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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 11 January 2016

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Draft Investigatory Powers Bill

1. **Stephen McPartland** (Stevenage) (Con): If she will ensure that the proposals in the draft Investigatory Powers Bill are limited to the police and security services. [902903]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): A small number of public authorities have the ability to use investigatory powers where it is necessary, proportionate and for limited purposes. All public authorities that have powers to acquire communications data have made a strong operational case to retain those powers. In his review of investigatory powers, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, David Anderson QC, said that there was no public interest in reducing the number of such bodies.

Stephen McPartland: The United Nations has condemned the Bill, which introduces mass surveillance, as having a chilling effect. Will the Home Secretary be kind enough to clarify how many organisations, including local authorities, and employees would have access to communications data as a result of the draft Bill?

Mrs May: I assure my hon. Friend that the United Kingdom does not and has not participated in, or undertaken, mass surveillance. The investigatory powers in the Bill are necessary, and they are used proportionately by the police and other agencies. They are particularly important for the police, including those in his own Hertfordshire force, in dealing with not just terrorists and serious criminals, but the area of child protection, in which he has a particular interest. There is only one new power in the draft Investigatory Powers Bill, which is access to internet connection records, and I can reassure my hon. Friend that local authorities will not have access to such records.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware of concerns among journalists that these powers, which the security services and the police need to keep us safe, might have a chilling effect on their ability to publish and to report. What steps is she taking to try to guarantee free speech for journalists within the

Bill while enabling the security services and the police to have access to the information that they require to keep us safe?

Mrs May: I am well aware of the concerns of journalists, specifically about the powers to access information that might lead to the identification of their sources. They feel that that could have a chilling effect. We have already made a change in the code of practice to require a higher level of judicial authority to allow access to something that could relate to journalists' sources, and we will legislate on that in the draft Investigatory Powers Bill.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The David Anderson report refers to Cambridgeshire county council's Operation Magpie, which relied on communications data to protect more than 100 elderly and vulnerable persons from attempts to defraud them. Does the Secretary of State agree that such operations may benefit from the powers in the Bill to protect the most vulnerable?

Mrs May: My hon. and learned Friend raises a very important case, and provides a good example of why it is necessary sometimes for local authorities, such as Cambridgeshire county council, to have access to such powers so that they can do that important job of keeping people safe. After the Government were elected in 2010, we increased the requirements on local authorities in terms of gaining access to the most intrusive surveillance powers, but as she makes clear, in trading standards and other such areas, these powers are necessary to keep people safe.

Immigration System

2. **Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to prevent abuse of the immigration system. [902904]

3. **Chris Heaton-Harris** (Daventry) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to prevent abuse of the immigration system. [902905]

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): The Immigration Act 2014 and related changes have expedited the removal of more than 2,000 foreign national offenders from this country and stopped illegal migrants from having access to services such as bank accounts, driving licences and rented accommodation. The Immigration Bill will go further, enabling the seizure of earnings from illegal workers, further penalising rogue employers and extending the deport first, appeal later principle to more cases.

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, but immigration remains one of the top concerns of my constituents. With that in mind, what assessment has the Minister made of the Government's proposed right-to-rent scheme on those who are here illegally?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the issues surrounding right to rent, which we intend to roll out nationally next month. It is a matter of ensuring that property is available only to those with a right to be

in this country. We undertook an assessment of the first phase of the scheme in the west midlands. That found that the scheme was operating as intended, which is why we are now rolling it out further.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Can the Minister outline the steps the Government are taking to root out the problem of illegal working in economic sectors where skills shortages are pronounced, such as the construction and care industries?

James Brokenshire: We are certainly looking at several employment sectors that may face such risks, such as construction and care, to which my hon. Friend refers. I have had meetings with representatives from those industries and others to see what further steps can be taken to prevent that from happening, and making sure that employers have adequate awareness of the steps that they can take. We have doubled the maximum penalty for employing an illegal worker to £20,000, and through the new Immigration Bill we intend to tighten those restrictions even further and make it easier to prosecute rogue employers.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): May I draw the Minister's attention to an abuse of our immigration system by the Indian authorities in the case of my constituent, Paramjeet Singh, to whom we have granted refugee status from India and indefinite leave to remain in the UK? But while he was on holiday in Portugal last month with his wife and four British children, he was detained with a request for deportation by India. Does the Minister agree that if the Indian authorities have a case, they should take it up with the UK Government? Will the Minister put the case to his counterparts in Portugal and the European Commission to secure Paramjeet Singh's early return to his family in Smethwick?

James Brokenshire: I will look carefully at the case that the right hon. Gentleman has raised, specifically at the facts and circumstances which he has drawn to the attention of the House, and I will write to him.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Despite measures having been taken by the Government, the number of sham marriages appears to be on the increase. In 2014, the last year for which we have figures, a total of 2,486 weddings were visited by enforcement officers. Will the Minister look at the possibility of giving registrars the power to cancel ceremonies, thus relieving the pressure on Home Office officials to crash weddings in this way?

James Brokenshire: The Chair of the Home Affairs Committee and I have debated these issues in the past. Since April last year 12,253 notices to marry have been referred to the Home Office through the new arrangements. Of these, 160 proposed marriages were considered a sham, and a further 99 marriages were prevented because couples did not follow the necessary requirements and co-operate with the investigation. This is a serious matter on which we have already taken action. Between April and September last year we arrested 528 individuals and removed more than 279 people involved in sham marriages, underlining our focus on that issue.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend reconsider the question of ID cards, not only in respect of immigration and the introduction of many digital services for all our individuals and

citizens, but particularly in regard to national security and the protection of all our citizens from terrorism? Does he agree that this is now a matter of national security?

James Brokenshire: My right hon. Friend will be aware that one of the first steps that the coalition Government took was to respond to the Labour Government's proposals on that issue, which we continue to judge was the right thing to do. We are taking various measures to enhance the security of this country, but our judgment remains that ID cards are not the right way forward.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that other countries with ID cards find it much easier to identify, detain and deport illegal immigrants? Given the support now on both sides of the House, may I suggest that the Government re-open the agenda for the introduction of ID cards, which we understood they dropped under pressure from the coalition?

James Brokenshire: Many of the issues that we face in relation to deportation involve foreign nationals—obviously, by the nature of the work. We have introduced biometric residence permits, and in her speech last October to the Conservative party conference the Home Secretary referred to the further measures that we are taking so that we can remove those people who do not have authority to be in this country. We are using biometric residence permits and other means to achieve that.

Online Crime

5. **Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC):** What estimate she has made of the number of crimes committed online in 2014-15; and how many of those crimes were (a) recorded, (b) investigated and (c) resulted in a conviction. [902907]

The Minister for Security (Mr John Hayes): Crime is falling and crime is changing. Different types of crime may have an online element and an accurate national picture is critical to informing our ongoing response to cybercrime. That is why the Office for National Statistics recently published, for the very first time, initial estimates of the numbers of frauds and cybercrimes committed per year.

Liz Saville Roberts: None the less, the organisation Kick it Out, which campaigns to kick racism out of football, recorded more than 130,000 instances of racist abuse of footballers and their teams via social media in 2014-15, and the chief constable leading on digital crime fears that the police are on the verge of being overwhelmed. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that all police officers have the capacity to make risk-based assessments and to prioritise this ever-increasing crime appropriately?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady makes a good point. She has focused her parliamentary career so far on the issue of online harassment, although she did not mention that in detail today. She knows that it is something that she and I both take very seriously. We welcome the preliminary trial by the Office for National Statistics to better reflect fraud and cybercrime in statistics. Having a more accurate picture will allow us to take the kinds of steps that she has advertised to the House today, because we will then be able to get a better idea of the

scale and character of cybercrime and to do the preparatory work that she has requested. I take this seriously, as she clearly does, and I know that the whole House will join us in that.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): It is not just harassment that is done over the internet; it is also phishing and fraud. Does my right hon. Friend not think that the Home Office might have a role to play in educating internet users in how best to protect themselves against such cybercrime?

Mr Hayes: As I said, when we get to understand the figures more accurately—the measures we have taken to look at these matters in greater detail will allow us to do that—my hon. Friend is absolutely right that we will need to be precautionary in our approach. He is also right that fraud is a significant element of the problem. In dealing with online fraud, we need to measure what is happening, look at what can be done about it and take appropriate action, and that is exactly what we will do.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The media today reports that as more people use social networking apps such as Tinder and Grindr, reports of burglary and rape are rising. Can the Minister outline what assessment the Home Office has made of the problem and how it plans to attack it across these islands, in co-ordination with the devolved Governments?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman will know that we have a national cyber-security programme. We have invested more than £90 million in this Parliament and the previous Parliament to bolster the law enforcement response, and we will continue to make that investment. Indeed, the Government have committed to spending £1.9 billion on cyber-security over the next five years, including tackling cybercrime. It is about resources, earlier identification and preparation, but it is also worth saying that we have established the national cybercrime unit, so the Government are doing more, taking the steps necessary, tackling this seriously, listening and learning—unafraid of taking action.

Contraband: Entry into UK

6. **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to stop firearms, illegal drugs and other contraband entering the UK. [902908]

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): The United Kingdom's border controls are among the toughest in the world. Border Force works closely with other law enforcement agencies, including the National Crime Agency and the police, to target and disrupt freight, international post, vehicles and vessels attempting to smuggle prohibited and restricted goods, such as firearms and illegal drugs, into the UK.

Jeremy Lefroy: I thank the Minister for that answer. Will he expand on how the National Crime Agency is co-operating with authorities overseas to protect Britain from serious organised crime?

James Brokenshire: The National Crime Agency does vital work, both here in the UK and overseas, to track down the source of plots and conspiracies, as well as to

disrupt the activity of organised crime groups. It has been crucial in recent operations, for example in arresting those suspected of drug smuggling offences in Greece, intercepting shipments of cocaine passing through the English channel and cracking down on Europe-wide people smuggling operations. The NCA is increasingly showing the importance of that international work, and equally it is working through organisations such as Europol to show that we have the best intelligence and good co-ordination to combat organised criminality.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Given that at least 67,500 small planes or boats landed at British ports or airports unchecked by Border Force, does the Minister have any concerns that that might be a route for illegal drugs or firearms?

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware, through his experience of being a Home Office Minister, of the steps that are taken by all our various agencies in looking at each potential way in which people may smuggle into this country. We are improving the systems through which general aviation reports are captured in order to ensure that we are tackling non-compliance. We are also working through air traffic control to track flights that fail to report and, through improvements to legislation, take action against those who fail to comply with the requirements. We remain focused on these issues.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Which port or airport sees the biggest flow of illegal drugs into the United Kingdom?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend seeks to draw me into issues that we do not comment on. We do not comment on specific issues or particular ports, but I can assure him that Border Force, the National Crime Agency and others take an intelligence-led approach to the way in which people and technology are deployed in order to have the most effect in confronting the criminals who are trying to smuggle stuff into this country.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The single largest item smuggled into Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland is illicit fuel. Last month, the Republic of Ireland produced a report that showed that in one month alone €316,000 was spent on cleaning up sludge from waste illicit fuel. Will the Government review the markers that are used in our British fuels? The Dow ACCUTRACE marker is a dud because it can be removed.

James Brokenshire: The National Crime Agency, working with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, is looking at all threats across the border from the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, we have very good relations with the Government there. I will refer the hon. Gentleman's comments to other colleagues across Government who take a direct interest in this.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Perhaps the most lethal weapon of mass destruction is the AK-47 and similar small arms weapons rather than any nuclear weapon. The Government have done a huge amount in the arms trade treaty. As of December 2015, 79 countries had ratified the arms trade treaty, while 53 have signed it but not ratified it. What more can the Government do

to deal with and tackle the illegal supply of weapons across borders and get those countries to ratify the treaty?

James Brokenshire: We are taking this forward at a European level. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is in discussions with other European leaders on how best we can co-ordinate with and lobby Governments beyond Europe as well, to share the focus that we as a Government have on confronting the smuggling of weapons and ensuring that this issue is dealt with even more firmly.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I raised concerns about Hull's port security with the Home Secretary on 16 November and followed that up with information to her office on 18 November. In the light of today's reports in *The Guardian* by Vikram Dodd about ferry security, what additional steps might be introduced to increase security at our ports?

James Brokenshire: I cannot comment on the individual case that the hon. Lady mentions, but I can say that we take seriously the issue of our ports, and indeed the juxtaposed ports in northern France. We have maintained 100% screening checks on those coming through. Our introduction of operational and technological improvements has prevented nearly 70,000 illegal entry attempts through those juxtaposed ports.

Police Services: Co-operation

7. **Neil Carmichael** (Stroud) (Con): What steps she is taking to promote co-operation between police services. [902909]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): The Government are supporting local policing leaders to invest in cross-force capabilities and collaborative initiatives by protecting police funding over the course of this Parliament, using the police innovation fund to incentivise collaboration, and providing new transformation funding to drive further investment and innovation.

Neil Carmichael: That is a very encouraging answer, but bearing in mind the work of the ministerial taskforce on child protection, what steps is the Home Secretary taking to make sure that the police co-operate well with other agencies in schools, in the healthcare system, and in social work?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend raises a very important point about the police's interaction with other agencies in dealing with child protection. On Friday, I visited a school and talked to people there about the work they do with the multi-agency safeguarding hub in bringing together police and various parts of the school and the local authority to deal with those issues. We recognise the role that schools have to play, including through personal, social, health and economic education and through sex and relationships education. We also announced in March, when we launched our "Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation" report, that we will be looking at the training of staff, to enable them to be better able to spot the signs of where children may be being exploited in that way.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Home Secretary aware that, although there is a lot of good co-operation across the police services in Yorkshire, many criminals in our part of the world flee to Pakistan and, given that we do not have an extradition treaty, that is becoming a great burden on the police services when dealing with very serious crimes?

Mrs May: I am, of course, aware of a small number of particular cases where concern has been expressed. I would not want to comment on individual ongoing police investigations, but both we and the police recognise the significance of the issues. Indeed, as the hon. Gentleman says, some of the cases involve very serious crimes indeed.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, Avon and Somerset police and Wiltshire police are working together strategically to help increase efficiency. The police and crime commissioner elections are coming up in May. Does she agree that PCCs across the south-west should work together to help merge the authorities in order to not only increase the efficiency of the police, but help tackle cross-authority crime?

Mrs May: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Some weeks ago, I visited the new combined firearms training facility that is being used in that way by the Avon and Somerset, Wiltshire and, indeed, Gloucestershire forces. That is a very good example of collaboration. It is absolutely right that police and crime commissioners should also be looking for ways in which they can collaborate, not just in relation to the police, but, increasingly, in relation to fire services.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Such co-operation is vital for the Disclosure and Barring Service to meet its target of 40 days to deal with applications, but it is taking much longer in many cases, including that of a constituent of mine who has been waiting five months since his initial application, causing serious hardship. Is the Home Secretary aware of such delays, particularly within the Metropolitan Police, and what steps will she take to correct the situation?

Mrs May: I assure the hon. Lady that I am aware of the delays taking place in the Metropolitan Police, which is a matter that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), is taking up and looking into in detail.

Tom Purslove (Corby) (Con): Northamptonshire has been extremely innovative in developing new policing models, particularly in relation to rural crime, so what steps will the Home Secretary take to share that best practice nationally?

Mrs May: Northamptonshire has indeed taken a number of initiatives and I am very pleased to say that, in collaboration, the police and crime commissioner, Adam Simmonds, has been particularly innovative in his thinking, looking at ways in which collaboration, not only between police forces but with other agencies, can take place. It is part of the role of the College of Policing to ensure that good practice, where it occurs,

is spread so that other forces are aware of what action can be taken, to help them deal with the same issues, such as rural crime.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): Could the Home Secretary update us on the progress she is making on co-operation between emergency services, be they the police, the NHS or the fire services?

Mrs May: Yes, I will refer later to some of the steps the Government are taking in relation to that collaboration. We are encouraging police forces and fire services in particular to look for collaboration where they can find it. In some parts of the country, such as Northamptonshire, the police and crime commissioner is also actively looking to see what action can be taken in relation to ambulance services, too.

Net Migration Figures: International Students

8. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What her policy is on the inclusion of international students in net migration figures. [902910]

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): The independent Office for National Statistics includes international students in its net migration calculations. Like other migrants, international students who stay for longer than 12 months have an impact on communities, infrastructure and services while they are here. We continue to welcome the brightest and best to study at our world-leading institutions. There remains no limit on the number of genuine international students who can come to study in the UK.

Mr Sharma: The Minister will be aware that the UK Statistics Authority and others have expressed concern about the robustness of the international passenger survey and that, therefore, the contribution of students to net migration may be significantly lower than thought. How will he ensure that immigration policy is made on the basis of good evidence?

James Brokenshire: It is the Office for National Statistics that provides the figures. It includes international students in its net migration calculations, as does Australia, Canada and the US. We keep such issues under review all the time, but I underline to the hon. Gentleman that changing the way we measure migration would not make any difference to our policy because there is no limit on the number of genuine international students who can come here to study. We certainly remain open to attracting the brightest and the best.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): In Portsmouth, there are 4,000 international students from 130 countries. Does my right hon. Friend agree not only that they help the immediate economy, but that the relationship between such foreign students and Britain should last a lifetime and helps the long-term political and economic future of Britain?

James Brokenshire: The Government certainly recognise the benefit that international students bring in enriching so many of our university campuses. We want to continue to attract international students to study at our world-leading universities. It is important to note that, since 2010,

university visa applications from international students have increased by 17%, and by 39% for Russell Group universities.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Is the Minister not concerned that the word has increasingly gone out to countries such as India and China that Britain is no longer as welcoming a place for international students, and that that is affecting our long-term business relationships quite seriously?

James Brokenshire: No, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's analysis. When we look at the students coming from China, we can see that the numbers have increased by about 9%. The way in which international markets operate can sometimes be quite complex, particularly in countries such as India, where the use of agents can be important. When I go to India later this year, I will certainly underline the clear message that the UK remains an attractive place for students to come to study.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): We all welcome international students, but what steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that international students who overstay are removed?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend highlights the important point: we want to attract students to come to this country to study, but we also want to ensure that they leave at the end of their time. That was a particular problem under the previous Labour Government, but we are using exit check data to work with the university sector to see that students leave when they have completed their studies.

