, and Pope Francis' Laudato Si.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to cut carbon emissions to keep global temperature rise below the dangerous threshold of 1.5°C, and to prevent climate change pushing people deeper into poverty.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P001663]

Merger of NHS Trusts in Nottinghamshire

6.19 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I wish to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Newark in Nottinghamshire. The petition declares that the petitioners support a full merger of their NHS Trust—following a disastrous inspection report by the Care Quality Commission, and a terrible legacy from the private finance initiative—with a high-performing neighbouring trust, such as Nottingham, in order to secure the future of high quality healthcare provision in the Newark area. Furthermore, the petitioners support and will work constructively with that new trust, and furthermore, they support the hard-working doctors, nurses and staff of Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Trust, including those at Newark hospital.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Newark,

Declares that the petitioners support a full merger of their NHS Trust with a high-performing neighbouring Trust in order to secure the future of high quality healthcare

provision in Newark; further that the petitioners support and will work constructively with the new Trust; and further that they support the hard working doctors, nurses and staff of Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Trust including at Newark Hospital.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage the full merger of Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Trust with a neighbouring high-performing Trust.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P001665]

6.21 pm

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): I wish to present a petition further to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick). It, too, calls on NHS bosses to allow a takeover of Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Trust by a neighbouring trust. Members may be familiar with the financial issues faced by the Sherwood Forest trust, mainly as a result of a disastrous PFI deal which was signed under the Labour Government and which requires it to make repayments of nearly £1 million a week. The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage the full merger of Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Trust with a neighbouring high-performing Trust.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Sherwood,

Declares that the petitioners support a full merger of their NHS Trust with a high-performing neighbouring Trust in order to secure the future of high quality healthcare provision in Newark; further that the petitioners support and will work constructively with the new Trust; and further that they support the hard working doctors, nurses and staff of Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Trust including at Newark Hospital.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage the full merger of Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Trust with a neighbouring high-performing Trust.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P001664]

East Anglia Rail Franchise

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

6.22 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to address the House on a subject that is both timely—given that the invitation to tender will close tomorrow—and fundamentally important to the securing of economic growth and prosperity throughout East Anglia. It is a once-in-a-generation moment, and it should not be lost.

I thank the Minister for being present to reply to this short debate. As rail Minister, she has been tireless in her support, working to find solutions to the huge challenges that we face in bringing our rail service up to the standard that is so essential to the success of a modern, accessible and mobile economy. I know that, as a regular visitor to the area, she has experienced at first hand—I will not say “enjoyed”—our historically underfunded and unreliable rail service. She has always taken time to meet, listen to and respond to the organisations, businesses and passengers whose concerns, ideas and comments are at the heart of our case for the improvement that we want.

I also wholeheartedly thank my right hon. and hon. Friends, representing constituencies across East Anglia, who have taken the time to support me this evening. Their presence on the eve of the closure of the invitation to tender is an indication of the significance of the topic, not only for East Anglia but, I would argue, for UK plc's growth ambitions.

My first question in the House concerned this very issue: the quality of rail services for my constituents in Bury St Edmunds. In terms of passenger numbers, Stowmarket and Bury St Edmunds are the second and third largest stations in Suffolk, with, respectively, nearly 1 million and nearly 600,000 passenger movements a year. I have met some of those passengers at cold, blowy stations at 6 am and discussed what the current service gives them. It is not what they pay for, that is for sure. Indeed, 66% of customers in Abellio's own survey felt that they did not get value for money.

As a new MP I have been challenged, rightly, by my constituents to join the campaign by MPs of long standing from Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex, Cambridgeshire and lately Hertfordshire to fight for what they deserve. Only this Saturday my constituents were frustrated by rail freight trains holding up passenger services. Services are hindered by the decrepit and aged rolling stock. Ours is on average 27 years old. The national average is 20—and you never want to be older than the national average. We are also hindered in our area by the lack of reliability and frequency, by the appalling state of stations and real estate and by the lack of services. With the new franchise we must not miss the opportunity to meet some of these needs. We must rise above and exceed what the invitation to tender asked for.

Only last week, the list of red delays between Liverpool Street and Colchester was long enough to make the timetable look like a seasonal candy cane. It does not matter from whatever angle you view the situation: having to guess your arrival time, or even whether you will arrive for work or an appointment on time is simply not fair. As a rather famous little tank engine once said, “Run my train on time” and I could not agree more.

In November 2013 the Chancellor of the Exchequer visited our area and agreed that the Great Eastern main line rail service was not good enough and was a barrier to growth. The taskforce led by my hon. Friends the Members for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) and for Ipswich (Ben Gummer) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) has demonstrated the rail needs across three counties. In 2014 the taskforce report was accepted, highlighting, along with the issues already mentioned, overcrowding and outdated infrastructure.

My constituents and the broader customer base using the rail service are charged too much for a rail service that is inadequate. They expect and deserve better for their money. Additionally, we need Network Rail to fulfil its commitments to the infrastructure across control periods 5 and 6. That need was confirmed in the recent Hendy report. That would contribute to faster, more reliable journey times in 10 years' time.

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): My hon. Friend is making the case powerfully. The number of Members present in the Chamber shows how strongly we all feel on the issue for our constituents. I agree with her in the strongest possible terms that this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity. We have to align the work of Network Rail in the next 10 years with a nine-year franchise to get infrastructure improvements and new trains. That is what our passengers need.

Jo Churchill: I could not agree more. There needs to be that connected thought—that is the important thing—to allow works at the Ely North junction, for example, where there is a real need. That has been the demand by my colleagues in Cambridgeshire, but this issue also affects users in Norfolk and Suffolk. The work has already slipped from period 5 to period 6.

Freeing up capacity is an urgent need across our dynamic growing area, so it was with disappointment that I, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matthew Hancock) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich noted that the tender did not highlight a more frequent service between Ipswich and Peterborough or Ipswich and Cambridge. Indeed my right hon. Friend had a meeting with rail users only last week to press that point home.

These critical centres need a more frequent service, as does the science corridor between Norwich and Cambridge, for which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), who has emailed me because he cannot be here today, has campaigned. That would doubtless give huge economic benefit to the life sciences industry as well as to other businesses.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. She is giving us a great history going around the various branch lines in East Anglia. Does she agree that if investment is made in the east Suffolk line in terms of through-trains to Liverpool Street, faster service and investment in stations, that can play a significant role in bringing economic growth to east Suffolk?

Jo Churchill: I could not agree more. The beauty of delivering this tender well is that it can bring benefits across Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Essex and

[Jo Churchill]

benefit all our constituents, who, frankly, do not care whose constituency they are travelling through; they just care about getting where they want to go on time and in a way that is easy to access.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does she agree that, given the growth in our region and the fact that Cambridge is one of the few net contributors to the Treasury, it is essential we get the infrastructure we need? Ely is often a pinch point in infrastructure development, including the Ely North junction and the Soham-Ely doubling.

Jo Churchill: I could not agree more, because those pinch points affect such a broad area and affect the delivery of services into all our towns across the region. That is hugely important, and it was highlighted in the Hendy report.

I ask myself whether the obvious need for greater capacity would be addressed if we were not on the eve of this franchise re-tender. Our plan, with which the Minister is very familiar, is underpinned by a solid business case that will unlock the economic potential of up to £4.5 billion based on a package of improvements costing just over one tenth of that: £476 million. It will generate some £9.50 for every pound spent, providing a cost-benefit ratio that is acknowledged to be one of the most compelling investment propositions for rail. Over the next decade the plan will deliver over £15 billion in gross value added, 184,000 homes and some 50,000 new jobs, but if nobody can move around the area—and we already have to accept that the A14, which cuts right through my constituency and which travels down to the country's largest container port at Felixstowe, is at times overwhelmed by the traffic—we really do have a problem.

Let me state quite clearly that we do not want to see “business as usual” being the operating criterion for the chosen bidder when those bids land tomorrow. We want change; we want transformational change at that, based on best practice from home and abroad. We want innovative thinking about some essential needs. I want those constituents of mine who are disabled, and particularly those who use a wheelchair, not to be faced with the situation where they cannot even access a train. If you live in Needham Market and you are in a wheelchair, that is it; you are not getting on that train. That is simply not good enough in 2015.

We know that whatever is to be delivered will be some way down the track—I have tried to avoid such comments, but I may hit the buffers at times. We do not want our new rolling stock to be somebody else's refurb. The taskforce report was very clear: we want new rolling stock. One reason much of our stock is to be upgraded is, quite simply, that it will be illegal shortly due to its inadequacies. We do not want pacers or old tube stock either. We have made do on this line for too long.

We have been told that with new rolling stock will come the reliability we seek. Everyone in the know says infrastructure is essential, too, including track signalling and overhead line equipment, as part of that bigger picture. But that rolling stock is essential, as the Minister knows very well from having used our service.

Essential east-west link improvements are needed, including the Felixstowe to Nuneaton and Birmingham freight route that will link the UK's biggest container port with the rest of the UK and take pressure off the A14. My hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) has campaigned tirelessly on this issue. As an aside, it seems incredible that one of the busiest ports in the UK is served by the single-track Felixstowe branch line.

To relieve pressure on commuters, I would recommend the introduction of an hourly Ipswich to Peterborough service—which I reiterate was not stated as a requirement in the invitation to tender—and I will add to my wish list the request that it should be increased to a half-hourly service at peak times. Improved passenger journey times, particularly in the east, are essential to optimise growth from east to west. In my constituency, we would like tomorrow to be an early start to Christmas. We have heard of Norwich in 90 and Ipswich in 60, and I am standing here today to ask you for Stowmarket in 70.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I have let the hon. Lady get away with this the first couple of times. When she says “you”, she is addressing the Chair, not the Minister. If she wishes to ask the Minister something, she must say “the hon. Lady”.

Jo Churchill: I am terribly sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker; you are absolutely right. It is my enthusiasm on securing the debate and having the chance to ask the Minister to listen to my arguments. I hope that, when the bids hit her desk tomorrow, she will take this opportunity to give us what we really want for the next nine years.

Peter Aldous: Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to avoid a repetition of the situation that arose in Lowestoft last Saturday, when people could not even get on the trains? It was a day of high demand, with people going to a premier league football match between Norwich and Everton, and also going shopping in Norwich, but they could not even get on the trains.

Jo Churchill: Absolutely. That point would probably also be supported by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk, who has called for special trains to Newmarket on race days. We have a centre of excellence for the racing industry in Newmarket, but it cannot optimise what it could do for the country because we cannot get people there smartly enough.

My constituents do not want to stand on trains; they want to sit. They also want to be connected to wi-fi, and maybe have a cup of coffee, but at the moment they can get neither of those services between leaving home and arriving at their main line station. They want to be able to park at their stations and shelter from the elements until the train arrives. Otherwise, they will opt to use different forms of transport. We are not talking about a third world country here.

Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does she agree that, regardless of who is awarded the franchise, we must also address the question of the corporate governance of Network Rail? Until that is improved, we will not see the improvements that we need.

Jo Churchill: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. I am sure that it is something that the Minister will attend to.

With the Paris summit fresh in our minds from the weekend, the provision of a better train service makes both economic and environmental sense. The frustration at the lack of frequency in the timetabling and at the poor reliability cannot and should not be underestimated by my hon. Friend the Minister. My constituents are being ill served, their journeys are being made more arduous, and the potential for growth in the towns in my region—and, more importantly, my constituency—is being thwarted by the lack of investment on the line. This all adds up to my wanting the requirements in the invitation to tender not simply to be met but to be exceeded. I fully appreciate that not everything I have asked for can be given, but I do expect the signed franchise agreement to deliver the absolute maximum punch for my constituents and everyone across East Anglia.

The tenders will come in tomorrow, so when the Minister looks at them on Friday, she will have the opportunity to challenge the prospective operators to fill the gaps that the tender has failed to specify in the detail. If the nine years from October 2016 do not put the east in a primary position to compete in our competitive global economy, my Government will have failed to release the further potential of one of the country's net contributors to the Treasury.

I will finish with these words: "East Anglia is one of the fastest growing regions in the country and is establishing itself as a world leader in science, technology and manufacturing. To support this growth we need to have modern, efficient rail services and improved connections". Those are not my words, but those of the Prime Minister in April 2014. I do not think I can beat that. I just want to see these things being delivered.

6.39 pm

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): I join in the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) on giving us the opportunity to emphasise the rail needs of our region and on our having had the good fortune of the extended time for debate. A clear demonstration is being made in the House by the presence of her colleagues, and we are all united in understanding how badly we feel we have been let down over the years.

I do not want to be too hard on Department for Transport Ministers, because we have moved on considerably from a situation where the then Government took a dumbed-down approach during a previous franchise. In effect, they said to applicants, "We want you to do it cheaply." As my hon. Friend said, new rolling stock is key, and although it is not made mandatory in the invitation to tender, it has been made clear that that is what is expected of bidders. In response to my question the other day about whether the bounty being received by two franchises in the north was a signal to what our bidders should be doing, the Secretary of State said emphatically and in a single word, "Yes." We therefore have some cause to be hopeful and it will be appalling if we are let down on that, because the time has come.

Strictly speaking, if we are talking of a franchise, we should be majoring on the rolling stock, because that is what the operating company is going to be primarily

concerned with. My interest in the Great Eastern line is not as extensive or as long-standing as that of some other colleagues, because until boundary changes took place in 2010 I did not have a significant number of constituents who used the line—but I do now.

We must not forget the West Anglia line, which of course serves the region's major airport, which is described as the third London airport. It is amazing to think that even after the decision in 1985 to establish that airport on the scale that has been achieved, nothing has been done to improve the railway line. When that decision on the airport was taken, it was necessary then to build a spur track to the airport to allow some kind of service to be delivered.

A private Bill had to be promoted by British Rail, as it was then, in order for that to happen. I followed the normal procedure in such circumstances of tabling a blocking motion. As one does, I hoped that such a motion would cause the promoter of the Bill to come to talk about what might appease me. I said that new rolling stock would, and I was told, "Fine, done." I therefore had great expectations. That rolling stock was to have been the type 321, which now comprise a substantial part of the rolling stock on the Great Eastern line. We were deprived of it because DfT officials, and, I suspect, the Treasury behind them, had gone over things with a tape measure to see how many people could be crammed into this tube of metal. The result was that the design interior was worse in the first-class compartments than in the standard class. That became an outrage, and the whole lot had to be taken away and re-engineered. It then reappeared on the Great Eastern line, but these trains, too, are tired now.

The rolling stock that came on the West Anglia line after that fiasco was the type 317. Type 317s do not have fitted to them what are politely called "container tanks", and use of the lavatory on those trains is pretty crude so far as disposal is concerned. Their reliability is terrible, and the acceleration capacity of the type 321 trains is inadequate for the sort of track improvements that we can hope to get. We will not get the extra track that we need and that we would like on both rail lines—that will not come soon—so the new trains, which are needed for comfort and capacity reasons, must be able to use the advantage of crossings being taken out to take minutes off their various journeys. That is what we are looking for, and that is what the bidders must come up with.

We can take some comfort from the fact that Crossrail 1 will come into operation in a year or two's time, which will bring some relief to passengers on the southern end of the Great Eastern line, and there is a glimmer of hope that Crossrail 2 might also feature to build the business case for the West Anglia main line.

As we know from experience and from what our constituents tell us, we cannot run fast trains and slow trains on a two-track system, so the relationship between the successful bidder for this franchise and the infrastructure company is crucial. One hopes that the Department will try to ensure that the relationship works better than it has done in the past. We do not want to hear, "Well, the trains were all right, but it was the points, the signals or the overhead wires that went." Both things have to be right, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds was right to emphasise that.

Understandably, we are promoting the case for expenditure for the benefit of our constituents, but what is important is that improvements benefit the

[*Sir Alan Haselhurst*]

whole line—whether we are talking about the short journey to Shenfield, the fast journey to Chelmsford, or the journeys to Ipswich, Norwich, Stansted airport or Cambridge. Even the intervening stations need a better service. What struck me quite recently was that the sector of London through which our lines pass has been the most neglected part of the city, so it too would benefit from investment in this line and the whole new service approach.

I hope that the demonstrable unity we have shown tonight—there is no difference in view on party lines or on whether we represent inner London, mid-London, outer London or the coast—proves that we speak with a united voice, which I hope is heard very clearly in the Department.

6.47 pm

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) on securing this debate. The fact that so many Members are present in the Chamber shows just how important the debate is. I am particularly pleased to see on the Front Bench—it is not often that we see so many Ministers in an Adjournment debate—my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) because they, with my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), were on the taskforce that was created by the Chancellor and that has done so much work to identify and then promote what we need on our railway.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) said, we are of course fighting for a better service for our constituents, but it is not solely a better service for them. East Anglia is an economic engine, and that engine needs to be sustained by improving communications. I am talking about the communications of commuters who commute on the line—whether it is into London to work in the City or into other parts of East Anglia. The benefits will also be felt by the freight service, which all too often has to come down on the main commuter line from Felixstowe to London to then go back up north. We need far greater improvements on the line from Felixstowe to Nuneaton to open up capacity on the lines down to London and up to Norwich.

Tomorrow is, of course, crucial because of the franchise and its implications for the future of our railways. The Minister will probably get bored stupid hearing this—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): Never!

Sir Simon Burns: The Minister is very kind, and she can add to saying “never” by doing what we want. What we want and what we have to have is new rolling stock. Our rolling stock is archaic. It breaks down too frequently. Most of the eastern line from Liverpool Street, Chelmsford, Colchester and Ipswich to Norwich has two tracks—one up, one down—and if a train breaks down, particularly during the morning or early evening rush hours, there is utter chaos, with all the suffering that that entails. We must ensure, within the confines of the franchise wording, that whoever is successful in that bid and gets the franchise from October next year is under no

misunderstanding—no ifs, no buts—about the fact that we will have new rolling stock that is fit for purpose for our railway needs.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I join in the general congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) on obtaining this debate, but will my right hon. Friend concur with two things? First, the service has become intolerable. Our commuters have had enough, and we should not be asking them to put up with a service continuing at this level. Secondly, I am afraid that the capacity of the network is not up to standard. We will have more housing in Essex, and unless we have improvements in capacity, we will go on having a vulnerable and unsatisfactory network.

Sir Simon Burns: My hon. Friend raises two important issues, which I will deal with briefly because other hon. Friends want to take part in the debate. First, capacity is a problem because the railway has two lines. We can take measures to help to improve it, one of which will be the loop to the north of Witham that will allow fast trains to overtake slower ones, which will increase the number of trains that can run on the line, particularly in the rush hour. Secondly, we need to identify other areas that can have loops. Sadly, because of the nature of the railway, we cannot put in more lines. For example, two more lines could not be put through my constituency, Chelmsford, to increase capacity, simply because the railway is enveloped by housing and businesses, and doing so is not physically possible. I certainly would not advocate knocking down houses for that railway expansion. With that constraint, we must look at other imaginative ways in which to increase capacity. We also need to ensure that all trains have 12 carriages during the rush hour and that we do not have some with eight carriages, as we certainly do at the moment.

Finally, the Minister can have as good a franchise as she wants and she can find as excellent a rail service provider as she can get, but that will not release the full potential that can be developed if Network Rail gets its act together and stops engineering works overrunning into Mondays and ensures that, when there are signal failures, track problems or overhead electricity cable failures, the work is done swiftly and efficiently to minimise disruption to the service. I know from previous conversations that the Minister is acutely aware of the dissatisfaction not only of right hon. and hon. Members, but of our constituents who use the service and pay for it day in day out, year in year out. I know that she, too, is determined to find a service provider who recognises their responsibilities to improve reliability and the quality of the service and to ensure that we have new rolling stock. I also know that she and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport are working to ensure that Network Rail gets its act together, so that we do not have unnecessary problems that cause disruption to our constituents.

6.54 pm

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) for calling for this debate. As is eminently clear, we are a united team here tonight arguing for our rail network in East Anglia at a very important moment.

When I was traveling back to my constituency a couple of weeks ago, the train was, rarely, a moment ahead of schedule and the announcer said over the tannoy, “Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to say you have arrived in Norwich...”. He meant to say, “You have arrived in Norwich a minute early,” which is a record-breaking feat. The surprise that nobody in the carriage felt was that we had arrived. It can take all too long sitting on those trains to East Anglia and not being entirely sure of arriving at all. That hapless announcer had managed to make one of the best jokes in the book—that people do arrive when they are trying to go to East Anglia.

I wish to thank the team of colleagues and the many businesses out in our constituencies who contributed to the report of the Great Eastern main line taskforce. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns). I pay tribute, too, to the work of the New Anglia local enterprise partnership, the Essex chamber of commerce and others throughout our three counties who have contributed extensively to this work, and I thank the passengers who have supported it, because it is for them that we do this work. It is for them that we make sure we have a bright future for our economy. It is for them, travelling every day on a poor service, that we want to make these differences.

When we launched the report, we had more than 111,000 passengers represented by the organisations behind the campaign. That is a force to be reckoned with and I know that my hon. Friend the Minister sees that as she looks at East Anglia. She knows the prize that we are aiming for—the opportunity to create jobs in Norwich, Ipswich, Chelmsford, Colchester, and up and down the line, including the smaller towns which are often forgotten but which are crucial. I am talking about figures of the order of 8,200 new jobs in my city, Norwich, just under 10,000 new jobs in Ipswich, and some 30,000 new jobs throughout Essex. That is what we stand to gain through this campaign, and that is why it is so crucial.

The Minister is well aware of the strength of the East Anglian economy. It is a regional economy. It is, in the phrase of my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich, the “California of Europe”, or so it would be if it was served by better transport links, and that is the key point of our campaign. Let us not forget that it is also a major destination for many thousands of tourists who want to come there every year, but who get stuck. It is not good enough for people to be unable to get to the destination of our wonderful counties.

Let me give an example from the business world. One of our colleagues on the campaign team was escorting an investor from quite far around the globe to East Anglia to talk about a new business venture, the kind of thing that builds the jobs that we have spoken about. That investor stood on the platform at Liverpool Street contemplating the candy cane of the cancellations board and said, “But I can’t invest in this. This is no good. Is it normally like this?”, and our colleague had to say yes. That is what sets our region back. We want an end to such disappointment.

It has not been good enough to have some of the oldest rolling stock in the country. It has not been good enough to have delays. It has not been good enough to

have unreliability. I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) will talk about some of the day-to-day economic impacts that that can have. At a time of year when people want security in their working lives and security for their families, it is not good enough.

We have been looking this week at an astronaut going into space and we are all extremely excited to see Major Tim Peake’s progress. When I heard the numbers involved, I could not help but think of a comparison. When I understood that he was going to travel 250 miles from the orbit of earth to the international space station, I thought to myself, “Well, that’s only double the distance between London and Norwich.” Then I heard that he was going to take six hours to cover the distance from the orbit trail to the ISS, and I thought, “That’s about a good day on one of the weekend services to our county,” and I thought, “We could do better than that.” Let us see rocket boosters on our rail franchise—that is what we need. We have the opportunity to do this. We have made significant progress so far. We are on the cusp of a franchise that will give us new trains, and on the cusp of proper investment through Network Rail that will enable us to have the investment in the track that we need.

My call to action is this: we need passengers to continue to have faith in this campaign.

7 pm

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

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

Chloe Smith: Passengers have been patient and persevered with us through long years in getting this far. Let us make this a reality for them in the next 10 years. In the words of one passenger who supported our campaign:

“I am utterly supportive of this campaign to improve...the rail journey...It’s a challenge on no small scale but worth every effort over the years to come.”

7.1 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) on calling for this debate at such a timely moment. I associate myself with the comments of all my right hon. and hon. Friends about the importance of this franchise to the future of our regional economy.

I want to focus on one specific and increasingly infamous incident on our railway line in East Anglia in recent weeks. In fact, it is so infamous it has now earned its own title—leafgate. It was the recent closure of two branch lines in Suffolk for 13 days as a result of leaves on the line. The key thing is that they were closed not because of leaves on those lines but because of leaves on other lines in Suffolk, meaning that there were not enough diesel engines to go around. The lines from Sudbury to Marks Tey and from Felixstowe to Ipswich were closed because they were the easiest to close. Try telling that to passengers spending thousands of pounds a year on their season tickets!

We were given very good excuses by Abellio Greater Anglia for this debacle, and I am sure that it had very good reasons. It said that there was unprecedented leaf fall creating unprecedentedly strong leaf mulch, which meant that our relatively old diesel trains could not cope and were taken out of service. The whole problem

[James Cartlidge]

came down to the fact that when they had to go to the depots, the only places with a wheel lathe that could fix them were in Derby and Ilford, not in East Anglia.

This has been a very disappointing and depressing episode, particularly for my constituents in Sudbury. Sudbury is the largest town in my constituency and it has the only railway station in my constituency. While I accept the importance of the main line—my constituents use Colchester, Manningtree and Ipswich in large numbers—Sudbury has our only station. Sudbury is a very proud town. We have had a difficult year. We had a massive fire this summer, the biggest for decades, which destroyed some of the most ancient buildings in the heart of our town. The residents are a pretty stoic bunch, but when they were told that they would have no rail service for two weeks because of leaves on a different line, it was pretty humiliating for them. I have to say that it was pretty humiliating for me to have to deal with ever-angrier constituents.

We recognised that the one positive was the rare window of leverage because of what is happening tomorrow with the franchise. That gave us a rare opportunity to get stuck in. I wrote a letter to the Minister, who has been as helpful as she can be in what is clearly one of the hardest jobs in the Government. The letter was signed by all hon. Members with stations on the two branch lines. My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) has Chappel and Wakes Colne. My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) has Bures, which is the station that I use.

In the letter, we asked for two things in particular: whether the franchise could be amended or a letter sent to the bidders to ask them to ensure that when they bid they have a robust contingency to ensure that we do not have another leafgate next year. After all, I remind my hon. Friend the Minister that this franchise goes live in October, when leaves do have a habit of falling off the trees—it is not unprecedented. We have been promised root and branch reform on our branch line—[HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”]—and we look forward to it. [Interruption.] That was a terrible line; my right hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise is absolutely right—very poor service.

I was delighted to receive a written answer yesterday from my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State saying that Network Rail and Abellio Greater Anglia

“have secured the services of John Curley, a respected railway industry professional, to hold an independent review of the factors and circumstances that conspired to affect services so badly. We expect this review to identify the root cause of failures and highlight lessons that need to be learned for the future. We expect corrective action to be taken wherever practicable to avoid recurrence in the future.

I can confirm that the results of the review will be made available to the winning bidder of the current East Anglia franchise competition.”

I welcome that. Will Mr Curley be able to meet local Members of Parliament and visit our constituencies? Although there is not much cash, I am happy to walk the line with him, if need be.

The key point is that branch lines are often overlooked. The main line service is important and I support all the measures for which my hon. Friends the Members for Ipswich (Ben Gummer) and for Norwich North

(Chloe Smith) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) have been pressing. But we must not forget our branch lines. Many thousands of passengers rely on them.

The town of Sudbury is proud of our railway line, which avoided the Beeching axe—it just about got through. We still just about have a train, but for two weeks we had to have a bus. We do not want a bus; we want a train and a decent rail service. That is what we expect in Suffolk and across East Anglia, and this is the key moment. We expect great things from the franchise, so we hope that tomorrow we will turn a new page—a new leaf.

7.6 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), not only on securing this powerful and timely debate, but on giving us a platform on which to make some very important points. [Interruption.] That was not intended to be a pun, I hasten to add.

Not only is the town I represent the oldest recorded town in the country, it is also the fastest growing. Tens of thousands of homes have been built there and we are a massive tourist destination. We are also a commuter town and we have a large university. We have huge numbers of small and medium-sized enterprises and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) has said, Essex is an economic powerhouse. Therefore, tens of thousands of commuters in our county are being let down. The service does not represent value for money. The minimum cost of an annual ticket from Colchester to London is £4,800, so people expect to be able to get into work and to get home in time to see their families.

A number of points have already been raised eloquently by other right hon. and hon. Members. I will not dwell on all of them, but I want to touch on a few. On Abellio and communications, it is totally unacceptable to leave people sitting on a stationary train for 20 or 30 minutes without making an announcement and for them then to find out via Twitter why the train has not moved. One thing that has to get better as part of any new franchise—it will not cost a penny—is communication with customers. That has to happen.

A number of Members have already pointed out that some of our trains are more than 40 years old. We have trains that dispose of human excrement on to the tracks, not just on the line at various points, but even at stations. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) has said that he is happy to walk the line, but I am absolutely not happy to do so, because it is a public health risk.

I write to Network Rail regularly—I think I am becoming a bit of a pest—and it keeps telling me that it is investing £170 million this year. I pass that information on to my commuters and rail users, who keep telling me—I am very sympathetic to this view—“Well, show us the evidence, because it isn’t there at the moment.” There are consistent delays, signal failures and track problems—they face delay after delay after delay.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds made this point eloquently: our commuters are really informed. As our Twitter feeds will demonstrate, it is very hard to keep up with non-train-related tweets, because of the sheer volume of train-related tweets. We

cannot keep saying, “Jam tomorrow.” We cannot get around the fact that they are well aware that £1.4 billion has gone back into the Department for Transport over the past 10 years. They know that this line has not had the investment it has deserved over decades.