Police Funding Formula

9. **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What recent progress she has made on reviewing the police funding formula. [902911]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): I announced in the House before Christmas that I was delaying the implementation of the new funding formula. We are considering the next steps, especially in the light of the excellent spending review settlement on behalf of the police that the Home Secretary has managed to get. I will update the House on the decisions I will make in the near future.

Helen Hayes: In the autumn statement, the Chancellor said:

"I am today announcing that there will be no cuts in the police budget at all. There will be real-terms protection for police funding."—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1373.]

We seem to have smoke and mirrors on police funding, because we now know that the draft settlement for the Metropolitan police in fact contains a 10% cut. That is in a context of increasing need, not least the need to investigate allegations of child abuse that occurred in the past. That need will increase as the Goddard inquiry gives victims and survivors the confidence to come forward. Will the Secretary of State commit to resource such investigations separately within the new formula

so that they can be completed quickly and so that the perpetrators, many of whom are now elderly, can be brought to justice before it is too late?

Mike Penning: I do not recognise the figure of a 10% cut to the Metropolitan police, and neither does the commissioner nor the Mayor. I think the level of spending was a surprise to Labour Members, considering that they wanted a 10% cut across the board. We did not go along with that.

18. [902924] **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): May I press the Minister, when there is a review of the funding formula, to take into consideration the additional costs involved in policing rural areas such as Shropshire?

Mike Penning: When the previous Government announced a review—in 2006, I think—that was one of the reasons why they looked at the funding formula so closely. Yes, we most certainly will look at funding for rural constituencies and rural police forces, just as we will look at why that is so opaque under the present system.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The police were the unsung heroes of the floods crisis, which was the latest example of the growing pressures on a diminishing police service. The Policing Minister was right to apologise for the omnishambles of the chaos over the police funding formula. Will he also admit that it is simply not true that there will be, in the words of the Chancellor,

“no cuts in the police budget at all”?—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1373.]

Mike Penning: I visited Lancashire last Thursday on my first visit as the fire Minister as well as the Policing Minister. Although I absolutely praise the work of the police force, which went way beyond what we would expect any of our officers to do, all the other emergency services did so as well. The chief constable thanked me for making sure that there were no cuts.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that when the precept is taken into account, it could mean extra funding for the police of up to £900 million across the country by 2019-20?

Mike Penning: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If police and crime commissioners take the opportunity of the precept increase, it will amount to an increase of just under £1 billion or just over £900 million, rather than the cut of 10% that the Labour party wanted.

Immigration of Children

10. **Natalie McGarry** (Glasgow East) (Ind): Under what circumstances her Department permits the immigration of children to join relatives living in the UK. [902912]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): The circumstances in which a child can come to the UK to join relatives living here are set out in the immigration rules. We keep

the rules under review, but believe that they protect the rights of individuals, while ensuring that there is confidence in an immigration system that is fair.

Natalie McGarry: Save the Children estimates that up to 2,000 unaccompanied children are living in refugee camps in Calais and Dunkirk, many of whom have family in the UK. However, the family reunification process between the French Government and the UK Government can take up to 11 months, which results in many children making the dangerous decision to cross the channel. Will the Minister tell the House why the process takes so long and what steps the Government have taken to speed it up?

Karen Bradley: I do not recognise the length of time the hon. Lady suggests the process takes. We work very closely with the French authorities, but let us bear it in mind that those children are in camps in France, which is part of the European Union. It is important that they are processed properly in that sovereign state.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Some 15 years ago, Victoria Climbié came into this country from west Africa and was placed with a so-called aunt in a private fostering arrangement. The Government no longer collect figures about private fostering, so what measures are they taking to ensure that children who come to this country do not have their welfare compromised in the way that she did?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend has great expertise in this area, particularly given his time as a Minister. He knows that I take the welfare of children extremely seriously, as does the Home Secretary. We make sure that we have the information we need to protect those children.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I spent Friday in the camps in Calais and Dunkirk. I have seen some pretty appalling conditions in my time, including in prisons in Africa and the Caribbean, but nothing could prepare anyone for the squalor of those camps, particularly in Dunkirk. What was obvious, among other things, was that there is simply no process in place on the ground for anyone—particularly children—who is entitled to join their family in the UK. What steps are the Government taking to address that issue and to ensure that children in Calais and Dunkirk who have the right to join their families are able to do so?

Karen Bradley: The hon. and learned Gentleman knows that we work very closely with the French authorities. We are working with them to make sure that their processing is done as swiftly and efficiently as possible. I must repeat that these are camps in France. It is a sovereign country and we cannot interfere in French matters.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Just after Christmas, 15-year-old Masud, an asylum seeker from Afghanistan, died in the back of a lorry trying to make it from Calais to be reunited with his sister here in the United Kingdom. The Home Office was seeking to defend his exclusion in protracted legal proceedings relating to the Dublin convention. Will the UK Government please reconsider

their approach to the Dublin rules and, indeed, to their own family reunion rules to avoid similar desperate journeys ending in tragedy?

Karen Bradley: Refugees can seek asylum in the first country in which they arrive in the European Union. I cannot comment on an individual case, but it is important to make the point that people should not try to make that journey illegally. We have a relocation programme to bring 20,000 Syrian refugees to this country. I must restate that France is a sovereign country and we must not interfere in its affairs.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Government reconsider the stress and anxiety caused by their policies to children who have one British parent and one non-EU parent? Last week we learned about Andrew McLaughlin, who served this country in Afghanistan and now has to choose between leaving Britain or leaving his wife and child, thanks to the grossly excessive financial requirements in the immigration rules. Why do the Government continue to defend the indefensible?

Karen Bradley: Our current family reunion policy is already more generous than our international obligations require, and we have no plans to widen the criteria under immigration law. We consider each individual on a case-by-case basis, but we have no plans to change the rules.

20. [902926] **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Minister will be aware that 3,500 people died last year trying to reach safety in Europe. Twenty-seven non-governmental organisations and charities wrote to the Prime Minister at the beginning of the year, asking him what the Government would do about extending safe and legal routes to the United Kingdom, and about family reunion. When does the Minister expect a response to be forthcoming, and is it likely to be positive?

Karen Bradley: I am proud of the support that this Government are giving to people in the camps and in the region, where we can support far more people for the same amount of money than if they arrived in Europe. We have a relocation policy for 20,000 Syrian refugees, but it is important that we help as many people as possible, and we can do that best in the region. We must not encourage people to get on those boats, because nearly a quarter of people do not get off at the other end and die in the process.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Has the Minister had a chance to look at the report by the International Development Committee, which praises the work being done in the region, and urges the Government to reach a rapid decision on the proposal by Save the Children that we should take 3,000 children from Europe?

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who I know has considerable expertise in this area. As the Prime Minister said last week, we are looking at those proposals and will come back on that.

Overseas Student Visas

11. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): How many visas were issued to overseas students to study in the UK in the last year for which figures are available. [902913]

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): Some 196,000 study visas were issued, excluding dependants, in the year ending September 2015, and we continue to welcome the brightest and best to study at our world leading institutions.

Mr Robertson: Given that students who come to this country for more than a year are officially classed as immigration, and given the concern about levels of immigration into this country, would it be sensible to give a separate classification to students who come here to study? As we have already heard, those students bring a lot of money to the country, and they extend British influence abroad.

James Brokenshire: As I have already indicated, the Office for National Statistics includes international students in its net migration calculations, and like other migrants, international students who stay for longer than 12 months have an impact on communities, infrastructure and services while they are here. I underline that having those numbers there does not bear on our policy.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Many businesses in Scotland, higher education institutions, wider civic society and all political parties, including the Scottish Conservatives, support the reintroduction of the post-study work visa as a means to attract foreign students to our universities and boost the economy. Will the Minister join that happy consensus in Scotland, reconsider the Government's position, and reinstate the post-study work visa?

James Brokenshire: I gave evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee before Christmas, and underlined the fact that in our judgment, there are already adequate opportunities for students who graduate in Scotland to move into employment that is commensurate with their qualification. I will look carefully at the recommendations of that Committee.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): How does the UK's proportion of the world market in international students last year compare with equivalent proportions in previous years?

James Brokenshire: Numbers of university applications continue to rise, and that underlines the effect of our crackdown on the abuses that we saw under the previous Labour Government, where people were coming to the country who could not speak English and who were going to bogus colleges.

Policing: Administrative Costs

12. **Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What steps she is taking to reduce the administrative costs of policing. [902914]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): The Government have made it easier for the police to do their job by cutting red tape, scrapping bureaucracy, ending targets and giving officers the discretion of their professional judgment. In my hon. Friend's constituency, the number of front-line officers has increased from 87% to 90% in the past 10 years.

Dr Murrison: The TaxPayers Alliance and HMRC have made clear that they consider Wiltshire to be both efficient and effective administratively in delivering first-class services, so good governance does not have to be taxing. Is the Minister confident that the existing legislative framework allows sufficient latitude for reforming police and crime commissioners, such as Wiltshire's Angus Macpherson, to flatten and de-layer management structures and rationalise working practices in the interests of front-line policing?

Mike Penning: The Home Secretary has already announced that we will be bringing forward legislation in this Parliament to give police and crime commissioners the powers they need. Around the country, many PCCs are already collaborating. We are going to head that up here in government.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): There has been a lot of smoke and mirrors from this Government around police funding. Given the specific proposal, which I support, to increase the number of armed units in places such as Cardiff, will the Minister assure us that that will not be at the expense of crucial back-room offices and other front-line policing, such as stopping firearms getting into the country in the first place?

Mike Penning: I can categorically give that assurance, but savings can be made in the back room. We have seen savings made across the country through collaboration with other agencies, in particular the fire service.

Police Grant Settlement

13. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the police on the police grant settlement. [902916]

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): The Home Secretary and I have regular meetings with our police partners on issues including police funding. The Government have already published, on 17 December, the police funding settlement for 2016-17. The consultation will finish at 5 pm on 25 January.

Gerald Jones: The House may be aware of the comments last week by the Conservative police and crime commissioner for Staffordshire that police forces are once again having their budgets cut, despite promises in the spending review. Will the Minister confirm that the message has got back to the Chancellor that his claim that police funding is being protected is incorrect?

Mike Penning: The Chancellor announced a settlement of zero cuts. The Labour party wanted 10% cuts. We did not think that was right and that is why we did not do it.

14. [902917] **Marcus Fysh** (Yeovil) (Con): Yeovil police station in my constituency is threatened with closure under a local decision. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, with funding now safe, proposed closures in areas that can suffer from antisocial behaviour should be paused to allow further consideration?

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): Whether police stations are open or not, and where they should be open, is an operational matter for the police force. I am sure that my hon. Friend's local force commander and the police and crime commissioner have heard exactly what he says, but this is a matter for local policing and not something for the Minister to get involved in.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On the police funding settlement, would it help the Minister if, when the country votes to come out of the European Union, part of the £350 million a week the UK people give to Europe was spent on police funding?

Mike Penning: The Home Secretary negotiated brilliantly the funding agreement for the next four years. That was exceptionally good to hear.

Violence against Women and Girls

15. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to tackle violence against women and girls. [902918]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Tackling violence against women and girls is a key Government priority. We have introduced a new offence of domestic abuse and are consulting on new measures to protect victims of stalking. We have already committed £40 million between 2016 and 2020 to support victims of domestic abuse. We will publish shortly a refreshed violence against women and girls strategy, setting out how we will do more still to support all victims.

Maggie Throup: Following the meeting with the Derbyshire police and crime commissioner candidate, Richard Bright, I was shocked to learn that on average between July and September last year one rape a week was reported to Derbyshire police, linked to nights out in Long Eaton, Ilkeston and Derby. Will my right hon. Friend outline what is being done to ensure that victims receive a good level of practical and emotional support following a sexual assault? What can be done to help the police bring predators to justice?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. First, we have generally seen an increase in the number of reports of rape and other sexual violence. It is good that people have more confidence to come forward, precisely because of the support they now feel they will get from the police and other services. It is, of course, important to ensure that support is available to individuals, for example at Rape Crisis centres. I am pleased to say that over the past five years the Government have made money available to ensure that new Rape Crisis centres have opened, unlike under the previous Labour Government when they were closing.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is believed that 170,000 women and girls in the UK have endured female genital mutilation. It is right that the Government have introduced legislation and are funding projects in Africa and training NHS and education staff, but without significant UK grassroots intervention to change cultural norms, we will never prevent this horrific child abuse.

When will the Secretary of State change her approach and invest in helping communities to prevent FGM, rather than failing to prosecute once the crime has been committed?

Mrs May: As the hon. Lady knows, we have taken the question of forced genital mutilation extremely seriously, which is why we have significantly strengthened the law on FGM and have issued a range of materials to support professionals in being able to understand these issues and spot signs of somebody being taken out of the country. I commend the work of the all-party parliamentary group on female genital mutilation and, in particular, of the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), who has ensured that information is made available to communities and community groups about what can be done to prevent forced genital mutilation and to ensure that people can spot the signs and stop it taking place.

Topical Questions

T1. [902928] **Mr David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Colleagues across the House will recognise the dedication and commitment of the emergency services in response to the current widespread flooding. It has been a demonstration of public service at its best and a testament to the ability of our police and fire and rescue services to work together to keep the public safe from harm. We believe we must build on this foundation and encourage greater collaboration between local police and fire services—an issue raised in questions previously. On 5 January, the Prime Minister informed the House that responsibility for fire and rescue policy in England had transferred to the Home Office with immediate effect, and I am delighted that the Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice, himself a former firefighter, is the new fire Minister, in addition to his policing, victims and criminal justice responsibilities.

This machinery of government change is a natural progression of the Government's work on emergency services collaboration. Police and fire services are sharing control rooms and back-office services, and we will shortly publish legislative proposals to enable police and crime commissioners to take on the governance of local fire and rescue services where a local case is made. I am keen to go further still and apply the lessons of police reform in the last Parliament to the fire and rescue service and ensure that policing learns from the tremendous success of fire prevention in recent years.

Mr Speaker: That was extremely informative but far too long. We need to be briefer from now on.

Mr Burrowes: The Home Secretary has confirmed that the Government's relocation programme applies to vulnerable Syrian refugees who are also outside camps, but is the programme sufficient, given their number and vulnerability, and, not least, their risk of exploitation by people smugglers?

Mrs May: Yes, we have extended the list of criteria on vulnerability according to which we take people from the camps, but we have also provided specific expertise—for example, by working with the French Government to identify those who have been trafficked.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): I shall take the Home Secretary back to a question she was asked several times last week but refused to answer. In late 2014, a terror suspect from east London well known to the UK security services skipped police bail and walked freely out of the UK to Syria via Dover. Let me try again: when was she first informed that this individual had absconded and were any checks made on his passport before he left?

Mrs May: I said to the right hon. Gentleman and other of his colleagues last week, and I will say it again today: I will not comment on individual cases because of issues relating to police investigations and proceedings. I would say, however, that this Government have taken significant steps to enhance our border security, including by establishing the UK Border Force, thereby taking it out of the failed UK Border Agency, which was set up by the last Labour Government.

Andy Burnham: That is not good enough. The public are concerned about this and deserve answers. A UK terror suspect broke police bail and walked out of this country unchecked, but it gets worse: yesterday, it was reported that the mastermind behind the Paris attacks last year freely entered this country, through Dover again, despite being known to the authorities in Europe. Is this true, and were any checks made on this individual on his arrival in the UK?

Mrs May: I make it absolutely clear to the right hon. Gentleman that this Government have taken steps to enhance our border security, taken the UK into the second-generation Schengen information system, introduced exit checks, and decided to do what the last Labour Government failed to do: put the UK into the Prüm system.

Andy Burnham: Two straight questions; no answers. On matters as serious as this, that is simply not good enough. Terror suspects are freely walking in and out of the United Kingdom on this Home Secretary's watch. Terror suspects know the sea border is a weak link, partly because she delayed UK involvement in the Schengen Information System, which would have given the UK access to EU security checks. The British public need answers, not Ministers hiding behind excuses. Will she today order an urgent review of our border security at our ferry terminals and of the police bail regime for terror suspects?

Mrs May: As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration indicated earlier, we take a number of steps in relation to our border security, and indeed always look to see whether more can be done in relation to our border security, but I repeat what I said earlier—indeed, I said it to the right hon. Gentleman last week. The Labour Government had opportunities in relation to SIS II and Prüm. The Labour Government failed to get this country into Prüm; it is this Conservative Government that have taken the action necessary.

T3. [902930] **Sir Simon Burns** (Chelmsford) (Con): What are the Government planning to do to combat knife crime, given that in the last 13 months two young people have been tragically and callously killed by the illegal use of knives in Chelmsford? Also, there has been a rise in the number of crimes committed involving knives, partly due to drug-related incidents and gangs coming out from London.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): Tackling knife crime is a priority for this Government. Knife crime is 17% lower today than it was in June 2010, but I know that is little comfort to anybody affected in the way that my right hon. Friend's constituents have been. May I suggest that I meet him to discuss specific measures that could be taken in Chelmsford related to the work we have been doing across the country on gangs and other antisocial behaviour?

T2. [902929] **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): People across the country are rightly very anxious that the Government do everything they can to keep our borders safe at this moment in time. On that basis, for the Secretary of State to stand there and blame a Government that have not been in power for five and a half years is an absolute dereliction of her duty. What can she say to constituents across the country who want to know what she is doing and what responsibilities she is taking to keep our borders safe, in the light of the incidents raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), which people are justly concerned about?

Mrs May: The hon. Gentleman mentions people's concerns about border security. It is precisely because this Government recognise the importance of border security that we have taken the steps to enhance our border security that I outlined in response to the shadow Home Security, the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham). It is this Government that have ensured that the UK is now a member of SIS II and can join Prüm. It is this Government that have introduced exit checks. All these are measures that enhance our border security.

T7. [902934] **Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): Following the horrendous attacks in Paris, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that young people's minds in the UK are not poisoned and that they are not radicalised by the poisonous ideology put forward by Daesh?

The Minister for Security (Mr John Hayes): My hon. Friend will know that much of this is done online, where there are those who are seeking to corrupt people to inspire them to murder and maim their neighbours. Since February 2010, more than 120,000 pieces of unlawful terrorist material have been taken down from the internet, and our Prevent programme works with communities, schools, colleges and local authorities across the country. Mr Speaker, I am intolerant—intolerant of that wickedness which seeks to do so much harm.

Mr Speaker: We are better informed.

T4. [902931] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Figures released recently from the Met police show that serious youth violence is continuing to rise across the

capital. Since being elected last year, I have lost three of my constituents to serious youth violence. Young people need to be safe on our streets. It is an issue for all of society. Can the Minister not see the link between rising numbers of knife crimes and falling numbers of police officers? London's Mayor has been letting people down. Is it not time for a Labour Mayor of London?

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): I did not realise there was going to be a party political broadcast on behalf of the Labour candidate for Mayor of London on such a serious subject. It was this Government that brought in the legislation, with the help of Nick de Bois, to ensure that those caught with a knife twice will now get six months. That is the sort of legislation we need, but we need to work harder. The Met police do a fantastic job and we should not run them down.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Despite the UK's strong commitment to allowing 20,000 legal refugees into the UK, the fact remains that there are still thousands trying to enter illegally through the channel tunnel. What does the Minister think can be done to protect freight companies such as Broughton Transport in my constituency, which is threatening job losses and the end of the company?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Refugees (Richard Harrington): We fully accept the vital role that hauliers play in the economy, and it is never acceptable for drivers to be attacked or threatened while doing their job. The Government's funding, improved security measures, port infrastructure at Calais and the surrounding area and the new secure zone will provide a secure waiting area for 230 vehicles. It is expected to be completed by late spring this year. There is an enhanced French police response team comprising more than 1,100 officers. The Minister for Immigration regularly meets the haulage sector, and officials would be happy to meet Broughton as part of this consultation.

T5. [902932] **Marie Rimmer** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): The police are coming under increasing strain, picking up the pieces as other public services are slashed. Last summer, however, a National Audit Office report stated that the Government have little understanding of the crucial job that the police do. Will the Home Secretary advise us of the effort she has put into understanding the increasing demands put on the police?

Mike Penning: I think we all understand what a fantastic job the police do in the 43 forces in England and Wales. For many years, they have done jobs that are not part of their front-line job, particularly around mental health. That is why the triage of mental health and mental health professionals in custody suites and elsewhere is a really important step forward. I fully accept what the hon. Lady says and that we need to do more.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): Further to earlier questions on the important issue of illegal immigration, will my right hon. Friend tell us what assessment has been made of the effectiveness of the Immigration Act 2014 in tackling this critical issue?

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): Measures introduced in the Immigration Act 2014 included a number of issues confronting the accessing of services by migrants to which they are not entitled. I can certainly tell my hon. Friend that we have revoked more than 13,000 driving licences and deported more than 2,000 foreign national offenders, as well as exercise new powers to block bail when someone is scheduled to be removed within 14 days.

T6. [902933] **Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Home Secretary will know of the vital work undertaken by the British Transport police to keep the public safe and support policing in her Department. In written answers today, however, Ministers have refused to rule out reducing the number of front-line officers, following the spending review. Does she agree that no police cuts should mean no cuts to policing levels, and will she urge her colleagues in the Department for Transport to rule out such cuts?

Mike Penning: As Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice in the Home Office, I work closely with the Secretary of State for Transport who is responsible for the British Transport police. I am sure he will have heard the hon. Lady's comments, and I will talk to him about them, but this is not a matter for the Home Office.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Last week, an officer in Crawley suffered an appalling hammer attack. I am pleased to say that he has now recovered. Will my right hon. Friend pay tribute to the professionalism of Sussex police, which now has the prime suspect in custody?

Mike Penning: Let me say what a fantastic job that officer does, along with other officers. I hope that a full recovery happens soon. Body-worn cameras are going to transform policing, particularly assaults on officers, as can be seen from the roll-out of the pilots. Evidence like that is putting away the sort of criminal people who assault our officers.

T8. [902935] **Jo Cox** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): The message from my constituents who make applications to UK Visas and Immigration is that there is a distinct lack of fairness in the current system. They have a strong sense that the deck is stacked against them, their families and their ability to exercise their legal rights. Will the Minister take steps to address that, not least by allowing staff to exercise discretion in their deliberations in the better interest of fairer decisions on visa applications?

James Brokenshire: I am certainly happy to look at any individual cases that the hon. Lady might wish to send to me. Clearly, there are processes in place to ensure that decisions are fairly made and in a speedy manner.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update us on progress made under the Khartoum process, which aims to tackle the trafficking and smuggling of migrants between the horn of Africa and Europe?

James Brokenshire: An officials group meeting took place just before Christmas to give effect to the Khartoum process, and, as a consequence, various actions have been agreed to maintain the momentum.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Secretary said earlier that she had extended the vulnerable persons scheme to help those who were at risk of being trafficked. On that basis, will she ensure that it is extended further to help vulnerable children, who are at more risk of trafficking and exploitation than anyone else and who are alone and abandoned in Europe? Masud, whom she heard about earlier, suffocated to death in the back of a lorry.

Mrs May: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question, which gives me an opportunity to clarify what I said earlier. I apologise if the way in which I put it gave the wrong impression. I said that we had extended the criteria of vulnerability that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was using to determine who should be resettled under our Syrian refugees resettlement scheme. However, we have also, separately, offered extra support to the French authorities in relation to the identification in the camps of those who have been trafficked.

T10. [902937] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Given that 1.5 million migrants entered the European Union in 2015 and a similar number will do so in 2016, will the Home Secretary confirm that all European leaders are aware of the impact on fellow EU nations and, in particular, on the United Kingdom, which is already experiencing unsustainable levels of migration?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend will be well aware that, in the renegotiation, the Prime Minister is highlighting migration as one of the key elements. There is a sense of the impact that migration has on populations, which is why it remains a key issue.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, Simon Danczuk.

T9. [902936] **Simon Danczuk** (Rochdale) (Ind): The Minister wrote to me saying that 33,000 asylum seekers were spread across 95 local authority areas. If they were spread across 326 local authority areas, there would be 101 in each area. Why does Rochdale now have 1,071 asylum seekers?

James Brokenshire: We have maintained the dispersal arrangements that were agreed by the last Labour Government, and we continue to operate those arrangements with strategic migration partnerships to ensure that people are well settled in this country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but pressure was very intense today. Demand usually exceeds supply.

Prisons and Secure Training Centres: Safety

3.37 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State if he will make a statement on safety in prisons and secure training centres.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Michael Gove): The safety and welfare of all those in custody is vital, so we take seriously all reports of the mistreatment of those in our care.

On 8 January, the BBC and other media outlets reported allegations of verbal and physical abuse directed towards young people detained at Medway secure training centre, an establishment managed by G4S. The allegations arise from an undercover investigation for a “Panorama” programme which will be broadcast this evening. It must be stressed that investigative reporting is vital to keeping government honest, and I am grateful to the BBC for the work it has undertaken.

We must treat these allegations with the utmost seriousness. Kent police and the Medway child protection team are now investigating matters on the basis of information shared with them by the BBC, and the police will decide in due course whether criminal charges should be brought.

It would be inappropriate for me to comment further on the specific allegations while these investigations are under way, but I can assure the House that my Department and the Youth Justice Board—under the determined leadership of my right hon. and noble Friend Lord McNally—will do everything we can to assist the police and the local council. Our immediate priority has been to make sure that the young people in custody at Medway are safe, which is why Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons and Ofsted visited the secure training centre this morning. They are meeting representatives of G4S, Medway council and the Youth Justice Board to ensure that all necessary action is being taken to ensure the wellbeing of young people at the centre. Inspectors will speak directly to the young people detained at Medway to satisfy themselves that everything is being done to ensure that people are safe. I will also be meeting G4S this week to discuss the allegations and to review its response.

I am under no illusions about the fact that our system of youth justice needs reform. Although youth offending is down, recidivism rates are high, and the care and supervision of young offenders in custody is not good enough. That is why I asked Charlie Taylor, the former chief executive of the National College for Teaching and Leadership, to conduct a review of youth justice. He will report back later this year with recommendations on how to improve the treatment of young people in our care. But it is not just youth justice that needs reform. We need to bring change to our whole prison estate. There is much more to do to ensure that our prisons are places of decency, hope and rehabilitation.

Violence in prisons has increased in recent years. The nature of offenders currently in custody and the widespread availability of new psychoactive substances have both contributed to making prisons less safe. There is no single, simple solution to the problems we face, but we

are determined to make progress. We are trialling the use of body-worn cameras and training sniffer dogs to detect new psychoactive substances. We have made it an offence to smuggle so-called legal highs into prison, but ultimately the only way to reduce violence in our prisons is to give governors and all those who work in prisons the tools necessary more effectively to reform and rehabilitate offenders. That is the Government’s mission and one I am determined to see through.

Andy Slaughter: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question on a most serious and troubling topic involving the mistreatment of children in custody. I am sure the Secretary of State and the whole Government take their responsibilities seriously, not least their duty of care under the Children Act 2004. I am grateful for the steps that have already been taken, which the Secretary of State mentioned, but perhaps he could have met G4S sooner, as I am sure the Government have had some notice. Perhaps he will tell us when he first had notice of these allegations.

As the Secretary of State said, these are serious allegations involving seven members of staff at Medway secure training centre. I also put on record my thanks to the BBC “Panorama” programme for bringing these matters to light.

The allegations involve matters such as slapping a teenager several times in the head; using restraint techniques; squeezing a teenager’s windpipe so as to cause problems in breathing; boasting of mistreating young people, including using a fork to stab one in the leg; equally seriously, the concealing of behaviour by deliberately doing it outside the sight of CCTV cameras; and covering up violent incidents to avoid investigation and the possibility of sanctions against G4S.

Deborah Coles, director of the charity INQUEST, has said that in any other setting the treatment “would be child abuse” and that

“this points to a lack of accountability and culture of impunity.”

Adding to the seriousness of this situation, it is clear that these allegations have come to light only following the investigative journalism the Secretary of State mentioned, rather than following any monitoring or oversight from the Youth Justice Board or Ministry of Justice. Perhaps he would say what the Youth Justice Board monitors have been doing, as they are supposed to be an essential protection in these circumstances.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that a full independent investigation of the circumstances of the abuse will take place and that this will not be swept under the carpet or blamed on a few rogue officers? Any culpability or negligence by G4S management must be exposed. We must also be told whether the Ministry of Justice knew about the alleged abuse before the story was broken by journalists. If it didn’t know, why didn’t it know?

Sadly, this is only the latest in a long line of failures and mismanagement from G4S. In addition to inspection reports at Oakwood prison and the removal of the contract for Rainsbrook STC last September, there have been investigations into a number of deaths in custody or detention, including those of Gareth Myatt and Jimmy Mubenga. There was a debate in the House last week on the appalling healthcare at G4S-run Yarl’s Wood immigration detention centre. The Secretary of

State may wish to confirm that the Serious Fraud Office is still investigating G4S over fraud in the prisoners tagging contract.

Given the concerns raised over many years and in many areas about G4S, we urge the MOJ to review all its contracts with that company to see whether it is fit and proper to manage major public contracts. In the meantime it is our belief that G4S should not be considered for bidding for other Government contracts. Can the Secretary of State give me those assurances today?

There are serious questions—I think the Secretary of State acknowledged this—that go beyond G4S. We have to see this in the wider context of a rise in violence in prisons. Figures show that 186 prisoners took their own lives over the 23-month period to September 2015, which means that, over the last two years, on average, a prisoner has taken their own life every four days. Last Friday, the outgoing chief inspector of prisons told “Newsnight” that there were more murders and suicides than there had been in 10 years. We need a cultural shift across the entire secure estate.

To begin that process, we ask that today the Government take immediate action to put all G4S-run prisons, STCs and detention centres into special measures to assess the safety and competence of their operation. The Secretary of State has powers under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to intervene in contracted-out STCs. We urge him to do so and to put in management teams alongside existing staff, particularly those with experience of working with vulnerable children. It is clear that the measures currently in place are not working. It remains for the Secretary of State, who has said that he wishes to reform our prisons, to take action now.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising these questions in a serious and sombre way. He is absolutely right to say that the allegations involve children and that we have a duty of care towards them. We must ensure that those who are in our care are treated appropriately and responsibly. “Panorama” informed the local authority on 30 December and appropriate steps were taken by the local authority to ensure that an investigation could be initiated. Of course, Kent police were also informed at the same time, and because a police investigation is necessarily taking place, we have to respect due process.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the allegations that he has listed are very serious, but they are allegations, and it is important that we give G4S and those involved the appropriate time and space to respond in a way that is congruent with the seriousness of the allegations. It is because I take the allegations seriously that I do not want to rush to judgment or do anything that could be used to enable those who might be guilty of serious offences to wriggle off the hook.

I had the opportunity to meet the editor of “Panorama”, as well as the programme’s producer and the director who was responsible for this investigation, on the eve of the publication of the allegations in *The Times* and elsewhere on 8 January. It was as a result of that conversation that I had discussions with members of the Youth Justice Board and that we took the steps that I outlined earlier in my statement. It was also as result of that conversation that the roles of the YJB monitor and of Barnardo’s, which also visits the establishment,

were enhanced to ensure that the safety of the children at that centre could be guaranteed to the best of our ability.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that G4S has, in a number of other ways, at times in the past, let the Ministry of Justice and those in our care down. It is also important to stress, however, that there are other institutions run by G4S that continue to do a good job, and it would be quite wrong to make a blanket allegation against the organisation of the kind that I know the hon. Gentleman did not make but that others might be tempted to.

The hon. Gentleman was also right to make reference to the remarks of the outgoing chief inspector, Nick Hardwick. I thank Nick Hardwick for the superb work he has done. His candour and honesty in that role serve only to underline the scale of what we have to do to ensure that children and young people in custody and everyone else in prison are in a safe and decent environment, and nothing will stop us making sure that safety and decency are at the forefront of the changes that we bring to our prison and secure training centre estate.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that the Justice Committee is investigating the treatment of young people within the estate, and all those who are looking into this issue will welcome his measured approach. Does he agree that the Taylor review should not only deal with the present issue but have no constraints placed on either the areas it looks at or its opportunity to consider the learning that is now available on the questions of maturity and of the appropriateness of having very young people in the same establishments as hardened and much older people? Will he also tell us when Charlie Taylor is likely to be able to deliver his report?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those questions. I have stressed to Charlie Taylor that he should consider there to be no limits on his review. I know that my hon. Friend’s points will be well taken by Charlie, and I hope that we will see the fruits of his report in two to three months’ time.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Like all hon. Members, we on these Benches were alarmed to see the reports emerging over the weekend about the Medway secure training centre, so we congratulate the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on raising the issue today and the Secretary of State on his response. Three questions arise. First, will any review of procedures and practices at training centres include not only Medway and not only contracts involving G4S but similar centres including those run by Serco? Secondly, what improvements can be made to the system of inspection to prevent similar incidents from arising in future? Finally, are any procedures—even something as simple as providing a telephone number—available to the children in those centres to allow such behaviour to be drawn to the attention of outside authorities without having to rely on undercover journalists?

Michael Gove: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. He is absolutely right: although there is understandable focus and attention on G4S, not least because of some of the mistakes the company has made in the past, what should concern us is the safety of

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children and young people, rather than the reputation of any particular organisation. There should be no limits on our capacity to investigate wrongdoing, wherever we find it. He rightly says we need to consider and reflect on inspection and monitoring to make sure it is fit for purpose. I have absolute confidence and faith in Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons, but we do need always to keep under review the powers available to our inspections.

There is a telephone line that enables people in STCs to call Barnardo's. Barnardo's was visiting the site three days a week, but that has now been doubled and its volunteers and professionals visit six days a week. We will, of course, do everything we can do to reassure young people that if they are victims of abuse, they will be heard.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his response this afternoon, which I found very helpful. I was shocked and appalled to hear the allegations of abuse of young people by staff at Medway secure training centre, a borstal in my constituency. I understand that the allegations result from an undercover BBC "Panorama" investigation and I, too, thank the BBC. I am extremely concerned to learn, however, that the BBC revealed these allegations only at the end of December, with the investigation having run from October to December. I question why authorities were not alerted immediately. Last Thursday, I had a long conversation with Paul Cook, the director of children's services at G4S, so that he could update me on the immediate action that has been taken at Medway STC following these allegations. Will the Secretary of State assure me that following the conclusion of the police investigation, the Youth Justice Board will review the safeguarding processes and measures in place at Medway STC so that I can be sure, as a constituency MP, that young people placed there are being looked after?

Michael Gove: I take seriously the points that my hon. Friend made, and I will talk to Lin Hinnigan, chief executive of the Youth Justice Board, again later this afternoon in order to take them up. As for the nature of the investigation, I had the opportunity to talk to Mr Plomin, the producer-director of this programme, and he explained to me that in investigative journalism of this kind it normally takes between two to three months to establish and marshal the evidence necessary to build a case worthy of investigation. That is obviously a matter for the BBC, but it should be stressed that this "Panorama" producer-director was involved in the investigation into Winterbourne View as well, so he is someone with a track record in uncovering unacceptable practices.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Yvonne Rose Bailey, a constituent of mine and the mother of Joseph Scholes, specifically raised with me over the weekend the issue of Joseph's death more than 10 years ago in custody at Stoke Heath. She drew to my attention again the request for an inquiry into deaths that have occurred in STCs and in youth custody. Having been a Minister in the Department, I know that this is difficult, but will the Secretary of State look again at the purpose of an inquest into the deaths that have occurred?

Michael Gove: Knowing the right hon. Gentleman's experience, I take his request very seriously and I will come back to him on that.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): A number of my constituents are employed at Rainsbrook STC, near Rugby, where the YJB has taken decisive action by transferring the contract from G4S to MTCnovo—that will take effect in May. For the benefit of my constituents, will the Secretary of State confirm that that transfer is proceeding satisfactorily? For the benefit of the House, will he confirm that the change will prevent the kind of distressing allegations that we have heard today?

Michael Gove: The transfer from G4S to MTCnovo should reinforce some of the changes that are already taking place, which ensure that children and young people are better looked after. I had the opportunity to visit Rainsbrook, where I saw that staff were taking very seriously some of the unhappy practices that had been reported in the past and were determined to improve the care of young people.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Despite what the Minister said earlier, why should organisations with such a dubious record, to say the least, be given such responsibility, as we all agree that the safety of children is of the utmost importance? Why should such work be outsourced in the first place?