On the new franchise, I do not think that the requirements or requests are unreasonable. They include new trains, wi-fi, power sockets and toilets that do not flush human excrement on to the lines. I do not think that that is much to ask. It is reasonable for commuters to expect to be able to get a seat and to have a power supply and wi-fi so that they can work, and if their trains are on time not all of the time but most of the time, that would be an improvement. They deserve that.

I want to pay tribute and give credit to my right hon. Friends the Members for Chelmsford and for Witham (Priti Patel), and my hon. Friends the Members for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) and for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin). They have played a huge role on the Great Eastern main line taskforce. The evidence of that is clear to see in its fantastic report.

I sit on the Transport Committee, which has recently agreed to launch an inquiry into our line. Both Network Rail and Abellio keep saying, “Jam tomorrow”, but we still have to wait until next October and, quite frankly, commuters have had enough. I do not blame them, because I use the train line as well. We talk about jobs that may be created through the new franchise, but what worries me most is the very serious issue of the jobs being lost now.

When I made that point in the Transport Committee, I based it on the anecdotal evidence I have received of jobs being put under threat. That is happening through choice, with people saying, “I can’t cope with this any more, given the constant delays and not getting home to my family”. However, there is also the pressure being applied by employers because people are not getting into work on time. After the Transport Committee had agreed to the inquiry, I started to receive actual evidence. One individual’s contract has been terminated, and they were told, “It is not to do with your performance, which we think has been excellent, but because your rail line”—specific reference was made to the operator—“means you have not been able to get into work on time.” That is totally unacceptable, and it is why the inquiry is very important. I also very much welcome the independent review, which my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk mentioned.

The performance of Abellio and Network Rail recently has been shambolic, verging on incompetent. I do not use those words lightly. Commuters and rail users from Colchester and across East Anglia deserve so much better. We must ensure, as part of the new franchise, that services get better. I want to say to the Minister that the one thing our commuters and rail users want for Christmas is a franchise that gets them to work and gets them back on time to see their families, and I hope that we can make that happen.

7.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): Before I respond to an incredibly powerful set of speeches, may I crave your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, to put on the record my thanks to the

staff of this place, who have done so much for us over the year? In my view, they never get thanked enough and I am truly grateful to them.

We have a star-studded Chamber for this Adjournment debate. Such debates are usually very ill-attended. I think there are more Members here than we had for the previous debate. It is quite terrifying to face this star-studded pack tonight. They represent—if I have not left anyone out—the fine counties of Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex and Cambridgeshire. They have very passionately and powerfully made the case for improvements in our railways.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill). Like many new Members in the Chamber she has been an assiduous correspondent and lobbyist for improvements in her railways. She has focused specifically on the requirements of her constituents and on what the improvements will bring to the broader area.

I am pleased that I have the time to try to set out what we are attempting to achieve with the franchising process. There is a tension between specifying everything, crowding out any form of innovation in the market and not being able to cope with franchise change and setting out more broadly what we expect bidders to deliver, while letting them come up with the right solutions.

My hon. Friend, like others, very powerfully made her point about the need for new rolling stock. Indeed, she referred to what is currently running as “decrepit and aged”. We have discussed this matter, so she will know that we absolutely expect the rolling stock on the whole franchise to be transformed, because we completely agree with the assertions made about its unsuitability for purpose. But we want the market to go away and find the best solutions for customers, based on what different customers along the routes may need. There is a combination of inter-city, metro and suburban services, and we want the bidders to be creative in what they come up with. I can, however, tell my hon. Friends that the score that we will give to rolling stock in this franchise process is the highest ever. We are no longer in the business, as previous Governments were, of letting franchises purely on the economics. That did a huge disservice to the customers who use the routes. Now, the process asks what the economics look like and, crucially, what the quality looks like for the passengers. Rolling stock provision will have the highest score ever in this franchise.

We will also have very clear customer performance targets in the franchise. I was shocked to find out that we used to let operators set their own. How can we possibly run a contract with an operator if we do not know what we are contracting for? I of course want to contract for measures such as punctuality and reliability, but crucially I want to contract for customers, because these are not empty boxes rolling around the network; they are boxes full of people, often over-full of people, trying to get to their jobs or home to their lives. I reassure right hon. and hon. Members that we are expecting a transformation in the quality of the rolling stock.

Turning briefly to stations, I know that my hon. Friend’s station is a grand old building that features all of 20 car parking spaces. We should expect to see real improvements at that station and at many stations across the network. We have asked bidders to make those improvements. We have asked them to work against a 40-year asset management strategy. We are trying to

[*Claire Perry*]

extend the management of the assets beyond the franchise period to ensure that investment proposals can be properly made for the stations in the franchise. We will look at those proposals in the bids and hold bidders to account against them.

Turning briefly to routes and services, I was delighted that we were able to confirm the absolute requirement for Norwich in 90 and Ipswich in 60. I pay tribute to the group that has been led so ably by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith); my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), who have to remain silent as they are on the Front Bench; and my dear friend the former rail Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns). That group has become the poster child for how to do it.

I am the most popular Minister and, in a way, the most unpopular Minister, because I am deluged in the Lobbies and at other times by people who want to talk about railways. What I say to them is, "Go and look at what was done in this study", because, for the first time, it tried to capture that elusive thing that we all know is there: it asked, if we invest a bit of money in transport, what is the broader economic value that it delivers?

You will be amazed to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, or perhaps you will not, that every major infrastructure project in this country—the extension of the Jubilee line, HS1, the M25—has failed the economic value test that the Government have imposed on it, because such projects are looked at through a very narrow prism that does not factor in the economic value added that good transport investment brings. This group broke that mould and created a model—we are working hard to see how to capture this—that showed what we all instinctively know to be true: that if we invest in transport infrastructure, we grow the local, regional and national economy. That is an incredibly important point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds asks why no half-hourly service is specified between Ipswich and Cambridge, via Bury St Edmunds.

Matthew Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con): And Newmarket.

Claire Perry: I do understand the need for special services on race days, my right hon. Friend will be pleased to hear.

Such a service has been looked at carefully and I looked at it again today. Two things would need to happen to make it work. The first is a series of infrastructure investments, including in the Ely North junction, which several Members have referenced. The disappointing news on that is that the original project cost of about £30 million to £40 million has escalated to more than £130 million in the current analysis. Given that we are in the business of delivering infrastructure against the very tight Hendy review, with a known amount of funding, that is simply not acceptable. The team has been sent away to look at how that work could be delivered more cost-effectively.

Other works such as doubling track, putting in passing loops or improving signalling capability would also need to happen to deliver a robust service. I believe that

work will be done on that as part of the analysis going into the next control period, which starts in four years' time.

Alternatively, a service could be provided that skips stops. One challenge on our network is that we always want stops from everywhere to anywhere, but it is also possible to provide fast and semi-fast services with slightly different stopping patterns. The beauty of having a unified group of people who work intelligently together, is that they can work out what such a measure might look like for the benefit of the region. I do not suggest that there should be a bidding process for whose station will be missed out, but we could consider whether there is a way to serve better an enormous housing development or a new town by using existing infrastructure.

It has become clear that we are good in this country at specifying enormous investments in infrastructure without necessarily thinking more creatively about how we could deliver that solution through better rolling stock or minor track improvements. For example, we might not necessarily need dual tracking, but perhaps there could be some passing places, and I encourage people to work on that.

Chloe Smith: I am grateful to have another moment to speak in this debate. The Minister has asked for a couple of fast services that will achieve Norwich in 90 and Ipswich in 60. Will she confirm that in a way those are bonuses, because the true version of Norwich in 90 and Ipswich in 60, and the better services that we all look for, will come when we have new trains and improved infrastructure? Those extras are just that—extras—until we can achieve the long-term goal.

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and controlling the franchise levers is the first step in the process. We expect bidders to exceed what we have asked for in the franchise, because we are saying "This is the minimum that we expect". We will, of course, award the franchise to the bidder that is able to exceed those minimums, including with possible additional services. When the bids come in tomorrow I have no idea what they will contain, but we are confidently expecting those specifications to be exceeded.

As I have said, I am confident that the winning bidder for this franchise will deliver huge, tangible, transformational improvements that are commensurate with the economic weight of the region. We will see route improvements, and we have set out what we expect as a minimum. However, this is not set in stone; this is a starting point. When the franchise starts up next October, there will be every opportunity to change routes, add additional service patterns or new stations—that has happened across the country—improve timetables, and deliver better scheduled services, or even special services such as to Newmarket on race days.

I urge Members to continue to work together, pulling in the excellent provision of help and information from the local enterprise partnership and local businesses, and to help us make the business case for the improvements to infrastructure that the Government will make. We must also work with the operators to encourage them to change their patterns.

We have heard from several hon. Members tonight, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst), who is an assiduous campaigner on this issue, re-emphasised the absolute

importance of new rolling stock in this franchise. Crucially, he also mentioned the linkage of rail services to airports. I am lucky not to have airports in my portfolio, or indeed HS2, but the linkage of rail services to airports is vital. He will be pleased to know that already an early morning service has been introduced from Liverpool Street to Stansted, because it turned out that more than 500 people a night were sleeping at the airport because they could not get there early enough. That has now changed, and a new service is running.

Peter Aldous: The Minister is setting out her case well. As well as linkage to airports, in such a rural area we also need linkage to public transport and buses.

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend makes a good point about integrating the transport system so that it works for people who might take a bus or drive a car, and who need a car parking space before they get on the train. We must assume that transport plays that role.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) made a wonderful speech and referenced the importance of freight, which is a particular boon and issue on these lines. I am very sympathetic to the issue of freight disrupting passenger traffic. We need more freight paths. Freight is strategically important to productivity and air quality. The more freight we can get off the road and on to trains the better. My Department will be undertaking a strategic freight review. I am very pleased that in the spending review we preserved the majority of funding for freight.

Mr Carswell: Regardless of who is awarded the franchise, does the Minister agree that unless we address the fundamental issue of corporate governance and accountability, and the underlying problem, which is Network Rail and its mediocre service, we will not see the transformative change she wants? A year ago almost to the day, we had a debate in Westminster Hall about this. I would be interested to hear if she has given the issue any further thought.

Claire Perry: We have made huge progress on Network Rail's governance. It is now an arm's length public sector body. I think Sir Peter Hendy, the current chair, will transform the organisation.

Jo Churchill: I urge the Minister to have a conversation with the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones). Moving freight on to the railway has such an impact. We were talking only earlier this week about freight travelling down the A14. Freight trains can take up to 35 containers. If we could get that freight, at a whoosh, off the A14, it would have a really big impact on the roads.

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is right. *[Interruption.]* Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) says, "Off the A12 too". My hon. Friend will be interested to know that one fully loaded freight train can take up to 72 HGVs off the road. That is astonishing. That is why we make money available through the modal shift grant and for the strategic freight network.

I really cannot pay tribute enough to my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith). She has been a live wire of co-ordination and energy as the person to whom others must come and talk. I do not

feel I am in a position to deliver rocket-powered trains just yet, but I would certainly like to try. Maybe there will be a train called Major Tim very soon, which would satisfy her.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) raised the very worrying issue of leafgate. There is an important point here. I would be happy to confirm I will ask Mr Curley to meet representatives of his constituents and others. The question for me is this: what is the productivity loss to the British economy from accepting the fact that every year for a few weeks we are all late for work by 10, 15 or 20 minutes? I want to start looking at investments in our rail network through the prism of passengers and of productivity, because the two things are linked. We are making people late consistently, year after year after year, because of leaves on the line. Other places do not shut the lines, he will be pleased to hear, but they do slow down trains and run them slowly. People are cautious. I used to refute leaf stickiness as nonsense, but it is a problem. And it is not just us who face this: the Netherlands have a problem and Germany has a problem. Let us have a pan-European get-rid-of-leaves-on-the-line prize. The productivity improvement it could deliver for the British economy would be huge. I am determined that the productivity improvements rail can deliver are factored into the investment decision.

Lucy Frazer: It is concerning that the cost of improvements to the Ely North junction have gone up. If the improvements come in early in control period 6—we very much hope they will—it might still be possible to have them finished in the franchise period, which we all want, so we ask her not to rule that out.

Claire Perry: I rule nothing out on that point. I am very keen that what is funded and delivered will be delivered by Network Rail in this period.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who has already, in the first few months of this Parliament, been such an incredible campaigner for his constituency. He raises the very important point that we are not in the business of peddling jam tomorrow. That is why we have to deliver what is in the Hendy review, and that is why we have to make this franchise absolutely deliver for all passengers.

I want to make a couple of final points. First, we are in an unprecedented place for rail. We are investing more in our rail network than at any time since Victorian times. We will spend £38 billion on our railways over this period, and I am bound and determined that that money is spent for passengers who can see and feel the benefit. I urge this group, who are working so well together, to bring their collective intelligence and the network effect that one of my hon. Friends talked about to help us make the business case for these improvements. The benefits are much, much broader than the narrow rail prism that we often use.

Question put and agreed to.

7.30 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

PETROLEUM

That the draft Onshore Hydraulic Fracturing (Protected Areas) Regulations 2015, which were laid before this House on 16 July, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 298, Noes 261.

Division No. 151]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bellingham, Mr Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, Alun
Cameron, rh Mr David
Carmichael, Neil
Carswell, Mr Douglas
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colvile, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris

Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Nusrat
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, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen

Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
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
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria

Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Osborne, rh Mr George
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi

Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin

Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Khan, rh Sadiq
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
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McCartney, Jason
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart
C.

Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O'Hara, Brendan
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Salmond, rh Alex
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds,
Nick

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Cox, Jo
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Mr David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John

Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Docherty, Martin John
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dromey, Jack
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elliott, Tom
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Flelo, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Hamilton, Fabian
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn

Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Khan, rh Sadiq
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
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McCartney, Jason
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart
C.
McDonnell, John
McGarry, Natalie
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
Mearns, Ian

Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Salmond, rh Alex
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds,
Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turner, Mr Andrew
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith

Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh

Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David

Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah

Woodcock, John
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 16 December 2015

[MR DAVID NUTTALL *in the Chair*]

Community Transport

9.30 am

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the provision of community transport.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I am delighted to have been successful in securing my first Westminster Hall debate on such an important issue. Community transport lies at the heart of our community and is greatly valued by many of our constituents. It occupies a unique central ground between the passenger transport industry and the voluntary sector, providing innovative solutions to the otherwise unmet transport needs of local residents.

When we think of community transport, our thoughts immediately turn to the elderly and disabled as the two main user groups, and in large part that is true. Services such as community bus services, hospital transport and dial-a-ride help the elderly and the disabled to lead independent lives and participate fully in their communities on a daily basis. However, community transport services extend further to support other user groups such as schools, working people and scout and guide groups with schemes such as wheels to work and minibus hire. Community transport fills the gap when conventional transport services cannot fully meet the needs of the public.

I am pleased to say that last year, Erewash Community Transport in my constituency celebrated 30 years of service to local residents. Sadly, last month we learned that Derbyshire County Council is to cut Erewash Community Transport's funding from next April, which will see the group lose nearly £150,000 and will spell the end of both the dial-a-bus service, which transports people to shops and supermarkets, and the active travel service, which takes people to medical appointments.

Erewash Community Transport, together with other Derbyshire community transport groups, organised a petition to request that the county council review that decision. However, the council simply refused to listen and instead reverted to its default position of blaming the Government. The truth is that at a time when the Government have committed to invest £25 million in new community transport minibuses, Derbyshire County Council continues to waste vast sums of taxpayers' money while cutting vital public services.

Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act shows that the council has spent more than £150,000 with a London-based public relations company run by a former assistant general secretary of the Labour party, and it paid £219,000 to get rid of its former chief executive. The new post of assistant chief executive costs £83,000, each cabinet member has received an allowance rise of £3,000, and 107 council employees are accredited to take time off for trade union duties at the local taxpayers' expense. The list goes on.

This is a council that mismanages its finances for political gain while the elderly, vulnerable and disabled of Erewash are left to suffer, yet its accounts clearly state that it has more than £55 million stashed away in general reserves. The Government back anyone who wants to save, but, when it comes to the loss of services such as community transport, surely it is far more prudent either to use some of those reserves or, better still, cut some of the waste, so that Derbyshire's community transport schemes can be supported at least until other funding streams can be secured.

We should consider two other key factors when discussing the loss of community transport services: the cost to the local economy and the impact on service users' physical and mental health. Schemes such as dial-a-bus are used frequently by our elderly and vulnerable people to access local town centres, supermarkets or even pubs, helping them to retain their independence. In turn, they contribute to the local economy and provide a welcome boost to many of our high street shops. If the service were to stop suddenly, that income would be greatly missed by our small retailers, many of whom rely on regular, loyal customers to survive.

When it comes to health, community transport helps local health and wellbeing boards to deliver their obligations under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, which cannot and should not be ignored. We have not even considered the benefits to the many community transport volunteers, who are often the newly retired, such as helping them to keep fit and active with a purpose in life.

I understand the need for organisations such as Erewash Community Transport to diversify their funding streams, but the pace and scale of Derbyshire County Council's changes concern me. With effectively just a four month notice period for a dramatic cut in funding, Erewash Community Transport does not have the time or capacity to look for alternative funding streams, which are out there for it to find if Derbyshire County Council would give it a longer stay of execution.

Recently, as a member of the Select Committee on Health, I visited Halifax as part of our primary care inquiry. I was able to learn about the diverse funding streams that Community Transport Calderdale has managed to develop. That organisation lost its local authority funding a number of years ago, yet it is now thriving. It works closely with Calderdale clinical commissioning group to help deliver its vanguard project, as well as with other third sector organisations such as Age UK. It gets funding from the CCG to provide transport for emergency visits to hospital for respiratory patients, which prevents the need for in-patient stays.

Community Transport Calderdale also provides "home from hospital", a free-of-charge service that helps elderly and vulnerable residents in Calderdale and greater Huddersfield with transport home after a stay in hospital. The service provides a safe, supported, wheelchair-accessible journey home from hospitals in the region. Patients can also be met at home by Age UK, which offers immediate help and arranges further support for those who need it. I am sure that Community Transport Calderdale will be viable for many years to come.

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful argument. Her example demonstrates that community transport is not just for rural areas, but

[Chloe Smith]

for urban and suburban areas. Does she agree that examples from across the country, such as Norwich Door to Door and its hard-working volunteers, should be included in the debate because they serve many different types of communities?

Maggie Throup: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Community transport services are valuable throughout the country, whether in rural, urban or suburban areas. It is a shame to see them being put under such pressure and cut, taking away vital services. She gives a good example from her community.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady accept that part of the reason for the changes, and the pace of those changes, is that her Government have imposed budgets on Derbyshire County Council that take something like £60 million from its budget, while she has identified only tens of thousands of pounds of potential savings in areas such as the chief executive's salary?

Maggie Throup: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but it is not just tens of thousands of pounds from getting rid of or changing the chief executive—

Neil Coyle: Sixty million pounds.

Maggie Throup: But we are talking about £150,000 for Erewash Community Transport, so the council would not need to manage its finances much better to pay for that service. I therefore disagree with the hon. Gentleman. It is quite well within Derbyshire County Council's ability to fund the service for longer.

I conclude with a short story provided by the Community Transport Association, which does fantastic work in supporting local community groups and lobbying Government effectively on their behalf. It illustrates perfectly the impact the services in question have on people's lives and why we should do everything we can to support them. Jenny from Green Community Travel, which operates in South Gloucestershire, says:

"We had a passenger who did not have any family living locally to him, when his spouse was admitted to hospital it was very difficult for him to visit her. I know we all think about getting older but I can't imagine how difficult it must be after spending every day with someone for over 50 years then having to find ways to see them or not be sure if you can see your spouse on that day!"

That was at Christmas, and the gentleman was anxious about not seeing his wife on Christmas day—it would have been the first Christmas they had spent apart in 50 years.

Jenny mentioned the situation to a volunteer called Stuart, who said he did not mind taking the gentleman to see his wife on Christmas day. On Christmas morning, he took the gentleman to visit his wife for a couple of hours. Community transport therefore plays an important role in not just medical appointments but all such hospital visits—it is about going above and beyond. Jenny went on to say that the generosity of people in this line of work never ceases to amaze her. Hats off to Stuart for going the extra mile and for making that couple's Christmas a happier one than it might have been.

Up and down the country, such stories are typical in the community transport movement. There are many Stuarts going above and beyond to make a difference to those who might otherwise be isolated from society, and I am sure other Members present will have their own stories.

In Erewash, I have had many pleas from residents to do whatever I can to save their community transport—their lifeline. Connie Clark is no exception, and nothing would give me greater pleasure than being able to tell her that her community bus has been saved and to see the huge beaming smile on her face. I am sure it would be the best Christmas present ever for her. I therefore thank the Government for their continued support for community transport, and I commend the motion to the House.

9.41 am

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I thank the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) for securing the debate, although I disagree with some of her critique of Derbyshire County Council, which is obviously responding to significant budget changes. That is a direct result of her political choices in the House and her support for the budgets that we will see over the next three years, which will mean £60 million disappearing from the council's resources.

The hon. Lady mentioned the £25 million that the Government are setting aside for community transport, which should be welcome. Part of that funding is for the community transport minibus fund, which should be a very positive scheme. In March 2015, not long before the May election, 400 organisations across the country were told they had been awarded community transport minibus funding from the Department for Transport. One was Lewisham and Southwark Age UK, which is a fantastic organisation serving my constituents. Nine months ago it was told it would receive support, but it is still waiting—it is yet to receive funding or a vehicle from the Department for Transport. It gave the Department for Transport its specifications some time ago, but it has no idea what has caused this significant delay, which obviously affects its ability to serve older and disadvantaged people in my community.

It would be helpful if the Minister could outline what has happened to the community transport minibus fund. What is causing such significant delays for Lewisham and Southwark Age UK and the rest of those 400 organisations? Is the delay being caused by a centralising tendency, with the Department trying to commission 400 identikit minibuses? Has the Department considered the impact of delays on such organisations? Should it provide additional resources to mitigate problems that have been caused during the period when organisations thought they would have support that has not arrived? It would be brilliant if the Minister could answer some of those questions.

9.44 am

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall? I think this is the first time I have served under you in Westminster Hall. I congratulate my colleague from Derbyshire, my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash

(Maggie Throup), on securing what is a very important debate, particularly in Derbyshire. She mentioned many of the things I was going to say, but I will repeat some of them.

I want to talk specifically about the provision of community transport in my constituency. Despite its name, Glossop Community Transport serves not only Glossop, but residents across my whole constituency, so people should not be taken in by the name. The organisation was started in Glossop, and it is based there, but it looks after the whole of my large, rural constituency. A few years ago, I did a week out with different voluntary organisations, including a day with Glossop Community Transport. During that day, we did a variety of tasks. We went round picking up the elderly and vulnerable. We took them to the local shops and supermarkets. I was to be seen going round with trollies of food for the elderly and helping them with their weekly shopping.

As well as enabling people to get to the shops, the dial-a-bus service provides a valuable social benefit. When I was on the bus, I saw that there is a sense of camaraderie. It is almost like a social occasion; people go out and chat with each other. We talk a lot about exclusion; this is a great way of getting people together. There was a great sense of fun on the bus. A photograph was taken of me on the bus, and a couple of old ladies at the back were pulling faces behind me and stuff like that.

Chloe Smith: I bet they were.

Andrew Bingham: Yes, can you believe it? However, it is a fabulous service.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It was fear in their eyes.

Andrew Bingham: No, I do not think it was fear. Some may say it was lust, but I could not possibly comment.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Steady on.

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Order.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): At this point, I will ask my hon. Friend to allow me to intervene.

Andrew Bingham: Yes, I think I had better have a sit down—we are all getting very hot under the collar.

Victoria Prentis: The debate is going to places that community transport does not normally reach.

Andrew Bingham: I said it was a good service.

Victoria Prentis: I am grateful for the marvellous volunteers who operate from the town of Banbury. They provide a good service for those who, sadly, have to travel to hospital, particularly early in the morning, when other forms of transport are not available. Does my hon. Friend agree, however, that other parts of the community also need services that are not provided by public buses, such as young people who have finished their education and who need to travel to work? People such as young apprentices also need to be able to take some form of public transport in rural constituencies.

Andrew Bingham: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There are so many potential uses for community transport, and she has remarked on just one.

The door-to-door service that operates in High Peak is trusted, consistent and valued. When we took people home with their shopping, we did not just drop them off; I helped them to the door, as the drivers do every week. In addition, Glossop Community Transport does many other things, and the potential of these organisations has been highlighted. The organisation's out-and-about club is for people who would not otherwise get out and about in the community. People are taken on day trips—the constituency is 80 or 90 miles from Blackpool, and they are taken to things such as the illuminations.

That work relies on funding from Derbyshire County Council, but it also relies heavily on volunteers. Constituents, including friends and colleagues—people such as George and Jean Wharmby and Chris Webster—give up their time to drive the buses around the constituency and beyond and to assist the passengers. In short, the funding is not just about money to make the service operate; it levers in so much more than just money, bringing together people in the community, so that they work as a community, for the community. The benefits are therefore huge.

As we know, there have been necessary reductions in public spending, and Glossop Community Transport has played its part. In February, it joined forces with Bakewell and Eyam Community Transport, which is outside my constituency, but still in Derbyshire, to make savings. I am told that, since April, the new organisation has saved about £85,000, because the pooled resource has enabled a reduction in subsidy, and a move from two separate grants of £186,000.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): I want to come to Glossop, too; it sounds like great fun on the community transport. Derby City Council outsources its community transport to private firms. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to promote close working relationships between councils and the private sector to get the best for the taxpayer?

Andrew Bingham: Of course we do. That goes across a wide range of services. I spent 12 years as a local councillor, and there are lots of areas beyond community transport where we can work with the private sector.

I was explaining that the two community groups each had a separate grant of £186,000. They have merged and now operate on a single joint grant of £285,000, so quite a big saving has been made of about £80,000. Only last week I met Edwina Edwards of the community transport service, to talk about it and how it was operating. She and her staff, as well as the volunteers, work tirelessly to keep the service literally on the road.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash has already pointed out that Derbyshire County Council has proposed removing the grant. There was a consultation in the summer that produced more than 1,000 responses. It was proposed to make the changes from 1 April, I think, but I am told that that has been put back to 1 July; I do not think that the council knows quite what to do. I am told that it intends to seek tenders for providing a service, but to date nothing has been published and there appear to be no firm published plans—and I am told that nothing has even been presented to Derbyshire County Council's cabinet.

There is talk of a one-year contract for the provision of a once-a-week service. There were some workshops in the summer and agreement was widespread—almost

[Andrew Bingham]

unanimous—that once a week is not sufficient. In my view, a one-year contract is also insufficient. If we want an organisation to invest in a service, that does not provide enough certainty for long enough. I ran a small business for many years, and one thing that businesses or organisations like is certainty. A year goes by in the blink of an eye, and it is not long enough.

I admit—it is clear—that we have asked local authorities to make savings; but, like my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash, I have great concerns about the way in which DCC is doing it. It has recently removed many of what, when I was a kid, we used to call lollipop men and lollipop ladies; they probably have a title now. I understand the need for that, but, to digress a little, the lollipop lady has gone from Furness Vale school in my constituency, although it is right at the side of the A6, one of the main arterial routes into the south of Manchester. I fear that those who are looking for savings are using the wrong priorities.

As has already been said, £150,000 was paid to a public relations firm, to do a range of things including advising cabinet members on PR. The chief executive was paid off when Labour took control in 2013, at a cost of almost £250,000. People have come to my surgery about the spending of, I think, £70,000 on some public trails, because of a single complaint, without consultation or proper discussion with the Peak District national park. That has been described to me as wanton ecological vandalism. That profligacy is becoming widespread in the county council. Yet the cuts that we are debating will affect the vulnerable. I understand the need to make savings and do not shy away from it; but the proposals on community transport in Derbyshire are ham-fisted. They are a blunt instrument that may save some money but will disadvantage those who are already disadvantaged, and mean the removal of what has become a valuable and much loved service throughout my constituency.

9.52 am

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to consideration of the crucial issue of community transport provision. I congratulate the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) on winning the debate.

In many ways, the community transport service in Scotland is different from that in England. Many English operators have large fleets of minibuses and are fortunate in receiving large grants from their local authorities. Of course, they operate in areas where the population density is much greater than it is in most of Scotland—and certainly much greater than in my constituency, or that of my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). In England, much of the debate about community transport centres on encouraging providers to diversify services to reduce reliance on local authority financial support. They are also encouraged to obtain sponsorship, develop partnerships to promote joint working, reduce bureaucracy and overhead costs, and utilise smart technology to promote total transport solutions where passengers use technology to order a service.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The hon. Gentleman elaborates on the differentials affecting community transport in the UK, and he is right that things work differently in different parts of the UK; but does he agree that the one overarching principle that seems to apply across the nation state is that mobility, particularly among the elderly, is greatly enhanced whenever community transportation infrastructure gets the support it needs?

Dr Monaghan: I agree with the hon. Gentleman and suggest that that is particularly important in rural areas. In Scotland, the defining feature of many community transport schemes is their size. They are small organisations that tend to operate in vast geographical settings, serving remote rural communities. It is vital in this debate to recognise the geographical challenges that community transport schemes in Scotland face, and to understand that remoteness makes partnership and collaboration between community transport schemes difficult.

To put that in context, I want to highlight the 10 excellent community transport schemes in my constituency. In Easter Ross, Alness heritage centre has one vehicle, Invergordon seafarers mission has one and Socialisation, Opportunities, Activities, Recreation, also in Invergordon, has two. None of those schemes receives any grant funding from the local authority. In Caithness there are two schemes. Wick and East Caithness church operates one vehicle, and Caithness Rural Transport operates four. In Sutherland there are five community transport schemes. Assynt Community Transport has two vehicles and covers the ninth most geographically challenged area in Scotland as measured by the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. The Bradbury centre in Bonar Bridge operates one vehicle, while Helmsdale Community Transport operates just two. The North West Community Bus Association in Kinlochbervie operates one vehicle, while Transport for Tongue, in north-west Sutherland, operates five.

All those schemes operate in areas recognised as among the most geographically challenging in Scotland. Perhaps for that reason, many of the people I meet who rely on community transport in the highlands consider the social experience on the journey to be as important as getting to the destination, and in Scotland more than 100,000 people use community transport each year—but never for a profit. The social experience is important, because the round trip from Wick in Caithness to Kinlochbervie in Sutherland is 233 miles on predominantly single-track roads. That is broadly comparable with the distance from London to Blackpool, but with a journey time of seven hours, compared with around four and a half hours if travelling to Blackpool from this place. I think that puts in context the geographical and organisational challenges faced by community transport schemes operating in Scotland, and the near impossibility of collaborative working.

As a consequence, community transport schemes in Scotland work hard to be resilient and self-sustaining. All the community transport schemes in my constituency provide services specifically to meet the needs of local communities where there are few public transport services and even fewer taxis. All the schemes operating in Scotland are excellent, and I applaud their work, which makes an invaluable contribution to sustaining rural communities. They are responsive, accessible and flexible, but they are also under threat.

The Department for Transport is in consultation with the European Union on existing derogations that enable the UK to allow not-for-profit organisations to operate transport services without having to comply with public service vehicle regulations. The overarching legislation in respect of this derogation is in sections 19 and 22 of the Transport Act 1985, which allow community transport schemes to operate through what are known generally as section 19 and section 22 permits. There are restrictions on the services that can be provided, but the permits enable groups to fill gaps in public transport provision. The Scottish Government encourage section 19 and section 22 transport services to apply for a fuel duty rebate, implemented by Transport Scotland, called the bus service operators grant. Operators receive 14.4p per eligible kilometre. Community transport operators in Scotland achieve a great deal on very low levels of funding.

One of the biggest challenges for these small groups is having to pay 20% VAT when purchasing vehicles, because most have incomes falling far below the VAT threshold. Other problems are the high comparative cost of fuel, high maintenance costs because of poor quality roads, and high delivery cost of spares because of remoteness. The ongoing infraction proceedings appear likely to cause major problems for community transport operators by adding significantly to overhead costs. I understand that the outcome of the discussions might be a two-tier permit scheme that will allow only those groups not tendering for commercial contracts to continue in a similar way in future. However, no formal announcement has been made, and no timescale has been given for when changes might take place. As a result of the infraction proceedings, Derbyshire County Council, which previously allocated £1.49 million to six community transport groups in the county, will from next June withdraw all its grant funding to community transport schemes. That shift will significantly erode the ethos of community transport in the area.

In advocating diversification, partnership and reduced overheads, the Community Transport Association UK is adopting an English perspective, rather than a UK one. It talks of accessing sponsorship from local groups, but that is unlikely to be achievable for community transport schemes in Scotland. It also talks of tendering to take over service provision on a commercial basis, which I know community transport schemes in my constituency are against.

I urge the Minister to consider the value of community transport, and to argue for the adoption of a two-tier permit scheme as an outcome of the ongoing EU infraction discussions. I also urge him to reflect on the challenges facing operators in Scotland, to discuss with the Treasury an exemption from VAT for new vehicle purchases and, crucially, to look at how the rural fuel duty rebate scheme could be extended to allow community transport schemes to flourish. We are in real danger of losing all our community transport schemes by emphasising the price of everything and ignoring value.

10.1 am

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Nuttall. I join other Members in congratulating my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup)

on securing this important debate, which is timely: community transport services in Derbyshire are under great threat.

I start, as other Members did, by paying tribute to the work of the employees and volunteers in my local community transport provider, which used to be called Amber Valley Community Transport but now has the catchy name of Community Transport for Town and County—or CT4TC for short, which is a little harder to remember. It has initiatives similar to those that the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan) spoke about, in terms of trying to be more efficient and developing partnerships. It now covers not only Amber Valley but north-east Derbyshire and Chesterfield, and even provides a newish service in Bassetlaw, crossing the county boundary—we are getting into quite radical territory there, by bridging the divide between Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.

I do not think anyone could doubt the great importance and value of the service that CT4TC provides, or the value for money for the taxpayer. The county council's contribution to the organisation is about £250,000 a year, but what we actually get is about £1.5 million-worth of community transport, so we get six times as much as we spend. The real risk is that we will lose not only £250,000-worth of valuable services but all the extra value on top of that; we will lose £1.5 million-worth of service. That would be a terrible loss from such a cack-handed and ill-thought-through approach to funding reductions. I am not sure how many services in Derbyshire deliver that kind of return on the money spent.

CT4TC provides a number of services, and not only the ones directly funded by the county council. It provides schemes for care home outings, group outings, lunch clubs, regular day trips and a school service, as well as a dial-a-bus scheme and a community car scheme. If we lost the community car scheme, what impact would that have? The scheme exists to help people get to medical appointments with their general practitioner or at the hospital. Those people will still need to get to their medical appointments, and they will have two ways of doing that: they will either have to pay for a taxi themselves, which I suspect they cannot afford or are not willing to do, or they will have to use ambulance transport, which I think is now provided by the East Midlands Ambulance Service, but was previously done by a private provider. That just moves a cost for the taxpayer from one part of the system to a different part—namely, a service that is already overwhelmed and is not particularly efficient, either. I am not sure we are saving any money there.

At a time when we are meant to be trying to join up health and social care, if we move costs around the system and make it harder for people who are quite excluded to get to their health appointments, all that will happen is that a larger cost will end up falling on social care from people not getting the medical treatment they need when they need it. That scheme is vital, and that funding ought to stay.

We can make the same argument for what would happen if we were to lose the dial-a-bus scheme, which helps people who are otherwise excluded or stuck in their homes to get out, socialise, get their shopping, go to important appointments and pay their bills. If that service ceases to exist, where do we leave those people? We leave them more isolated, more lonely and stuck at

[Nigel Mills]

home, so they cannot get the shopping they need or reach the other services they need. What happens then? They will need more social care and more visits a day. People who are not yet in the social care system will perhaps need to go into it, which will have a much more significant cost than what we will save from making these budget savings.

We are in danger of being very short-sighted here, by looking at one particular cost and not thinking about all the knock-on effects around the system. I fear that if Derbyshire County Council proceeds as it is doing, and we end up losing all these services, that will create a whole load more costs in its already stretched social services budget. The value that it gets for the £250,000 that it spends is far more than that sum, and it risks spending a whole load more if it loses this service. There must be a better way of achieving these savings that does not involve risking what CT4TC says could happen: we might leave them with no option but a managed wind-down if these savings go ahead as planned.

It is not right for us to stand here and oppose every cut that county councils have to make, when we are making the necessary funding reductions to them; that is not fair. We elect councils, and they should make decisions based on their priorities, but it is right for us to ask, "Have you really thought this through? Is this really fair? Is it a sensible system? Are you giving these organisations a chance to reorganise their funding and find a different way of doing this? Are you going to deliver the services that you are legally obliged to?" We are saying, "Why do it so quickly? Take longer over it; think about what you are losing and see how we can replicate it."

I am sure there is scope for these organisations to be a bit more efficient and to have some more partnership working and perhaps some further merges, to avoid a repeat of leadership costs, management costs, trustee costs and premises costs. We can perhaps make maintenance costs a bit more efficient and get some more efficient routes by not having services split across boundaries. There is a challenge for these providers to become more efficient, but we cannot say that that is a solution to losing the £1.5 million of services that CT4TC provides across the whole county.

It is worth thinking about the other money being spent on transport services around the county. We have a valuable but quite costly bus pass gold card system. I have never been able to work out exactly why we can put someone on a commercial bus service that makes a profit, on which they can use their gold card to travel for free in Derbyshire, yet when they catch a community transport service, they cannot use that gold card, or they can use it but have to pay some of the fare. Is there not a way of thinking more logically about how we merge those two services? Is it sensible for subsidised, profit-making private bus companies to run routes with not many people on them, while we cannot provide a community transport service that is probably more efficient and takes the most disadvantaged and most excluded people where they really need to go to a planned timetable, so that there is a group to make the service viable?

Is there a way of using the money we are spending on the bus pass and on subsidising those services to get better, more inclusive provision that targets the people

who really need it? I am not saying we should not have buses going to housing estates that otherwise have no service, or that we should in any way change the gold card or the national bus pass system, but is there a way of linking those uses with community transport, to get better value and provide the better service that our constituents really need? We will then be able to deliver for people who cannot get out of their house if they do not have such a service. That is what we face losing in Derbyshire.

I will conclude by reading CT4TC's mission statement:

"No one regardless of age, ability/disability, financial status or domestic location should be prevented from enjoying a full life because of lack of access to private or public transport."

I do not think any of us could disagree with that as a mission, and I hope we can find a way through this funding issue so that that does not become a reality for some people.

10.9 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall, and I thank the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) for securing today's debate. I shall make some general comments about the policy in England and the UK and then turn to specific points on Northern Ireland, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan) did for Scotland. Community transport is a massive issue for my constituency and it is always good to make a contribution on its importance.

Whether we are talking about voluntary car schemes, community bus services, hospital transport, school transport, dial-a-ride, wheels to work, group hire services or anything else, community transport is an essential service for many in the United Kingdom, and not least for the people in my constituency. It reaches vulnerable people, such as the elderly, and if ever we needed a reason for having it, that alone should be enough.

In 2013-14, more than 15 million passenger trips were provided by the 2,000 community transport organisations in England. It is clearly a huge sector and a credit to those who make it happen, as we have said. We have the opportunity to assist the unsung heroes in that sector and I welcome today's debate.

The Government have made various single-year funds available for community transport—£20 million for 2011 and 2012 and, most recently, £25 million for 2015. I welcome the previous Government's record on those funds; it is good to see the sector getting the recognition that it deserves with the increase in the single-year funds.

The bus service operators grant is also paid to community transport operators, and part of the BSOG that was devolved to local authorities in the last Parliament included an amount for their in-house community transport operations. I am very conscious that that has been devolved to the regions and that, for us in Northern Ireland, it is a devolved matter, but none the less, I would like to see it maintained across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I urge the Government to work closely with the devolved regions, so that community transport providers and those who avail themselves of community transport can get the best deal possible wherever they are in the United Kingdom. We should have a similar system

across the whole of the UK. The Department for Transport also provides £200,000 a year to the Community Transport Association, which is a great organisation providing representation and assistance to community transport providers. That funding should continue and even be increased if appropriate.

Given the Government's greater knowledge and experience of local transport issues, they believe, I understand, that

"it should be for local transport authorities, working in partnership with their communities, to identify the right solutions that meet the economic and environmental challenges faced in their areas and deliver the greatest benefits for their area."

That is commendable and, hopefully, very achievable.

It may be a fair argument. Decisions about local issues are often made best at local level, but when it comes to funding and national attention, we have the clout to make a difference, as we should remember today. Local authorities that make payments to community transport operators must abide by the EU state aid rules, for example, and I am sure that there are other areas of red tape that make provision of community transport harder than it should be. Where possible, we should be cutting the red tape for local authorities to make their lives easier in providing and funding those important organisations and their services.

Again, this is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, as the Minister knows. The Community Transport Association Northern Ireland has a record of 89 community transport organisations throughout Northern Ireland, ranging from those whose main purpose is to provide transport services to the local community, as well as those where transport is an ancillary service to the organisation's main objectives. The types of groups include rural community transport partnerships, local community-based minibus operators, schools, churches and youth groups. The figures, as well as being important statistically, show the help that people are given.

In 2009-10, slightly fewer than 1 million passenger trips were recorded for community transport in Northern Ireland. We are a small region with a population of 1.8 million, which gives an idea of how important those community organisations are and the role they play in communities. It should be noted that less than a third—29%—of the organisations surveyed had access to such data, meaning that that is not entirely representative of the true figure, which we believe would be even higher than the almost 1 million that I mentioned.

The total fleet size across all vehicles in Northern Ireland, according to data collected by the Northern Ireland Assembly, is approximately 700 vehicles. In my constituency of Strangford, community transport is essential, and so important in the Ards peninsula that I live in and in the hinterlands of Ballygowan, Saintfield and Ballynahinch. There are two different council areas: the Ards and North Down Borough Council represents the peninsula and the Ards town, and part of Comber, and the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council represents another portion. That rural community transport is run out of Downpatrick and reaches out to all those parts of the constituency, almost like the lifeblood that flows through someone's body. Its importance cannot be underlined enough.

Approximately 100,000 volunteer hours were recorded by the 18 organisations who responded to the Northern Ireland Assembly consultation. As this matter is devolved,

the Assembly has responsibility and has recognised its importance. It really is vital to rural communities, as other Members have said. If the total of 100,000 volunteer hours is scaled up from 29% to 100% of respondents, the total number of hours provided by volunteers would equate to more than 350,000 hours. I am ever mindful of the volunteers—where would we be without them doing all sorts of work in charitable organisations, helping people and caring for them? All these things come together. I believe that we are a good nation of people who help others and look compassionately at how we can do that better. The total benefit to society of 350,000 volunteer hours is worth £2 million—that valuation is based on the national minimum wage rate.

We realise that, in Northern Ireland, community transport is under certain pressures, as, indeed, we all are at this time, as we try to live within our budget. Other Members have referred to that but, at the end of the day, we cannot take away from those people the door-to-door transport that they have. It directly gives a lift to the elderly and takes them to the shops, who perhaps have their only social interaction and communication with anybody through that trip—on that bus that picks them up and takes them to the shopping centre or to the day centre, where they meet people of like mind. That is so important. The hon. Member for Erewash set the scene very well in her introduction, as others have as well, and in Northern Ireland, that is critical.

There have been concerns in recent years, notably from the same Community Transport Association that is funded by the Government, that community transport has been under pressure to replace local bus services that have been cut as part of wider local authority funding reductions, and that the resources are not available to compensate for all the cuts. For example, the Campaign for Better Transport told the Select Committee on Transport that

"community transport can only fill between 10% and 15% of former supported transport provision".

There is a gap, therefore, and perhaps the Minister will address that in his response.

There are two types of community transport licence. Section 18 of the Transport Act 1985, as amended, provides an exemption from public service operator and driver licensing requirements of vehicles used under permits. There are two types of community transport permits, both granted under the 1985 law. Twenty years on, surely we need to have another look at that. The debate is long overdue, and today we have had the chance to address that. Clearly, there are areas in which the Government are succeeding, such as the increase in the single annual payment. I warmly welcome that and hope to see more of the same, but I hope that 20 years is not an indicator of how long we will leave it until there is more serious legislation to assist this essential and undervalued sector.

In conclusion, community transport in my constituency and across all of Northern Ireland is critically important for people and their lifestyles, for their quality of life and for their interaction with people. I welcome this debate and thank all the Members who have participated, and particularly the hon. Lady for her introduction. I look forward to the responses from the shadow Minister and the Minister.

10.18 am

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. Let me also thank the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) for securing this important debate.

We have shed a lot of light today on the benefits for all our communities from community transport. Let me also thank the five Members who have spoken in this debate and briefly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan) on raising the important issue of VAT exemption for vehicles, which I hope the Minister will address. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) on his comments. He made a very good point that the cost of cutting funding may result in additional costs elsewhere for our councils, as indeed, did the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) with his last point about the effect that community transport has on people's quality of life.

However, as we have this debate on the cuts that may happen to community transport, I cannot help but reflect back on the election campaign and what the Scottish National party said: that there was an alternative to austerity and that we wanted Government spending throughout the UK increase by £140 billion. That sensible, pragmatic approach would have seen the budget deficit shrink to 2% of net national income by 2020, relieving some of the pressures on councils. I appeal to Conservative Members to accept the sense of that. We should approach the Chancellor to see what he is doing to relieve some of the pressures on our councils.

I want to reflect on some of the issues affecting the highlands and islands, which my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross mentioned. In my constituency and throughout the highlands and islands, community transport provides a lifeline to thousands of people in a vast number of communities. Many remote rural communities suffer from lack of access to services through the absence of public transport, which has a negative effect on their sustainability and economic viability.

The lack of public transport is often linked with lack of other public services: schools, medical facilities, shopping facilities and so on. Lack of resources can lead to a declining population, and within that an ageing population that is increasingly isolated. Providing access to transport is something the Scottish Government take seriously, although responsibility for funding services was made the full responsibility of Scottish local authorities from the 1 April 2008.

The Scottish Government recognise the important role community transport services play in providing accessible transport options as part of the transport network in Scotland. They play a major part in reducing isolation and increasing social inclusion. It is right that responsibility for such activities is in the hands of local authorities, which are the appropriate bodies to understand the needs of those in their communities. In this case, I recognise that Highland Council has sought to be proactive in working with others in the highlands to deliver effective solutions.

There is a question of what can be delivered through public transport and what is the inter-relationship with community transport. The Community Transport Association states:

“Community transport enables people to live independently, participate in their community and to access education, employment, health and other services. It uses and adapts conventional vehicles to do exceptional things—always for a social purpose and community benefit, but never for a profit.”

Transport Scotland, with the Community Transport Association and independent consultants, collaborated on research into the community transport sector in March 2015. A survey asked respondents to list three main purposes for which their services are used. It found that 71% listed social outings as the main purpose, 56% listed care centres and day centres and 47% listed health-related purposes. That is clear evidence of the positive impact on the wellbeing of users from being able to access community transport.

Highland Council spends around £15 million on public and school transport. Separately from the public transport, the council currently supports 23 community transport projects. For some years its funding has been renewed annually, but it has now invited new applications for three-year grants, which is very welcome. The challenge is a 10% reduction in the budget. To put that in context, Highland Council has a budget of £416,961 for community transport. The council states:

“Community Transport provides a flexible, economic service to many people who are not reached by conventional transport, and its coverage could be usefully increased, given the right operating conditions.”

We understand the financial pressures on councils, but in the light of the evidence of the benefits of such spending and the grim reality of isolation that can occur if such links are cut, spending in this area must be protected. Given that the Highland council states that these services could be usefully increased, I am calling on the council today to protect this budget.

Neil Coyle: The hon. Gentleman focused on leisure need. Is he aware that it is not a statutory duty on local authorities to provide that? What is his party doing to improve social care legislation in the absence of central Government funding to ensure that the leisure needs of older and isolated people are better taken into account under the statutory provision of services?

Ian Blackford: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point and I agree with him. It is one reason why the Scottish Government have integrated social care into health care. We understand the importance of bringing the two together. We have made enormous steps to deliver on that and will continue to do so.

Neil Coyle: What about leisure?

Ian Blackford: Social care certainly has a leisure element. Transport needs are associated with that and it is important that community transport plays its part. Important discussions are taking place and include, for example, hospital transport to the new hospital in Broadford. That is part of the mix we are discussing.

In remote and sparsely populated communities there are enormous hurdles in ensuring that we deliver. A sense of isolation hampers community cohesion, connection to social and health services, which the hon. Member for Amber Valley mentioned, and acts as a barrier to people settling in sparsely populated communities.

I represent the largest constituency in the country, with a land mass of 12,000 sq km. It is by far and away the most sparsely populated constituency in the country. Whether we are talking of public transport or other forms of transport connectivity, we suffer from being in the slow lane. Let me take air connectivity as an example. In the 1930s, it was possible to fly from Skye from either Skeabost or Glenbrittle, as indeed my wife's grandmother did. Today, we have no regular air link to Skye, although we have a perfectly accessible runway at Broadford.

We need regular passenger services to be resumed to benefit local communities, tourists and businesses. An economic assessment is taking place on re-establishing air links, and although it will go to the Scottish Government in the first instance, I ask the Government in London to do what they can to ensure that Skye and the western highlands are connected to the outside world. There is much debate about an additional runway for London. I want just one functioning runway for Skye and the north-west coast of my country.

There is a challenge in providing transport capabilities throughout this vast region, but whether you live in a metropolitan area or a highland township, transport connectivity is a basic need. I applaud Highland Council for being imaginative in developing solutions. For example, a research project looking at rural transport options for the Glenelg area was carried out by Robert Gordon University. A pilot scheme was established and provided a capped sum of £3,000 to the Glenelg community for the scheme to run for 12 months. It procured a local taxi service for a fixed fee and sold tickets to travellers for £3 with the balance being provided to the taxi through the community group. It was a low-cost scheme that brought enormous benefits to the community of Glenelg and it has been continued. It is a good example of a locally driven solution with the community working with the local authority and a university with proven skills in the area of community transport.

One community that I know particularly well is Waternish, which is on a peninsula at the north end of Skye. It has a resident population of several hundred people, 35% of whom are retired, often with no access to their own transport. There is no shop in Waternish and those who live in Geary in Waternish and want to get to the nearest shop must travel 11 miles to Dunvegan. There is no bus to the peninsula, which is 7.5 miles long. There is a school bus but it is not licensed to carry anyone other than school pupils out of Waternish. This is something that needs addressing because it just adds insult to injury when a public service could be provided.

For Waternish and other communities, it is a question of how community transport can fill the gap and how we can connect them to the rest of Skye and beyond. We must rise to the challenge because if we do not we will leave communities at the margin, isolated and witnessing decline.

There is a willingness to tackle those challenges, often with the resourcefulness and drive of those who live in rural communities. They tend to want their communities to be sustainable and there is cause for hope. When I look at such places, I see entrepreneurialism and many people starting their own local businesses, often providing the highest quality products. Local food suppliers and outstanding craft producers, often working with others, want to interact with the local authority to fashion their own community-based transport solution.

If we are to reach out and deliver connectivity, the kind of example that I described in Glenelg needs to be experienced in other areas. A partnership of local authorities and communities working together can fill in some of the remaining gaps, but there is a desire to recognise that budgets have to be protected to allow this to happen.

10.28 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) on securing this debate. I am glad she recognises how essential community transport services are, particularly at a time when her Government are destroying bus services across our country. The shadow Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), visited the hon. Lady's constituency last year and met a group of residents from the Fields Farm estate who have a bus stop but no bus. I have exactly the same problem in my constituency, so I know how it feels.

We have heard a series of powerful and passionate accounts from hon. Members about the importance of community transport. It seems to me that all hon. Members want to support community transport, but I did think that a political attack on Derbyshire County Council was perhaps inevitable. I understand the motives of the hon. Member for Erewash, and I am sure that equally, she will understand that I have to make a few points for the sake of balance. The council informs me that it is facing cuts of £157 million before 2018. She mentioned the level of reserves, and my understanding is that the council is managing to continue to support bus services by digging into those reserves, which will not be able to go on forever. It tells me that it has had an in-year cut in its public health budget, and of course, like every other shire county, it has a huge problem with the adult social care budget. I understand why an impassioned debate is going on in Derbyshire, and I am sure that it will continue, but I have every sympathy with my colleagues who are trying to deal with a very difficult situation in that county, as they are in other shire counties.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) made a powerful point. I have to say that I was unaware of the Government's largesse just before the election: £25 million was suddenly available from a Government who had no money. Excuse me for being cynical, Mr Nuttall—I would not want to say anything unparliamentary. I just hope that the Minister can assure us that some of the promises will have been delivered by Christmas time. That would be a good thing to do, particularly for such worthy schemes as my hon. Friend outlined.

The account given by the hon. Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) corresponds exactly with my recollections—in a former life, I was a councillor in very rural Norfolk. Again, I think we all understand just how important the social aspect of community transport is. I would also reflect that if the good people of eastern England had services that were remotely at that level of those in Derbyshire, they would be amazed, because in rural East Anglia we have not seen many such services for a long time.

[Daniel Zeichner]

Having made my political points, I will be charitable and suggest that all of us in this Chamber probably have the same goal—to ensure that everyone, no matter who they are or where they live, is able to connect with their community and get to school, shops, work, hospitals, friends and family. That is why buses are vital, especially for disabled people and those from low-income households. Indeed, almost half of the poorest households in the country do not have access to a car, and people in the lowest income group use the bus almost four times more often than those in the highest income group. Moreover, about 60% of disabled people live in a household with no car, and disabled people uses buses about 20% more frequently than people without disabilities. I am sure that the Minister is familiar with those statistics; I suspect that he quotes them too.

We can therefore agree that we need buses, but the current situation just is not working. In many areas, private bus operators have abandoned bus routes and services that they have found to be commercially unprofitable, leaving many people isolated. Of course, local authorities, as I have mentioned, face deep cuts, leaving them unable to step in. As hon. Members have suggested, those responsible for various modes of community transport have valiantly attempted to perform the vital connective role that buses should play. Community transport serves areas that the bus companies have turned their back on.

However, there is something on which we cannot agree—the Government and Government Members continually refusing to take any responsibility for what is happening and blaming local councils for having to make cuts to transport funding. The Government are passing the buck and forcing local authorities to take the blame for those cuts, while keeping their own hands clean. It is estimated that central Government funding to English local authorities shrank by almost 40% between 2010-11 and 2014-15. The bus service operators grant, which subsidises bus fares for all, was also cut, by 20% in the previous Parliament. It is therefore no surprise that since 2010, 70% of local authorities, stuck between a rock and a hard place, have been forced to cut funding for bus services.

To suggest that councils are playing politics with these community services is slightly unworthy. The Government have been talking the devolution talk on one hand while taking funding away with the other, leaving councils and councillors in a near impossible position. That is not localism; it is a con. Furthermore, the Minister told us in July that he believes that decisions about funding to support local bus services are best made at local level, but in their comprehensive spending review the Government quietly included a further reduction of almost a quarter in central Government funding for local government over this Parliament. When local authorities face funding cuts that are that severe, it is really the Treasury making the decisions about which services to fund, not local authorities, whatever the rhetoric.

Against the backdrop of reduced services, community transport is more crucial than ever in helping people to get around, but as the Campaign for Better Transport has shown, community transport can only fill between 10% and 15% of the gap left by formerly supported transport provision. That suggests that although community

transport has a very important role to play, it is only a partial solution to plugging the growing gap left by the Government's policies and the subsequent cuts to services. We believe that the Government should be much more ambitious for the sector and should aim to develop and expand the role of not-for-profit bus operators, giving them the power to take up routes and services in all areas of the bus market and not only in unserved and unprofitable areas. Expanding community transport could challenge the virtual monopoly of the bus market enjoyed by just a handful of conglomerates and, most significantly, put passengers before profits. Indeed, the People's Bus campaign says:

“By keeping routes open and fares low, community transport operators are enabling people to access work and education, tackling social exclusion and loneliness, and can be the lifeblood of isolated communities.”

That is because unlike private operators, community transport operators reinvest profits in services, refocusing bus services on the shared interests of communities rather than shareholders.

A shining example of successful community transport is Hackney Community Transport. Formed more than 30 years ago, it has since expanded into Yorkshire, Humberside and the south-west. That social enterprise provides an aspirational model for community transport and a symbol of just what can be done. It provides more than 20 million passenger trips each year and delivers a variety of transport services: mainstream bus services, school transport, social care transport and more. The bus operator recently raised a £10 million investment—the largest growth capital investment in the UK impact investing sector. That demonstrates the potential of community and not-for-profit transport providers to ensure a fairer bus system by breaking the stranglehold that private bus operators retain over the market and giving communities a voice over the transport that they need to be delivered.

Clearly, buses face huge challenges in our country, and we want to give local authorities genuine power over their bus services. Local authority budgets have been decimated of late, and the Government need to stop wilfully ignoring both the financial pressure that authorities are under and the value of investing in subsidised transport.

We eagerly anticipate the Government's forthcoming bus legislation and hope to see within it local authorities being given both power and money to deliver much-needed services, as well as a recognition of the huge economic and social potential of community transport. Devolution for Nottingham and Derbyshire is being long drawn out and delayed, and we want discussions to give way to real local powers. We just hope that when that legislation is on the table, it provides for authentic devolution. We will not settle for more of the same. We need a better bus system, but also a community transport system that can flourish and prosper in its own right, rather than propping up ever diminishing bus routes as the Government withdraw support. What an irony that the Prime Minister pledged to retain the bus pass, but neglected to keep the bus.