Michael Gove: There are two related points. First, there are institutions that are run by G4S, which are the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice, that are well run, that have been inspected and that every respectable observer believes are run in the interests of the inmates in a way that ensures that inmates do have a chance to turn their lives around. More broadly, it is fair to say that, within the secure estate overall, there needs to be a balance between the innovation that can be brought by outside organisations, and the rigour that proper inspection and proper monitoring can guarantee. That balance is always a difficult one to strike.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Today, Ofsted and HM Inspectorate of Prisons have published a report into the G4S-managed Oakhill secure training centre in my constituency. They have awarded the centre a "good" rating and found that young people there feel safe and are being helped in their education. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the staff for all their hard work in raising standards?

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. We should stress that the overwhelming majority of people who work with offenders—young and old—in secure training centres, young offender institutions and prisons are idealistic figures who do an exemplary job. We take very seriously the allegations that were listed by the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) precisely because the majority of staff, such as those mentioned by my hon. Friend, do this work because they want to improve the lives of those with whom they work.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): In the light of what we have found out from the BBC, will the Secretary of State look again at the Harris report into deaths in

custody, because the original response from the Government was lamentable? Will he look again at the 30 or more recommendations that were rejected, as some of them could be implemented tomorrow and would save an awful lot of the problems that he is now having to confront?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to Lord Harris for his report, and we accepted more than half of his recommendations. I know that he will appear before the Justice Committee tomorrow, and there will be an opportunity for him to reflect on where we might have gone further. I will look with care and attention at the evidence he gives.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Given that offenders have access to a private phone line, weekly meetings with their social workers, and regular visits from Barnardo's and NHS nurses, and that all the staff are approved by the Youth Justice Board, does my right hon. Friend agree that, on the face of it, it looks as though there is little more that can be done?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for stressing the range of services that exist to help ensure that young people are kept safe. When an allegation or a series of allegations such as those in the "Panorama" report are made we must of course take them seriously. It is also important to stress that the Youth Justice Board, the Ministry of Justice and others have continually striven over the years to try to ensure that young people are kept safe in custody. Of course we can never do enough, but he is quite right that there have already been interventions that have been designed to ensure that young people are safe.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am sure that we will all watch "Panorama" with great interest, but, whatever we see, we have all known for years that there were problems with these institutions. That is why we have the recidivism rates to which the Justice Secretary referred. We must not be allowed to scapegoat the staff. They do an exceptionally difficult job, very often picking up the failures of other parts of the public services—the education system, the care system and the social work system. When he comes to give the remit to the inquiry that he has announced today, will he make sure that the work of all those different parts of the public services and others interacts with these young people before they end up in detention and is given proper scrutiny as well?

Michael Gove: That was a typically thoughtful intervention from the right hon. Gentleman. He is absolutely right. Ideally, we should prevent young people from getting into custody in the first place. Obviously, there are some people for whom custody is an appropriate response, but we should seek to intervene much earlier in the lives of these young people—whether that is through ensuring that they have appropriate education, that there is intervention from social workers in their family circumstances or that the criminal justice system is much more thoughtful in the way in which it treats them.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate both the Opposition Front Bench team on raising this urgent question and the Secretary of State on his response

to it. Following on from that very thoughtful question, does he think that, given the high recidivism rates among young people in institutions—even well-run institutions—the whole system is not fit for purpose? Will he ensure that his review is as thoroughly wide ranging as it can be, and will he give a date to this House on when it will report?

Michael Gove: Again, I completely agree with my hon. Friend. There are a range of aspects of the way in which youth justice operates that need reform and to change. I will write to him and share with the House a date by which we can expect Charlie Taylor's report, in order to satisfy the desire which I know is felt across the House for as much urgency as possible in dealing with this problem.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah! I call Mr Nigel Keith Anthony Standish Vaz.

Keith Vaz: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for reminding me of my names.

I welcome all the steps that have been taken by the Minister. He has acted swiftly to deal with a serious set of issues. When he meets the chief executive of G4S this week, can he ensure that a Home Office Minister is also present? G4S has a number of contracts with the Home Office relating to the removal centres. That would help enormously in dealing with this issue.

Michael Gove: That is a helpful suggestion. There is a joint Minister for the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice. We will do everything possible to ensure that there is as much sharing of information and as much agreement as possible about a way forward with our colleagues in the Home Office.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will be aware, one of the communities that suffers daily persecution in prisons is the trans community. As the Women and Equalities Committee is about to publish its trans inquiry report later this month, will he confirm that young trans people will be included in the review of youth justice?

Michael Gove: Absolutely.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Given that there are currently record numbers of assaults in prisons, that a third of the deaths in prisons are self-inflicted, and that this year has seen a bigger increase than any other year in violence in our prisons, what is the Minister doing to make young people who are in prison because they have been offenders safe while they are there, in our care?

Michael Gove: Neither I, the Youth Justice Board nor the Ministry are in denial about the scale of the problem that we face. One reason why we initiated this review, which started in September, was that we realised that there was much that needed to be done to improve the care and welfare of young people in custody and those who come into contact with the criminal justice system. One reason why I have responded as I have done today

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is that I am determined to ensure that Charlie Taylor has all the support he needs to make radical suggestions, if necessary, to transform the opportunities available to those young people. But as has been pointed out by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), there are so many different parts in the criminal justice system that relate to the fate of young people and for which this Government are responsible, from social work through education to the secure estate, that we need to be clear that when we come forward with proposals, they are coherent and meet the need of the hour.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Locking up young offenders has consequences of all kinds. Do events such as the one in question further persuade the Secretary of State that there is merit in monitoring low-level drug and alcohol offenders, rather than in sending them to prison?

Michael Gove: My hon. and learned Friend has a detailed knowledge of the criminal justice system. It is appropriate and important that the option of custody is always available. There will be some young offenders for whom a custodial sentence is appropriate, but it is also right, in particular where we can keep people out of custody and deal with drug, alcohol or substance abuse or mental health problems, that we make sure that there is an appropriate intervention that keeps them out of the sometimes tough and brutal environment of prison, but only if we can be certain that the intervention is getting their life back on track.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Given the severity of the allegations being made and the seriousness with which we should take the safeguarding issues presented to us, can the Secretary of State inform the House whether the officers concerned at the detention centres are being replaced by temporary personnel while the investigations into safeguarding take place?

Michael Gove: Seven individuals have been suspended. It is my understanding that staffing is at an appropriate level, but during my conversation with the chief executive of the Youth Justice Board I will seek to satisfy myself that we have exactly the level of both staffing and monitoring that we need to keep people safe.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I am pleased that my right hon. Friend referred to body-worn cameras, which are proving to be a vital tool in tackling crime on our streets. Does he agree that they have an important role to play not only in our prisons, but in secure training centres?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. I was fortunate to be here when the Policing Minister pointed out the important way in which body-worn cameras can help in crime detection and in keeping officers safe. The same applies in the secure estate.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): In 2012 G4S failed to provide security for the London Olympics and the Army had to save the day. It has had to repay

£110 million for overcharging for security tags, and £4.5 million for overcharging for facilities management at UK courts. Surely its luck is up and it cannot be offered any more Government contracts.

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to draw attention to those past failures by G4S, but I would stress that there are prisons and other facilities run by G4S that do meet a high and exacting standard. Although it is understandable that criticism of G4S will be heard again in the light of these allegations, and that it will become more intense if the allegations are sustained, it is nevertheless important that we take a step back and recognise that it is also the nature of our youth justice system that needs to change.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): On Friday I attended the packed and moving funeral of the son of one of my constituents. His death in custody is currently under investigation. Will my right hon. Friend join me and my constituent in campaigning together for our young people, and indeed all people, in prison to be better looked after?

Michael Gove: I know just how closely my hon. Friend has taken this case to heart. Both the conversations he has had with me and the correspondence he has had with the Department are testament to the fact that he has been moved by the case and is determined to see reform as a result. I can only say that I will do everything I can to ensure that families do not have to live with the tragedy with which the family he so ably represents have had to live.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Does the Justice Secretary think that it is time for a review of the vetting and barring scheme that the Government introduced in the previous Parliament, to see whether it is actually providing the most suitable people to work with young people?

Michael Gove: I know that the hon. Lady has a number of concerns about changes to the vetting and barring scheme. If she has specific concerns about how it might have failed in that area, I would be interested to hear them. More broadly, I absolutely take her point, and it will be the subject of the conversations I have with the Youth Justice Board and others.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know that I admire his passion for reform in the Prison Service, particularly in youth justice. Having been a shadow Prisons Minister many years ago, and having faced exactly the same challenges in youth offending and how we look after young people, I find the situation today depressing. Does it not often come back to the absolutely essential principle that we need those children to be looked after and supervised by highly qualified, well-paid, well-trained and well-supervised people? Have this Government not become far too dependent on half a dozen companies that do not have the greatest track record when it comes to recruiting and training those sorts of people?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman knows that I have the greatest respect for his passion on these issues. I think that he hits a number of nails squarely on the

head. I do not want to pre-empt the results of Charlie Taylor's review, but I think that it is important that we review the qualifications and professionalism of those who work in youth justice. One thing that I should say, however, is that it is appropriate for me to thank the chairman of the Youth Justice Board, Lord McNally, for the work he has been doing. It is on his watch that the number of young people in custody has diminished and youth offending has fallen. Even as we recognise that there is progress to be made, it is important that we also thank those who have worked in this area in the past few years.

Mr Speaker: We can all be assured that the noble Lord has heard that message in real time.

Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's words today, and I think that most of us would agree that it is absolutely essential that we have reform, particularly in youth justice. Will he consider introducing the duty of candour in the prisons estate, particularly in young offender institutions, because young offenders are extremely vulnerable? The duty of candour was introduced in the national health service only last April. I think that it would be worth while looking at that, because of the need to safeguard young people in custody—sadly, there will always be a need for that. It is absolutely essential that we have that duty, so will he please give it consideration?

Michael Gove: I will ask Charlie Taylor to reflect on the hon. Lady's thoughtful recommendation.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I served on the Committee on the Bill that became the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, where we argued against the inclusion of the use of restraints to preserve good order and discipline for youth offending, and said that instead force should be used only where there is a danger to staff or the child. Unfortunately, the Minister in Committee ignored this, even though the UN Committee Against Torture had said of the UK:

"The Committee is concerned that the State party is still using techniques of restraint that aim to inflict deliberate pain on children in Young Offender Institutions".

Does the Secretary of State now regret this decision, and will he amend the legislation accordingly?

Michael Gove: The principles behind MMR—minimising and managing physical restraint—are designed to ensure, exactly as the hon. Lady would hope, that physical restraint is used only when there is a danger to other prisoners or to the individual themselves, but of course there will be occasions when physical restraint is used inappropriately, and in those circumstances disciplinary or other action may need to be taken.

Syria: Madaya

Mr Speaker: Before we start exchanges on the urgent question to the Secretary of State for International Development, I wish to record my thanks to the Secretary of State, who is here to answer the question. I am sure that the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Mr Swayne), would have done a most admirable job in her stead, but it is much appreciated that she has come here. I want also to record my thanks to the Chair of the International Development Committee, which was scheduled to be hearing from the Secretary of State now but has courteously volunteered to postpone its sitting until half-past 5 in order that she, and the Minister, can be here in the Chamber. That is a very good sign of respect for the Chamber and for the importance of the subject, as well as for the questioner, and I am most grateful for it.

4.11 pm

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab) (*Urgent Question:*) To ask the Secretary of State to make a statement on the current situation in Madaya and other besieged communities in Syria.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Justine Greening): Thank you for your kind words, Mr Speaker, which are appreciated. I am very grateful to you, and to the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox), for the chance to discuss this important matter here in the House today.

No one who has seen the pictures coming out of Madaya over recent days can say this this atrocious situation is anything other than utterly appalling. The situation is deliberate and man-made. The Assad regime has besieged the town since July, causing horrific suffering and starvation. I should remind the House that the UK has been at the forefront of global efforts to help ensure, from day one, that people suffering inside Syria have been helped over the past four years.

I would like to update the House specifically on what is happening now. The House will be aware that there are reports that a humanitarian convoy is delivering enough food to all those in Madaya for the next month. In fact, the aid on this convoy is UK funded. We have allocated about £560 million to help people inside Syria. That is partly delivered out of Damascus, which is about 40 km from Madaya, with the consent of the regime, as well as across borders from neighbouring countries, without regime consent. This sits alongside all the work that we are doing to help Syrian refugees across the region and outside Syria. Our overall response of just over £1.1 billion for Syria and the region is our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis, and it makes us the second largest donor after the US.

We have lobbied hard for UN Security Council resolutions 2165 and 2191, which has now been superseded by resolution 2258, enabling the UN to deliver aid across borders without the consent of the regime. That is absolutely pivotal for us in order to be able to get to the people we need to get to. We have to remember—this is a very important point for the House—that the people of Madaya are not alone in facing these horrors. In fact, they represent just 10% of those people in besieged areas and just 1% of those living in so-called

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hard-to-reach areas in Syria. About 400,000 people now live in besieged areas like Madaya, and about 4.5 million in total live in hard-to-reach areas across Syria.

Across Syria, Assad and other parties to the conflict are wilfully impeding humanitarian access on a day-by-day basis. It is an outrageous, unacceptable and illegal mechanism to use starvation as a weapon of war. The most effective way to get food to people who are starving and to stop these needless and horrific deaths is for Assad and all parties to the conflict to adhere to international humanitarian law, so right now I call on the Assad regime and all parties to the conflict to allow immediate and unfettered access to all areas of Syria, not just Madaya.

We will not stop in our fight, whether it be through hard work on a political solution that will deal with the root cause of the problem or through our humanitarian efforts, which provide immediate, life-saving relief. This shocking situation underlines the vital work of aid agencies and shows how important it is that they can have the assurance of knowing that they have the resources to keep going. It also underlines the importance of next month's Syria conference in London, which we will co-host. I look forward to further questions from Members.

Jo Cox: I thank the Secretary of State for her response. I am sure she will agree with the following quote:

"In order to break the siege, you need to first break the silence surrounding it."

Those words were spoken by an individual in Yarmouk—a camp in Syria's capital, Damascus—which was besieged for two years by the Syrian Government, causing a reported 200 people to die of hunger. It should not have taken an international outcry on this scale to agree what is a nominal agreement on access to just one small community of 40,000 people out of up to a potential 1 million currently living under siege in Syria.

As we know all too well, it is the Assad regime that is primarily responsible for the policy of sustained, systematic starvation of the population of Syria. Of the areas under siege, 52 are under Assad control, two under rebel control and one under ISIS, so let us be clear: he is responsible for 99% of those areas under siege.

I would be honoured if the Secretary of State could reply to a few questions. First, UN Security Resolution 2165 states that

"United Nations humanitarian agencies and their implementing partners are authorized to use routes across conflict lines".

Does she agree that, to date, the UN has not pushed the envelope and used that clear authorisation to break the siege not just in Madaya, but country-wide?

Secondly, will the Secretary of State demand answers from the UN on why it is still waiting for permission from Assad when resolution after resolution states that that is not necessary? It has the authority and the mandate to go in right now. Thirdly, will the Secretary of State ask the head of the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs why certain besieged areas are not yet classified as such? For example, why is even Madaya not classified as besieged in the latest OCHA report to the Security Council?

Fourthly, does the Secretary of State agree with me, Médecins sans Frontières and other aid agencies that one-shot distribution to Madaya and other places will not alleviate the problem in the months to come or deal with the wider issue country-wide? Sustained and ongoing access is needed. What measures will the Government take from today to make sure that that pressure is maintained?

Fifthly, does the Secretary of State agree that, as the second largest donor, we have a critical role to play in making sure not just that next month's donor conference is successful in raising the significant amount of money needed, but that that aid actually reaches Syrian children? We play a welcome role as the second biggest donor to the country, and it is critical to get access.

Finally, does the Secretary of State agree that, if the UN fails to negotiate and agree sustained, ongoing access to those populations under siege, we should start contingency planning for RAF food drops? It has worked before—we have seen it happen. I was an aid worker for more than a decade and I have seen the difference that airdrops can make. Will she investigate whether that is a viable option at this time?

Justine Greening: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. I underline that all parties to the conflict, including Assad, are besieging various parts of the country, so I condemn all of them.

The hon. Lady mentioned OCHA, which is the UN relief organisation that co-ordinates the overall response of UN agencies on the ground in such situations. I spoke to Stephen O'Brien earlier today to go through the latest UN assessment of the situation on the ground. At that stage, the aid convoy had reached the town lines, as it were, but had not passed the border of the town. There are some reports that the aid convoy has now gone into the town.

As much as anything else, the challenge on the ground is to have a viable UN operation that can be carried out safely. In fact, 42 UN aid workers and people delivering aid on its behalf have already lost their lives in the Syria effort, and 40-plus aid workers and UN workers have lost their lives delivering humanitarian aid in Yemen since mid-December. The reality is that we need some sort of agreement on the ground, because if we do not, it will simply be unsafe to deliver aid. Indeed, if there is no agreement with warring parties on the ground—incidentally, such an agreement is part of international guidelines in this area—there is a real danger that the aid will end up in the hands of the very people who are causing the misery in the first place.

I assure the hon. Lady that everyone working on the crisis—I have been involved with it for some time—has no thought in mind other than to get aid to all the people who are desperately in need. That is why we condemn utterly the fact that international humanitarian law is routinely being broken. We often have challenges in reworking aid access when territory switches from one military group to another, and we have to work through such difficulties on the ground every day. It is important to take safety into account, because if we do not, there is a real danger that any system to deliver aid within Syria and similar countries will break down entirely.

I can assure the hon. Lady that there are such discussions. I have regularly and routinely pushed UN agencies on their need to remain impartial, but not to get into

unnecessary and inappropriate negotiations, if I may call them that, with the regime. They should not have to make choices about where they deliver aid; aid should go to where it is needed. I and the UK Government, through me or through officials, reiterate that point virtually daily. The UN system agrees with that, but we also need to make sure that UN workers are safe.

The issue of how to protect people caught up in this crisis will be at the heart of the forthcoming conference. That will sit alongside two other strands: one is to have a pledging conference to make sure that UN agencies and non-governmental organisations can get the significant resourcing they need to deliver aid on the ground; and the second is about education and the kind of jobs needed for the people caught up in the crisis, so that remaining close to home in the region is a viable option for them.

The hon. Lady highlighted the children caught up in this crisis. If there is a face of this crisis, it is one of a child. If we look at the people who are left in Madaya, we can see that they are predominantly women and children, which is why the situation unfolding there is so dreadful. As she pointed out, that situation is one of many in Syria right now that, all too often, are happening away from the cameras.

The hon. Lady was right to raise the issue of ongoing access. Frankly, the transparency of the media reporting about Madaya and the profile that the town has received have helped to ensure that the regime felt it needed to provide access. I condemn the fact that it takes the BBC, Reuters and other news agencies to have to report what is going on there for the regime to respond. Such an approach is outrageous, unacceptable and illegal.

There are many things in this world—including at the UN Security Council, which I had the privilege of chairing in November—on which we cannot agree. Finding a long-term peaceful resolution to the Syria crisis will obviously be complex and require significant diplomatic effort, but one thing on which we should be able to agree is the need for adherence to international humanitarian law. I assure the House that I will continue to press for that right through this crisis until we find a peaceful resolution in Syria.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): May I say to my right hon. Friend how glad I am that our country is the second biggest donor to Syria and that Britain has sponsored the aid convoy to Madaya? Does she agree that the appalling and unspeakably cruel acts that have been visited on mainly women and children in Madaya and elsewhere amount to a fundamental breach, even in such a barbaric conflict, of all the laws of war, and are thus war crimes? Does she agree that those responsible will be brought to justice, and that the British Government will see to it?

Justine Greening: This is a clear breach of humanitarian law. We cannot see those who perpetrate these sorts of crimes and illegalities go unpunished. The system relies on there being no impunity for people who are involved in perpetrating such atrocities.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Part of the unfolding horror of the Syrian civil war has been the tactic of siege and counter-siege. The Secretary of State will be aware that only 10% of the UN's requests to deliver aid to people in besieged and

hard-to-reach areas were granted, yet that is where 4.5 million Syrians live. The Opposition absolutely support her call for Syria and other combatants to offer humanitarian access and to stop flouting international law. Does she agree with me that while in the short term we have to get aid to these communities and we have to get Syria and other combatants to stop flouting international law, in the medium term there has to be a political solution and an end to the horrific civil war in Syria, and that must involve not just the west and the UN, but the key regional players on the ground?

Justine Greening: I do agree with that. If this situation shows us anything, it is that Assad can have no place in Syria's future. How can people living in besieged areas such as Madaya ever realistically be asked to live under the leadership of a man who is willing literally to starve them to death? The only way in which we will tackle this situation is through tackling the root cause of the conflict. That will require a regionally owned response in the end. Of course, it requires other countries, such as Russia, to be around the table. I want to hear condemnation of these breaches of international humanitarian law from all those people who have stood alongside the Assad regime. They need to play their role in helping us to get aid through to the people who need it.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox), my near neighbour in west Yorkshire, on securing the question. The horrors of Syria transcend party politics. I am proud that the United Kingdom is taking the lead in delivering humanitarian relief in Syria. I visited Domiz refugee camp on the Syria-Iraq border. Will the Secretary of State continue to rule absolutely nothing out in helping civilians in Syria, even if it means looking seriously at Royal Air Force aid drops?

Justine Greening: We do not rule anything out. The key thing that we always consider is what is the most effective way to get to the people in need. The challenge when using military assets, particularly in the context of the airdrops that are being discussed, relates, as much as anything else, to the practicalities of dropping food and water from what would need to be very great heights to do it safely, while targeting them at the people who actually need them, as opposed to risking them ending up in the wrong hands. Additionally, there is the need to make sure that there are the logistics on the ground to get that aid from wherever it arrives to the people who are most at risk of death and starvation.

Right now, what will hopefully be happening, not just in Madaya but in two other besieged communities quite close by, is not only that food has got into the town, but that it will be directed to those—particularly children—who are most acutely malnourished. As the House will start to see, this is not just about how we get food and supplies into a community and area; it is about ensuring that we have people on the ground to distribute that aid fairly.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): People in Scotland and across the country have been horrified by the images and stories coming from Madaya, and we condemn the use of starvation as a weapon of war. People are calling for airdrops. We were told about the logistical capabilities of the RAF and the precision with

[Patrick Grady]

which it could hit military targets, so why cannot those logistical skills and precisions be applied to the dropping of food? Does the Government aid that the right hon. Lady mentioned come from the £1 billion of aid announced by the Prime Minister, or is it from previously committed funds? If we are to rely on land convoys, how can we at the London conference—and, indeed, beforehand—ensure preparation so that as soon as access to those sites is assured, land convoys can be mobilised as quickly as possible?

Justine Greening: I mentioned some of the challenges of using different routes, other than those on the ground—as I said, Damascus is literally 40 km from the town of Madaya. The issue is not about whether there is sustenance and humanitarian supplies in the area—it is there—but about ensuring that we get it from the centre of Damascus to those people who are starving. That is why this situation is so utterly atrocious and should be condemned. Food is within the proximity of the people who need it, and it is being prevented from getting there routinely. UN agencies made seven requests last year to get into Madaya, and only one was permitted by the regime.

The money I mentioned is part of how we fund aid convoys such as the one seen today. We fund UN agencies such as the World Food Programme, and the Syrian Arab Red Cross is also part of the convoy that has been organised. We work with the International Committee of the Red Cross on its operations, and the Syria conference in London in February is important because it will give us a chance to discuss some of these important issues and press for better adherence to international humanitarian law. It will also mean that we can replenish the kind of funding that those organisations need to keep going.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's condemnation of those who are refusing to let the convoys through. What action is her Department taking to ensure that there is proper documentation, so that the International Criminal Court can step in and send a clear signal that those who breach international law in this way will be prosecuted?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and one challenge of these besieged areas is that it is hard to find out what is going on inside them. It is therefore hard for us to understand exactly what the humanitarian needs are. As she says, that makes following up these atrocities all the harder. However, whether for this kind of atrocity or for some of the sexual violence that we see in such conflicts, there is increasing recognition across the international community that such crimes should be tracked, monitored and logged. Those are precisely the discussions that we had with the UN and agencies on the ground, so that when we finally get some kind of peaceful resolution in Syria, these atrocities will not simply be swept under the carpet—they will be dealt with.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) on securing this urgent question, and I welcome the strength of the Secretary of State's response and the fact that the UK is once again at the top of

the queue in providing much-needed aid. I understand that today's convoys contain food, which is urgent. Will she say what the position will be for medical supplies and medicines for those who are besieged, because that is also of great importance and will make a difference?

Justine Greening: It is not only food but nutritional supplements for children, and I understand that there may be some medical supplies as part of the convoy, too, which relates to the point made by the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) about making sure we have ongoing access to these areas. That is why adherence to international law is so important. In the end, that is the only way we can guarantee reaching people—including the other 360,000 people who are not in Madaya—not just today but in the future.

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The House will know—indeed, the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) pointed it out—that the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs has said that only 10% of the requests made for the delivery of aid to the besieged areas were granted by the Assad regime last year. As my right hon. Friend has indicated, the Security Council has passed a resolution to authorise the delivery of aid without permission from the Assad regime. Is she confident that the resolution can be effected? What steps can be taken to ensure the convoys can get through, and that those who are in charge of operating them are sufficiently protected?

Justine Greening: The Security Council resolution and the discussion around it has been specific about which borders can be used as cross-border aid routes. This means there is accountability and that we can check to ensure those border routes remain open. The critical challenge is that even when convoys are able to leave Damascus and get across the border, will they always be able to get to the place they need to? The reality is that we want them to do that safely and reliably. We do not want to send aid not knowing whether it will get to the people who need it. Possibly the worst thing would be to see scarce resources of UN agencies falling into the hands of the very people who are committing atrocities. We have a structure in place. The key is to make sure it is stuck to by all the warring parties concerned. In the end, the only thing that will really solve the Syria crisis is a political resolution. That is what we all must aim for. What we have seen in Madaya tells us why the sooner we reach a solution, the better.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): We all know how many great voluntary aid organisations there are in the UK. One based in Slough that I particularly admire is Khalsa Aid, a Sikh-led organisation that provides aid to people—from the victims of flooding in the north of England to victims of situations like the one we are discussing. Ravi Singh, the founder and chief executive of Khalsa Aid, wrote to the Secretary of State for Defence some time ago requesting that the RAF agree to drop up to £50,000 of food aid that Khalsa Aid is sponsoring. He has yet to receive a reply. The Secretary of State for International Development has argued that RAF drops are not the most efficient way to deal with this, but I am absolutely certain that failing to respond to this kind of initiative is completely unacceptable and

makes it less likely that great organisations such as Khalsa Aid will want to step up. What is she going to do about it? Will she speak to her colleague the Secretary of State for Defence?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady makes her point very well today in the Chamber. I will follow it up with the Ministry of Defence. Indeed, the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), who is here today, has said to me that she will follow it up. I pay tribute to the many faith-based charities that are playing a key role in working on the ground with local communities in what is an incredibly challenging situation. We will follow up the points that the hon. Lady has set out.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The Secretary of State will know very well that Madaya used to be a holiday resort for the denizens of Damascus. To see it today is heart-breaking. Will she talk a little about the help being offered by our friends and allies in the region to the communities that are so badly affected? I am thinking in particular of Lebanon, which is barely a few kilometres over the mountains from Madaya, and Jordan. Will she also say a little about the requests made for help from our Gulf allies and the support she has received from the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), the Minister with responsibility for the middle east, who is in his place? Unless we approach this in a more universal fashion, we will struggle to find a solution.

Justine Greening: We are supporting countries such as Lebanon and Jordan, which have been hugely generous in accepting millions of refugees—alongside Turkey, Egypt and Iraq, whose contributions have been perhaps less recognised—by helping refugees with food, shelter, medical support, counselling—in some cases—and, in Lebanon and Jordan, with education. Critically, we have also worked with host communities, many of which have seen their populations double in size. Members can imagine the strain that puts on public services, food prices and labour wages, for example.

On our broader efforts in the region with Gulf partners, it is worth saying that Kuwait has hosted the last three pledging conferences on Syria and is co-hosting the one in London next month. It has played a role in marshalling the overall efforts and humanitarian resources in the region. Needless to say, however, we all need to do more. This is a protracted, ongoing crisis, and not only does it require day-to-day lifesaving support of the nature discussed this afternoon; but we need to see children in school and young people with the ability to find work and support themselves. If we cannot deliver those basics, we should not be surprised if people leave the region to try to build their lives elsewhere.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): This weekend in *The Daily Telegraph*, a Mr David Blair made an unwarranted and ill-informed attack on the Royal Air Force, going as far as to suggest that the absence of airdrops was due to the RAF. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to pay tribute to our forces and make it clear that the absence of airdrops is due to political and practical problems and nothing to do with the capabilities of our forces?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady has set out very clearly just how much work the RAF has done and the challenges of carrying out airdrops in this particular situation. DFID and the MOD have never had a closer working relationship in providing humanitarian support to those who most need it around the world. Whether in tackling Ebola, responding to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines or saving the lives of people on Mount Sinjar by dropping water, the MOD, and the RAF in particular, have played a critical role, and I have no doubt that they will continue to do so.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) for her urgent question and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for her answer and all the work she and her Department are doing 24/7. Will she make it a top priority to send food not just to Madaya but to wherever there is the opportunity to do so? Does this not show the importance of the UN system? Whatever its faults—there have been many—it is the only game in town, and the UK must support it in every way possible and encourage our friends, our allies and indeed the whole world community to do the same.

Justine Greening: I agree wholeheartedly. It shows that in such circumstances our main leverage is the existence of a rules-based international system. Human rights are universal. It is occasionally argued at the UN that sovereignty is more important than human rights, but human rights do not depend on where someone is; they are universal and apply to people wherever they are, including in Madaya.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Have the UK Government had discussions with Russia about stopping Assad dropping bombs on people in Madaya as soon as aid has been delivered, and about whether it would allow the RAF to drop food supplies in Madaya, the other two places the Secretary of State mentioned and elsewhere, if the aid trucks fail to get through?

Justine Greening: The Vienna process at last gives us a chance to get the right people around the table—the people who will need to reach some kind of an agreement if we are ever going to see peace in Syria. Russia clearly has a role to play in helping us to achieve a peaceful resolution to the Syrian crisis. The most important thing that Russia could do right now to help would be to ensure that the Assad regime, which it is propping up, complies with international humanitarian law. That, in the end, is what we need to see happen. Ultimately, no amount of RAF airdrops can make as big a difference, frankly, as getting the Assad regime to comply with international humanitarian law in Syria.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) on asking the question and the Secretary of State on her detailed response to it. With our engagement in Afghanistan, this country has very recent experience of driving convoys through hostile territory. If we are to achieve what the Secretary of State wants to achieve—getting aid to where it is needed, not where we are given permission for it to go—there needs to be an element of force protection for the convoys, in terms of a certain degree of hardware and armoured capability within the

[Mr Philip Hollobone]

convoys, to demonstrate that the UN really does mean business. In that respect, may I ask the Secretary of State what negotiations are taking place with the Ministry of Defence and the United Nations to see how we might have a hard convoy of that sort? Following on from the thoughtful question posed by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), were there to be Russian vehicles in some of those convoys, that would seem to suggest an element of protection from the Syrian forces.

Justine Greening: I recognise the points my hon. Friend is making; the challenge in what he suggests is that the impartiality of UN agencies is the main reason they are able to get on with the kind of work they do. The reality is that it would be extremely difficult to get any kind of acceptance around the UN Security Council table of a particular military force supporting a particular convoy. There is a security aspect to what we look at in ensuring that the UN convoys can get to where they are going, but as we see with the loss of humanitarian workers on some of those convoys, it is an immensely dangerous role for any of them to play. We should pay tribute to the humanitarian workers who, in spite of those dangers, are out there right now, crossing lines into territories where they may lose their lives getting support to people who need it.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a terrible irony that, on the day that the UK Government announce the first use of Brimstone missiles—the ones we are told minimise civilian casualties—we are forced to watch children starve to death in Madaya. If the convoys do not get through, does the Minister agree that if we have the ability to drop bombs, then surely we have the ability to drop bread?

Justine Greening: I recognise the point the hon. Gentleman is making, but those operations are very different in nature. One of them can happen from literally thousands of feet up, but if we are going to get bread, water and medical supplies to the right people, that is an entirely different RAF operation, requiring aircraft to fly much, much lower, which is why it is so hard to do effectively. That is why, in the end, we have to get the system that is there to work. That is why we have international humanitarian law. We should not let up on this. We should make sure that the political system that is in place delivers for the people on the ground. As we are seeing, when pressure is brought to bear, that is what happens.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The abhorrent use of siege as a weapon of war is a symptom of Assad's war without law and a war without end in Syria. He has reduced his economy to a wartime economy, based on disappearances, looting, and arms and people smuggling. The London conference, which the Secretary of State is organising, is an important step in the plan for peace and the economic reconstruction of that country. I wrote to the Prime Minister before Christmas, and copied her in, asking how UK-based people from Syrian civil society could be involved in that conference, so that the voices from Madaya and all the other besieged towns and cities in Syria can be heard in the conference, rather than it just being a top-down process. I wonder whether she has had a chance to look at that.

Justine Greening: I did see the hon. Lady's letter, for which I thank her. I can reassure her that civil society is a core part of the conference; we will make sure that those voices are very much heard when the conference takes place. I will write to the hon. Lady, ensuring that she is responded to formally.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for her assurances today. However, can she confirm that consideration is actively being given to the use of food drops by the RAF, which we have done before, so that those who are starving—and are just six miles from the border with Lebanon and a 40-second flying time away for the Hercules transport aircraft—can have some hope of aid being delivered to them much more swiftly than it currently is?

Justine Greening: I repeat my earlier answer—that convoys are getting into Madaya now and that the key issue is safety on the ground. I am sure the hon. Lady would not want any airdrops to fall into the hands of the people who are besieging the affected communities. It is not a question of just doing an air drop; it is not as simple as that. We need to ensure that we use the most effective route so that we get the help to the people who are starving on the ground. That is why we are using the routes that we are. I can assure the hon. Lady that we of course look at all options. There is no doubt, however, that the most effective option is to enable the UN agencies to get on with the work they are there to do.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): The local authority and charities in my constituency are willing, ready and able to take refugees, but they are being told by the Home Office that none will arrive in our region until April. Why that delay, and can she do anything about it?

Justine Greening: We are, of course, relocating people from the region, saving them from having to put their lives into the hands of the people smugglers. The hon. Lady raises the issue of her particular local authority. I am not familiar with the details, but I am happy to make sure that the offer made is followed up and responded to.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): This is a hugely concerning issue, and the besieged people in Madaya are starving while we talk tactics. What specific action has been taken to secure the agreement of all parties to permit the necessary access for food, medication and other vital supplies by whatever means necessary to reach the residents of Madaya and other places where civilian populations are being besieged?

Justine Greening: As I set out earlier, my discussions with Stephen O'Brien, who heads up the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, are going on daily. Then, of course, we have the London Syria conference in early February, and the issue of the protection of civilians will be a key part of it.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): One of the International Committee of the Red Cross reports that I read about the situation in Madaya clearly states:

"we saw pure hunger and despair in people's eyes...We saw mothers not able to breastfeed their new-born children because they lacked adequate food for themselves to produce milk."

That was in October, and we now hear of people having to eat dogs and cats, along with all the other appalling things we have seen on the news. As the right hon. Lady says, the Assad regime must bear the brunt of the blame for this situation, but it is also clear that other groups such as Hezbollah are involved in the blockade, too. What would she say about that, and what is being done to encourage those other groups to abide by the very basics of humanity?

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that it is not the Assad regime alone that is breaking international humanitarian laws. Some areas that we find it hard to reach are held by Daesh, for example. Two of the nearby communities in Fua and Kefraya are not being besieged by the Assad regime, whereas Madaya is. All of this is unacceptable. It all represents a breach of international humanitarian law, which is why I roundly condemn it. There is no place for people who are civilians to be caught up in this situation. It is horrific in the 21st century to see the images that we have seen over recent days. An even more shocking fact than that, if it is possible, is that these cases represent only the tip of an iceberg of the suffering in Syria.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Rather than asking the Secretary of State to waste time explaining to the Scottish National party what would happen to a food parcel if we tried to deliver it via a Brimstone supersonic missile, may I ask her to focus more on the issue of Russia? Specifically, what have the United Kingdom Government done to try to persuade Russia to be a constructive force in this regard, and what more can she do from here?

Justine Greening: I think that, for the first time, we can welcome the fact that, as a result of the Vienna talks, Russia is now one of the countries around the table. However, we want to see—I want to see—the actions that have led to the situation in Madaya condemned roundly by all countries. The United Kingdom has condemned what has been happening, and I want countries such as Russia to do the same.