10.38 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I congratulate my hon. Friend

the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) on securing this debate on the important subject of community transport. The community transport sector has for many years stepped in and provided services where traditional public transport services have not been available or not been suitable for passengers. These vital, lifeline services enable people to live independently, participate in their community and access education, employment, health and a range of other services. The key point is that they are always provided for a social purpose and community benefit, not for profit. The range of services provided includes voluntary car services, community bus services, dial-a-ride and wheels to work, making use of every type of vehicle from mopeds to minibuses. Community transport is responsive, accessible, flexible and local. Services are often run by volunteers, who help communities merely out of social kindness without expecting anything for themselves, on which they must be congratulated.

We have heard from Members some great examples of local services, and we have heard how well valued they are and how significant their impact is. There is real scale to the sector: tens of thousands of volunteers deliver millions of passenger journeys. The House might be interested to know that the Community Transport Association has done some analysis of who its customers are. It found that 98% of those who use community transport are older people, and 85% of passengers are people with disabilities or restricted mobility. The figures showed that 78% of community transport services take people to social outings, 73% carry out health-related trips and 64% take people to day centres. The CTA found that 31% of community travel services are provided in mostly rural areas and a further 21% in exclusively rural areas. It is helpful to quantify the points that hon. Members have made, because of the scale and importance of the service. It deals with some of the more vulnerable people in our community, and the social element, which hon. Members from Scotland particularly emphasised, is most important.

We have heard from hon. Members about services such as Bakewell and Eyam Community Transport in Derbyshire. Such services help to sustain and develop local economies and social integration, and we can see the real value of the organisations that run them. Evidently, so can the people of Derbyshire; I understand that a recent petition opposing the possible withdrawal of funding by the county council received strong support from local residents.

The Government recognise the importance of the sector, as we do the importance of all types of bus services. We recognise that buses are of enormous social and economic importance. They are at the heart of a modern transport system. The number of bus passenger journeys in our country is 5.7 billion a year, compared with 1.65 billion journeys on our railways. Bus services do the heavy lifting in our public transport system. That is why we have supported them and will continue to do so. The Government protected the bus service operators grant in the spending review to ensure that vital bus services continue to run.

We have created a £25 million fund for the purchase of new minibuses by community transport operators, so that they may continue to run those vital services. We have started delivering those to organisations, and the number will steadily increase over the next few months.

The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) asked about the Lewisham and Southwark Age UK minibus. Let me provide a bit more information for colleagues. Each vehicle is being individually built to meet each organisation's needs. The number of successful organisations was actually 310, not 400. When officials from the Department for Transport liaised with community bodies around the country, they found fairly clear consistency in the types of vehicles that those organisations sought. We therefore bunched them into different groups—we had perhaps 25 organisations seeking a 16-seat minibus with a lift, for instance—and those groups are now being dealt with under the procurement framework. The procurement portal has been launched. It is important that we deliver the procurement through a portal, because it will result in better value for taxpayers. The pace is picking up—some vehicles are out there already, and some grants are being made to individual bodies locally. The scheme is an important and popular one, which has my personal attention to ensure that it happens as quickly as possible. That is a quick update, and I will keep the hon. Gentleman informed about progress on the order for his constituents.

I recognise that the sector is working in challenging times, with changes to local authority funding and reform of the bus market. The Government are committed to balancing our country's finances and reducing the deficit, and I recognise that many local authorities are facing reductions in budgets and difficult decisions about where to spend their money. That is not easy for local councils. However, I gently remind Labour Members that they too stood on a manifesto platform of cuts in budgets, with Health, Education and International Development being the only Departments that would be protected. They should not pretend that they have no mandate on this, because they stood on a manifesto of some cuts and, of course, we all know that it was the Labour party that crashed the economy in the first place.

I cannot comment on decisions made by Derbyshire County Council, but I encourage local authorities to think innovatively about the decisions that they take on public transport funding. Transport is vital to keep the country moving and to continue the economic recovery. Connecting people is a key Government transport objective, and we all understand the social, economic and environmental benefits of effective transport systems. That is why we have provided £196.5 million to the D2N2 local enterprise partnership, provided Derby City Council with £4.9 million for better ways to work as part of the local sustainable transport fund, and given £2.95 million to Derbyshire County Council to repair its local roads.

Many colleagues spoke about access to healthcare. Whether they are visiting a GP or a hospital, people need to make essential journeys and they rely on transport to get them there. A scheme in the Department that is of real interest is the Total Transport pilots. We believe that Total Transport can help. The idea is to integrate transport services that are currently commissioned by different central and local government agencies and provided by different operators. Such integration may deliver improved passenger transport, particularly in isolated communities, by ensuring that existing resources are allocated more efficiently. That might entail, for example, combining conventional bus services or dial-a-ride

[Andrew Jones]

with hospital transport. The objective is to meet individual transport needs; it is not about what is written on the side of the vehicle.

Some £2 billion of public funding for transport services is provided each year by a number of agencies, in addition to £1 billion for concessionary passes. To break that down, £350 million is provided for local authority support of socially necessary bus services, £1 billion for home-to-school transport provided by local authorities, and at least £150 million for non-emergency patient transport provided by the NHS to individual local clinical commissioning groups. However, that funding is not generally co-ordinated or integrated at a local level, which sometimes results in duplication and wastage of public money—wastage that we can ill afford.

That is why, in April, the Government allocated £7.6 million to 37 schemes run by local authorities to pilot Total Transport solutions in their areas. The pilot schemes will run for a maximum of two years. That is a small amount of money, but a very big idea. It is about integrating services. It has the capacity to make a real difference in meeting the transport needs of every community.

Nigel Mills: Would the Minister care to comment on whether community transport providers can access concessionary fare money? I believe that those who run a for-profit service that is open to everybody can access that scheme, but those who run a targeted community transport scheme cannot get the refund on some of the fares. That seems a bit unfair.

Andrew Jones: What my hon. Friend says is correct. There are different types of schemes under different types of permits, which may therefore attract different levels of fares. I will look into the matter and respond more fully to him.

Let me mention buses, which Members have highlighted. As everybody knows, the Government are committed to devolution. Bus services are inherently local and must take full account of local circumstances and needs. It is right that areas that have ambitious plans to grow and develop their bus markets should be given the powers they need to achieve their aims. We have signed groundbreaking deals with several local authorities, in which we have committed to providing them with powers to franchise their bus services. Franchising continues to form a core part of ongoing devolution deal conversations. Our devolution plans go beyond Manchester, Cornwall and Sheffield; if other areas want to come forward with attractive devolution deals that include bus franchising, they will be considered.

The future of bus services in each area will depend on how well local authorities, LEPs and operators adapt to local conditions. Not every place will adopt the same bus strategy, nor should they. It is about what works best for each area. That could be partnerships, franchising or, where bus services are working well, the status quo. What matters is that local authorities, bus operators and LEPs sort out what will be best for them locally and get on with it. In all that, the aim is to grow the bus market. I am a great fan of buses, and they are a key part of our transport mix. The buses Bill will present us with the opportunity to give local areas powers to make things even better.

As I have described, the Department provides several pots of funding to help provide strong transport and social connections in our communities. It is true that reductions in funding to local authorities have been tough. I was a cabinet member in a local authority for five years, with responsibility for its finances, so I know that these are difficult, big decisions, but the funding has been set at a sufficient level to deliver effective services.

It is up to Derbyshire County Council where to prioritise its funds and whether it ought to be making cuts to community transport. It has significant reserves—I understand that they could be up to £200 million—and it will have to consider what to do. It is the council's decision, and as hon. Members have said, it is not easy, but the key priority must be to focus the money on where it will make a difference. Community transport really makes a difference, as everybody knows and has been so clear about. I am sure that the council is watching the debate and will listen to hon. Members.

I look to community transport operators to be part of the changing public transport picture and to work closely with their local authorities, and I look to all parties to consider how they might best contribute to providing services.

Ian Blackford: Will the Minister address the comments that my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan) and I made about VAT exemption for community transport vehicles?

Andrew Jones: I was just about to come to some of the points made by the hon. Members for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross. VAT exemptions are obviously a Treasury matter. I will take that up with the Treasury and write back to the hon. Gentleman.

The contribution of the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross was powerful, particularly as it highlighted the social experience of journeys and how big some of those journeys are in his part of the world. It is a fantastic part of the United Kingdom, but the journey distances are unrecognisable to other areas. Low population density areas face greater challenges with transport.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the infraction case. That is an ongoing case, and as it is not resolved it would not be appropriate for me to comment on it. I assure the House that we will continue to work closely with colleagues in Scotland and Northern Ireland as the case progresses.

I confirm that the Government recognise the importance of community transport. It is clear that that view is held right across the House, and that there are no political divisions at all on the matter. I will work to ensure that community transport has an even stronger future.

10.52 am

Maggie Throup: Thank you very much for your chairmanship today, Mr Nuttall. I think the debate was about to get a bit raucous at one stage, but you brought us back under control. I thank the Minister for his response, for his and the Government's commitment to community transport, and for acknowledging that it plays such an important part in all our constituencies.

I thank all hon. Members who have made valuable contributions to the debate. I feel like I have had quite a good bus tour around the country. We have been to the very north of Scotland to Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, and to the west of Scotland to Ross, Skye and Lochaber. We have been over the waters to Strangford and down to Bermondsey in London. During the journey, we have been through the rest of country from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) to that of my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham), whose experiences we heard about. We have taken in Banbury, Derby North and Amber Valley. It has been an interesting tour around the country.

Although Members may disagree on some points, particularly about funding cuts, we have all come to the consensus—whether we represent a rural, urban or suburban constituency—that community transport plays an immensely important role in supporting the elderly, vulnerable and disabled.

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) quoted the mission statement for his constituency's community transport service, and indicated very well that it is not only the elderly and disabled who benefit from community transport services but a wide variety of service users across the board. As my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak did, I encourage other Members to spend a day with their local community transport service, experiencing at first hand what it does and the pleasure it brings to so many people.

We have heard about several community transport organisations that have already diversified their funding, and about the added value that community transport brings to our communities. It is important that community transport organisations, including those in Erewash and others across Derbyshire, look for alternative funding streams. However, I ask the Minister, as well as taking on board the issues raised by other Members, to do whatever he can to ask Derbyshire County Council to give community transport across Derbyshire a stay of execution until alternative funding streams can be found. I am sure that once that has happened, our community transport services will benefit from having control of their own funds and the freedom to develop services in the way they really want, so that they can benefit an even wider range of local user groups.

I would like to finish by acknowledging that Erewash has good bus routes. In fact, constituents in some areas think that we actually have too many buses—an oversupply. There is not a lack of buses, it is just about how those bus routes are delivered. I disagree with the shadow Minister, because it is his colleagues at Derbyshire County Council who are playing politics with people's lives. They are always blaming the Government for their poor decision making. Erewash Borough Council is under the same pressures, but it is thriving.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the provision of community transport.

10.56 am

Sitting suspended.

Sale of Ministry of Justice Land: Gloucester

11 am

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the sale of Ministry of Justice land in Gloucester.

Today's debate is about the agonising detail of pushing forward one aspect of the regeneration of the ancient and small city of Gloucester. It is, as I will explain, a story of our time—a story of complex partnerships—and, hopefully, it has a happy ending. I will start with the context of today's debate. The regeneration of Britain's big cities has ploughed ahead successfully for some time. The previous Labour Government did it through Government-funded or private finance initiative-funded projects, especially in the north of England; the coalition Government did it through growth funds and bids via local enterprise partnerships; and this Conservative Government are continuing that process with the additional features of devolution, local powerhouses and more pressure on the public sector to release unused and unneeded real estate—I will return to that last point in a moment.

At the same time, inevitably, there has been a process of consolidation in both the public and private sectors in that part of the west of England bordering the west midlands, the River Severn and Wales, which is Gloucestershire. The Government, like the Crown Prosecution Service, have been tempted to retreat to Bristol, and some businesses have done likewise. A city such as Gloucester, therefore, has to paddle very hard to attract new businesses, growth and jobs, and as the Minister knows, paddling hard is precisely what Gloucester does. The turnaround in global aerospace demand and the Government's support for Britain's technology and innovation advantages in aerospace have benefited the M5 corridor from Bristol to Gloucester and Cheltenham, and our subcontractors have benefited from the Government's support for research and development, apprenticeships and capital allowances.

If I may list a few more areas of growth that are relevant to the importance of the car park in question, I highlight the huge rise in the importance of cyber that has driven interest in the cheaper real estate and convenient location of Gloucester for a new cyber- centre. The importance attached to nuclear energy is a huge boost for EDF Energy's nuclear operational headquarters in Barnwood and has brought Horizon, which is going to build two new nuclear power stations, to the edge of our city. The waterside location of Gloucester Quays has attracted tidal lagoon power, which will surely be approved before long to create Britain's new tidal energy hub and will be a huge contributor to the production of our green energy. At the same time, through Peel plc, we have been able to become a major shopping and leisure destination, with more than 5 million visitors a year to Gloucester Quays, and we have benefited from hosting the rugby world cup this autumn, using sport as a catalyst for regeneration.

Importantly, alongside all those major developments, we have seen a huge increase in the number of new businesses created in Gloucester—I call them new Gloucesterpreneurs. We are ranked in the top six in the country for the creation of new businesses. Last, but by

[Richard Graham]

no means least for this MP who studied history, thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund, forward-thinking trustees of different charities and, I hope, strong political support, we have made much more of our heritage to win bids for funding to improve and highlight our destinations, and to host new festivals that, in turn, are bringing more visitors; the cathedral has a critical role in that. Should the Minister have the chance, I would be delighted to show him our city—not just the car park in which he is playing such an important role, but a city where heritage comes alive and new businesses thrive.

A common theme for all such growth is, of course, transport. On the edge of the M5 between Bristol and Birmingham, and two hours by train from London, one of Gloucester's key attractions for inward investors is our transport links, which also support those living in neighbouring constituencies such as Forest of Dean, Stroud and Tewkesbury. Gloucester's growth means that the most recent railway passenger statistics show an increase of 4% in passengers from Gloucester, which is a third more than the national figure of 3%. That will increase and, as the Minister may know, trains will shortly be running every half hour from London towards Gloucester and Cheltenham, which in turn will increase the number of passengers using our station and, inevitably, the station car park. In turn, of course, that will put significant pressure on existing facilities, which is precisely where the Ministry of Justice comes in—this is the crux of today's debate.

Almost 10 years ago, the previous Labour Government bought land for new courts in Gloucester. We will return to that theme another day and, before the Minister gets nervous about the scope of today's debate, I assure him that I will not be raising the issue of a new justice centre in Gloucester today. The land acquired on Great Western Road, a former car park, lies beside platform 4 of the station, although it is currently without access to it, and opposite Gloucestershire Royal hospital, which employs many thousands of people and, of course, has many more patients every year. The car park has sat empty and unused for a decade, ever since the Labour Government changed their mind about new courts for Gloucester. In October 2014, I launched a campaign to bring the car park back into use as a new long-term car park for the station, with new access to the station from that side.

The ingredients for that project, or “stakeholders”, if we prefer that term, were many. I needed support in principle for the idea, above all, from what was then First Great Western and is now Great Western Railway—a name resonant from my younger days in Gloucestershire and my many school journeys from Moreton-in-Marsh to Colwall. I needed the Department for Transport's support for Great Western Railway's proposal in its seven-year franchise extension. Both Great Western Railway and the Department for Transport, led by the Secretary of State for Transport, who visited Gloucester, responded magnificently. I needed support from the county council, which it also gave, not least because there is a spin-off benefit in relieving some of the traffic pressure from the station forecourt on to Bruton Way from the current car park. And I needed support from the city council for the potential planning application, which it gave in principle, noting the huge added convenience

for Gloucestershire Royal hospital staff and patients and the regeneration implications for the site, the road and the city.

Lastly, but by no means least, as the Minister knows, I needed support, both in principle and in practice, from the Ministry of Justice in disposing of the land and being the catalyst for something that, although modest in itself, will have much wider transport, traffic and growth implications, enabling a virtuous circle of easier access for travellers, more trains, better experience, more visitors and more jobs from the economic boost.

The Minister and the then Secretary of State for Justice, my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), could not have been more helpful, and I wish to put that on the record. Everything was agreed in principle in March 2015, but of course the business of process, transfer to a Government entity to avoid any question of state aid, legalities, price and the number of entities involved—the Ministry of Justice, the valuers, the independent valuer, the city council, Great Western Railway, the Department for Transport and Network Rail at one point—plus the summer holidays meant that progress during the middle of this year was somewhere between modest and slow, but the pace has picked up in the last few weeks, which is perhaps in part due to the Chancellor's determination that the Government should make much greater use of their real estate assets as soon as possible. My understanding of the current situation is very encouraging, and part of today's objective is to hear whether the Minister shares my understanding.

First, I believe that the Ministry of Justice has agreed in principle to sell the land to Gloucester City Council, and I understand that a recommendation on the price and an agreement goes to a Ministry of Justice real estate board in early January 2016. Secondly, Great Western Railway has agreed in principle to lease the land from the city council and intends to submit a planning application in January. Thirdly, Great Western Railway and the Department for Transport are holding talks to ensure that the land is retained as a station asset way beyond the current franchise. Fourthly, the city and county councils have submitted a bid of almost £5 million for various station improvements, in line with my recommendations of October 2014, to the Gloucestershire local enterprise partnership, and that bid is likely to be high on the LEP's list of priorities.

I hope that I have laid out that never was an empty car park so important to the development of transport in our city, or to our city's regeneration; its value as a catalyst for change is much greater than its commercial value. A year and a bit on from a series of proposals laid out by e-news to my constituents, I believe that the public sector—Government and local government—working together with the train operator means that we are close to bringing this opportunity to reality.

Today, I hope that the Minister can confirm his understanding of where things are, and that he will continue his key role in urging that the most important of Government responsibilities—the implementation of decisions already made in principle—be carried out, so that early in the new year, the city of Gloucester can have certainty that ideas on paper will become reality.

In the bigger scheme of things, this car park is at the very fringes of the Minister's empire of responsibilities and goals to deliver, but I hope that it is a project—small

as it is—about which he and his Department will be able to say shortly, “We reviewed this proposal. We agreed with it in principle. We promised to make it happen. And we have now delivered.” If that is the case, Gloucester will be very grateful, but it will also set a magnificent precedent for other opportunities involving MOJ real estate around the country.

11.11 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara): As always, Mr Nuttall, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on securing this debate on a subject that is vital for the residents of Gloucester. I also take this opportunity to put on the record the huge amount of work that he has done for the people of Gloucester, not only regarding this particular piece of land but more generally. As far as this issue is concerned, he has engaged with me on a regular and active basis, and he has also been instrumental in ensuring that the many other stakeholders and key players involved in the whole of this transaction have been engaged with one another. He has been instrumental in ensuring that all the threads are woven together to make one canvas, so that hopefully in the new year we will be able to arrive at an agreeable solution.

Of course, my hon. Friend and I have met on a number of occasions to discuss this issue and we have also corresponded about it. He has a terrific vision for Gloucester. My officials have engaged extensively with representatives from the many other interested parties on how the land owned by Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service in Great Western Road can form part of the wider regeneration of the city.

Let me explain at the outset that the piece of land in question was purchased quite some time ago with the intention of building a new Gloucester court. The freehold interest in the site was one of a number of magistrates courts and other properties transferred to the Courts and Tribunals Service under the Transfer of Property (Abolition of Magistrates’ Courts Committees) Scheme 2005. Since that time, the site was used temporarily as a car park by the national health service and was later used as a store to facilitate works to the adjacent railway. As my hon. Friend indicated, for quite some time it has not been in use.

Following an approach by Gloucester City Council, the Courts and Tribunals Service considered a request to transfer the land. In support of its request, the council asked that we take into account the wider economic development of the area and its importance for the city as a whole. My hon. Friend will appreciate that the Ministry of Justice and Gloucester City Council have a duty to achieve best value for the taxpayer at large and for the citizens of Gloucester. As part of that duty, the Ministry of Justice is obliged to work within Her Majesty’s Treasury guidelines for managing public money. That means that, when disposing of surplus property assets, we must always seek best value for the taxpayer. The council, for its part, has to consider the potential return on its investment in a future lease arrangement.

After careful consideration of the representations made by my hon. Friend, the council and others, it was decided that the land was no longer required for a court

or tribunal building. That cleared the way for the Courts and Tribunals Service to move towards a sale of the land, at market value, to Gloucester City Council.

I understand that the council intends to enter into an agreement that would see the site being used as a car park, which, as my hon. Friend highlighted in his speech, would improve access to the nearby railway station. The redevelopment of the land is an important part of the vision to regenerate the city. Of course, the use of the site as a car park also has broader implications for the highways and traffic management within the area. This is not a simple issue but one that is complex and that involves a number of other agencies.

The Ministry of Justice has been in regular and constructive dialogue with the council, and I am pleased to say that much progress has been made. However, both parties have produced their own valuations of what the property is worth. Nevertheless, we may now be nearing some sort of agreement. I hope my hon. Friend will appreciate that, for reasons of commercial confidentiality, I cannot divulge the final details of the valuations or the negotiations. He will understand that, as is the case in almost every transaction of this kind, there are many aspects of the proposal to discuss, including the future development potential of the site; the current and future planning status; whether there should be any conditions attached to the completion of the sale; the timing of any such conditions; whether any overage or clawback should be applied, and if so, how much and over what time; what price should be paid; and whether that price should be paid in one lump sum or in staged payments.

While there remain technical details to resolve, I share my hon. Friend’s enthusiasm for seeing the matter settled, and both parties continue to work towards achieving a deal that is acceptable to all concerned. I emphasise that there is no lack of willingness on our side to achieve a mutually beneficial sale.

I turn briefly to the wider changes that we are making to courts and tribunals in England and Wales as part of our court reform programme. We have conducted a consultation on the possible closure of 91 courts and tribunals across England and Wales. The HMCTS estate is a major asset, but many buildings are underused. Indeed, around a third of our courts are used at less than half their capacity. Our proposal is to close the less efficient buildings and to transform the way that courts and tribunals operate and deliver services to the public in the future.

Those improvements cannot be secured without some difficult decisions having to be made, but I genuinely believe that the court reform programme offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create a modern, user-focused and efficient Courts and Tribunals Service.

Richard Graham: The Minister is kind to give way. I promised him that I would not extend this debate to cover the issue of the future of the courts, but I just thought it would be helpful to him if I were to put on the record the offer that Gloucester has made to the Ministry of Justice. Effectively, it is to provide land free of charge in the wonderful central area of Blackfriars, very close to the current Crown court, the families courts and the magistrates courts, to create a single

[Richard Graham]

justice centre for all the courts and tribunals in the city, which will provide justice for the people of Gloucestershire. I hope he will consider that offer.

Mr Vara: In his usual eloquent way, my hon. Friend has managed to sneak into this debate another angle, which obviously also involves his speaking up for constituents in Gloucester. I commend him for that. I am mindful of the submission that he and the people of Gloucester have made, and we are reflecting on it. No decisions have been made so far regarding the wider consultation.

As far as the court reform programme is concerned, we must recognise that the world outside the courts is changing rapidly. In the 21st century, we expect to be able to transact our business online, quickly, efficiently and at a time that suits us. Cheques and paper forms have been replaced by contactless payment cards and smartphone apps. The Courts and Tribunals Service has already established alternative ways users can interact with its services, such as the use of video links, and it is looking to expand the provisions to provide more choice than is currently available. That includes exploring whether appropriate use can be made of civic and other buildings for certain types of hearings. My hon. Friend is aware that Gloucester magistrates court is included in the consultation. The proposal is for criminal work from the court to be transferred to Cheltenham magistrates court. As he is aware, we are analysing all the responses to the consultation, and we have not made up our mind or made any decisions so far.

For the sake of good order, I assure my hon. Friend that the sale of the land at Great Western Road does not impact in any way on the decisions that will need to be made following the consultation. He will understand that I cannot give him notice of the finalised transaction, for the reasons I have given. I very much hope, however, that he and his constituents will be in no doubt that I support the positive vision that is regeneration in Gloucester—a matter that he has so forcefully put across. The Ministry of Justice is keen to be a part of that vision, and we are taking steps to ensure that we do not stand in the way of progress. At the same time, he will appreciate the importance of my Department faithfully discharging its duties to taxpayers and ensuring that we deal with valuable assets responsibly.

I again congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I very much hope that, in the new year, there will be some resolution to all the hard work that he has put in on behalf of his constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

11.21 am

Sitting suspended.

Benefit Sanctions

[MRS CHERYL GILLAN *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered benefit sanctions.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to lead this short debate this afternoon. Members will be aware that I have debated this topic with Ministers several times in the past, and that I have been at pains during those debates to raise concerns about the impact of conditionality on vulnerable claimants. At the forefront of those debates has been the disproportionate level of sanctions imposed on people with mental illness. I met the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People not long ago to discuss some of the ways in which the Government might address the acknowledged shortcomings in the regime for those with serious mental illnesses and other fluctuating conditions. However, I am glad that the Minister for Employment is responding to today's debate, because I think the wider issues sit far more appropriately in her portfolio.

As I have argued before, one of the reasons why the sanctions regime is failing vulnerable people so badly is the underlying problem with the work capability assessment. High levels of sanctioning among people who are ill or very disadvantaged is, in part, symptomatic of people being found fit for work when they are not really fit for work. Until that gets fixed, I fear we are destined to go round in circles. But that is not the whole story. Although I do not think anyone would dismiss the value of conditionality in the benefits system per se, the conditions that the Government set need to be proportionate and fair, and I do not think we can say that at the moment, particularly for the more vulnerable claimants.

The Government's announcement a few weeks back that they intend to pilot a so-called yellow card scheme for sanctions in the new year is, I think, an acknowledgement that the system is not working very well at present. I hope the Minister will take the opportunity today to set out in more detail how that warning system will work in practice, and, specifically, what protection there will be for those who are identified as vulnerable.

My main call today echoes the calls I have made previously, and that the Work and Pensions Committee made in the previous Parliament, for a full independent review of the benefit sanctions regime. That is necessary and long overdue. I fear that tinkering around the edges of the system will not resolve the systemic weaknesses, and this afternoon I want to highlight a growing body of evidence that sanctions are not only failing to support claimants into work, but are actually having a counterproductive effect, undermining the Government's policy objectives and causing unacceptable levels of hardship and destitution to vulnerable and disadvantaged people.

Last week the homelessness charity, Crisis, published a major piece of research undertaken at Sheffield Hallam University into homeless people's experiences of welfare conditionality and benefit sanctions. It is a significant and timely piece of work; it is the largest study of its kind ever carried out, and it provides a robust qualitative

evidence base for how sanctions are affecting vulnerable claimants. The researchers drew on the experiences of more than a thousand people who use homelessness services in England and Scotland, and looked specifically at the impact of sanctions on their lives and employment prospects. Distressing individual stories are documented in the report, and I urge the Minister and other hon. Members to read it. It deserves to be widely read.

There are many reasons why people become homeless or precariously housed. Often in the past, relationship breakdown has been cited as the single biggest reason why someone will end up homeless, but more recently that has been overtaken by problems with benefits, particularly among those who have been sanctioned. In many cases, though, homelessness is itself a symptom of underlying vulnerabilities. Young people leaving care; people with long-term mental health problems; people with addictions; and people with borderline learning disabilities who have trouble with literacy or numeracy—those are all high risk factors for becoming homeless, but what the Crisis research found was that the most vulnerable claimants were those at the greatest risk of being sanctioned. They also found that, far from pushing people to secure work, sanctions were actually pushing people further away from the labour market. To my mind, that is an extremely serious finding, because it undermines the Government's assertion that sanctions are helping to bring down claimant numbers and are playing a positive role in getting people into work.

As far as vulnerable claimants are concerned, that is simply not where the evidence leads. Research from the University of Oxford and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, published earlier this year, found that

“Sanctions do not appear to help people return to work. There is a real concern that sanctioned persons are disappearing from view.”

Similarly, the Economic and Social Research Council has questioned the effectiveness of conditionality in getting people into work, and the Department for Work and Pensions' own evaluation of Jobcentre Plus in 2013 concluded that there was no evidence to suggest that knowledge of jobseeker's allowance conditionality led to actual movement into work. However, there is mounting evidence that sanctions are a key driver of the growth in demand for food banks and are causing unprecedented hardship, and now there is evidence that they are fuelling homelessness.

The number of people being sanctioned has fallen from its peak in the year to October 2013. Since that time, the labour market has improved significantly, and the number of people claiming jobseeker's allowance or its successor benefit, universal credit, has fallen by 41%, so we would expect to see a corresponding fall in the number of people being sanctioned. What is more revealing is that we have also seen a smaller, underlying downward trend in the proportion of claimants being sanctioned, which has fallen to 4.92% a month in the year to June 2015, from a high of 6.77% a month in the previous year. That, however, is still dramatically higher than the pre-2012 rates prior to the introduction of the new regime, and a staggering proportion of sanctions—more than two thirds—are now overturned on appeal, where claimants challenge the decision. I know from speaking to colleagues in Citizens Advice that it now urges people who are sanctioned to appeal against that

first sanction. If people do not appeal against that first sanction, there is a real risk that if they are sanctioned again, the consequences will be devastating for their incomes.