There can be no excuses for what we have seen going on in Syria: none whatever. There can be no excuses for the breaches of international humanitarian law which have been happening day in, day out for the last few years. All countries, but particularly those on the United Nations Security Council and those that have signed the resolutions allowing us to send cross-border convoys, should stand up for the underlying principle of international humanitarian law, and for the free and unfettered access of civilians to life-saving humanitarian supplies.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The horrific events that are unfolding in Madaya are part of a dramatic power shift that is taking place in the region. Russia has carried out more than 60 airstrikes against Free Syrian Army forces in the last 48 hours, and there are huge numbers of Hezbollah and Iranian-backed militias on the ground. Is it not time that we were all very clear about the fact that it is for Russia and Iran to direct their puppet regime in Syria to allow freedom of movement of aid to civilians? There is nothing that the RAF can do when the air is not under its control but under the control of the Syrian and Russian forces, unless they agree to freedom of movement. It is in their hands that the alteration of this crisis rests.

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady is right to point out that the countries and regimes that are backing the Syrian regime need to be tough on that regime, and need to call it out for its lack of adherence to basic human rights and international humanitarian law. As a result of the Vienna process, we now have countries around the table that need to be around the table, and that gives us a glimmer of hope for the first time, but I think we should be under no illusion about the challenging nature of the diplomatic process that lies ahead. That is all the more reason for us to have a successful Syria conference in London. We must ensure that the necessary resources are there to support people who have been caught up in the crisis in the meantime. The political issues which can make or break our ability to ensure that humanitarian support gets through absolutely must be resolved if we are to be able to take care of the people who have been caught up in this terrible crisis.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): I welcome the statement, and the comments that the Secretary of State has made. She has mentioned the United Nations Security Council resolutions a number of times. Resolution 2258 states that the Security Council expresses “outrage at the unacceptable and escalating level of violence”, and that it is

“Gravely distressed by the continued deterioration of the devastating humanitarian situation in Syria and by the fact that urgent humanitarian assistance, including medical assistance, is now required by...13.5 million people”.

That is an enormous number of people. I welcome the contribution that the United Kingdom is making and the fact that it is the second greatest contributor, but many other countries have signed up to those statements. What efforts can we make internationally to ensure that those other countries do more to live up to them, and to help the poor Syrian people?

Justine Greening: Security Council resolutions of that kind are important, because they provide a statement of intent in making clear that we condemn what is going on and that we need to act collectively to at least provide humanitarian support for people. As the hon. Gentleman says, and as I said earlier, the countries that are on the Security Council need to back up those words with clear action. I welcomed the renewal, at the end of December, of the Security Council resolution that enables cross-border deliveries to continue. But that is the first step of putting that plan into action. As he says, we now need countries not only to support that, but to be clear in their condemnation of the Syrian regime and of other warring parties that fail to adhere to basic law.

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) on raising this political issue, and I welcome the Secretary of State's condemnation of the Assad regime. She said that only one previous request to the regime to allow the delivery of aid to Madaya was granted, suggesting that the international community has for some time known about the potential for a humanitarian crisis and about the actions of the Assad regime. Does it not demonstrate the incoherence of tackling only Daesh without tackling Assad, when Assad and allies such as Hezbollah are so comprehensively breaching international law? To slightly misquote Harry Patch, the last remaining Tommy, surely this is a war that must end around a table.

Justine Greening: That is why the Vienna talks are so important. In the end, it will end with talks reaching a resolution around the table, but let us be clear: a resolution needs to be reached for a Syria that has territorial integrity. Daesh is a clear threat to that. That is why this House passed a motion enabling us to take action against Daesh not only in Iraq but in Syria. Unless we tackle Daesh, there will not be a Syria to regain its freedom and to have peace in the medium term. So there are two strands. One is tackling Daesh and the second is reaching a political resolution on Syria itself. In the meantime, I remain committed, as the Government do, to ensuring that we remain a leading partner in the work to help people who are affected by the crisis and need humanitarian support.

Points of Order

5.1 pm

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At the risk of being accused of going from one extreme to the other, may I commend you—this sounds very oleaginous and creepy, I know—for the production of your “Quick guide to participating in the Chamber and Westminster Hall”? Very succinctly put it is, too. I notice that you say that, at Question Time, for example,

“Keep your question short...Don’t read out your question”.

I also note that the guide applies not just to new Members but to older Members. One of the rules is

“Don’t walk between the Chair and whoever is speaking.”

There is one particular elderly miner—I cannot name him; it would be wrong to do so—who constantly walks between you and someone asking a question. I wonder whether you can somehow make the guide compulsory reading, particularly among elderly miners and some of the older Members.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is seeking to establish himself as a general aid of first-class character to the occupant of the Chair and to other Members. He has just provided a real-time advertisement for the rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House. That document has just been circulated and I hope that all Members are paying the keenest attention to it, even if an hon. Member is currently consulting an iPad and taking an intense interest in some matter other than that which I am dealing with. I feel sure it is only because the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) has already read and possibly inwardly digested over breakfast the document concerned.

It is a most useful document. The quick guide to participating in the Chamber and Westminster Hall has been circulated to all Members, but I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant). I am trying to work out who has caused the hon. Gentleman’s consternation through his offending conduct. I cannot think of the individual concerned but, whoever that Member is, it is never too late to learn the courtesies of the House. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Lichfield.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In that vein, I have also taken the liberty of enjoying your new book. In point 35, you rightly draw our attention to the importance of Members informing other Members when they intend to visit their constituencies, unless they are on a private visit. I was therefore particularly surprised and dismayed to get a letter this morning from the Chancellor of the Exchequer informing me of not one but two visits to my constituency that took place five days ago. Further to that, it has been alleged that at least part of one of those events was of a party political nature relating to the Welsh elections and involving the Chancellor urging people to support the leader of the Welsh Conservatives. The second event was a purely party political event involving activists in Wales and perhaps even fundraising. It has also been alleged to me that Treasury civil servants were involved in the facilitation of at least one of those events. Could you tell me

whether the Chancellor has received a copy of your book? Could you also tell me how I might find out whether Treasury civil servants were indeed involved in activities that might have breached the ministerial and civil service codes?

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am in the same situation as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). Last week, the Secretary of State for Wales and the Chancellor of the Exchequer visited my constituency, but I had no notice of either visit from either right hon. Member. I would be grateful if you advised me on how I might take the matter further.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Members for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) for those points of order, and I appreciate their giving me notice of their intention to raise this matter. As the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) well knows—and as everyone else should know—it is a long-standing and firm convention that hon. Members should give notice if they intend to visit another hon. Member's constituency in anything other than a purely personal and therefore, in a sense, private capacity. In the case of Ministers, it is clearly stated in the Government's ministerial code that such notice must be given. It is open to either of the hon. Members to raise this matter with the Cabinet Secretary, if either or both of them should wish to do so. However, I trust that what has been said, by them and by me, has been noted by those on the Treasury Bench and will be communicated directly to the Ministers concerned.

For the avoidance of doubt, as with virtually every convention in this place, the convention applies without fear, favour or discrimination. No Minister can be exempted or exempt him or herself from it on the ground of seniority. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth inquired whether the Chancellor of the Exchequer had received a copy of the note on conventions and courtesies, and the answer is that he most assuredly will have done so, because it has been sent to every Member.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about receiving notification some days late, it is a fairly obvious common-sensical point that if people are going to comply with the convention, as they should, they should take great care to do so in a timely way. There is no point in leaving it to the last minute, only to find that the notification arrives late. It must be done in a timely way that is considerate of Members' responsibility to each other. So all three Members have, in cross-party fashion, done the House a service today and I thank them for that.

Michael Fabricant: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. We have been discussing the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Treasury, and I am just speculating, given the need to save money, that the letter might have been sent second class.

Mr Speaker: The imagination of the hon. Gentleman is vivid, and what I would describe as his spontaneous intellectual gymnastics are an example to us all.

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.]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Committee

Mr Speaker: To move the first new clause, I call the Minister, my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster). In wishing him a happy new year and inviting him to address the new clause, I notice that he has grown a beard, upon which we congratulate him.

New Clause 1

DISCHARGE OF MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES: HOMOSEXUAL ACTS

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

(2) In section 146(4) (homosexual acts as grounds for discharge from the armed forces etc), omit the words "discharging a member of Her Majesty's armed forces from the service or".

(3) In section 147(3) (homosexual acts as grounds for discharge from the armed forces etc: Northern Ireland), omit the words "discharging a member of Her Majesty's armed forces from the service or".—(*Mark Lancaster.*)

This new clause removes wording which provides that sections 146 and 147 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 do not prevent a homosexual act from being a ground for discharging a member of the armed forces.

Brought up, and read the First time.

5.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments 1 to 5.

Mark Lancaster: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I assure you that the beard is only temporary—otherwise, Mrs Lancaster may divorce me.

I am delighted to be speaking to this new clause today. It reflects the Government's commitment to the fair and equal treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender armed forces personnel. It repeals two provisions regarding homosexuality in the armed forces that are inconsistent with the Department's current policies and the Government's equality and discrimination policies more generally.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): During the evidence session for the Select Committee, on which I served, I asked Mr Humphrey Morrison, from central legal services, whether this could be done. The answer I was given was that because it was tied up with the merchant navy, it could not be done. What has changed to allow this to go forward?

Mark Lancaster: We have simply decoupled the two issues. We will be dealing with this matter in this Bill and the Department for Transport has made it clear that it intends to deal with the merchant navy aspect as soon as possible. I am delighted to say that we are therefore moving ahead quickly, as we said we would.

[Mark Lancaster]

This new clause would amend sections 146(4) and 147(3) of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which currently contain wording indicating that a homosexual act can constitute grounds for discharging a member of the armed forces. New clause 1 removes this wording, while amendments 1 to 5 make a number of small technical changes to implement this clause. When sections 146 and 147 were enacted, it was Government policy that homosexuality was incompatible with service in the armed forces and, accordingly, members of the armed forces who engaged in homosexual activity were administratively discharged. That policy was rightly abandoned in January 2000, following a judgment of the European Court of Human Rights.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I wholeheartedly support the Minister's efforts on new clause 1. I have received a letter from a constituent who was discharged from the Women's Royal Air Force in 1968 because she was gay, and there will be a number of similar cases historically. She says that

"there was a witch hunt of proportions you cannot imagine, inevitably ending in ignominious discharge...When I was discharged I was told (as were others) that unlike our male counterparts, we had not broken the law and could not be court martialled and an administrative discharge is not 'dishonourable'. However, the...regulation is generally understood to cover...theft and similar unsavoury matters".

She therefore sees this as dishonourable and she says:

"It has certainly influenced the whole of my life."

Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss this? Will he say what he thinks about dealing with historical cases, where people were so dreadfully treated in our armed forces? They served with distinction, but because of their LGBT status and the circumstances in which they left they were affected by what happened for the rest of their lives.

Mark Lancaster: The hon. Gentleman highlights precisely why the then Government decided to make the changes they did, and I think we all agree in this House that they are very positive changes. Of course I would be delighted to meet him to see what we can do for his constituent.

Since 2000, the provisions I mentioned have had no practical effect and they are therefore redundant. I would like to thank Professor Paul Johnson and Mr Duncan Lustig-Prean for raising this important issue in their evidence to the Bill's Select Committee. I would also like to thank the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for championing the repeal of these provisions through his amendments introduced in Select Committee and in Committee of the whole House. These provisions in no way reflect the position of today's armed forces. We are proud in the Department of the progress we have made since 2000 to remove policies that discriminated against homosexual men, lesbians and transgender personnel, so that they can serve openly in the armed forces. All three services now feature in Stonewall's top 100 employers list, and we continue to benchmark our activities to ensure we are doing as much as we can to support our LGBT staff. This new clause is a practical step which shows that this Government are serious about our commitment to equality in this area.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I had the sad duty of discharging a man administratively from my battalion. I really regretted it happening at the time, but I must urge caution about our going back in time to try to put right what was apparently right at the time but which was clearly wrong.

Mark Lancaster: I hear what my hon. Friend says. Of course there is balance in all such cases, but the moves in 2000 were absolutely right. They reflected a change in policy and a change in attitude in society.

5.15 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I welcome this opportunity to speak in support of the Bill on behalf of my colleagues in the Labour party. I am conscious of the fact that the previous stages of the Armed Forces Bill were led by my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who rightly enjoys tremendous respect across the House and will be a considerable loss to the Front-Bench team. I wish to place on record my thanks to him on behalf of the Labour party and of all those who know how important the armed forces are to the Labour party. As a new member of the team, I also wish to thank him for the help, assistance and wise counsel he has offered to me.

The Labour party has a strong tradition of supporting our armed forces both in Government and Opposition. The reason many of us feel so passionately that this Parliament should do right by our armed forces is that they step forward and answer the country's call in the most dangerous situations imaginable. They risk life and limb daily to protect Britain's interests around the world, often facing the prospect of mortal danger at just a moment's notice. We also recognise that a significant proportion of serving servicemen and women are from Labour-supporting constituencies. As a result, the scale of the sacrifice required of our armed forces personnel and the importance of standing by them is very keenly felt by us all.

When we were in government, we ensured that forces' pay increases were among the highest in the public sector. We also invested heavily in accommodation and rehabilitation facilities, and increased access to the NHS for service personnel injured in action. In Opposition, we have looked to build on that Labour tradition, ensuring that we do all we can in support of our armed forces and their families. We are proud of the role that we have played in campaigning successfully to have the military covenant enshrined in law.

Happily, the amendments before us today, which were argued for in Committee by my hon. Friend and by other Labour Members, now return to the House with the Government's support. Labour is determined to continue to offer that support to everyone who chooses to serve in our armed forces. We will do that by developing policy around a commitment to the highest standards of welfare and well-being for all our service personnel. We will scrutinise any proposals brought forward by the Government and continue to make the arguments about the extent to which personnel cuts have stretched to the limit the capacity of our armed forces to respond. We will also work constructively with the Government to support legislation that will ultimately improve the welfare and security of the British armed forces.

On the specific amendments being discussed today, the Government have ultimately decided that my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham was right in Committee when he promoted new clause 4. We also welcome proposed new clause 2, which has been tabled by the hon. Members for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott) and for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan). It is reminiscent of the amendment that my hon. Friend proposed in Committee.

We welcome the opportunity to renew the Armed Forces Act 2006, which completely overhauled legislation relating to military and service discipline. It is encouraging to see that the Government have adopted new clause 4, which will bring the legislation up to date and remove the now superfluous references to homosexual acts within the Bill. Although it is 16 years since the ban on gay men and lesbians in the armed forces was lifted, the legislation still contained references to homosexual acts despite the fact that that is just one form of sexual activity that could lead to someone being dismissed under certain circumstances and does not need to be specifically singled out. As that has now quite rightly been superseded by more appropriate guidelines, there is no need to have such references in the current law. Removing them from the statute book is a welcome step forward so that the explicit refusal to discriminate against homosexual servicemen and women is expunged from the service book, just as it has in practice been outlawed. That is an important step forward, and we welcome it very strongly.

We will continue to support our armed forces and the invaluable contribution they make to ensure Britain's security. This Bill and these amendments offer a further step forward in ensuring that support for our armed forces personnel, and we will continue to support them enthusiastically.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I support the amendment. Tomorrow will be the 16th anniversary of the Labour Government abolishing the draconian regulations that meant that someone who was gay or bisexual could be dismissed from the armed services, so it is apt that we are agreeing to the amendment today.

It is strange how things work out. I moved similar amendments in Committee and on the Floor of the House. I pay tribute to the Minister, whose approach to the Bill has been constructive, ensuring that practical measures such as this are taken forward. I accepted during earlier stages of the Bill that the measure should apply also to the merchant navy, and I look forward to the Government introducing legislation to mirror this provisions for the merchant navy.

I join the Minister in paying tribute to Professor Paul Johnson, professor of sociology at York University, who not only gave evidence to the Committee but in my conversations with him assisted me and ensured that I understood that the legislation currently on the statute books was discriminatory. As the Minister rightly said, it means nothing, but for lesbian, gay and bisexual potential members of the armed forces, the measure expunges those provisions from the law. That should be celebrated. I wholeheartedly support the new clause, which is a great step forward.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The SNP fully supports the Bill. We appreciate the requirement that Parliament's consent is given, and we appreciate too the significant contribution made by members of

our armed forces. We support progressive change in our armed forces and welcome the Government's actions to address discrimination against LGBT personnel.

The SNP welcomes the new clause and the action from the Government, which is a step forward for better LGBT rights among our armed forces personnel. I am very pleased that the Minister has felt able, as he put it, to uncouple this from other legislation which was previously thought to hamper such progress. I echo the words of the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) in looking forward to the Government moving similar provisions forward in relation to the merchant navy.

It is scarcely credible that we are discussing this in 2016. The existing provision is discriminatory and it is offensive that it exists. Notwithstanding the fact that it has not been used for a number of years, we welcome the fact that the Government are finally removing the provision, as they should, because it has clearly infringed the rights of LGBT people over a number of years. I am pleased that this was the clear view of all members of the Committee and, as we have heard, of witnesses as well, who noted that the existing provisions were out of step with where our armed forces are now.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Almost everything in praise of the Bill and of my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) has already been said. Looking at the time perspective from a different angle, it is remarkable how much this country has changed—only in 1994 the provisions on the statute book were renewed. The idea of doing that now would rightly provoke outrage in the country and in the House. Sometimes what we do in this place does not fill us with pride, but we can take pride in enabling the statute book to catch up in this respect with where the country and the armed forces have been for some time. I welcome the new clause and praise everyone who has had a part in bringing it forward.

Mark Lancaster: I am grateful for the comments from hon. Members across the House, and delighted that we have consensus on the issue.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 1 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 2

PAYMENTS TO VETERANS SUFFERING FROM MESOTHELIOMA

'(1) From 11 April 2016 the Secretary of State has a duty to ensure that compensation due to former members of the Armed Forces who have contracted mesothelioma during the course of their military service is assessed and paid efficiently and promptly.

(2) By 1 October 2016 the Government must put in place:

- (a) a publicity programme to raise awareness of former members of the Armed Forces who may be at risk of, or susceptible to, mesothelioma; and
- (b) a monitoring process to ensure the comprehensive and prompt detection of mesothelioma cases.—(Danny Kinahan.)