Research carried out by Dr David Webster of Glasgow University highlights a couple of very important statistical limitations of the data that we have on sanctions. First, the recorded stats show sanctions only after reviews, considerations and appeals, so there is a time lag in the data, and the figures do not tell us how many people actually had their benefit money stopped in the first place. Also, and more significantly, as the DWP has been making the transfer to universal credit, new single claimants of unemployment benefits are going on to that benefit instead of on to JSA, and absolutely no data have been published on universal credit sanctions. This is now having what researchers describe as a “significant distorting effect” on analysis, because the number of those at risk of JSA sanctions is being reduced. Moreover, the young single claimants now more likely to be on universal credit—almost half of them are under 25—were previously twice as likely, statistically, to be sanctioned under JSA, so the distortion in the data could be amplified by that, but without hard data, we simply do not know. So we need that data on universal credit.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. She has made an interesting point about jobseeker's allowance, but there are data to show that in the past couple of years there has been a significant increase in the number of disabled people in receipt of employment and support allowance who have been sanctioned, up from 1,400 in March 2013 to 5,400 in March 2014, according to the Crisis figures that I believe the hon. Lady was citing.

The hon. Lady made comments about improving the work capability assessment. Even if the WCA were improved, what is her solution to the sanctions on disabled people on employment and support allowance?

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): May I remind hon. Members that interventions are supposed to be short and pithy?

Dr Whiteford: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about employment and support allowance. I was particularly addressing the universal credit figures, on which, at the moment, the data are lacking, although I believe that in August the UK Statistics Authority called for those data to be published, along with data on actual numbers of sanctions applied. Will the Minister tell us when the Government plan to publish those figures?

The wider issue about the move to universal credit is that it introduces critical differences to the conditionality regime that applied for JSA. First, under universal credit, sanctions run consecutively, not concurrently, so they will potentially be much longer. Also, any hardship payments made are repayable, so if, for example, someone is repaying a hardship payment at the rate of 40% of their benefit, their sanction will effectively become three and a half times longer in real terms than its nominal length. That seems unduly punitive. Moreover, the 80% hardship rate for vulnerable claimants will be abolished

[*Dr Eilidh Whiteford*]

under universal credit. Again, given what the Government have already said about recognising the needs of vulnerable claimants, they really should go back to the universal credit changes and look at how they are going to impact on people.

Hardship payments are not made automatically. People need to know that they exist, whether they are eligible for them, and how to apply. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) has introduced a ten-minute rule Bill, which we are due to debate early in the new year, that would make hardship payments automatic and non-repayable. In the wake of the Oakley review, the Government accepted in principle the need to: make hardship payments available from day one of a sanction; remove the requirement for those who are vulnerable or have children to complete a separate application process; and extend vulnerability markers. Given that acknowledgement that there are vulnerable people in the system, that people are being sanctioned who are not really in a position to comply with the conditions placed on them, and the growing evidence that those claimants are at much greater risk of sanctioning, will the Minister look at this again as universal credit is rolled out more widely?

The rate of sanctions for those in receipt of ESA is very much lower than for JSA, but it is nevertheless a serious issue. We would expect ESA sanctions to be less prevalent, but one of the deeply worrying issues that emerges from the figures released by the DWP in November is that around half of the ESA sanctions imposed between April and June this year were on claimants who had previously been sanctioned. That makes it crystal clear that sanctions are not having a deterrent effect on sick and disabled claimants; rather, it suggests that people are simply unable to comply with the conditions imposed on them. That echoes case studies in the Crisis research, which showed that when sanctioned claimants on ESA had support from professionals, they were subsequently assigned to the support group.

One of the key issues that emerged from the Crisis research with service users was that overall, 21% of respondents who had been sanctioned said that they became homeless as a result of the sanction. The Government have to take that extremely seriously. If someone becomes homeless, it becomes significantly more difficult for them to find work. Communication becomes difficult if someone does not have a stable address, reliable internet access, and cannot present themselves in a smart and work-ready way. It also puts untold pressure on relationships with family and friends. Indeed, it puts financial pressure on family and friends who are trying to support loved ones but might not have the means to do so. It also has a very costly knock-on effect on local authorities, which have statutory responsibilities in such circumstances but also face significant financial pressures.

A critical and perennial problem is that sometimes when a person is sanctioned their housing benefit is also stopped. I know that it is not supposed to happen, and the Government claim that it no longer happens, but very recent research makes it clear that it is still happening. The issue was highlighted in the Oakley review back in 2014, and the Government responded by advising claimants to keep local authorities informed of their situation.

They also said that they would implement an IT fix. When the previous Employment Minister appeared before the Work and Pensions Committee in February, prior to the election, it was suggested that the problem had been resolved, but it had not. In early October, DWP issued an urgent circular to local authorities confirming that sanctioned claimants should continue to receive housing benefits without interruption.

It is clear that there has been an ongoing problem that has not been resolved. That is backed up by the evidence in the Crisis report: more than a third of those it surveyed who claim housing benefit reported that it was stopped when they were sanctioned. That rate rose to 38% for those in the ESA work-related activity group—that is, those people currently not fit for work and in an inherently vulnerable situation. It is clear that not all councils' systems have caught up with the new guidance yet, and it is still a bit of a lottery. This has been happening for a long time now, and the Government really need to get a grip of the issue. Will the Minister update us on that, and tell us what the Government are going to do to protect vulnerable claimants who face housing benefit cuts?

It is important to understand that for many people in rented accommodation, housing benefit or local housing allowance will not cover all their rent in the first place. Many people in private rented accommodation make up the rent out of their JSA or ESA, and some folk in social housing will be liable for the bedroom tax—although thankfully not in Scotland. In a lot of cases, sanctioning is pushing people into arrears, even where the system is working as the Government intend it to.

It is abundantly clear that the sanctions regime is causing real hardship for the most vulnerable people. The Crisis report lays out in very stark terms the extent to which some claimants find it immensely difficult to comply with the conditions placed on them. It is really notable in the research findings that the overwhelming majority of claimants want to work and have every intention of meeting their responsibilities, but simply cannot always meet the demands placed on them. Sanctions need to be reasonable, proportionate and fair, but for those who face the biggest hurdles, the current regime is none of those things.

No one should be made destitute because of the conditionality regime. That is not an acceptable outcome in a civilised and wealthy society. Neither is it a proportionate response to minor infringements, which are often the result of circumstances beyond the control of individuals. Only one in 50 people who are sanctioned is sanctioned for refusing a job. That seems like a heavy burden for people who have made minor infringements. They can potentially lose their homes and any means of supporting themselves. All Members know that we are witnessing destitution in too many communities. People are simply falling through the safety net, and at this stage we have no way of quantifying how many people simply fall out of the system altogether. I have seen them in my constituency, and they tend to be sick people who have long-term health conditions, but we have no systematic information. It is clear that we need a root-and-branch review of the sanctions regime and, as a matter of urgency, we need hardship payments to ensure an accessible safety net.

I am really conscious that it has been a balmy 12° to 15° here in London over the past few days, but I left Aberdeenshire this weekend in sub-zero temperatures.

As winter sets in, those who cannot stay warm and cannot feed themselves properly are at the gravest risk. The Government are culpable if they do not protect our most vulnerable citizens. I urge them to listen and to respond to the specific points I have made. I thank the Members who have come to contribute to this very important debate so close to the end of term.

2.48 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on securing what is possibly the most important debate that could be brought before the House. We heard from her some important and shocking statistics, which I will not repeat. I intend to look at the principle of sanctioning people's benefits, share a few stories about people in my constituency who are currently being crucified by sanctions, and say a little about what I think the Government's motivation is.

The idea is that if we punish people for not wanting to work, or for not wanting to work hard enough, and really make them suffer, it will teach them that they cannot always rely on the Government to take care of them. I would challenge the idea that there really are people who do not want to work. Yes, there are plenty of people who struggle to find work, but there are many reasons why they cannot, such as a lack of jobs, a lack of confidence, no self-belief, an experience of applying over and over and getting nowhere, and generational unemployment in the area where they live.

I also want to challenge the idea that people get comfortable on benefits and on the Government's largesse. Jobseeker's allowance is about £73 a week, and people struggle to pay their living costs on it. Being cash poor is incredibly time-consuming. People have to be very creative to get by, but it is not a fun creativity. It is stressful, depressing and, for many people, never-ending. I am sure we would all agree that we could live on £73 a week, and I agree that we probably could for one week, but try doing it week in, week out, month in, month out—for some people, it is year in, year out—with absolutely no respite. There are no bonuses for people who live on benefits.

Seventy-three pounds a week means that, if your washing machine breaks down, you've had it. Nobody is going to fix it for less than £50, so where will you get the money? It means always being the one who turns up to family weddings and parties in the same outfit and with a cheap present that you know they do not really want but is all you can afford. It means having holes in the bottom of your shoes and getting used to soggy cardboard underfoot. It means keeping up the facade so friends do not pity you. It means being in job interviews trying to focus on coming across well, but spending far too much time worrying that they can hear your shoes squelching. Being poor can be really embarrassing. Nobody gets comfortable on benefits.

The money people are given does not stop them looking for work. Yes, low pay is a problem that we need to tackle, but we need to acknowledge that pay is not the only attraction to work. There is the purpose that work gives; it is somewhere to go and a reason to get up in the morning. Most importantly of all, there are people to interact with on a daily basis. Whether you like them or not, interaction is important.

We all know that, but not everybody does. There are areas in which whole generations have been unemployed for long periods. If someone does not remember their parents, aunts and uncles working, how can they know that jobs are about more than money, and how do they therefore garner the enthusiasm to apply for very low-paid jobs?

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some important points about the most vulnerable in society, as, indeed, did the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford), who secured the debate—I apologise for being late. Does the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) agree that we should welcome today's jobs figures, which show that more people are in work than ever before, and that we, as Members of Parliament, have a responsibility to promote those who are in work and the benefits of work that she is highlighting?

Anne McLaughlin: I represent Glasgow North East, which has the 17th highest rate of unemployment in the whole of these islands, so my constituents have got very little to cheer about today, although I hear that the Prime Minister was most gleeful about the fact that we have managed to cut unemployment a little overall.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Is the hon. Lady aware that, although more people are in work than a year ago, the number of hours that we are working as a country has gone down, which indicates the sort of jobs that people are getting?

Anne McLaughlin: Yes, I am aware of that, and I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting it.

I grew in the shipbuilding town of Greenock in Port Glasgow. I often tell a story about when I was at Port Glasgow high school—I am not going to tell Members what year it was. Every Monday morning in my first year at high school we had a 15-minute registration class, and the teacher would ask, "How did you get on at the weekend?" I remember a long, long period in which several people in my class—it felt like dozens, but it could not have been—said, "My dad got made redundant", "My dad was a fitter, and he's lost his job", "My father was a welder" or "My mother worked in the canteen." Not many women in those days were time-served tradespeople. For so many of my classmates, both their parents lost their jobs. For many of them, the last time they could remember their parents working was when they were 12, so they have very little memory of working parents. Where there is generational unemployment in an area in which expectations are low, surely our job is to raise people's expectations; give them confidence and self-belief; work with them, not against them; give them additional support, not less support; and certainly not punish them.

Let me turn to what I believe lies behind the Government's sanctions agenda. I will start with what they say lies behind it. They say it is to teach claimants that they cannot expect something for nothing. I will refer to a few of my constituents, and perhaps the Minister will tell me what each of them was supposed to learn. Sara was late—not very late—for an interview

[Anne McLaughlin]

and was sanctioned. She was late because there was an accident on the road and her bus was stuck in traffic. It was not her fault. What is she to learn from that?

Another constituent was told that she had to go to an interview at the jobcentre. She was given a week's notice, and they said, "We want you to come next Wednesday at 3 pm." She said, "But I pick up my six-year-old from school at 3 pm." "Well, that's just tough"—her parents lived 100 miles away—"You either come to the interview or we sanction your benefits." What is she to learn from that? Should she have abandoned her child at the school playground or take her child out of school? That is what she did, and her child missed an hour's education.

I have two constituents—a couple—who live in Roystonhill. The wife went into labour—not the party; she was having a baby. [Laughter.] I do not know why I said that. The husband unsurprisingly went with her. He had no credit to phone and say that he would not be signing on that day, so he went the next day. They were sanctioned for six weeks. Welcome to the world, tiny baby; your parents are getting no money for six weeks, and not even a single milk token. What is that couple to learn from that sanction? Did they learn that the husband should have abandoned his wife and left her to it? Before anybody starts thinking that they were long-term unemployed, let me say that their daughter is two and they are both working now. They were both working up until six months before she had the baby. They are not people who do not want to work. They learned nothing from that experience, except that the Government do not care about them.

I have a constituent who has mental health problems and a visual impairment. He has severe panic attacks. A condition of his ESA is that he attends an office in the city centre either once a month or once a week. It takes him hours because he gets lost and distressed. He was asked, "What is it you do when you get there?" He said, "I just sign a bit of paper and leave." Why? What is the point of that?

Michael Tomlinson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne McLaughlin: That would be very helpful.

Michael Tomlinson: I want to be helpful, but I also want to make a point. The hon. Lady is raising some tough, interesting cases, but does she recognise that there is a test of good reason that can be employed where there is good reason for sanctions not to be imposed?

Anne McLaughlin: I recognise that, but, as one of the most active welfare rights providers in Barmulloch in my constituency told me, most people do not ask for a mandatory reconsideration. That couple with a baby did not know that they could apply for a mandatory reconsideration. No doubt they were given a leaflet, but they were so distressed and busy working out what they were going to do with their baby—they had absolutely no money for six weeks—that they did not do it. I am sure everybody here will agree that those cases cannot be justified and that those decisions were wrong, but they are not exceptions. Those people are losing money for unacceptable reasons.

I want to look at the exception of the people the Minister will no doubt argue should be sanctioned—those who are deemed not to be doing enough to find work. I can tell him a little about that, because I was one of them, apparently. I recently spent a significant period looking for work. I started off confident. I was certain that I would find something fulfilling and reasonably well paid, and I was prepared not to limit myself. I spent days putting my heart and soul into applying for jobs that I knew I would be offered an interview for. Rejection is very hard to take, but no acknowledgment is even harder. When someone has put their heart and soul into something, to be treated as if they do not exist—as if they are invisible—is soul-destroying. Some weeks, I confess, I could not face it. I could not pluck up the energy to try to write in the confident manner that is necessary to impress a potential employer. Should I have been sanctioned? That is what is happening to people now. Should I have been punished, or should I have been given a bit of additional support? We should acknowledge that finding a job is a stressful, extremely low-paid, full-time job. Is it really so difficult to understand why claimants sometimes need to clear their head and build their confidence again?

It is clear that what lies behind the benefit sanctions regime is an ideologically driven determination to drive people further into the ground, to show them who is boss, to pander to the red tops that tell people about layabouts living the life of Riley, never having worked a day in their lives and never having wanted to because the poor, downtrodden workers are doing it for them while they get paid way too much to sit about on their backsides all day. That is utter nonsense and anyone who argues it should be ashamed of themselves.

Michael Tomlinson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne McLaughlin: If the hon. Gentleman wants to argue that, carry on.

Michael Tomlinson: The hon. Lady is being generous with her time, particularly with my interventions. I cannot let her get away with the accusation that Government Members are determined to drive people into the ground. It is the exact opposite. The intention is to drive people into work. For SNP Members to accuse Government Members of wanting to drive people into the ground, not into work, is to miss the point entirely.

Anne McLaughlin: We are not missing the point. Most of us have been there ourselves. Most of us have been unemployed and looking for work. None of us was born with a silver spoon in our mouth. None of us has had a job for the boys. Most of us have experienced living on benefits. I am telling the hon. Gentleman that the way to get people into work is to support them, understand them and build their confidence, not to attack or threaten them and certainly not to take away the means by which they feed and clothe themselves and their children.

Neil Coyle: Does the hon. Lady share my concern about the despicable comments that we just heard? We are talking about disabled people with mental health conditions or learning disabilities. A quarter of a million people on employment support allowance have been

found unfit for work. It is disgraceful to be pretending that this is about supporting them back into work. This is about taking money from disadvantaged people.

Anne McLaughlin: I will finish by completely agreeing with the hon. Gentleman. I have had a constituent—a grown man—crying to me on the phone. He once had a lot of self-respect. He once had a tough job that he worked really hard at. He became ill, but he has not been believed. He is now talking to me about ending his life. I do not know what to say to him. The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) pretends that this is all about getting people into work, but why does he not listen to what we are telling him? Why does he not listen to the evidence? He may believe something else, but he needs to open his ears and start listening.

3.2 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I do not know how to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin). She was excellent.

I want to discuss the Crisis figures, highlighting a few that were not mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) earlier. Some 77% of those who were sanctioned skipped meals and 64% went without heating. As was mentioned, someone can just about get away with that in this weather down here in London, but not in a cold granite tenement in Aberdeen. It is horrendous that people are having to decide whether to spend their last £10 on the prepayment meter for electricity or on food for their children. It is ridiculous that people are being put in such positions.

Returning to the figures, 60% found it harder to look for work after being sanctioned. That does nothing to encourage people into work. It is an attempt to take money away from people. In a Citizens Advice survey, nine out of 10 people who had been sanctioned said they did not know why they had been sanctioned or how to stop it happening again. If they are supposed to be encouraged into work and to learn from the experience, which is presumably an attempt by the Government to prod them in the right direction, why are they not learning? Why do they not know how to avoid being sanctioned in future? Why have they not gained knowledge from the experience?

I also want to mention the link between sanctions and food banks, which has been discussed at length previously. Research carried out by *The BMJ* found that areas with the biggest increase in benefit sanctions saw the biggest increase in food bank use. The link is clear. I represent Aberdeen North. Aberdeen is the oil capital of Europe. It has the highest proportion of Rolls-Royces outside of central London. It is a very rich city, but we have so much poverty.

3.5 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.14 pm

On resuming—

Kirsty Blackman: I was talking about the food bank situation, and the situation more generally, in Aberdeen. We have three food banks in Aberdeen that publish

statistics: the Trussell Trust, Instant Neighbour and Community Food Initiatives North East. In the past year, we have seen a massive increase in food bank use in our city. Indeed, between 2012 and 2014, the Trussell Trust saw 240% growth, while the Instant Neighbour food bank saw 120% growth—the growth has been absolutely huge. All three food banks cite late benefit payments and benefit sanctions as reasons for food bank use.

Interestingly, on the topic of getting people back into work, 22% of those across Scotland who go to Trussell Trust food banks say they do so because of low wages.

Michael Tomlinson: Does the hon. Lady welcome the pilot scheme under which jobcentre advisers attend food banks to signpost people in the right direction and to help them get back to work?

Kirsty Blackman: It is good to have all sorts of advisers in food banks, but food banks are filling a ridiculous gap that we should not have in the system. They are going out of their way themselves to do their best for people in terms of advice. They are having to finance these things and to get money from people, including from local charities and organisations, to provide advice. People really need that advice, and I welcome advice from all quarters, but these things should not be happening in the first place.

As I said, Aberdeen is a rich city. How do people get into a situation where they are unemployed and need to go to food banks? I came from a job where I was not earning as much as I am now—obviously, most of us took a bit of a pay rise when we got this job—so the combined income in my household was less than £40,000. People in my peer group, who are not earning the lowest of the low wages are still just a couple of pay checks away from having to go to food banks. The Government say it is really good that we are giving breaks to people with savings, but people do not have massive savings. If the main earner in the house is made unemployed, and they have a couple of months where they have no finances, they are in serious trouble, no matter how careful they have been or what they have done.

In Aberdeen, people cannot rent a one-bedroom flat for less than about £500 a month. People who have been made unemployed, who are struggling and who are having to pitch up to the jobcentre are really struggling to pay their rent.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): My hon. Friend will be aware that, in my constituency, we now have not only food banks, but a Christmas toy bank. Food banks, general practitioners and the rest are referring people to toy banks at this time of year. Surely that shows that the welfare system is failing.

Kirsty Blackman: A local organisation, Home-Start Aberdeen, did an Advent book bank and people donated children's books. Some of the children who received books would not otherwise have got a book at Christmas time. It is absolutely awful that children are being disadvantaged because of those policies.

Some of the people who walk through the door of my constituency office and through the doors of food banks are pitching up because of late benefit payments.

[Kirsty Blackman]

For example, an adverse decision has been made against them, they have been sanctioned and they have got the decision overturned, but it takes another month for that to get through the system and for the money to come in. How can the Government say that someone will be sanctioned for being 15 minutes late for an appointment when they cannot pay somebody for a whole month? How is that a realistic position? They expect individuals to behave in an impossible way—it is impossible for anybody to be on time for every single appointment and never to be 15 minutes late—when they can happily miss paying people for an entire month, and that is acceptable. It is ridiculous that they expect people to live by rules they cannot live by themselves.

I am really distressed by the benefit sanctions system. I am particularly annoyed about the late payments. I am annoyed that the Government, despite having published the guidelines and policies they expect people to work within, do not even stick to them. If there is an appeal, for example, it would be really good if they could make payments timeously to ensure that my constituents do not have to go to food banks.

3.19 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on securing the debate, and other Members who have spoken passionately about their constituents and the situations that they have seen. I want to highlight a couple of constituency situations as well.

The sanctions regime for employment and support allowance is particularly punitive, going by my experience in my constituency office. It has put sick and disabled people into serious hardship for unacceptably long periods. I have a constituent in the ESA work-related activity group who suffers from serious clinical depression. As a result he has been totally unable to get to advisory interviews and take part in work-related activity. He should be in the support group but has not been able to advocate that for himself because of his condition, which has compounded his situation. He was sanctioned for an entire year and has been unable to reapply to get the sanction reduced to a fixed period. He should not have been sanctioned at all, but it is clear that the structure of the ESA regime and the increasingly punitive sanctions imposed by the Department for Work and Pensions are targeting the sick and vulnerable.

Despite guidance that states that claimants must be officially notified of sanctions in writing, many jobseeker's allowance claimants have been sanctioned without an official warning and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said, without any understanding of the reason for the sanction. A constituent of mine lost his benefits from 2013 when he was sanctioned for failing to attend an interview. He was told verbally that he had been sanctioned, and the sanction should have lasted four weeks. He was not given further information about how to challenge the sanction. It is estimated that over the past five years, 28,000 claimants in Scotland have been sanctioned without official notification in writing from the DWP. Following the switch to automatic

notification of sanctions by the DWP in 2015, my constituent finally received notification of his sanction two and a half years late. That burden of administrative error puts people into situations of great confusion and misunderstanding. They do not know why they are in such circumstances, and that is unacceptable and should not happen.

Michael Tomlinson: The hon. Lady again highlights very effectively some hard cases involving the most vulnerable people. There are examples in my constituency as well. However, just so that I can understand, is it her party's policy that there should be no sanctions at all? After all, sanctions have been in place for some time. Alternatively, is the issue simply that they are not being implemented correctly?

Alison Thewliss: The sanctions regime as it stands today is unacceptable. The hardship that people are placed in, the stress on their lives and the effect on their children and wider families is unacceptable. The sanctions regime is not fit for purpose. It targets entirely the wrong people and makes things worse.

There is particular concern at the citizens advice bureau in Bridgeton about the question of the first sanction, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan. People are not challenging that first sanction. They think, "I'll ride that one out. I can wait a week. I can manage. I can cope," but if they do not challenge it the system decides that they have accepted the reason for the sanction, and that it was fair and justified. When something else happens—the next time their bus is late, or they have to pick up a child, or they are ill or in hospital, or some other thing happens—the second sanction will be far more punitive and the third one, should there be one, even more so. The first sanction is crucial, and that fact is not getting out to people. I cannot stress enough how much I would like people to challenge the first sanction on every occasion. An awful lot are overturned, because they are not fair.

The last case that I want to highlight puts the tin lid on how ludicrous the system is. I do not know, but I imagine that hon. Members from parties outside Scotland will not have seen the front page of *The National* this morning. It reports on a case that I highlighted about a constituent who was on universal credit and sought work. He obtained an offer of employment, which was great—that is what we want for people. As with all jobs, a start date was negotiated and agreed; that was fine. However, because of the expectation of compliance with the claimant commitment, which is the core requirement at all times for receiving universal credit, that constituent faced the threat of sanction even though he had a confirmed offer of employment. The new employer of that person will be the DWP. Well done, guys; that is absolutely tremendous. You could not make it up. The Government urgently need to review universal credit, particularly to ensure that the transition to employment is managed properly and is not subject to sanction. It is ludicrous to sanction someone who has complied and done everything they ought. It is crazy.

Michael Tomlinson: I repeat my question on that. Is it the position of the hon. Lady's party that there should be no sanctions regime at all?

Alison Thewliss: Does the hon. Gentleman think that he should be sanctioned because he was late for the debate today? I hope he loses a week's, a month's or a year's wages as a result.

Michael Tomlinson: I had good cause.

Alison Thewliss: Did you? Then you should explain it to someone else and see if they consider that fair. That does not happen to my constituents. Why should the hon. Gentleman have a different set of rules?

I have another case I want to raise, although it is not the case of a constituent of mine. However, the lady who told me about it affected me deeply. She was in Central Lobby a few weeks ago, and was so upset; she was in tears and absolutely broken. Her brother had committed suicide. He died with £3.44 to his name because he had been sanctioned and lost his benefits. He committed suicide as a result of the pressure put on him by the policies of the Government. The sanctions regime needs to be resolved and reviewed, and that must happen now.

3.25 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) on securing the debate, which follows on from one that I secured in this Chamber two weeks ago. The Minister may well be getting fed up with responding to Scottish National party debates about the Government's sanctions regime, but I warn her that the party will return to the issue and challenge the Government on it until we see fairness in the social security system.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan made an excellent speech and has been a constant campaigner on the issue for some time. I pay tribute to her for that. She highlighted the issue of work capability assessments and people being declared fit for work when they are clearly not. She also highlighted the fact that although there is a need for some form of conditionality, the conditions should be proportionate and fair. She called on the Government to look at the trial of the yellow card warning system, and argued that the very need for it shows that the system is not working. I call again on the Minister, as I did two weeks ago, to tell us about the detail of that trial—when we can expect it to happen, and where and how it will happen. That detail has not so far been forthcoming.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan also highlighted the hardship and destitution resulting from sanctions. The Crisis report gives excellent qualitative evidence on that: 1,000 people were spoken to in a survey, and the impact on their lives was documented. My hon. Friend's speech, coupled with the Crisis research, reveals the urgent, desperate need for a review of the sanctions regime, and for better protection of homeless claimants and those with mental health conditions against extreme hardship resulting from sanctioning.

My hon. Friend also touched on issues to do with hardship payments, which I hope the Minister will reflect on and deal with. Sanctions have not become a deterrent. That is clear, and my hon. Friend showed it. Indeed, there is a debate to be had about whether a deterrent is needed. The Crisis report set out that homeless

people accept the need for conditionality. The problem is that they are simply unable to comply with the conditions, because of their unfortunate circumstances.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) made an incredibly powerful speech on behalf of her constituents, and I must agree with her. Over the nearly eight years I have helped in and represented the constituency of Airdrie and Shotts, I have yet to come across anyone who has shirked the responsibility of looking for work, or anyone who does not want to get work. As my hon. Friend said, there is no bonus for living on social security support. I support her in challenging any of us here to live on £73 a week. Maybe we could do it for one week, but week after week it would be incredibly difficult. No one gets comfortable on benefits. For her to be able to draw on her own experience of living on social security support and applying for jobs, and of the dent to confidence from being knocked back, was powerful testimony to which I hope the Government pay heed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) was worried about following my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East, but she did so well. She drew on figures from the Crisis report, such as the one showing that 77% of those sanctioned had skipped meals. That has to be a wake-up call. That figure alone should trouble Members in all parts of the House. Another critical figure is that 60% of those sanctioned found it harder to find work as a result—little wonder, frankly. The rise in the number of food banks in her constituency is reflected in mine, but we should not be relying on food banks and third sector organisations to fill the gaps in the social security safety net caused by Government cuts. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that in her winding-up speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) spoke about the case of her disabled constituent who was sanctioned for a year—an absolutely disgraceful example, which we should all be shocked by. She was also quoted in a newspaper report this morning—I have a copy, if the Minister wishes to read it—which highlights another of her constituency cases. My hon. Friend's constituent had earned employment at the DWP, but was sanctioned while waiting for the employment to start. That sums up the omnishambles of the sanctioning regime.

Michael Tomlinson: The hon. Gentleman, too, is highlighting some of the hard cases. As the SNP spokesman, however, will he confirm whether it is his and his party's policy for there to be no sanctions system? After all, sanctions have been part of the social security system since 1946.