This new clause would place a duty on the Secretary of State from the date sums are due to be paid to pay compensation due to former members of the Armed Forces who have contracted mesothelioma during the course of their service is paid swiftly. It would also

require the Government to put in place a publicity programme to raise awareness of those who are at risk of mesothelioma and a monitoring process to ensure the comprehensive and prompt detection of mesothelioma cases.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

I would first like to say how pleased I am to see new clause 1 added to the Bill. I do not intend to rerun all the arguments on mesothelioma today, because we all know that it is a deadly disease. I wish instead to speak to our new clause, the purpose of which is to push for compensation payments to be made as quickly as possible. Those who heard last Thursday's Westminster Hall debate on the armed forces covenant annual report will know how essential it is that things happen more quickly.

I very much welcome the announcement made before Christmas about those affected by mesothelioma having the choice of receiving either £140,000 or a war pension, which I think was an extremely good move. I am keen to hear from the Minister on how that is proceeding and whether there have been any changes. I welcome the fact that he is still considering whether the Ministry of Defence will look at retrospective cases, because I think that is absolutely essential, particularly for the families who have lost loved ones.

I would like to praise all those who have worked on this matter, such as the Royal British Legion, the shadow Armed Forces Minister, and the hon. Members for North Durham (Mr Jones) and for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane). Just after the announcement in December, the Royal British Legion stated:

"Whilst we are pleased that the Minister has indicated that he will review special arrangements for these individuals, we urge him to do so quickly under the terms of the Armed Forces Covenant and in light of the limited life expectancies and extreme suffering of these veterans."

That is the key: we want compensation to be paid quickly. I hope that the Minister will indicate today how that will be done so that everyone can go away confident that it will happen quickly. Those involved know that mesothelioma is a deadly disease and that, unfortunately, an individual is lucky to live more than one or two years after diagnosis. However, that diagnosis might be made 30 or 40 years after exposure.

We also want to ensure that compensation is comprehensive and that every single person who might be affected is personally contacted by the Ministry of Defence to ensure that they know that there is a chance they have the disease. When it comes to submarines, I am told that it is the P, O, Valiant, Resolution, Dreadnought and early S classes that might have contained asbestos, and in the Army it is the Centurion tank. I am asking the Minister to look at all the places where there might have been asbestos and ensure that the message gets to every person who might have been exposed to it, and extremely quickly. I am told by one source that this could involve as many as 2,500 people, although the Royal British Legion says the number is only 60. It is essential that we look at who was serving on those submarines at the time and work out how to get the message to them personally.

Bob Stewart: Does my hon. Friend mean that 2,500 people are affected, or that 2,500 people may contract mesothelioma in the end, because I suspect that the number is much higher? I am slightly confused on that point.

Danny Kinahan: My hon. Friend is right to ask that question, because I went through exactly the same thought process when I received those figures. I am told that 2,500 people may be affected. However, many more will have served on all those different submarines, and indeed in the various tanks. The onus is on the Ministry of Defence to work out exactly which ships and what equipment contained the threat of asbestos, find out how to contact the people affected and then get the message to them. That is really what we are pushing for. We are keen to make sure that the MOD also looks at other illnesses that may well be hiding in the background of those who have worked with depleted uranium or had carbon monoxide poisoning.

We should always be thinking of how we look after our armed services, not just those who serve but their families, well into the future. We must set that example for everyone who has joined the services. It is a fantastic career that I myself have thoroughly benefited from. They must know that their families will be looked after and that we will look at all the risks well into the future. We want this to be dealt with very quickly and to make sure that there is a good campaign that ensures that everyone is informed. We must keep an open mind and think about how we will look after all our armed services and their families into the future.

5.30 pm

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I start by doing something I have done very rarely in this House, and that is to say "Thank you" to the Government. I thank them for the important steps they have taken in treating people who have served this country, in many years of war, in the way that they should be treated. Sadly, though, because of the potential effects of retrospective legislation, some people may be left behind, and I want to focus on them.

I spent a lifetime working in the trade union movement before I came here, including representing people in the mine works who had a variety of diseases such as vibration white finger as a result of being exposed to the damage caused by pneumatic tools, and pulmonary diseases caused by exposure to coal dust and stone dust. However, I had never heard of mesothelioma until about 15 years ago, when I was asked by a friend if I could do some fundraising on behalf of an organisation that was being set up by a woman called Chris Knighton—the Mick Knighton Mesothelioma Research Fund, of which I am very proud now to be a patron—and I asked them what it was about. I have been castigated in the past by a member of the public for the brutal way in which I have exposed this disease, but it is a brutal disease. I was told about it very bluntly by a solicitor from Thompsons some 15 years ago.

When someone is exposed to asbestos, the fibres lie dormant for decades, but one day they wake up, they suffer horribly, and then they die. There are no two ways about it. Once someone has full-blown mesothelioma, they have a death sentence. The only thing that is questionable is how long it takes to happen. In a small

number of cases medication and drug treatments such as chemotherapy can help, but it only slightly extends the time in which people suffer and eventually die.

There is a huge moral issue for all of us regarding what happened. Asbestos was shown to be poisonous as far back as 1892—a long, long time ago. It was banned from 1965 onwards—50-plus years ago. It was seen as one of those wonderful things that did so many good things for people. In a huge number of different areas, it was seen as being something worth working with, so it was in lots of places that people would not even have thought about—when changing brake drums, lagging pipes, and all that sort of thing. I myself have worked with it. It is in schools and other buildings. It is in our own homes.

As long as asbestos is not disturbed, people are usually okay, but a lot of those who were exposed to it worked in places where it was in the air all the time, so they were working with it without knowing, and they should have known. Clearly, in some cases they were criminally exposed. I am not, by any means, saying that about the MOD. The history of fighting for justice for people with asbestos has been long, tortuous, and hard.

When my party was in government from 1997 to 2010, we would take two steps forward and one step back. There were challenges in the courts by insurance companies and £1.4 billion was handed back to them, because the Law Lords allowed them to no longer make payments for certain asbestos-related diseases. Thankfully, through the efforts of successive Governments, people with mesothelioma are treated much better now than they used to be, but the truth is that a significant group of people are still affected by that case. I am not going to argue about the numbers, because that case is so moronic that it overrules any discussion about numbers.

Mr Kevan Jones: My hon. Friend is explaining very well the history behind how we have got to where we are today. Will he join me in paying tribute to the trade union movement? Without its expertise and campaigning zeal, the conversation taking place with regard to not just this Bill but others would not have started.

Mr Anderson: I appreciate the work my hon. Friend has done on behalf not just of the armed services, but of our part of the world, where he has been an MP for many years, and long may that continue. He is right to say that the trade union movement has been involved from the beginning, and without it we probably would not be where we are today in trying to right this wrong.

The issue is of interest to Members across the House. On 4 November 2015, in the lead-up to Remembrance Sunday, the leader of the Scottish National party, the right hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), asked the Prime Minister:

“Does the Prime Minister agree that everything must be done to deliver on the military covenant—both the spirit and the letter?”

The Prime Minister’s response was unequivocal:

“I certainly agree with both parts of the right hon. Gentleman’s question... We make a promise to our military that because of the sacrifices they make on our behalf they should not have less good treatment than other people in our country and indeed that, where we can, we should provide extra support.”—[*Official Report*, 4 November 2015; Vol. 601, c. 961.]

He did not say that we should support service people only up to a certain cut-off date or, “Well, I’m really sorry, but retrospective legislation doesn’t apply.”

There is absolutely no doubt that these people are a special case, because of what we ask them to do. By “we”, I mean us as a nation and, more pointedly, us as representatives of the state. We ask them to go to places where human beings should not usually be made to go. As part and parcel of them doing that on our behalf, they have been exposed to this horrible disease.

On the same day, I raised with the Prime Minister the specific issue of people who were exposed before 1987:

“Thousands of people who served our nation in the Royal Navy before 1987 are not entitled to full compensation. That means that people who have been exposed to asbestosis and have contracted the cancer disease mesothelioma stand to lose out massively when compared with people in civilian life.”

His response was:

“I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. I understand that the Defence Secretary is looking at the matter. As I have said, since putting the military covenant into law, we have tried every year to make progress... I am happy to go away and look at the point that he makes.”—[*Official Report*, 4 November 2015; Vol. 601, c. 962-63.]

I am delighted with that response and, as I said earlier, with the fact that that the Secretary of State came back to us on this and moved some way when we debated the issue towards the end of last year.

The truth, however, is that while we are looking into this matter, people are dying, and they are dying without getting compensation equivalent to what they would get if they had not been in the armed services. That is quite simply wrong. I know that it asks a lot of the Government to go back and try to redress the issue, because there are always problems—unintended consequences—when we open up access to compensation, but this issue is far too important to ignore, and it would be wrong and, I believe, a breach of the military covenant if we do not address it.

The Prime Minister has said that we will go the extra mile for these people. I know that this is not part of the new clause, but I ask the Minister, please try to do more. Let us work together across the House to make this work in a way that delivers what these people deserve.

Mr Kevan Jones: It is a pleasure to follow my next-door constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson).

I, too, pay tribute to the Minister for accepting amendments that I tabled in Committee, and for looking at this issue in a practical way. That has been his approach to the Bill: he has looked at where he can make a practical and real difference to people’s lives. In Committee, he announced that, from that date onwards, people would have a choice about whether to accept compensation as a lump sum payment or as a war pension.

My hon. Friend has just outlined the issues involved in retrospective. I am aware of them from my time as a Minister, when I had to deal with issues such as pensions, but will the Minister consider this point? Will he make an exception for individuals alive today who were diagnosed just before the cut-off date that he had to introduce? As my hon. Friend said, they are under a death sentence—in many cases, they will not live for very long—so can that specific group be looked at? From speaking with my hon. Friend, I understand the difficulties of retrospective,

[Mr Kevan Jones]

so I know that there is a broader issue, but could individuals who already have a diagnosis and may be in receipt of a war pension be looked at? I do not expect the Minister to come up with an instant solution and say yes, but it would be very much appreciated if he could go away and consider that point.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I rise to support my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon—[*Interruption.*] I have dramatically moved him from the north to the south. I mean my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones).

The armed forces have no trade union or anyone to fight for them, except armed forces charities and Members of the House. It is very much the responsibility of Members of the House to be their champions, to fight their cause, to fight for what is right, and to fight for justice for them. I totally and utterly agree with my hon. Friend that people alive today who have received such a diagnosis are under a death sentence. The acknowledgment that their service in the armed forces has caused them to suffer from this most hideous of diseases would make a difference to them and their families. My brother-in-law died of mesothelioma, so I know how short but horrific such a death is, and how horrific it is for the family to watch as people struggle to breathe and die inch by inch, day by day.

This subject is very emotive, but it is one that says what we are as a country and how seriously we take our responsibilities to the members of the armed forces who faced risk not in war, but in their place of work. As a country, we have accepted such a responsibility for people who worked in civilian life, and we have a moral responsibility to accept that we have a duty to meet the needs of those armed forces personnel currently diagnosed, who are dying now, and to give them access to the compensation scheme.

I hope that the Minister will take this matter very seriously. As Opposition Members have said, the Minister has been very active in this matter and supportive of making changes to the Bill. I hope that this is another change that he will accept, consider and bring forward.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I put on the record not only that I sat on the Select Committee that considered the Armed Forces Bill, but that I am a proud member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, attached to the Royal Air Force. Along with other members of the Committee, I raised the issue of compensation for servicemen and women who have contracted mesothelioma. We were united when we raised it with the Minister in Committee, so I welcomed his announcement of the news that compensation would be made available as a lump sum payment.

Earlier, the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) quoted the Royal British Legion, which led the campaign on this issue so strongly. I, too, would like to quote it. When the Government made the announcement on lump sum compensation payments, the Royal British Legion said:

“Thank you to everyone who gave their support; the new changes really will make a difference for the families of thousands of veterans diagnosed with Mesothelioma.”

5.45 pm

I am proud that we have taken some really positive steps for veterans who are struggling with this disease and their families. Without the need for the new clause, the Government have taken steps in the right direction. Of course time is of the essence and I urge the Minister to put forward a timetable. Also of the essence is how we publicise the scheme to people up and down the country.

We must do the right thing by the people who spend their time protecting our great country. I want to recognise the welcome news that the Government have announced compensation for veterans with mesothelioma.

Kirsten Oswald: The SNP fully supports the new clause and its aims of creating accountability and ensuring the speedy implementation of the compensation. We are supportive of its efforts to raise awareness and to move at some speed.

It is inescapable that there has been real inequity in how we have treated veterans suffering from mesothelioma. I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) that until now the situation has not been consistent with the military covenant and has not been an appropriate way to treat our armed forces.

As we have heard, this is a matter of urgency because veterans who are suffering from mesothelioma simply do not have time for us to delay. The campaign run by the Royal British Legion has been incredibly effective. It is right to highlight what a terrible disease mesothelioma is and the injustice of this situation.

The tragedy of a mesothelioma diagnosis cannot be overstated. As the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) said, veterans and their families in this situation do not have time to spare. While rectifying this unfair treatment will not make anyone who is suffering from the disease any better, it may well improve the quality of the life they have remaining and it may mean less anxiety about those they leave behind.

Ensuring that there is a swift process and a campaign of awareness would be useful mechanisms in allowing us to deal better with our veterans as we should, so we fully support them. I call on the Government to look just a little further and to deal fairly with the group of about 60 veterans who are currently in receipt of a war disablement pension by allowing them to access this contribution. That would simply be the right thing for the Government to do.

Toby Perkins: This is another important step forward that is being taken in the Bill. I again pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for the difference that he made to the Bill in Committee.

All of us who serve former industrial communities are very conscious of the terrible disease that is mesothelioma and of the appalling and swift end it brings to the people who are unfortunate enough to suffer from it. It is an issue that many of us have campaigned on and for which we have campaigning groups in our constituencies because of the industrial legacy that we have. In my constituency, I am pleased to work closely with the Derbyshire Asbestos Support Team, which has done a tremendous amount of work to highlight the appalling plight that afflicts mesothelioma victims.

To see measures being brought forward in this context is incredibly positive. In recent years, the Labour party has campaigned tirelessly in support of the Royal British Legion's campaign to ensure that there is a better deal for veterans who have fallen victim to mesothelioma. We therefore welcome the Government's announcement of an improved compensation package for armed forces veterans who suffer from it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) was right to say that it is a clear breach of the armed forces covenant that veterans who have suffered from this awful disease have received up to £150,000 less than civilians. We are delighted that the pressure has forced the Government into action. I echo the comment of my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) about the credit that needs to go to the Minister for taking a positive approach in Committee, for being open-minded and for being willing to think again about the initial positions that the Government took. It is welcome that he has taken that step and it reflects well on him.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon said a few moments ago, where possible we would like the Government to go the extra mile and take extra steps to support veterans of our armed forces. There was an anomaly because members of the armed forces were being treated less well than those in civilian trades, and we all felt that that wrong needed righting. I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) about the urgency of this pressing matter. The House should feel proud that we have put right something that was wrong, as that is the least that our service personnel who have tragically contracted mesothelioma deserve. The new compensation package is a great victory for everyone who has supported the Royal British Legion in its campaign, and I am pleased and proud to be supporting it today.

Mark Lancaster: I thank the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) for his opening comments, and the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson), whom I know has campaigned on this issue for a long time and played a positive part in the progress made to date. I thank the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), and the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) who spoke passionately, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) and the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) who has rightly pressured me on this issue for some time. I also thank the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) for his kind comments.

It would have been impossible for anyone involved in this issue for a period of time not to be deeply moved and determined that the House should do all it can to move this issue forward. I am pleased that we have managed to make positive steps in recent times, but I am clear that we cannot simply rest on our laurels. I am determined to try to push this issue forward.

I hope I have demonstrated that the Government are committed to supporting veterans with mesothelioma and the wider armed forces community. On 16 December I was pleased to announce to the House that veterans diagnosed with mesothelioma from that date would have the option to receive a £140,000 lump sum, to be paid from 11 April this year. That lump sum will be provided through the well-established war pensions scheme,

which is administered by Defence Business Services Veterans UK. With speed in mind, Veterans UK prioritises claims for mesothelioma, and will continue to do so.

Claimants will be given a choice of either the new lump sum or the existing war pension payments. The details will be explained in correspondence, and I have asked the veterans welfare service to be on hand to help claimants understand the options available to them. I am determined to do all we can to support claimants. In addition to my announcement on 16 December, on the same day details of the lump sum option were given to ex-service organisations for them to publicise to their members and help raise awareness. I am keen to ensure that this measure is as widely known as possible.

When individuals leave the armed forces, their healthcare needs become the responsibility of the national health service in England and the devolved Administrations. Most people with mesothelioma will see their GP first, because they are concerned about their symptoms. Given concerns over a potential monitoring process, I have been told—I will go back and check again—that unfortunately there is currently no reliable screening test for mesothelioma. The aim of screening is to pick up cancers at an early stage of the disease before symptoms develop, but mesothelioma can be difficult to diagnose since the usual test for lung diseases often appears negative.

We are engaging with NHS bodies on disseminating information to GPs, respiratory clinics and other healthcare professionals, so that when they treat a veteran with mesothelioma caused by military service, they can direct them to the Gov.uk website and the Veterans UK helpline, which have details of how to make a claim under the war pensions scheme and the new lump sum option.

Mr Anderson: The Minister is giving a good response. May I politely suggest that some people in the NHS will never have seen mesothelioma—I mean no disrespect, but it is relatively rare? One body that might be able to play a key role is the British Lung Foundation—I mentioned earlier a fundraising group that I worked with, and it has given the BLF more than £1 million. A lot of that is about identifying mesothelioma as early as possible.

Mark Lancaster: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that helpful suggestion, and I shall instruct my officials to take it up.

On retrospection, whether to apply the lump sum to those diagnosed before 16 December 2015 is a complex issue that many past Governments have had to deal with. I have directed the Department to review options to support those claimants in a similar manner, and I am determined to consider those options carefully and as quickly as I can. Indeed, officials are actively working on that, and although I am sorry that I cannot update the House today, I will update hon. Members as soon as I can.

Following my announcement on 16 December last year, our legal staff are preparing the changes needed to the service pensions order to give effect to the payment of the lump sum from 11 April 2016. At the moment, I am told that 11 April is the earliest date we can do that, but I have asked my officials to look again and to do what we can to bring that date forward. If in the meantime an accepted claim is concluded before 11 April 2016, payment of a war disablement pension and any

[Mark Lancaster]

supplementary allowances will begin until the lump sum can be paid. The lump sum will be reduced by the weekly or monthly amounts paid until that point.