Neil Gray: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his diligence, especially after the put-down by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central: the hon. Gentleman was himself late for the debate and, had he been on social security support, he would have been sanctioned. I do not believe that many of us could survive for longer than a month or so without our own salary, never mind the £73 a week that other people have to live on. It does him no service to push this. As for our view of sanctions, we believe that there should be conditionality, absolutely, but not the punitive sanctioning that has increased exponentially under this Government

[Neil Gray]

and the previous one. That is our concern, not conditionality or sanctioning in general. I hope that answers the hon. Gentleman's question.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan said, the sanctions regime is causing extreme hardship and is being operated in an arbitrary and unfair way. The Crisis report she quoted shows plainly what is happening to homeless people.

Emily Thornberry: Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that the rules were changed in 2012, resulting in the much greater use of sanctions than ever before?

Neil Gray: Yes, absolutely, the Labour spokesperson is right. There is clear, documented evidence of the rate of sanctioning for all social security benefits such as JSA and ESA having risen since the coalition Government came to power.

Homeless people are twice as likely as others to be sanctioned, which must shock us all. I hope that the Minister will advise us of what plans she has to extend the at-risk group to those with mental health conditions and to the homeless, as I called for two weeks ago. I hope she will provide some detail on that.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): The Scottish Association for Mental Health published research that found that 98% of service users had said that their mental health had deteriorated as a direct result of welfare reform. The research confirmed that benefit sanctions had been detrimental to the mental health of service users. Does my hon. Friend agree that sanctions are inhumane? I call for a review of the practice.

Neil Gray: Absolutely. Two weeks ago I called for that same review, and the Select Committee on Work and Pensions has done so as well. I hope that the Minister will respond. It is little wonder that mental health of people who have been sanctioned suffers—their confidence, their ability to find work and their ability to feed and water themselves and their family are all damaged. It is little wonder that we find evidence that people's mental health is suffering. What benefit does sanctioning give to people seeking work? Very little, if any.

In the Minister's response to my earlier debate, she stressed the importance of sanctioning to the social security system and to getting people into work. I hope that in her response today she will provide some evidence of the effectiveness of sanctions in pushing people into work. I am genuinely interested to hear what the Department has done to get evidence of how many people have returned to work within three or even six months of a social security sanction. I am interested because there is certainly plenty of evidence to show that the system is not working.

One example of evidence is the academic research conducted by Oxford University and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, which my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan cited. They looked at official data on sanctioning rates, employment rates and benefit off-flow between 2005 and 2014 in 375 local authority areas—a pretty comprehensive and

wide-ranging study. They found that for every 100 JSA claimants who received a sanction, 42.4 no longer claimed the benefit. That sounds great until we realise that only a fifth of them actually reported having found work. So for every 100 sanctions, we get 8.5 people into work. Also, from those 100 sanctions, 34 people no longer claim the benefit but are not in work. How many of them are self-denying the support to which they are entitled and which they need because they are so scunnered and fed up with the system?

Has the Department carried out a social impact study? Has any work been done with those who have been sanctioned to find out what their experiences were, their destinations after the sanction and the impact on their quality of life? The Government have been quick to dismiss any link between work capability assessments and suicides, in spite of the study from Oxford and Liverpool Universities linking 590 suicides to WCAs. The Government have also been quick to say that the sanctions regime plays an important part in the social security system. As far as I can see, however, neither statement has so far been supported with fact. I hope that the Minister will enlighten us today.

Emily Thornberry: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of another statistic? If people go on the Work programme, they are as likely to get sanctioned as to get a job.

Neil Gray: That is a highly depressing statistic for the Government to reflect on.

I hope that the Minister will give us more detail on the yellow card sanction or early warning system. We heard that it was to be trialled in the new year, but where will the trial be, how long will it last and under what terms will it take place? I asked the same questions two weeks ago and hope that the Minister can now advise us of the answers.

Finally, will the Minister agree to the full independent review of the sanctions regime called for by the Work and Pensions Committee and by my party? With half of all sanctions being overturned on appeal, a sizeable increase in sanctioning rates and documented evidence from Oxfam, the Poverty Alliance, Crisis and many others linking sanctions to increased food bank need, now is the time for the Government finally to realise the damage that they are causing to individuals and communities and to review the sanctions regime.

3.38 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan.

I, too, did not expect to be back in Westminster Hall discussing benefit sanctions so soon after the previous debate. Nevertheless, I am grateful to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) for securing the debate. I am also very grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) for speaking from the heart, for speaking the truth and for speaking so powerfully.

The debate has given us another opportunity to hold the Government's feet to the fire. As the official Opposition spokesperson, I tend to speak second to last, before the Minister, so I do not get a chance to come back at her. We are two weeks on from the previous debate, so I will

anticipate to an extent what the Minister will say this time. Perhaps that will challenge her on some of the things that I suspect will be in her speech and she might be able to answer some of the questions.

I spent a long time looking at the Minister's previous speech from two weeks ago. It was interesting, but a number of things seemed odd. She seemed to indicate that the Government had given up even trying to persuade us that their sanctions regime is helping people into work, because she said,

"we know from claimants that there is a positive impact on behaviour"
—[*Official Report*, 2 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 174WH.]

and that, "sanctions make it...clear" to people that they must "follow the rules", so they are not about jobs. As is obvious, following the rules in terms of looking for work is not the same as finding work. In fact, it has become increasingly clear that, in many cases, the rules are a set of arbitrary boxes to be ticked that are as likely to hamstring people looking for work as they are to help them.

Sanctions are a major concern in Scotland, as they are in the rest of the country, as today's debate and the previous one show. I was struck by a case that came up at a recent hearing of the Scottish Parliament's Welfare Reform Committee on sanctions. A man from the east end of Glasgow described his experience on the Work programme, which included being made to sit in an office from nine to five, cold calling local employers to ask whether they had any vacancies. Of course they did not, so he ended up with a string of rejections, which was deeply humiliating as well as being a complete waste of time. For the Minister to suggest that the rules are about tailoring to the needs and circumstances of the individual frankly contradicts all the evidence and experience, which is to the contrary.

The Minister spoke about the claimant commitment in our previous debate. It is worth saying a few words about that, not least because, by setting the conditions that jobseekers are expected to adhere to, it has become an inextricable part of the wider sanctions debate. What are the conditions? Like the sanctions regimes we have today, the claimant commitment was a bit of a wheeze, cooked up by the coalition Government in what seemed to be more of an effort to score political points than to help people find work. I read the two reports on universal credit published by the DWP a little over a week ago and one thing I found interesting was that only 37% of people surveyed by the Department felt that the claimant commitment set realistic expectations that would help them find jobs.

It is time for a proper evaluation of the claimant commitment. Although that was a key recommendation of the Work and Pensions Committee in its recent report on sanctions, the Government continue to refuse to do that or to give us a reason why. In her previous speech, the Minister referred to her Department's efforts to "improve" the system by taking on board the recommendations of the two recent reports. One of them, which was by Matthew Oakley and published in July 2014, has been referred to, while the other is the Work and Pensions Committee's report from March to which I just referred. She said that the Government have

"responded positively to the...Oakley review",
and that they had

"accepted all 17 of the Oakley recommendations to improve the process".—[*Official Report*, 2 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 176WH.]

I found that interesting, so I had a good look into that. However, I am afraid that the Minister has been gilding the lily.

The Government actually said that that they would accept the recommendations

"wherever possible, and subject to detailed feasibility and securing the necessary resources"—

weasel words.

Effectively, they are giving no commitment at all and the reality is that, 18 months after the Oakley report was published, some of its most important recommendations have gone exactly nowhere. Recommendation 11, for example, called on the Government to pilot a system of non-financial sanctions. That seems entirely sensible, particularly for those with a strong record of meeting the requirements placed on them and who, for example, may simply have had a wife in labour.

To give another example, recommendations 12 and 14 suggested that the Government end the absurd practice of Work programme providers being required to refer people for sanctions even if the providers themselves do not believe that there has been an offence. The Government rejected that common-sense suggestion and once again gave no reason. Therefore, the Minister claims to have "responded positively" to Oakley, and to have accepted his recommendations "in full", but, having had a good look at the reality as opposed to the rhetoric, I do not see how they match up.

Similarly, the Minister did not tell us the whole story when she described the Government's response to the Select Committee report. She said that its Chair had

"welcomed our response and, importantly, our willingness to engage with the Committee to ensure that the conditionality system works as it should."—[*Official Report*, 2 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 176WH.]

Let us have a look at that. By far the most important recommendation was for there to be a full, independent review of the entire system. Inexplicably, the Government refuse to do that and will not give us a reason.

Another of the Committee's particularly important recommendations was for there to be a thorough evaluation of the new approach to in-work conditionality. We all need to be mindful of what the Government are doing and what they are about to do. They are currently piloting, within universal credit, an expansion of the conditionality regime. That pilot is very shadowy. We do not know where it is, who is being put through it or how many people are on it and, when we ask, the Government do not give us any answers. In-work conditionality means that someone is working, but they are not working enough, so, as far as I understand it—if I am wrong, I would love to hear from the Minister about exactly what is going on—they are told that, even though they are working, they must look for more work and, if they do not, they will get sanctioned. If that is right, we would like to know the details.

We welcomed the recommendation of a review, not least because in-work conditionality is completely untested and unprecedented—it is a new concept within any social security system. The Government's response to the recommendation was good. I give the Minister full marks for her response. She stated:

"We agree that individuals on Universal Credit and in work will not be subject to the full range of work-related requirements and sanctions beyond existing pilots until we have fully considered the learning from those pilots."

[Emily Thornberry]

Great.

However—surprise, surprise—we heard from the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the autumn statement seemingly just a few weeks thereafter that the Government will

“extend the same support and conditionality we currently expect of those on jobseeker’s allowance to over 1 million more benefit claimants.”—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1371.]

I do not know whether the Minister knew that. Who are those claimants? What are the Government doing on this? We have a shadowy pilot and we are told that it will be looked at properly before it is extended, but then the Chancellor of the Exchequer says that it will be expanded to another million people and we do not know what the circumstances are. This is completely new. The current sanctions regime is bad enough and if the Minister is now to expand that to those in work, we need to know why and how.

Neil Gray: Does the hon. Lady share my concern that the conditionality and sanctioning regimes are just a fig leaf for social security cuts?

Emily Thornberry: With great respect, I think that is a simplistic argument and that it goes further than that. Those who have been subjected to a large number of sanctions lose confidence and end up “economically inactive” and, when they are asked why they have become economically inactive, we find out that it is because they have been discouraged. For many people, that means sleeping on the sofa, asking mum for a loan and begging. Many people are falling out of the system and a large number of them are very young, but that allows the Prime Minister to get up at Prime Minister’s questions and say that the number of claimants is going down. It is more cynical than cuts. Cuts is bad enough, but that takes things further.

The Government have not made clear exactly what they will do, but our assumption is that the 1 million people must include those on universal credit. I respectfully suggest that the Government saying one thing to the Select Committee and then the exact opposite in the Chamber just four weeks later does not look like the Minister’s promise to have “engaged” with the Committee in any positive way.

More troubling still are the implications of that U-turn for the future of sanctions policy. The sanctions regime is broken, but the Government will not look at it or allow an independent review. They are bashing on regardless and now they want to increase it to include those in work. During the previous debate we seemed to be fairly close to reaching cross-party consensus on the fact that it is broken. The only differences that arose were in relation to the scale of the problem. It does need fixing.

For the Government more or less out of the blue to suggest that they intend to expand the scope of sanctions is quite extraordinary. I hope that, this afternoon, the Minister will answer some of the questions rightly asked by the Opposition to hold the Government to account, because it is silly for us to have to keep coming back time and again to Westminster Hall to ask them.

3.49 pm

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I will endeavour, in the time I have, to cover as much ground as possible.

It is fair to say that I am always happy to come to the Chamber to participate in debates on this important issue. Today’s debate has given all Members the opportunity to give their constituents’ views and their personal views on the sanctions and benefits system. It has also provided opportunities for Members of the House to discuss how we can support and encourage people back into work. On a day when we see figures showing record numbers of people in employment, we should welcome all the support put in place through our jobcentres and work coaches to help people into work. It is somewhat disappointing that we have not heard much from Members in this afternoon’s debate on the support available to help people into work.

Conditionality is a key part of the approach that has helped to deliver record-breaking levels of employment, labour market improvements and the lowest claimant count since 1975. As we have debated not only today and in the debate a few weeks ago but continuously, sanctions have been part of the welfare system for a considerable number of decades.

Neil Gray: Does the Minister accept that since her Government and their predecessor, the coalition, came into power, the sanctioning rate has increased for not only ESA but JSA? Can she give any reason for that?

Priti Patel: I do not accept what the hon. Gentleman says at all. Sanctions have been a part of the welfare system for a considerable number of decades, and successive Governments of all parties have acknowledged the principle that there should be a link between benefits and engagement with the labour market. That principle has been at the heart of the system, and it is important to recognise that that is exactly how the system works right now; we engage claimants and ensure they are being supported in their work searches, while ensuring fairness and balance in the system.

The claimant commitment clearly sets out the consequences of failing to meet the requirements of the claim. As I have stated in previous debates, the claimant commitment is discussed at length with the claimant and, of course, takes account of any barriers to work, health conditions, disabilities or caring responsibilities.

Anne McLaughlin: Will the Minister give way?

Priti Patel: I will not, because I have many comments to make and we are short of time.

Two weeks ago, in the previous debate on sanctions, a number of Members quoted from reports and gave statistics to support their claim that the system is broken. We have heard similar quotes today, but we should be clear that much of what has been quoted is not fully representative of the system. We have heard extensive quotes from Oxford University and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine report that suggests only 20% of JSA claimants find work after a sanction has been imposed. That is misleading, because it makes the assumption that the 80% of people who leave JSA with unknown destinations do not enter work. In fact,

many people do not inform Jobcentre Plus of their post-benefit destination because they are getting into work.

Statistics published by the Office for National Statistics put a clear disclaimer on the data, stating that the destinations data are unreliable and that it should not be assumed that all movements into employment are accurately reported. It would have been more accurate for Members to quote from the comprehensive DWP destinations survey that found that 68% of those leaving JSA move into work.

Members have rightly raised the issue of sanctions for people with mental health conditions. Less than 1% of ESA WRAG claimants with mental health conditions are sanctioned each month. The latest available data show that the number of sanctions across ESA WRAG claimants has decreased over the past year, including for those with mental health conditions. That is because, as we have continuously stated, we are seeking to support people with health conditions and, in particular, mental health conditions into employment.

The Government have just pledged more than £40 million to develop a proper and robust evidence base on which approaches are effective for people with mental health conditions. Over the next three years, that investment will enable us to have informed pilots that are based on evidence, to see exactly what kind of support works for those people and whether cognitive behavioural therapy for people on ESA, JSA and UC makes a difference. We are now working in a more integrated approach with the Department of Health on the use of talking therapies in our jobcentres and other community locations.

Several hon. Members mentioned the recent Crisis report, but they did not highlight that the report found there was support for a system of conditionality among the respondents interviewed.

Neil Gray: I said that.

Priti Patel: Let me finish my point. The report noted that

“the sanctions regime does prompt some behavioural change”.

Scottish National party Members have secured this debate; I congratulate them on that, but they have had their say. They have been giving very inaccurate reports about the sanctions regime. As I have said at least six or seven times on the Floor of the House, if individual Members want to raise their cases with me, I am happy to look into them. If they want to raise cases about jobcentres in their constituencies or the conduct of work coaches, I would like to pick those up with them. Members who have raised such cases have not done so previously, but I give them the opportunity to do so.

Emily Thornberry: I appreciate that the Minister has a lot to get through, so I will speak very fast. One of the Work and Pensions Committee's recommendations was that the DWP should monitor the destinations of people leaving jobseeker's allowance. Currently, the Department only does that on an ad hoc basis. That is one of the recommendations that the Government refused to apply.

Priti Patel: That, of course, is part of our ongoing work and, along with the sanctions system, it is always subject to review. We will continue to work with the system and learn from the data we receive.

To return to the Crisis report, it is not entirely clear how the respondents to the study were selected, and the conclusions appear to apply to only a subset of the overall homeless population. That is why we are quite cautious about the degree to which the views and responses included represent those of the broader population. We know that the most important priority for homeless people is to secure accommodation, and to secure support not only in getting into accommodation but in dealing with barriers to work and any particular conditions they may have. It is important to note that support is always, rightly, based on individual needs and circumstances, and is there to help homeless claimants find suitable living accommodation, which in turn helps to remove barriers to employment.

I return to the role of our work coaches. They are able to treat certain homeless claimants as meeting their job-seeking conditions if they are receiving the right support to find living accommodation. Work coaches are also able to suspend conditionality temporarily if the claimant's circumstances constitute an emergency. We recognise that homeless claimants may not be covered by our current list of vulnerable claimants for the purposes of hardship payments, and I emphasise that we are considering expanding the list to include those who are homeless.

We understand that homelessness is highly complex, and no one should generalise about the circumstances or backgrounds of homeless individuals. It is our priority to ensure that they get the right support. That is why the Government have made more than £1 billion available since 2010 to prevent and tackle homelessness and to support vulnerable households. In the spending review, we announced an increase in the Department for Communities and Local Government's centrally funded programmes over the next four years to tackle homelessness. I would like to think that all Members here would welcome that.

References have been made to sanctions statistics, and it has been suggested that according to the Government's March figures, 50% of sanctions imposed have been overturned on appeal. The official statistics say something different: in the year to June 2015, only 14% of original adverse JSA sanctions and 23% of ESA decisions were overturned by decision makers. Those decisions were based on new evidence being brought forward that was not available at the time of the original decision.

Anne McLaughlin: Will the Minister give way?

Priti Patel: I come back to my point that if individual Members want to raise specific cases with me, they are very welcome to do so.

I do not have time to touch on the overall improvements to the sanctions process, which I know we have discussed before, or the Work and Pensions Committee. We keep the operation of the sanctions system under constant review—as we do all our policies—to ensure that it continues to function effectively and fairly. We will continue to do that.

I will touch on the pilot of the yellow card system, which gives claimants an additional period of time to provide evidence of good reason before a decision is made. That will help to strike the right balance between fairness, conditionality and individual circumstances.

[Priti Patel]

Our intention is that the trial will operate in Scotland from March 2016, running for approximately five months. It will be carefully designed and delivered, with a clear process, training and guidance provided for all staff involved. The trial will be evaluated in full to assess the impact on the individual behaviours and understanding, and we will carefully monitor all the relevant data to consider the extent to which the warning system trial affects sanction decisions. We will make the findings available from autumn 2016. There are already a number of opportunities for people who are sanctioned to present more evidence, and of course, that will be part of an ongoing system of review. We are working with our work coaches to develop that.

As today's debate was secured by members of the SNP, I would like to raise some particular points about the situation in Scotland. First, I am pleased to say that today's employment figures show that Scottish employment is up significantly, by 178,000 since 2010, and that Scotland has an employment rate of 74.3%, which is higher than the UK average. We are seeing very strong levels of employment growth in Scotland. Unemployment has fallen by 63,000, with the number of people in work in Scotland now close to a record high. That is not just because of economic policies, but because of employers expanding their businesses and doing more to support the economy. There are plenty of figures on that, but I do not need to quote them. Members in all parties can access today's employment figures.

However, I want to touch on something that has not been raised today. When it comes to welfare provision in Scotland, we have the Scotland Bill, and the devolution package in Scotland will make the Scottish Parliament one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world. The Bill will also apply to welfare provision in Scotland, which will be tailored to local circumstances. Powers will include: a power for Scotland to create its own employment programme to help the long-term unemployed and disabled people into work; the power to create new benefits in any area of devolved responsibility; powers in universal credit to determine how and when claimants are paid and how much some claimants get for housing support; and the power to legislate for top-up payments to people in Scotland who are entitled to a reserved benefit.

This of course puts more power in the hands of the Scottish Government, and Members of the Scottish National party can now be up front with the public in Scotland on what they will do with this new devolved power and how they will apply the new powers to their welfare system.

Although we have had a full debate today, I think it is fair to say that sanctions are not a punitive measure, contrary to what the Scottish National party Members—[*Interruption.*] They are sitting there giggling right now, but I would not trivialise the support that has been put in place by this Government to help people into work; I think that is quite insulting, actually, to many of our work coaches and the people who work in the welfare area providing support for individuals.

This is part of a wider framework of policy to provide support to encourage claimants into work. Today's labour market figures show that. Not only are we seeing high levels of employment, but the claimant count rate

is at its lowest level since 1975. Conditionality and sanctions have played a role in that, and it is only right that we continue to keep under review the policy of sanctions, and continue to work to do more, to do better and to provide the support to help people get back into work. That is why we have the new joint health and work unit, set up by the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health between them, and why, during the autumn statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a new work and health programme. That will come in in 2017 to support individuals with significant barriers to work and, in particular, help them to get back into work, through the welfare system, with support. Of course, universal credit is part of that. It gives people the help that they need to increase their earnings, move away from welfare dependency, and importantly, make sure that work always pays.

Thank you for chairing the debate this afternoon, Mrs Gillan, and I thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

Alison Thewliss: On a point of order, Mrs Gillan. I was going to say this in an intervention, but the Minister was not taking interventions. I wanted to correct the record on the person I mentioned who died. It was not suicide; it is actually a lot more sad than that. He died from diabetic ketoacidosis from not taking his insulin. He had no electricity for the fridge in which it was stored.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Well, that is not a point of order for the Chair, but I appreciate that the hon. Lady now has that on the record, and has set the record straight. Dr Whiteford, you have two minutes for a brief wind-up.

4.5 pm

Dr Whiteford: Thank you, Mrs Gillan. I am glad to have the opportunity to sum up what has been a very wide-ranging debate, but nevertheless, the questions that have been posed in this debate have been very focused. They have been put repeatedly to this "Conservative" Government, because they need answering. They were posed by the Work and Pensions Committee in the previous Parliament on more than one occasion, and some were posed in the Oakley review. Most of the questions relate to the impact of conditionality on the most vulnerable claimants, because there is mounting evidence that the sanctions regime is hitting those people disproportionately and that the measures that have been taken are not going far enough to mitigate the impact on people who should definitely not be sanctioned.

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

We have heard powerful speeches this afternoon from my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin), for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), and indeed from the Labour Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). There is clearly a case to answer, because the detrimental impact of sanctions on the mental health and material wellbeing of people in the benefit system, particularly those in receipt of

jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance, is giving huge cause for concern across all our constituencies.

My constituency has one of the highest rates of sanctions in the UK, despite having one of the lowest rates of unemployment. I can only attribute that high rate to our rurality, the very poor and costly internet access, the limited transport links that people have, and the large numbers of people in seasonal, part-time and casual jobs. However, the questions that have been put to the Minister have come from right across these islands. They are about why people are using food banks in the 21st century, why people are being found fit for work when they are clearly not, and why the system is not providing a safety net.

I am glad that the Minister was able to give a bit more detail today about how the so-called yellow card system will work in practice, but is Scotland just one big constituency now? Which bits of Scotland will it work in? How will that be reported? How will that come back to this House? We still do not know the structure of that scheme, and we need to know.

My most important questions today were about how the conditionality regime becomes worse for the people on the receiving end of it under universal credit. The Minister did not touch on those questions at all, or on my questions about hardship payments. Instead she simply reiterated points that were made in the written statement—we know those; we have got that information. What we are looking for is more information about how the measures are going to be rolled out in practice.

I was also a bit surprised when the Minister mentioned the Scotland Bill, given that her Government voted down the amendments that we put to the Scotland Bill that would have devolved responsibility for these matters. I know that the Scottish Government have been committing £100 million a year to mitigate the impact of what is happening and to mop up the mess that the Government have created. Buried in the Blue Book, however, were some small lines about how the Work programme is to be cut drastically before it is devolved. That will significantly limit the amount of action that the Scottish Government can take. A set of powers are being devolved that are going to disappear before we get them.

I know that my staff in my constituency office work closely with very hard-working advisers in our benefits offices. I have paid tribute to them in this House before. They hear it and know that we appreciate what they do and the support that they give—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Primary Care: Tottenham

4.9 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered primary care in Tottenham.

I am grateful, Sir Roger, for the opportunity to introduce the debate. It is now 67 years since my party introduced the national health service. At that time, living to 100 would have been a newsworthy event, but today more than half the children being born in our country can expect to reach that age. This is clearly a sign of great progress and the quality of our healthcare system. However, that progress has not been the same across the board. There remain in this country huge discrepancies and a postcode lottery that determines the quality of healthcare people can expect to receive. I am particularly worried that the life expectancy of many children in Tottenham is nowhere near the national average.

The current situation paints a worrying picture. Today, average life expectancy for a male in this country stands at more than 80 years, but in my constituency, in the wealthiest city in one of the richest countries in the world, a male can expect to reach an average age of just 74. That is some five years lower than the national average, lower than Cuba where the average wage is £15 a month, and lower than Slovenia, Colombia, Bosnia and Peru. Perhaps most worrying, it is more than eight years lower than the life expectancy of men just a couple of miles away in Crouch End, in a wealthier part of the London borough of Haringey. That is a troubling and stark difference within the same London borough, and the same is true for women.

Primary care is the first point of contact in the healthcare system. In this country, that usually means GPs. They are the very frontline of our health services, the entry point for all our healthcare needs and the means by which we access a whole array of treatments. Primary care is, therefore, the linchpin of our healthcare system. In fact, it accounts for 90% of patients' interaction with the NHS. Because of that, NHS England's five-year forward view stated that in future a much higher proportion of its budget would be spent on GP services.

Both this Government and their coalition predecessor claimed to understand the importance of primary care, and to some extent matched their words with funding. For example, £550 million was earmarked in March 2015 to improve GP access, to modernise facilities and to provide better care outside hospitals. Then in May 2015, the Prime Minister announced the "seven-day NHS", proudly stating that by next April 18 million patients will be able to see a GP in the mornings, evenings and at weekends, with everyone being able to do so by 2020. One would therefore be forgiven for thinking that primary care provision on an average weekday is securely in place, given the £8 billion of extra funding earmarked in a time of austerity to provide additional services outside the current working week. That may be true in some areas of our country, but it is not true in mine.

Recent research paints a stark picture of primary care in Tottenham. The data come not from NHS England or from the Department of Health, which does not seem to be monitoring the situation adequately, but from a small local organisation, Healthwatch Haringey. With no extra funding or support, it went out and listened to local people about the problems they were

[Mr David Lammy]

facing in accessing primary care, and it found something quite disturbing. Some 86% of the patients at one GP surgery were either unhappy or very unhappy with their surgery. That surgery is ranked in the bottom 10 practices in England, with 41% of patients reporting they were unable to get an appointment.

That is apposite because, on Monday this week, Rob Clarke in my constituency tried to access his surgery, Bridge House surgery, with his three-year-old. He tried repeatedly for many hours and was ultimately told to go to A&E. That is not what we want in Britain, where A&E is always overrun, and it was appropriate in that circumstance for the child to be treated at the GP surgery.

Across Tottenham, there are currently 1,300 too few appointments a week, which equates to 52,000 appointments a year fewer than the NHS benchmark. In just one ward of my constituency—Tottenham Hale—there is a shortfall of 18,000 GP appointments a year. Tottenham Hale is undergoing significant regeneration and now has several large blocks of apartments, a sizeable retail park, 500 more properties under construction and a further 1,900 planned for the medium term. It is one of the Mayor of London's designated housing zones, but despite the influx of thousands of new residents, no new GP surgery was planned. It was only when the desperate need was pointed out by Healthwatch that NHS England's task and finish group eventually arrived to complete a planning exercise. I note that a final decision on a new surgery will be made on Friday 18 December.

Our treasured national health service has been fractured by this Government and their coalition predecessor, but even with the best will in the world and even when clear need is established, nothing can be achieved quickly. I want to press the Minister on how fast we can and need to move in the circumstances I am outlining. It will have taken over a year for a decision to be made and, if that decision is positive, nearly 18 months for the surgery to finally open. During that period—I put this starkly—people are dying as a result of not being able to get an appointment, and children are being born unregistered. They are the truly dispossessed in our city. Will the Minister look closely at the issue and do all in his power to make the process as swift as possible?

The issues surrounding primary care in Tottenham relate not just to the number of GP places, but to quality and accessibility. According to NHS England, three quarters of GP buildings there do not meet legal compliance, and there are not enough consulting rooms. Some of the facilities in use in the fifth largest economy in the world are shocking. Healthwatch found that 20% of young mothers were not registered with a GP at all.

The consequences of not being able to obtain a GP appointment are stark: more avoidable deaths from cancer, worse life chances for children, and a lack of antenatal and postnatal care when women and, of course, their infant children are at their most vulnerable. My constituency is where Victoria Climbié and Baby P met their tragic end. The ability to obtain an appointment is important if we want to safeguard children. If people cannot do so, it raises serious concerns for mothers and their unborn children, and has led to the grave situation of three unregistered births in my constituency, one of which was of a disabled child whose mother gave birth at home with no one to help her.

Furthermore, Healthwatch discovered clear health inequalities between the west and the east of the Haringey borough, where my constituency is located.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech with some good points about the disparity between those who live well and live long lives in the London borough of Haringey and those who do not. Does he accept that it is not solely Tottenham where there is a lack of primary health care? Parts of my constituency—for example, Noel Park—have similar problems with provision of basic, high-quality primary healthcare. Will he give that some consideration?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Her constituency includes Wood Green, and there are pockets of deprivation across Crouch End and Muswell Hill. She is absolutely right to make that point. In a way, this debate stands in both our names, because the crisis affects the borough of Haringey. It is not a coincidence that life expectancy of a male in the far west of the borough and the east correlates with the statistics that I have given, especially when so many mothers of infants are unable to register children in the constituency.

None of us should accept the situation. It is the sort of thing we associate with parts of urban America where there is no universal health provision. In the UK, we have a proud history of our national health service with its own constitution, which states clearly that people have the right to access NHS services. I fear that that is not the reality for many of my constituents.

These issues are not a reflection on the doctors in Tottenham, the vast majority of whom do an excellent job on behalf of the local community. I have recently met, for example, Dr Muhammed Akunjee of West Green surgery and Dr John Rohan of Lawrence House surgery, and I am very grateful for the work that they and their colleagues do in the constituency. As usual, the problems arise much higher up the chain of command. However hard GPs in Tottenham work, there are simply not enough of them and not enough facilities to serve our growing community. That leads me to wonder what it will take for the Government to address the crisis.

We know that there is a well documented link between poverty and ill health; we know that social conditions such as unemployment, overcrowding and inadequate housing make illness more likely; and we know that deprivation increases health problems and therefore pressures on the health system. Given that, I ask the Minister why one of the poorest constituencies in the UK receives significantly less health funding than wealthier areas nearby. Given the greater pressures, it should be receiving more. It is clear that the way to alleviate the GP crisis in Tottenham is to attract new GPs to the area and to retain the ones we already have. However, it is impossible to do that, because despite the huge workload, the urgent pressures and the ceaseless demand, GPs in my constituency are paid significantly less than those in wealthier areas just a few miles away.

For example, a GP in Holborn and St Pancras, the 126th most deprived constituency in the UK, receives £154.64 per registered patient, whereas their counterparts in Bethnal Green and Bow, the 36th most deprived community, receive less—£144.48 per patient. Despite the huge pressures on GPs operating in Tottenham,

the 23rd most deprived constituency in the whole country, they receive only £124.94 per patient. That is a full 20% less than in Holborn and St Pancras. Clearly there are fundamental problems with the Carr-Hill formula, which is used to calculate GP funding. There are also real concerns about the impact that withdrawing minimum practice income guarantee payments has had on GP practices in deprived areas such as my constituency. I urge the Minister to look at what he can do to incentivise new GPs to come to areas such as mine.

If the GP situation in my constituency is to improve, GPs in Tottenham must be paid at least the same as their colleagues working nearby. That is an urgent need, given that one third of GPs in the borough are over 60 and therefore due to retire. Things could get considerably worse before they get better. Clearly, younger GPs are being attracted to work in other London boroughs because of the price differential.

It was this Government who wanted the NHS run on market principles, yet they have failed to grasp the obvious problem that for a GP to set up a business in Tottenham, he has to do more work, in worse facilities, for lower pay. Any 12-year-old fan of "The Apprentice" knows that that is not the way to run a successful business. It clearly demonstrates the inherent problem with trying to force a market on the health service, yet we are stuck with this Government's NHS market framework, so I ask the Minister this: will market rules be applied so that GPs are given proper incentives to set up practices in Tottenham? Also, will he ask the chief executive of NHS England to finally take an interest? I am not clear whether it is Simon Stevens I should talk to or his London lead, but I would quite like the London lead at least to come down to the constituency for herself. I would have thought, given the work that Healthwatch has done, that she would have sought to do that.

I understand that following Healthwatch's report, NHS England has started to take the problems in Haringey seriously and has produced a detailed 10-year capacity plan, which sets out how many full-time GPs and clinical and treatment rooms are required. Growth is predicted in four key areas: Green Lanes, Northumberland Park, Tottenham Hale and Noel Park, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West). Three of the four areas are exclusively within my constituency. NHS England has identified a need for five extra GPs in the Green Lanes area, six in Northumberland Park, 16 in Tottenham Hale and eight in Noel Park over the next 10 years. That is 35 extra full-time GPs, 27 of whom are needed exclusively on my side of the borough.

There are a few questions that I want to ask. Does the Minister agree that it is unacceptable that 20% of my constituents in Tottenham Hale do not have access to a GP? Is he concerned that the gaping holes in primary care provision in Tottenham have contributed to the fact that the average life expectancy of a man in Tottenham is just 74—below that of Cuba? Will he explain how, within the NHS market framework, he will attract more than 27 GPs to my constituency, where, despite the far higher workload, GPs are paid significantly less than those in leafy areas just a few miles away?

Will the Minister give me his word that there will be a transparent process to increase the funding per patient in Tottenham by 20%, so that it is brought up to the

level of its far wealthier neighbour, Camden? Does he agree that it is disgraceful that the Government have committed themselves to providing a "seven-day NHS", with weekend GP appointments for 18 million patients, many of whom are in the richest areas of the country, whereas in my constituency 20% of new mothers and their infant children have no access to a GP at all? I look forward to hearing what the Minister, the Government and NHS England, which I hope is paying attention, have to say.

4.26 pm

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing the debate and thank him for his great courtesy in sending me and my officials a copy of his speech, which will enable me to address in my remarks some of his questions. I appreciate that.

I have some knowledge of the area. I was a member of Haringey Council between 1982 and 1984. I represented Archway ward at that time, and I was on the governing body of a school in Tottenham, so I have some feel for the area and I am grateful to it for giving me a start. I sat on benches opposite the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). I think I am now the only Member of Parliament who served on the council with him, so we have a long-standing relationship and friendship. My time in Haringey taught me that it was an outer London borough with inner-London characteristics. I saw at that time colleagues on the Labour-run council wrestling with very difficult issues and problems and I have never forgotten that.

I will tackle some of the issues that the right hon. Member for Tottenham raised. I do not follow all his argument. Yes, there is some element of market principles in the NHS, but I think Mr Blair had something to do with that as well as us. If the right hon. Gentleman would really like to reorganise the national health service completely, I am keen to hear the proposals from those on the Labour Front Bench in relation to that. The structure that we have is one we will have for some time. It does not stop the work being done but enhances the localisation of making sure that the right things are done.

The right hon. Gentleman is right on poverty and inequality. The tragedy of the United Kingdom is that this is not a short-term issue. If we laid a map of poverty in Victorian Britain over a map of the United Kingdom today, we would find remarkable similarities between the two. The issue that all Governments wrestle with is that Government in, Government out, and socialism in or liberal capitalism in, we still have not cracked all the issues of inequality that we want to crack, and everyone has given it a lot of effort. We have to do better and we have to try different things. That is at the heart of some of the different things that the Government have been trying in health service reform. It is a process that will go on, but none of the issues that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned—length of life and inequality issues—has arisen in the past six years. They are long-standing issues that go back many years, which is why it is always essential to work at new initiatives and look for things that are different, to try to make a difference.

[Alistair Burt]

The right hon. Gentleman raised very straightforward and serious issues. All of us in the Chamber pay tribute to those who work in front-line services—the primary care staff. GPs are the first point of contact. Of course, it is not just GPs, but nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, pharmacists and many other healthcare professionals who play a part in delivering high-quality care to patients in practices and in the community every day through the NHS.

In relation to the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, he quoted extensively from the report by Healthwatch Haringey. Healthwatch nationally is actually funded and part-supported by Government. It is part of the monitoring process that the Government use. I understand that the report "GP Access in Tottenham Hale", published in September 2014, highlighted a number of serious issues around accessing GP services in that part of his constituency. I thank Healthwatch and all associated with it for all the work that they do.

I am aware that access to GP services is a long-standing issue for local people. I am also aware that many local practices are single handed, and that some premises are not suited to the needs of primary care in 2015. Haringey clinical commissioning group has developed a primary care strategy to address just the sorts of issues that we have heard about this afternoon. That strategy focuses on encouraging practices to work together to run services more effectively, funding initiatives for practices to improve their appointment and triage systems, and encouraging a mix of professionals to work together as part of local networks: for example, welfare advisers, nurseries and healthcare assistants.

A number of practical steps to improve primary care locally have already been taken. In north-east Haringey, a shared call centre has been set up so that staff can respond to patients more quickly. In the south-east of the borough, GPs have worked together to provide telephone consultations for patients between 6.30 pm and 8 pm. In central and western areas of Haringey, Saturday clinics have been established. I understand that the CCG plans to have Saturday clinics and evening appointments available across the whole of Haringey in the new year. The CCG has funded two part-time practice managers to support practices that are struggling to meet access demands, and it is working to increase the number of practice nurses in Haringey through a recruitment programme to enable nurses from other settings to transfer into primary care.

On the important matter of GP premises, I am advised that the CCG and the local council have worked with NHS England to develop a strategic premises plan. The right hon. Gentleman is correct in saying that those have not been adequate, and he is right—as was Healthwatch—to draw attention to that. The premises plan was completed in July 2015. It highlights a shortfall in GP provision and in premises capacity in Haringey. The shortfall was particularly noted in Tottenham Hale and, to a lesser extent, in Northumberland Park. The plan makes a number of recommendations for short and medium-term action.

To date, NHS England London has appointed a local provider of temporary services for up to 6,000 patients in Tottenham Hale. It has also, together with Haringey CCG, sought national approval to use capital funding

from NHS England's primary care transformation fund to purchase the temporary premises. It has done so because capital funding is seen as representing best value and minimising annual revenue costs. As the right hon. Gentleman said, NHS England London and Haringey CCG hope to obtain approval for capital funding of the premises on 18 December, which is Friday of this week. However, I understand that, in the event of NHS England not agreeing to provide funds from the primary care transformation fund, the purchase of the premises will still be secured by means of revenue funding. NHS England will continue to work with Haringey CCG to find a permanent site for the practice in Tottenham Hale.

The new GP practice in Hale Village is due to open in the new year. It will start with a zero list and will have the capacity to register up to 7,000 new patients. That development has been welcomed by Healthwatch Haringey as representing a positive outcome for local residents. NHS England has also asked CCGs to set out an overarching estates strategy to ensure that estates resources are used across all of health and social care. As part of that work, Haringey CCG is looking closely at how else it can help to ensure that GP local premises are fit to meet current and future primary care needs, particularly in the light of the regeneration in Tottenham that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned and projected population growth in the area.

The right hon. Gentleman made clear his concerns about the levels of primary care funding in areas of relative deprivation. The national formula is currently under review, and the possibility of giving greater weight to deprivation is one factor being considered. I can reassure him about GPs' salaries, however. GPs are not paid differential salaries in different areas. The capitation is different, because capitation covers things other than GPs' salaries, but clearly it could not work if GPs in one area were deliberately paid less than those in another. That is not at the heart of the problem. When it comes to capitation and things that are considered in the national formula, deprivation is being considered as an issue to be looked at further.

Getting more people into primary care is really important. The Secretary of State set out in June details of a new deal for general practice, in line with the five-year forward view, recognising the pressures that GPs are under. We are training, and plan to train, more GPs. In the last Parliament, we increased the number of GPs working and training in the NHS by some 1,700, which is a 5% increase, but we still need more. That is why we have announced plans to increase the primary and community care workforce by at least 10,000 by 2020. That figure includes an estimated 5,000 more doctors working in general practice. That will be a 14% increase in the overall number of GPs working and training in the NHS.

We have established some work to try to reduce the level of workload. Having visited a number of practices in urban deprived areas and others, I can say that there is very much a sense in some practices that GPs are worn down, that they are on a treadmill and that they are worried about bringing new people in. In others, however, sometimes not very far away, GPs are trying something different. They are working with the Prime Minister's challenge fund pilots or the vanguard sites on different ways of providing their services. Such work can often be the trigger for more doctors being interested in coming into work.

There is a different side to the pressures on GPs. I am clear that, in practices that are very much under pressure, by reducing bureaucracy and working with them to provide support, we can lift them up from their present difficulties. The transformation fund of £1 billion that will be used to improve premises over the next few years will also make a difference, and it will ensure that premises are fit for purpose when it comes to what we want from primary care in future.

If we are to address the health inequalities that the right hon. Gentleman rightly mentioned at the beginning of his speech, it will be essential for that work to be carried out in the most deprived parts of the country, as in any other. It has been interesting to visit those pilots and look at what has been done. The reorganisation of resources in primary care and the establishment of more contacts with those who provide allied health professional services—relieving some of the pressure on GPs—can have a marked impact, as can the closer integration between the NHS and local authority services in the same area.

We are all trying to lever up standards and deal with the inequalities, as the right hon. Gentleman has mentioned. There are plans, proposals, new initiatives and new ideas, and some of those are demonstrated in London. I hope some of the practices involved, particularly the new ones, will take those opportunities to do something different where they are and try to meet the challenges that they face.

To conclude, as well as the investment in primary care that I have detailed, a number of approaches are making a difference to access to GP services: longer opening hours, to increase the sense of access; better use of telecare and health apps, which are really working and beginning to have an impact on populations that are much more used than some others to using such things; and more innovative ways to access services by video call, email or telephone. Schemes are integrating services in order to offer a single point of contact to co-ordinate patient services across health and social care. Some 2,500 practices have taken part in the access fund schemes, covering more than 18 million patients, so a third of the country will have benefited from improved access to primary care by March 2016. We want to continue to roll out such initiatives to 2020, investing in primary care and making sure that investment is made in the areas where most work is needed. It is clear from what the right hon. Gentleman said that Haringey is right up there.

Mr Lammy: Can the Minister get NHS England to take a greater interest, at leadership level, in Tottenham?

Alistair Burt: I will ask exactly that. I do not doubt that it is doing that already. Clearly, the right hon. Gentleman needs to be reassured, and we shall do so.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

West London Coroner's Court

4.39 pm

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Before I call Mr Berry to move the next motion, I want to make it plain that it is neither my intention nor my desire to curtail debate. However, I have to advise colleagues that inquests, which are the subject of the House's sub judice resolution, may not be referred to directly in this or, indeed, any other debate. Investigations that are under way by the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office are not subject to the sub judice resolution, but I ask Members to exercise good sense in referring to such investigations. I will be as tolerant as I can, but I may have to draw the line. Looking at the number of Members present, I would be grateful if speakers apart from the opening speaker would curtail their remarks to no more than about three to four minutes.

4.40 pm

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered standards of service at West London Coroner's Court.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and to see so many colleagues here who have been so vocal on this important issue for their constituents and mine. Two years ago tomorrow, my father died unexpectedly. It was a devastating experience for my family, as death is for every family, but the seamless service from the local council and the coroner made the whole experience just that bit more bearable. Although the registration process itself was clinical, because it was efficient it did not compound our distress as a family. Sadly, the same cannot be said for the experiences of many bereaved relatives of those living in Kingston, Richmond, Hounslow, Ealing, Hillingdon, and Hammersmith and Fulham, which are the boroughs that comprise the jurisdiction of West London coroner's court.

Since I was elected in May, I have received numerous complaints about the standards of service at West London coroner's court and about the senior coroner there. Those complaints come not only from bereaved constituents, but from the council itself and, indeed, from our local newspaper, the *Surrey Comet*. The complaints include: long delays in issuing death certificates; inordinate delays in bringing on inquests; a telephone service that is never answered when relatives call for advice; crass errors on death certificates, such as getting the age or sex of the deceased wrong; and general rudeness to boot.

It is important to note at the outset—I note your guidance, Sir Roger—that I do not intend to criticise the senior coroner personally, because I know that there is a complaint against him by a number of councils, and that that is under investigation. I would not want to impede that investigation, but there are three issues that I would like to consider in some detail: delays, burials for certain faiths, and deprivation of liberty safeguards.

West London coroner's court has one of the worst records for delays in the country. It takes almost double the national average time to process inquests. The delays are a shocking abrogation of the state's responsibility to bereaved families, including those in my constituency. The estimated average time taken to process an inquest

[James Berry]

in England in 2014 was 28 weeks—a figure that has been effectively stable over the past five years. However, in west London and in inner south London, the average time taken to process an inquest is 50 to 53 weeks. The figure of 53 weeks is the worst in the country. In West London coroner's court, the figure is 50 weeks—the second worst in the country.

In my borough, Kingston upon Thames, the target for registering a death is five days from the date of death, or seven days in a case where a post mortem is required. In 2013-14—the period during which the coroner was appointed, as he was appointed in November 2013—Kingston was meeting that target in 70% of cases. In this year, 2015-16, if we continue on the current trajectory, Kingston Council will meet its target in only 11% of cases, and that is because of delays at West London coroner's court.

In terms of post mortems, prior to the appointment of the current senior coroner in November 2013, the waiting time in Kingston from a death to a post mortem was two to five days, yet between June and September 2015, the average waiting time was four to six weeks. I understand that the situation has since improved somewhat. Those statistics speak for themselves and do not need labouring, so I will return to the bereaved families who are at the heart of the debate.

For most people, an inquest is a new and somewhat unsettling experience at a very vulnerable time in their life. In most cases, bereaved relatives simply want to bury their dead as soon as possible. In a small number of cases, they want answers or an inquest is required by law, but in all cases, they want to have the system explained to them, and to be kept informed of the reason for and the length of any delays.

Ronke Phillips from "ITV News London" has done a lot of work exposing the problems at West London coroner's court. In October, ITV London brought a number of families affected by services at West London coroner's court to Parliament to speak to their MPs, a number of whom are here today. The accounts those families gave of the distress they had been caused were quite moving. There were unexplained delays, no updates, and a telephone service that was never answered and turned out not to be manned at all.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend's flow, but I do not want to take up the House's time by making a speech. He highlights some of the issues very well. My constituent, Mrs Doreen Garcia, had what was essentially a completely straightforward issue in relation to her husband's death. She needed to get a death certificate because it was essential for the administration of the estate, yet she had to wait more than a year for an inquest that, in the end, was a hearing on the papers because of the complete inefficiency of West London coroner's court.

James Berry: That experience is by no means unique. In terms of the telephone service, when I called up on behalf of a constituent very early on in my role as a new MP, I had to wait on the telephone for more than 45 minutes, and then it became clear that the call was never going to be answered. Frankly, that plumbs the depth of poor service for bereaved families. As I understand

it, the senior coroner's position is that he inherited a backlog from his predecessor in 2013. Be that as it may, he has not cleared that backlog since November 2013, and has compounded the situation with an ill-conceived staff reorganisation and shocking failures to communicate with bereaved families.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): On the point about the attitude towards bereaved families, I would like to put on the record that twice I have had people in tears in my constituency surgery over inaccuracies on post mortem certificates, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) described. It is extremely distressing for MPs not to be able to improve the situation. I absolutely agree with everything he said.

James Berry: Finally on the delays at West London coroner's court, it would be easy to blame the situation on cuts, but they are not to blame. I wrote to the chief executive of Hammersmith and Fulham Council, which is responsible for funding the coroner service in west London. He made it clear that although the council has had to make cuts to various areas, the coroner service has been protected from those cuts. The responsibility for sorting out this shambles lays squarely with the senior coroner for west London. He needs to get his house in order for the sake of bereaved families living across the boroughs represented here.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am grateful for the comment that the hon. Gentleman just made. I have been copied into the letter that he received from the chief executive of Hammersmith and Fulham Council, dated yesterday, which points that out. I am sure it was done in good faith, but on the hon. Gentleman's website, he has said that the situation could be the council's fault. I hope that he will correct that. One of the issues that we will deal with is putting blame for this matter where it lies.

James Berry: I do not intend to go into the technicalities of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, but it is a matter of interpretation as to whether the local council or the police are responsible for providing administrative staff. However, the council is quite clear that there have been no cuts to the funding that it believes it ought to be providing.

Moving on to the subject of religious burials, Jewish and Muslim families have to bury their dead in a matter of days, and the pressure on those doing so is compounded by the situation at West London coroner's court. I need not say any more about that, because I can simply welcome the Minister's recent announcement of a review into the interaction that some faiths have with the coroner service across the whole country. I simply observe that in diverse communities, such as those served by the West London coroner's court and by MPs here, a reliable out-of-hours process for death certificates that are required over the weekend would seem to be the most sensible way forward.

The third point I would like to make is on the matter of national application—the requirement to hold an inquest when someone dies while subject to deprivation of liberty safeguards. Section 1 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 requires that a coroner holds an inquest in certain defined circumstances such as a death in state

detention, or a violent or unnatural death. In other cases, the coroner has discretion as to 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 on numerous times. In March 2014, the Court of Appeal considered the cases of *P v. Cheshire West and Cheshire Council*, and *P and Q v. Surrey County Council*. In those cases, the Court of Appeal 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 suffering from dementia lives in a care home and would be prevented from leaving if they attempted to. An inquest must be held in each of those cases because the individual is deemed to be in state detention. In my constituency, we have a nursing home in which 90% of the residents are subject to the deprivation of liberty safeguards. On the current interpretation of the law, there would have to be an inquest into each and every one of those individuals' death, even if they died entirely predictably in their sleep.

I am not saying that there should be no inquests at all into deaths where the deceased is subject to the deprivation of liberty safeguards—far from it. I am arguing that inquests should be opened at the coroner's discretion; they should not be mandatory. It was certainly 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 the deprivation of liberty safeguards apply, nor was it the Court of Appeal's intention in the *P and Q* cases, so far as I can work out; the issue was not canvassed before the Court at all because the case did not concern inquests.

In support of my point, the Chief Coroner of England and Wales highlighted the problem in his 2014 annual report to the Government, and highlighted the massive increase in the number of deprivation of liberty safeguards from 11,300 in 2013-14 to some 83,000 in the first three quarters of 2014-15, which will inevitably lead to a huge number of additional inquests. I ask the Minister to find legislative time, as a matter of real priority, to exempt people who die while they are subject to deprivation of liberty safeguards from the mandatory requirement to hold an inquest. That change would reduce the pressure that is building on coroners across the country. It would help, but by no means resolve, the problems at the West London coroner's court, to which I return in closing. It is clear that something must be done to improve the terrible standards of service in that coroner's court.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on what he is saying. In the few months that I have been back in this House, I have received an amazing volume of complaints about the West London coroner's court. Can the issues regarding the role of the West London coroner be properly remedied by the Chief Coroner, or should there be a formal investigation by the Ministry of Justice? We need to get to the bottom of what is going on.

James Berry: That encapsulates the sentiment of many MPs on this subject. I am pleased to have received reports that the telephone service at West London coroner's

court has improved—that has been confirmed by the leader of Hammersmith and Fulham Council—but the inordinate delays in issuing interim and final death certificates and in bringing on inquests must be addressed now. If that means sitting at the weekend, as judges did after the riots, or if it means appointing additional assistant coroners to help clear the backlog, so be it. By whatever means, the senior coroner, for the sake of bereaved families in our constituencies, must get a grip of the situation now.

4.53 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I will be brief, not least because this matter, although it is not sub judice, is potentially subject to an investigation by the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office, which is the appropriate body to deal with it. Indeed, in answer to my parliamentary question on 9 November, the Minister confirmed that that is the case. The chief executive of Hammersmith and Fulham Council sent a letter to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry), whom I congratulate on securing this debate on a subject of great concern to all MPs in the six boroughs, stating that the council expects to hear back from the JCIO in the second week of January on whether it will launch a full investigation, but clearly that is already under consideration.

Like everyone here, I have had complaints about the West London coroner's court, and this week I have corresponded with my constituent Angelita Rodriguez about the sad death of James Rodriguez, her late brother, which exhibits many of the problems that the hon. Gentleman identified. It is not necessarily appropriate to go into the individual details of these cases today, but it is not sufficient to blame others for what is going wrong in the coroner's office. Whatever is going wrong and causing the problems we have heard about, it ultimately falls at the coroner's door to resolve. I am not impressed by the fact that, at different times, the local authority, administrative staff, the coroner's officer, the Metropolitan police and even the previous coroner have been passed the buck. I declare an interest, because I chaired the panel that appointed the previous coroner, Alice Thompson, some 15 years ago—I was then the leader of Hammersmith and Fulham Council. She had more than a decade of distinguished service and conducted some of the most difficult and complex inquests.

This is a matter that concerns literally millions of people across west London, because the six boroughs have a population in excess of 1.5 million people. The coroner's court deals with people at a time of great stress and in extremis. It is often considered a bit of a Cinderella service. I am very glad that we managed to persuade the coalition Government not to abolish the post of Chief Coroner before it was introduced, and Peter Thornton is doing a very good job. Coroner services can and do go wrong from time to time, but they are an essential and ancient part of our judicial system. It is vital that those services work well, so I hope we will see a full investigation in the new year. I am pleased to hear that there has been some improvement, and I know that the borough council, which is the providing authority for these purposes, is taking the matter seriously in respect of its responsibilities, and I am sure the Metropolitan police are doing the same. In the end, the buck does have to stop with the West London coroner.

4.56 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I echo the feelings of everyone here today in thanking the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry), and I express our sympathy for his personal loss. He understands, as do many of us, but perhaps not to the same degree, how much pain can be caused by even casual incompetence. Just under 18 months ago, a very talented and beautiful 14-year-old girl in my constituency, a neighbour of mine, died. I will not refer to the case directly, but we now know that the case papers were left on a train—I can scarcely imagine the pain and agony caused to that family, who suffered again.

Like all Members here, I have a catalogue of complaints about the operation of the coroner's office, and they tend to fall into two categories. One is the most basic administrative errors. A constituent of mine, Roniel Mulchan, died on 28 November last year. His mother had some very basic and simple questions to ask of the coroner. We wrote in February 2015, in March and in June—no answers did we receive.

I hear from the hon. Gentleman that the telephone system has improved, and I would like to say that to my constituent Sally McMahon, whose mother died very recently, God rest her soul. My constituent tried to ring the coroner's office and was told that it shut at 4 o'clock—this was at 3.20 pm. I rang on 10 December and received the same message at 3 o'clock in the afternoon saying, "We are only open until 4 o'clock." That is casual incompetence of a degree that piles Pelion on Ossa when it comes to the suffering of individuals.

In another particularly unpleasant case, the absence of information was so awful that I wrote to the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office in July 2015 on behalf of Dr Batten, whose relative, a constituent of mine, had died. The complaint started with the typical waiting for 45 minutes, rudeness and that sort of stuff, which could almost be discounted. However, as part of the response I received from the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office—my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) is familiar with this, as I am sure the Minister is, but I had previously been unaware—I learned:

"The Coroner's Office is not run directly by the Coroner, staff and resources are provided by the Local Authority for the area and the Police service. Therefore, if you wish to further your complaint about your experience with the Coroner's Office...you may wish to contact the Police Service and the Local Authority".

Sir Roger, you are a distinguished Member of Parliament and you have probably dealt with more casework than anybody else in the room. When you receive a letter such as that, I am sure your reaction is precisely the same as mine, which is, "How on earth can we operate a system where the buck is passed with such dizzying speed that it is more like an ice hockey puck, and it cannot be slowed down in court?"

However, in many ways the most unpleasant, the most egregious and the most disturbing case that I know of relates to the daughter—the child daughter—of my constituent, Mr Seefat Sadat. His daughter died on 17 April 2013. After six months, he came to see me to ask why the inquest had not yet taken place, and I wrote, and I wrote, and I rang, and I wrote, and I wrote again. I then contacted the then Minister, the right hon. Simon Hughes, and received a response from the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) in April 2015. Two years after this child's death, the inquest

had not taken place, and we were told that there were various reasons for that. The right hon. Gentleman—I place no blame whatever at his step—said that the West London senior coroner, who has been referred to obliquely today, telephoned my constituent, as he says,

"on or around 1 April"—

he cannot be sure—

"explaining the problems within his area that have caused this long delay and that he now expects the inquest to take place in June",

And saying that the coroner was going to reallocate the case on Morwa Sadat's death. The right hon. Gentleman then went on to point out some structural difficulties and problems within the system.

That simply is not good enough—it is not good enough. We are talking about people who are in agony, who are grieving and who are in pain, and they are hanging on the telephone. They are being fed nonsense, and a child's death remains unexamined for two years—two years—and I have to bring in Ministers in the coalition Government and even Ministers in the present Government. Fortunately, thanks be to God, it has now been resolved.

How on earth can we say to our constituents, "Trust the system, trust the coroner's office", when we have this constant, almost ceaseless, list or catalogue of incompetence? Even when the incompetence is almost casual incompetence, the reverberations it causes throughout a family are so awful.

Dr Mathias: I have had experience of very similar situations, and what is distressing for us as MPs is that people's grieving process is unnecessarily extended and made worse, so there are not just administrative consequences.

Stephen Pound: The hon. Lady speaks from a privileged position, because in her profession before she entered this place she obviously had closer dealings with the coroner's office than many of us do. The fact that she says that certainly adds weight to the point, and I am even more concerned given that she makes those comments.

Mr Grieve: The case that I cited was unusual, because, as the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, my constituency does not fall within the area of the coroner in question. I was therefore particularly startled to receive the information from my constituent about the difficulties she was having with that coroner's court, because it is so completely at variance with my experience of the other coroner's courts that I have had to deal with. I would be most interested to know what is so particular about west London as to cause these immense problems, if indeed they are outside the coroner's hands.

Stephen Pound: The right hon. and learned Gentleman also speaks from a position of great authority. It is not for me to say; I hope that the Minister, when she responds to the debate, will indicate some way in which we can ventilate these issues further. I do not believe that west London is unique; I do not believe that it has more problems than, for example, east London. What I think we are talking about here is a structural failure. There is a failure of leadership, without a doubt. The problem is that we have a failing structure, and the leadership required to take the matter forward is absent.

I am conscious of your strictures, Sir Roger, and I want to allow other people to speak. I will simply close by again congratulating the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton on securing this debate and expressing my sympathy to him. I add that the finest tribute in remembrance of his father will be if we, today and in this place, can improve the situation not only for individuals here today but for all our constituents now and in the future. Quite frankly, anything else would be wholly and utterly unacceptable.

5.4 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am a new MP. I have only been here since May, but even from that short time, the vivid stories that Members from all parties have described are depressingly familiar to me from doing surgeries once a week for two hours.

I completely understand that it is not helpful to bring up individuals and hang people out to dry, and it is not my intention to do that today. However, I will highlight a couple of cases to see whether lessons can be drawn from them whether we can find ways forward.

I received an email in the summer from Sharon Hennelly and her sister, about their brother. They said:

"We have been contacting the coroner's office for a year trying to find out when we will get an inquest. We have phoned on numerous occasions and been kept in a queue for up to 2 hours. Our emails now go unanswered. We have no information about the circumstances of my brother's death. He was hit by a train at Barons Court tube... It is now 19 months later and we are completely at a loss".

Their brother died in 2014, so we are approaching the two-year mark since it happened, since when they have been dealing with the case.

There appear to be common problems, including the length of time it takes for cases to appear in the coroner's court in question. A report from 2015 in the *Kingston Guardian* says that at another inquest in April, the coroner himself confessed that he was "deeply embarrassed" by the length of time it took for cases to appear in his court, and that cases should not be taking 18 months to appear in court. He said:

"In future they will not."

However, it seems that things have continued since then.

Communication problems seem to be common, including the speed at which communications are made. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) described such problems. We have all heard stories about people being made to wait for hours on the phone and then, when that draws a blank, physically turning up in person, only to receive rather brusque treatment. The appropriateness of the communications is a problem in what are obviously sensitive situations. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) is a medical professional. People talk about "bedside manner" in the medical profession, but the bedside manner of the coroner has been found wanting on many occasions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) mentioned that the interpretation of what constitutes west London seems to be quite generous. There are six boroughs. My borough alone, Ealing, has 350,000 people, and the population of the six boroughs put together is getting on for a couple of million people, so maybe we should examine that unmanageable area. In one of his communications with me, the coroner

referred to the time when the coroner's court in Uxbridge was in operation. I do not know what happened there, but perhaps such a wide geographical area is unmanageable for one coroner.

There are several cases that I could cite. Theresa from east Acton was administering funeral arrangements for a 97-year-old deceased friend who had no relatives. She waited for four months, and it was only when the funeral director, W Sherry & Sons of Acton, intervened that it was found that the case did not require a post-mortem. There was no need for a coroner, so that sped up the process and the burial could take place. However, we hear horror stories of bodies waiting in fridges and people being left in limbo.

I must say that the communications that I myself have had from the coroner's office have been completely defensive and displayed a complete inability to accept any kind of criticism, even though constructive criticism could be helpful as we move forward. One of the emails I received said:

"This office, under pressure, attempts to deliver a standard of service that befits all the deceased"

and that is "faith-neutral". The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton mentioned that Muslim burials in particular are meant to be expedited quite soon after the death. Perhaps sensitivity could be shown in such situations, and if the coroner's office is under pressure, perhaps there are things we can do to help.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North mentioned, the notoriety of some of the cases in question has spread beyond west London and they have become cases of national interest. Leaving an important case file containing sensitive information on a train is not good practice; I believe that case has now been transferred to Westminster coroner's court. As far as I understand it, it is a rare occurrence to have a case completely transferred.

I will chop my speech because we have limited time. This coroner has said in his communications to me:

"The Coroners Court is a court of law. It is the oldest Court in the country. A judge can only make determinations based on evidence."

The evidence seems to be that standards at this coroner's court are falling short of what people in west London, across six boroughs, expect. We need to improve that experience.

People never know when they will need a coroner's services. As Members have said, it will be at a moment when people are raw, grieving and going through a healing process, so heavy-handedness is not what is needed. Most people have a positive experience. I have been an Ealing resident for 43 years. My father passed last year. It was not a controversial death, so there was no cause to contest anything, but for those who do have problems, we need to make the experience better.

5.10 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) for securing the debate and speaking at a time that may not have been easy for him. I concur with what other Members have said about the memory of his father and about seeing whether there is anything we can do to help the many people—our constituents and

[Ruth Cadbury]

their families—who are going through such pain. I also thank him for doing the research on comparative examples to let us know that what we are experiencing is not normal.

Delays in death certificates cause huge disruption and pain to those coping with the death of a loved one. We must not underestimate the problems that the delays at the West London coroner's court have caused, especially for those planning religious burials, as has been mentioned. I want to share two examples from casework in my constituency, which illustrate two different aspects of the administrative problems being experienced.

First, a constituent of mine sadly passed away at his home in Chiswick in April this year at the age of 85. He had not seen two doctors in the preceding months, so his body was taken to the mortuary and referred for an autopsy. In order to make arrangements for the funeral, the family rang the coroner's office to establish timings for the release of his body. They were held in a queue for more than 50 minutes without reply and directed to send an email. Two weeks later, the family were still waiting. They had not received an acknowledgement of the email and no phone calls were answered or returned. They did eventually get an answer, but for 16 days, the family had no idea whether the remains would be subject to autopsy or when the body would be released back to the family. That is a common situation.

Secondly, Cheryl Hounslow is the ex-wife of Raymond, who died and an inquest was needed. Although estranged, she was the next of kin. He died in April 2014, and she waited 15 months for an inquest that only went ahead, so far as I understand, after my intervention. It turned out that the person handling the case had all the files ready to present to the coroner within two months, but for some reason they were not passed on. I understand that the staff member may have left, but the case could have been passed on for inquest in June 2014. Every organisation should have a procedure for what happens when staff leave, and files should not disappear when someone leaves an organisation. Cheryl could not get through on the phone and got no response to five emails. It was only when my staff got involved that the case was looked at again. In fairness, when the coroner found out that the paperwork had not been passed on, he expedited the hearing and allowed Cheryl to choose the date of the inquest. He blamed the local authority and the Met police for the poor customer service. With that inquest being brought forward quickly, it will have meant someone else waiting longer.

In any organisation, someone somewhere must be responsible for performance standards. I spent 25 years in local government, and we had systems, processes and accountability. That seems not to be the case in this example. The coroner is a public service that people need when they are at their most vulnerable. I hope that the Minister can respond with a plan of action for us and our constituents.

5.14 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I am astounded by the humanity, sensitivity and care with which Members have presented cases on behalf of their constituents. I cannot think of anything more distressing for someone who has lost someone dear to them than having to deal

with such poor administration as some constituents have had to endure. I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) on securing the debate and on the incredibly sensitive manner with which he presented his argument. I was also struck by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who normally speaks with great humour and characteristically puts a lot of anecdote into his speeches. There was not one shred of humour today, such is the seriousness of the case he was arguing.

We seem to be having three different problems with West London coroner's court: errors on certificates; delays; and, rudeness, lack of care and poor communication with families. I will not go into specific cases in detail, but some of the comments that the families have made are useful in illustrating the problems. One said:

"After months of emailing I finally got a reply but my complaints were not acknowledged. In July this year I finally got the post mortem report riddled with mistakes. Talking about my daughter and referring to my mum as 'miss'. It was harrowing enough reading but the mistakes made me feel that my mum was just another body."

Another family said about a very young child:

"My granddaughter's baby boy died on the 3rd of January this year. And she still has not had a death certificate or told why he died. He was 11 weeks old and she is still devastated."

Another said:

"This was after they had put my late father's place of birth as my mother's home address. We still haven't been getting full responses to emails and it's only been 4 1/2 months since my father died, so I expect they won't have the inquest in the next year, let alone get a full death certificate. They are an utter disgrace."

Some people know more about this issue than MPs: funeral directors. I cannot imagine the frustration that funeral directors must be experiencing. One said that

"my heart sinks when we have to call them. To stand a chance of getting a reply we call at 7am and they answer around 3pm! It's awful when other calls come in and all people can hear in the background is 'your call is number ** in the queue!'"

It is maladministration, it is bad practice, and it is insensitive. It is not good enough and it should not be happening in this country in 2015.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North said, we are looking at a structural failure and a failure of leadership. It is surprising to families when they discover that it is difficult to know where to complain. There are many organisations with a hand in the issue, such as the council and the Metropolitan police. It is unfortunate that the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) has had to leave, because I would have been interested to hear an intervention from him.

Dr Huq: The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) referred to the ITV News investigation. One of the emails I have from the coroner says that

"this complaint is fuelled by the recent unbalanced ITN news items."

That is what I mean by the inability to take criticism—someone who is grieving has been pooh-poohed by the coroner saying that it is media manipulation.

Jenny Chapman: I was not aware of that as I am from the north-east and I do not watch the local news when I am down here. What my hon. Friend says gives a good

indication of the lack of care and sensitivity that has been experienced by families who have to access the service at such a devastating time. It seems odd to me that councils and the Met provide admin staff support, but do not have responsibility for the overall service. That confuses families at a time when they should not be expected to find their way through some web of the civil service.

I will not speak for too much longer, because I want to give the Minister as much time as possible to explain what she intends to do to put that right. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) has indicated, the council has called for the JCIO to investigate.

Stephen Pound: I want to put something seriously on the record, bearing in mind what my hon. Friend has just said, before the Minister responds. The debate is more in sorrow than in anger. It is not an attack on the Government in any way, shape or form. We are absolutely united here. The tone struck by my hon. Friend is exactly the right one. We are not seeking to blame the Government, but we are looking for some hope from the Government on how this situation can be resolved with the greatest expediency.

Jenny Chapman: That is exactly right. I know the Minister will care deeply about this and will want to respond and put this matter right as quickly as she possibly can.

The JCIO will let us know in January whether it intends to conduct a full investigation into matters in west London. I sincerely hope that it agrees to do that, and I hope that it is done in a timely fashion so that families who are currently experiencing delays can have their cases heard as quickly as possible, and so that the wider community can have confidence in the service. That is something the Minister will care deeply about and want to put right. I will stop now so that she has as much time as possible to let us know exactly what she intends to do.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) not only on securing this important debate, but on the incredibly diligent work that he has done. I took on this role earlier in the year and already I am aware from my own postbag of all the issues that he has raised, namely the standard of service at West London coroner's court, the provision of coroners' out-of-hours service to facilitate religious burials, and the need for inquests into those who died while under a deprivation of liberty safeguard. All those matters are of concern to many people.

My hon. Friend wrote to me in September to bring my attention to the case of his constituent who had to wait nearly two weeks for a death certificate from the West London coroner's office after her husband died. Other hon. Members have today raised issues of their own—disturbing and heart-breaking stories in many cases. I am grateful to them for doing so, as I am sure their constituents will be.

Andy Slaughter: The West London coroner is not here to defend himself, so I will cite the case of James Rodriguez that I mentioned earlier. The post mortem was carried out on 30 April. By the coroner's own admission, five months later they had not chased up the results, and he says now to the bereaved relatives, who have no death certificate at this stage, nine months later,

"I will not guess at this stage"

when that will happen. That is not in dispute, and that is the level of service we are dealing with.

Caroline Dinenage: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing that to my attention. I am absolutely clear that the needs of bereaved people should be at the very centre of all coroners' services. That was supposed to be the main aim of the coroner reforms that we implemented in July 2013.

The West London coroner's office in Fulham is very busy. It covers a large geographical area, as we know. In 2014 the office received 3,437 reports of deaths and 383 inquests were held. However, that is no excuse for poor, inefficient, rude and insensitive services, or, in some cases, a lack of communication, particularly at such a difficult time when people are grieving. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton is not the only Member whose constituents have been unhappy with the level of service they have received from the West London coroner's office, particularly with regard to the responsiveness of the office. Several Members have written to me detailing individual cases of constituents who have encountered delays, lack of engagement and rudeness from the coroner's office, and other Members have raised that today.

My officials and the Chief Coroner's office have also been alerted to problems. These include bereaved families not being able to access death certificates in a timely manner; delays in holding inquests, which is particularly stressful for bereaved families when they are already going through a very upsetting time; and not having staff at the end of the phone to deal with queries and concerns when they are needed. I understand that a number of complaints have also been lodged with the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham and that my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton has written to the council's chief executive on this matter as well.

Earlier this year, the Chief Coroner went to Fulham to visit the senior coroner and his staff. Along with him were representatives from the local authority, which provides the funding and infrastructure for the local coroner service, and also representatives from the Metropolitan police, which provide the coroner's officers, who are the front-line staff who deal with bereaved people. The senior coroner, the local authority and the police all have a role to play in improving the service. They discussed the issues together and looked at ways to resolve them, and an action plan was agreed. I am pleased to note that, as a result, we are beginning to see signs of a more positive picture emerging from west London. The office has reached its full complement of administrative and investigative staff, including a coroner's officer manager and six new coroner's officers. There is now a new way of managing the telephone system so that administrative officers deal with all phone calls in the first instance to relieve the burden on the coroner's officers, thereby allowing them to focus on progressing

[*Caroline Dinenage*]

cases. However, I take on board the recent instances that the hon. Member for Ealing North has raised about his own experiences with the telephone service. I have made a note of them and my officials will certainly deal with that, because that is not acceptable.

Members will be pleased to hear that west London has now reduced the backlog that it inherited. The senior coroner inherited 400 outstanding inquests when he took up post. That has now been reduced to 70 cases and it is anticipated that these final historic cases will be cleared by the end of February, which will allow staff to focus fully on new cases. The senior coroner has attempted to clear the backlog by making sure there are two courts running in parallel with his assistant coroners hearing cases alongside him.

As the Minister with the coroners portfolio, I share the wish of all Members in the Chamber to resolve matters as quickly as possible. As they have already articulated, the process is not straightforward. The Ministry of Justice has overall responsibility for coroner policy and law, but the responsibility for the delivery and funding of coroner services is a local matter for the appropriate local authority, in this case the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. It is for it to decide how to run and fund the coroner services.

Ruth Cadbury: The Minister has outlined where the funding lies and where responsibility for the overall policy and strategy lie. Where does overall responsibility for the monitoring and reporting of performance of coroners' courts lie?

Caroline Dinenage: That would lie with the coroners themselves and with the Chief Coroner, whose post was created in 2012. We now have a Chief Coroner who is responsible for overseeing all such matters, but where there are cases that need to be investigated, it is up to the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office. It is currently investigating the conduct of the West London senior coroner, including the case that the hon. Member for Ealing North referred to earlier. That case has been transferred to the inner west London coroner, Dr Fiona Wilcox, who will now be dealing with it. In cases where performance has not been as expected, it is up to the JCIO to carry out investigations.

Ruth Cadbury: The Minister referred to standards. Is there a set of standards for how coroners have to deal with cases? What are the measures against which we know that delivery is getting better or worse, or is adequate, satisfactory or inadequate?

Caroline Dinenage: That was all included in the coroner reforms. If the hon. Lady gives me just a little time, I am about to talk about them.

As I said earlier, bereaved people must be at the heart of the coroner service, and that was the key aim of the reforms in the Coroners and Justice Act 2009. The coalition Government implemented those reforms, including the rules and regulations that underpin the Act. The provisions came into force in July 2013 and introduced the role of the Chief Coroner. In September 2012, his honour Judge Peter Thornton QC was appointed as the first Chief Coroner. He has already played a central role

in providing guidance for coroners on the new national standards for coroners set out in the legislation. Coroners are now required, for example, to conclude an inquest within six months of a death being reported to them, or as soon as practicable afterwards. They are also required to report coroner investigations that last more than 12 months to the Chief Coroner, who is in turn required to report on that to the Lord Chancellor and to Parliament in his annual report.

For bereaved people and families, the most significant development under the 2009 Act was perhaps the "Guide to Coroner Services" booklet, a document published by the Ministry of Justice that sets out the standards of service that people can expect from coroners' offices and what they can do if they feel that those standards are not being met. It is vital not only that coroners know what the standards are, but that bereaved people understand how a coroner's investigation is likely to proceed. The guide is accompanied by a shorter leaflet that sets out the key aspects of an investigation. We have sent hard copies of the guide and the leaflet to every coroner's office in England and Wales so that they can be given to every bereaved person or family. The guide is also available on the gov.uk website.

Jenny Chapman: What the Minister is saying is very interesting, but we are talking about a service that has failed. It has been failing, persistently, for some time. It has been flagged to any authority that anyone can think of, yet we have seen the failure continue. What does she think she might need to do to ensure that we do not have this kind of delay in taking action should such a situation arise again in future?

Caroline Dinenage: A lot of the reforms that were part of the changes over the past two or three years will begin to take effect soon. There are obviously a number of issues at play here. We are dealing with a situation where someone is already under investigation. That may well continue, so there are a number of things to consider.

I shall make some progress because I want to address in full the concerns raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton about the provision of out-of-hours coroner services. I am aware that faith communities, particularly the Jewish and Muslim communities, are concerned about the lack of an out-of-hours service because that can delay the timely burial of their loved ones required by their faith. As part of our commitment to improve coroner services, we have recently completed a post-implementation review of the coroner reforms that we implemented in 2013, seeking views on, among other things, the availability of out-of-hours services. We have now received all the responses, which are being analysed, and I hope to come back to the House with a report in spring next year.

While the review was ongoing, we also worked with London local authorities and the Metropolitan and City of London police to develop a pan-London out-of-hours service. The police and local authorities are now also planning to commission a more general review of coroner services in London to see how resources can be better shared and managed to streamline and improve both in-hours and out-of-hours services in the hope that that will also address some of the issues raised by Members today.

On deprivation of liberty safeguards, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton raised concerns about additional distress caused to families and the pressure put on coroners' workloads by their having to conduct inquests into the deaths of those who were under a deprivation of liberty safeguard when they died. The safeguards frequently occur in care homes or in long-term hospital care, even when someone quite plainly dies of natural causes. That is because of a Supreme Court decision last year that held that such individuals are effectively in custody when they die, which is a category of case that coroners are under a statutory duty to investigate. With that in mind, I have been speaking to the Minister for Community and Social Care. We agree that we need to do what we can to solve the problem as a matter of urgency. My officials, together with their counterparts from the Department of Health, are looking at how we can remove the burden while maintaining the protections put in place for those who truly are in state custody.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton for all the matters he raised today and to all those who have raised concerns about the West London coroner's court, out-of-hours services and the deprivation of liberty safeguards. I have welcomed the chance to hear more details about such concerns. I have set out measures that will lead to improvements across the country, but we will continue to monitor and will be grateful for feedback as we move forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered standards of service at West London Coroner's Court.

5.36 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 16 December 2015

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Committee on Radioactive Waste Management

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): In January, my noble Friend Baroness Verma announced the commencement of the second triennial review of the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CoRWM). Today I am announcing the findings of that review, which I am pleased to say support the continuation of CoRWM as the most appropriate body to undertake the hugely important work of providing independent scrutiny and advice on Government's long-term management of higher activity radioactive waste, including the geological disposal programme.

The review has also examined the governance arrangements for CoRWM in line with guidance on good corporate governance set out by the Cabinet Office and makes some recommendations to ensure that CoRWM operates in the most effective and efficient manner.

The final report of the triennial review of CoRWM can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications> and I have made available copies in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS401]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (James Duddridge): My right hon. Friend, the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Baroness Anelay of St Johns), has made the following written statement:

I wish to inform the House that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, together with the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence, are today publishing a progress report on the UK's third "National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security" which was published on 12 June 2014 (*Official Report*, 16 June 2014, columns 72-74WS).

The national action plan sets out our priorities on women, peace and security from 2014-17. It is the guiding national policy document that sets out the direction and vision to the Government and their partners as we work to ensure that women and girls are at the centre of our efforts to prevent, respond to and resolve conflict. The report published today outlines the progress in our international and domestic work and gives examples of this against the four main pillars of women, peace and security: participation, prevention, protection, and relief and recovery. The annexes to the report also provide details of activities under way in the UK's six chosen focus countries: Afghanistan, Burma, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya, Somalia and Syria.

The strategic defence and security review was clear about the importance the Government attach to work on women, peace and security and its centrality to peace and stability overseas. We will continue to collaborate with our international partners and civil society to drive forward this agenda using the international momentum from the high level review of

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in October 2015. We will increase efforts to ensure that women's voices are represented in wider peace processes, negotiations and state-building.

We will continue to report to Parliament annually on progress, with our next report due in autumn 2016.

The progress report has been published on gov.uk:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-national-action-plan-on-women-peace-and-security-2014-17-report-to-parliament-december-2015>.

[HCWS404]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Crisis Relocation Mechanism and Safe Third Countries (Commission Proposals)

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): Further to the explanatory memoranda published by the Minister for countering extremism on 30 September, the Government have decided not to opt in to two Commission proposals for regulations of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a crisis relocation mechanism amending regulation (EU) No. 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 establishing criteria and mechanisms for determining the member state responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one member state by a third country national or a stateless person and establishing an EU common list of safe countries of origin for the purposes of directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection, and amending directive 2012/32/EU.

The UK did not opt in to the two temporary proposals allowing for the relocation of individuals in need of international protection between EU member states which were agreed over the summer. So far implementation of these has been extremely slow with only around 160 people relocated from Italy and Greece so far. Member states continue to argue over the detail. Negotiations on a permanent relocation mechanism have also proved long and difficult and it is unlikely consensus will be reached on this in the near future. This reinforces the view that relocation is the wrong response to the crisis and that the time and effort devoted to negotiating these measures would have been far better spent on implementing practical solutions to secure the external border and provide sustainable protection in the region, a position which the UK has been calling for since the beginning of the crisis.

The Government do see merit in establishing an EU-wide safe third country list, especially for those member states who have no experience of operating such a list. However, the UK has successfully operated its own list for many years and already has established procedures and safeguards in place, including parliamentary approval before a country is designated. Opting in would also require the UK to opt in to the underlying 2013 asylum procedures directive. The UK originally did not opt in to this directive as it was deemed not to be in the national interest due to implications for immigration control and the integrity of UK legal systems. Those reasons remain valid and we see no advantage in opting in to this measure.

[HCWS403]

JUSTICE

Cremations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): Today I am launching a consultation which seeks views on proposals for a number of changes to the Cremation (England and Wales) Regulations 2008, and for improving other aspects of cremation practice.

On 1 June 2015 David Jenkins published his report into the way infant cremations were carried out at Emstrey crematorium in Shropshire between 1996 and 2012. The report established that during this period Emstrey crematorium failed to obtain ashes to return to parents following infant cremations.

Scotland had experienced similar problems. In June 2014 Lord Bonython's report of his Infant Cremation Commission (ICC) found that in some Scottish cases parents had been incorrectly told that there had been, or would be, no ashes from their babies' cremations.

I am clear that what happened at Emstrey, and sadly also at other crematoriums, should never happen again. No other family should go through the pain of not having their baby's ashes returned to them. That is why I am taking action to make sure that after a cremation infant ashes should always be returned to their families.

A majority of the 12 Emstrey report recommendations were for the Westminster Government, including the recommendation that we consider the ICC's 64 recommendations. In July, I announced our intention to consult on these recommendations and that consultation starts today.

The consultation will run for 12 weeks. I will be writing to families involved in these tragic events to invite them to take part. We will then carefully consider the responses we receive and will announce the changes that we will be making next year.

Copies of the consultation document will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The consultation is also available at:

<https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/consultation-on-cremation>

[HCWS405]

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government Change: Pension Wise

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): This written statement confirms that responsibility for the Pension Wise service will transfer from Her Majesty's Treasury to the Department for Work and Pensions. This change will be effective from 1 April 2016.

[HCWS406]

TRANSPORT

Maritime Growth Study: Government Response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): In November 2014, the Department for Transport launched a comprehensive study, chaired by Lord Jeffrey Moutevans, now Lord Mayor of the City of London, into maintaining the UK's status as a world-leading maritime centre. The "Maritime Growth

Study: keeping the UK competitive in a global market" was published on 7 September, the opening day of London international shipping week 2015, with a commitment from Government to formally respond to the report by the end of the year.

The last such review took place nearly two decades ago and the global economic landscape has changed significantly since then. However, one constant has been the continuing contribution of UK maritime and marine industries to our economy and in keeping seaborne trade moving worldwide. The study highlights that this has been achieved through a highly advanced, world-class maritime cluster spread across the nation that attracts investment and exports services worldwide. The sector's direct economic contribution is at least £11 billion, while directly supporting at least 113,000 jobs and 6,600 businesses. The UK is truly a "one-stop-shop" for the global maritime market, but the study concludes that there is still much more that it can achieve.

The report recognises that other maritime centres in Europe and the far east are experiencing rapid growth and seeking to replicate our success. Government and industry must therefore work together to reinforce the UK's role in the global market and put our nation in the best possible position to exploit the expected doubling in world sea trade by 2030. A successful maritime sector will support the Government's commitment to enhancing domestic productivity, rebalancing the UK economy, increasing exports and raising our global status.

The study involved extensive engagement and independent research to inform and shape its conclusions and recommendations. The process also benefited from the scrutiny and support of an industry advisory group chaired by Michael Parker, chairman of the UK arm of global shipping company, CMA-CGM, and comprising senior business leaders from across the sector.

The report encompasses Lord Mountevans' recommendations for Government and industry, focusing on four themes in particular: Government leadership, industry leadership, the need for a skilled workforce and the opportunities for marketing maritime UK. The Government welcome his findings and will take forward the recommendations in all four of these areas, partnering with and involving industry as required.

Significant progress is already being made. A new ministerial working group for maritime growth has been established to drive growth and tackle issues impacting the sector. The working group, including representatives from industry, met for the first time last month to discuss items on maritime inward investment and export growth, as well as the opportunities presented by the Government's proposed reform of apprenticeships. The working group will be supported by a committee that will bring together senior officials from key Departments with an interest in maritime in the new year to identify what further action is required.

Officials will shortly begin the process of updating the Government's assessment of the seafarer requirement in the UK maritime sector so we have the most up-to-date picture of supply and demand. This will ultimately inform the chair's recommended review of our support for maritime training (SMarT) scheme to ensure it remains fit for purpose.

A key focus of the study was the role played by the Maritime & Coastguard Agency (MCA)-administered UK Ship Register. The register has now seen nearly

12 months of modest, but continuous growth in gross tonnage. However, we will not be complacent about this success and fully support Lord Mountevans' ambitions for the register, which were informed by evidence from the independent UK Ship Register Advisory Panel. In addition to the agency's existing plans for creating a more efficient, flexible and customer-focused survey and inspection function, I am pleased to be able to announce the appointment of Simon Barham as director of the UK Ship Register. Simon brings a wealth of commercial shipping experience to the role and will begin the process of making the register more independent from the MCA's regulatory functions when he starts in 2016. These improvements are being implemented against the backdrop of longer-term work by the Department exploring the scope for more significant reform of relevant MCA services, in particular the UK Ship Register.

While the specific recommendations for industry are for them to consider and respond to, the outcomes being sought, including greater co-ordination to promote

the sector as a whole, are vital to achieving the chair's vision for maritime. The Government are happy to support industry in this endeavour.

I am grateful to Lord Mountevans for his chairmanship of the project. His leadership and experience have helped to produce a compelling report on a sophisticated sector consisting of multiple markets and industries. He played an important role in successfully corralling the views of an expansive and diverse industry with varying interests. It is now for Government and industry to work in partnership to lever the findings from the study and keep the UK maritime sector at the forefront of the global market.

The report, "Maritime Growth Study: keeping the UK competitive in a global market" can be found on: <https://www.gov.uk> and copies were made available in the Libraries of both Houses on its publication in September.

[HCWS402]

Petition

Wednesday 16 December 2015

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

School Funding Model

The petition of residents of Maidstone & The Weald,

Declares that the petitioners believe the existing school funding model in England is arbitrary and unfair; further declares that the ten best funded areas

of England have on average received grants of £6,300 per pupil this year, compared to an average of £4,200 per pupil in the ten most poorly funded areas of England; and further declares that the petitioners welcome the Government's commitment to introduce fairer school funding.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons supports the earliest possible introduction of a new National Funding Formula for schools in England.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Mrs Helen Grant.*]

[P001566]

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PETITION

Wednesday 16 December 2015

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School Funding Model	15P

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