I hope I have demonstrated that the Government are absolutely committed to trying to resolve this issue as fairly and as fast as possible. Hon. Members have made kind comments about my efforts to deal with this issue quickly, and I will be proactive in making the changes. If I may, I simply ask Members to allow me that credit, and with that in mind, to take me at my word that I am trying to move these issues forward. I do not believe that legislation is required, but I am deeply committed to moving the issue forward as quickly as I can, and I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider withdrawing his new clause.

Danny Kinahan: I am grateful for the debate we have had, and pleased with what I have heard from the Minister. I am also particularly pleased with what I heard from Labour Members, and we have gained a great deal from today. It would be wrong of me to pursue the matter further, knowing that the Minister will come back and keep the House updated, so I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 18

COMMENCEMENT AND TRANSITIONAL PROVISION

Amendments made: 1, page 17, line 16, leave out “Sections 15 and 16 (Ministry of Defence fire-fighters)” and insert “The following”.

This amendment and amendment 2 provide that NCI comes into force two months after Royal Assent.

Amendment 2, page 17, line 18, at the end insert—

“(a) section (Discharge of members of the armed forces: homosexual acts) (discharge of members of the armed forces: homosexual acts);

(b) sections 15 and 16 (Ministry of Defence fire-fighters).”
—(Mark Lancaster.)

See amendment 1.

Clause 19

EXTENT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Amendments made: 3, page 17, line 32, leave out

“section 16 (Ministry of Defence fire-fighters: minor amendments)” and insert “the following sections”.

This amendment and amendment 4 provide that the amendments of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 made by NCI have the same extent as the provisions which they amend. Section 146(4) of that Act extends to England and Wales and Scotland. Section 147(3) extends to Northern Ireland.

Amendment 4, page 17, line 33, at the end insert—

“(a) section (Discharge of members of the armed forces: homosexual acts) (discharge of members of the armed forces: homosexual acts);

“(b) section 16 (Ministry of Defence fire-fighters: minor amendments).”
—(Mark Lancaster.)

See amendment 3.

Clause 20

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

Amendment made: 5, page 17, line 38, after “5(3),” insert

“(Discharge of members of the armed forces: homosexual acts).”—(Mark Lancaster.)

This amendment provides that NCI does not extend to the Isle of Man or any of the British overseas territories. NCI amends the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 which does not extend to the Isle of Man or any of the British overseas territories.

Third Reading

5.58 pm

Mark Lancaster: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Our purpose in this debate is to agree that the Bill has been scrutinised by the House and to wish it well as it moves to the other place, and it is customary at this stage to thank hon. Members for their interest and support. Armed forces Bills are generally well received and enjoy wide interest and support, and this Bill is no exception.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) for his sterling work as chair of the Bill Committee, and I thank the Committee for its thorough scrutiny of the Bill. I am grateful for contributions from both sides of the House to ensure that the Bill is fit for purpose. I also thank the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) for her contributions and support of the Bill, and I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for his positive and thoughtful contributions in consideration of the Bill. I have some catching up to do to match the hon. Gentleman's experience as a veteran of Armed Forces Bills, but I am pleased to add this one to my tally. I am grateful to him for showing his wisdom during our debates. I regret that he no longer sits on the Opposition Front Bench.

As I said at the outset, the Bill is relatively modest. However, that in no way diminishes the significance of its provisions. Hon. Members will know that the Armed Forces 2006 Act is a significant piece of legislation. The 2006 Act provides a single system of service law which applies to all members of the armed forces wherever in the world they are serving. The Bill provides for the continuation of that Act and makes a few changes to the service justice system to keep it current. The Bill also makes other important changes, including giving MOD firefighters the same statutory powers to act in an emergency as civilian fire and rescue authority firefighters. With the support of the House, we have introduced a couple of new clauses. I am pleased that we have not needed to make many changes to the Bill.

In Committee of the whole House, we amended the Bill so that it expands the statutory remit of the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committees. This is good news both for the Committees and the veterans they so ably support. Today, we added a clause to repeal redundant provisions in the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 that are incompatible with current policies on homosexuality and equality in the armed forces.

For completeness, I should mention Gibraltar. In Committee, I said that we were discussing with Gibraltar whether it would be best to provide for the 2006 Act and

the Bill to extend there. Those discussions are ongoing. If necessary, the Government will introduce an amendment to the Bill in the other place.

I am most grateful to hon. Members on both sides of the House for the contributions they have made. I thank them for their interest and support. As a member of the reserved forces, I have a personal interest in the Bill. I will repeat here my words spoken on Second Reading, which are that I take very seriously the obligations I have to the men and women who choose to abide by the high standards of discipline and behaviour that the Bill supports. I said then that I very much looked forward to taking it through the House. Today, I am very proud to have done so.

Finally, I pay tribute to the brave men and women in our armed forces who serve our country with honour and distinction, and to those who, as MOD firefighters, work to protect life and property. The Bill is for them. I believe the Bill we send to the other place is in good shape.

6.2 pm

Toby Perkins: The first test of an Opposition is whether it can support the Government constructively when they do positive things, introduce positive additions to Government legislation, and scrutinise both the intentions and implications of Government legislation. In all these regards, I believe the Labour party has done an important job of work in Committee and on Report. I am glad that the Bill leaves the House in a stronger state than when it arrived. We should be very pleased with that.

We welcome the provisions in the Bill to: extend the circumstances in which commanding officers can require service personnel and civilians, subject to service law, to be tested for drugs and alcohol after accidents; simplify the processes by which service personnel are charged with offences by reducing the number of stages required to decide and bring charges; and create of a statutory framework for immunity and sentence reductions for offenders who co-operate in investigations and prosecutions. The Bill will also bring the Armed Forces Act 2006 into force in the Isle of Man. As we have heard, consultation is ongoing with regard to Gibraltar. The Bill will also ensure that MOD firefighters will have the statutory powers to act in an emergency to protect life or property.

I have already covered the Labour amendments to the Bill, which we are pleased the Government now support. We were, however, disappointed that in Committee the Government failed to adopt our amendments relating to the incredibly important issue of sexual assault in the military. There is substantial evidence that sexual harassment is a major problem for a number of people serving in our armed forces, and for servicewomen in particular. Last year, General Sir Nick Carter described the level of sexual harassment in the military as “totally unacceptable”. Despite widespread acknowledgement of the problem, however, there is an alarming scarcity of reliable data. The Government do not regularly collect or publish statistics on the number of allegations, prosecutions or convictions related to sexual assault and rape. Labour’s new clause 5 sought to require the MOD to publish statistics on sexual assault and rape, including: the number of cases referred to the service police, how many cases are prosecuted and how many convictions are secured. Without a central register, we are leaving our armed forces at a disadvantage.

A recent report by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary on the Royal Military Police found that there was a

“lack of standards and guidance on incident and crime recording”. Currently, when allegations of sexual assault are made it is up to individual commanding officers to decide whether to investigate them themselves or to refer an allegation to a police force, which may be either military or civilian. We on the Labour Benches believe it is wrong to put allegations of serious sexual assault alongside other misdemeanours in behaviour. Labour’s proposed new clauses 6 and 7 would have removed commanding officers’ discretionary powers in these cases, introducing a legal requirement for all allegations of sexual assault to be referred to the relevant civilian police force for investigation. The Government chose not to adopt any of the amendments in Committee, deeming them all “unnecessary”. We feel that this is an opportunity missed.

Nevertheless, we recognise that, partly thanks to pressure from Labour, important amendments have been made to the Bill, including measures to ensure compensation for veterans suffering from mesothelioma, and the removal of unnecessary discriminatory clauses. I would like to echo the Minister’s comments and take this opportunity to thank all Members who scrutinised the Bill, and all those who have made a contribution to it: the Chairman of the Bill Select Committee, the Clerks of the House and other staff who facilitated the Committee stage. I even thank those members of staff at the Ministry of Defence who have done an admirable job of persuading the Minister to make the right decision or to appear to know what he was talking about—never an easy task. Seriously, I thank the Minister for the very positive steps he has taken during the passage of the Bill to ensure it leaves in a better state than it was in when it arrived. I look forward to working constructively with him at further stages.

The Bill will now be scrutinised in another place and Labour will continue to push the Government on some of the issues raised in Committee. We will continue to stand up in every case for the rights of our armed forces personnel and veterans. Labour believes in a modern, effective armed forces to ensure the security of Britain in the world. It is for that reason that I am pleased to offer our continued support to all those who serve our country, and to the Government’s positive measures that improve the lot of the personnel who serve.

6.6 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): It has been a real privilege for me, as somebody who has done a small amount of military service in the ranks before coming to this place, to have the honour of serving as Chair of the Armed Forces Bill Select Committee. I participated in, and contributed to, the previous Bill Committee. To chair the Committee this time has been a real privilege for me personally.

I would like to begin by reiterating what I said on Second Reading. I welcome the Bill in terms of its content and the fact that it comes from the great tradition of this place. It comes from 1688 and the Bill of Rights, under which

“no standing army may be maintained during peacetime without the consent of Parliament”.

[Jack Lopresti]

That provision is one of this country's enviable documents that form our uncodified constitution, balancing the power of the monarchy and the Government with both Houses of Parliament.

The Bill will renew the Armed Forces Act 2006, update elements of the armed forces' disciplinary system and extend the powers of MOD firefighters. To put that in the context of what we ask our armed forces to do, the great General George Patton said:

"Perpetual peace is a futile dream".

That quote is as relevant today as it was in his time. The world is as dangerous and unstable today as it has ever been. We never know where the next threat to our freedom and way of life will come from. We face threats from Putin in the east, are engaged in the global war on terror and ISIS in particular, and have to deal with threats from rogue states such as Iran and North Korea. The number of our service personnel deployed in joint operations in 19 countries has doubled over the past five years to over 4,000. Our fantastic and brave men and women of our three armed forces are the best soldiers, sailors, airmen and airwomen in the world.

The Bill is part of the UK's investment in the security of our people, which enables the Government to safeguard our prosperity and way of life. Not only are the Government one of the five of the 28 in NATO to meet the recommended commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence; but I am pleased to say they are also meeting the NATO guidelines to spend 20% of the defence budget on major equipment, research programmes and R and D. I am proud that the Government have plans to spend more than £160 billion on equipment and equipment support over the next 10 years.

I thank all Members of the Bill Committee, from across the House, for the constructive and informed way that the discussions and debates were conducted as the Committee scrutinised the Bill through this important stage in its passage into law. There has been a reassuring level of consensus, a word I am not normally very comfortable with and do not use very often. On this crucial matter of defence of the realm, however, and while we argue passionately for things we believe in, with our forces deployed in offensive operations, it is crucial that Parliament is united in support of them. In saying that, I sympathise with those Labour Members under pressure on account of their party leadership's position on defence.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank members of the public, representatives of service charities and voluntary groups for their engagement and written submissions. I also thank all the witnesses who gave oral evidence. In particular, I thank General Sir Nick Carter, Chief of the General Staff, and Andrew Cayley, Director of Service Prosecutions, for their excellent, extremely informative and very useful verbal evidence. Finally, I thank the House and departmental staff for their work on the Committee stage. In particular, I wish to mention Dr Dickson, whose procedural guidance was extremely helpful.

The Committee produced new clauses supported by the Government. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), whom I have come to know during my few years in the House and

with whom I was proud to serve on the previous Armed Forces Bill Committee, when we enshrined the military covenant in law. It is a shame that his expertise, passion and care in relation to the armed forces will be lacking from Labour's Front-Bench team, and of course I support and admire hugely his passionate defence of the provisions on homosexuality. Of course, homosexual acts should not in any circumstances be grounds for the discharge of members of the armed forces. It seems astonishing that it was ever thus.

Finally, I pay tribute to the Minister for the progress the Government have made and their ongoing work on compensation for mesothelioma. It is another great example of the Government doing the right thing by our service personnel, to whom we owe an enormous debt of gratitude and appreciation. I thank them all for their service.

6.11 pm

Kirsten Oswald: The Scottish National party supports the Bill and the immense work of our armed forces. It was a privilege to sit on the Select Committee, helping to move this vital Bill forward and make it the best it could be. The Bill is the thread running through all that we ask of our armed forces personnel, to whom we owe it to give proper consideration to the mechanics of what could seem like a dry topic. It is the means by which we put in place proper provision for our service personnel and veterans and continually review and, where appropriate, improve matters.

We must use the opportunities we have in this place, including in Committee, to continue to modernise the governance of our armed forces and to consider how properly to treat those who enter the services. In so doing, it is particularly important that we understand and act on our responsibilities to those who suffer as a result of their service and their families—for instance, in relation to their housing and education needs. In that regard, the Scottish Government's funding for supported housing in Cranhill is very welcome, as are the progressive education provisions, including the links with the curriculum for excellence and the provision for free tertiary education, which provide positive benefits to our service personnel and their families.

It is interesting that we are here, a century after some of the most significant battles of the first world war, debating our armed forces and seeking to improve the provisions we have in place. I mentioned at a previous stage of the Bill that a war memorial was being built entirely funded by public subscription and organised by volunteers in Neilston in my constituency. I applaud their tireless work on what is now a dedicated memorial at the centre of the community. It did not take me long, when looking at the list of those from Neilston who had lost their lives, to see that many of them died 100 years ago this year, in battles whose names are still familiar today—Verdun, Jutland, the Somme—and it was poignant to see among them, aged only 17, Private James Path, of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who was killed in action in 1916.

It is right that we do not deploy 17-year-olds to the front line these days, but we do, as we did then, expect extraordinary things of ordinary people. We send our forces into the most dangerous situations, so they should expect us to make every effort to structure our armed forces in the best way possible. It was therefore heartening

to hear in Committee about the progress being made, such as the developments in the leadership culture of our Army, as detailed eloquently by General Sir Nick Carter. These changes will represent a continued and welcome development in how Army personnel can develop their careers and how issues of bullying, harassment and discrimination are dealt with.

I was also pleased to hear such interesting and compelling evidence from Liberty on the importance of repealing the outdated and discriminatory laws on homosexuality. It is scarcely believable that we need to discuss this, but I am pleased there was such universal and enthusiastic support in Committee and here for the repeal of these provisions without delay. There is no place for such discrimination in our armed forces. The outlawing of homosexual behaviour could at best be described as Victorian, and more accurately as grossly offensive and directly discriminatory, so we are very pleased that these provisions will now be changed.

It was interesting to discuss in Committee the simplification of the service justice system and how issues of sexual assault are dealt with in the armed forces. We heard interesting and useful evidence from a number of sources, and it was heartening to hear the willingness of our service witnesses to engage in progressing these discussions. It is vital that we make progress. The Minister has outlined the fact that he intends a voluntary system of publication to ensure that appropriate data are published and in the public domain. I hope that this turns out to be the case. As we have discussed in earlier stages, it is vital that the data be reported fully, consistently and in a uniform format, so that we can accurately assess the situation in all our forces and whether the desired progress has been made.

We have a duty of care to our service personnel, and it is vital that we see publication of allegations of sexual assault as part of this suite of statistics, so that we can clearly understand all aspects of this issue. The Minister has made positive assurances about progressing this matter without the need for legislation, and I will be keen to assess what progress is made. The SNP wants to see guarantees on the publication of sexual harassment statistics and a positive improvement in the 2017 survey regarding sexual harassment as against the 2014 survey. I am keen for the House to retain a focus on the retention and monitoring of these statistics.

I concur with the Minister about firefighters and the need to extend the powers available to MOD firefighters to act in an emergency to protect life or property, in line with powers available to civilian fire and rescue authorities. This will provide welcome clarity. It will be important, however, to continue to review the operation of this provision and to ensure that our regular firefighters also have a voice in this respect.

Our ex-service personnel—our veterans—have featured heavily in our discussions in this place and in Committee, which is as it should be, and I am pleased that Scotland is leading the way in supporting our veterans, with the appointment of our Scottish Veterans Commissioner. This reinforces the Scottish Government's commitment to supporting the 400,000-plus ex-servicemen and women living in Scotland and to the capacity-building funding to Veterans Scotland that will allow the organisation to develop and improve support for our veterans over the next two years. I was encouraged by the Committee's unified view on the importance of making progress on

issues that affect our veterans. It is vital that we continue to make progress and that we consider carefully how best to fulfil our obligations under the military covenant. The covenant cannot simply be fine words; it is a call to action for us in the House to fulfil our obligations and continue to strive to do the right thing.

Regrettably, we have not always done the right thing by our veterans. Since I arrived in this place, I have spoken most about one subject—veterans suffering from mesothelioma—and mine has certainly not been a lone voice. It is scandalous that we have allowed ex-service personnel suffering from this terrible, terminal condition to be treated so much worse than their civilian counterparts. The Minister's commitment in December, and his comments today, about resolving this unfairness are therefore welcome indeed. His announcement that veterans diagnosed with mesothelioma on or after 16 December will have choices in relation to their levels of compensation will help to resolve matters and to close the gap. However, I must mention again the excellent campaign work undertaken by the Royal British Legion and echo its call for the Government to go further and agree to deal fairly with the small group of about 60 veterans currently in receipt of a war disablement pension by allowing them to access the new lump sum compensation.

Veterans and our service personnel rightly expect the House to use the Armed Forces Bill to examine all the issues and to do so regularly. I hope that on this occasion we have done that.

6.19 pm

Mr Kevan Jones: I think this is my third Armed Forces Bill, and I have to say that it was a minnow, certainly compared with the 2006 Bill, which, as the Minister described, was a major piece of legislation reforming our armed forces law as it applied to the three services. However, this Bill is important because, as has been said, it is the means by which we maintain a standing Army and also—this is an important point for this House—a way to ensure clear scrutiny of our armed forces. That is something we take for granted in this country, but in many parts of the world people do not.

I join other colleagues in thanking the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) for his chairing of the Committee. I also thank and pay tribute to the Clerks and civil servants who helped the Committee in its deliberations. This was a small Bill, but we took some major steps forward. Mesothelioma has already been mentioned, and I pay tribute to the Minister, because he has taken a pragmatic and consensual approach to the proposals that were put forward. It was his tenacity in taking these things forward that ensured that we secured the changes. The mesothelioma changes will make a real difference to the individuals affected. I also pay tribute to the Royal British Legion for its campaigning work on this issue.

There is also an historic issue, in that tonight we are finally removing from our statute book a piece of legislation that discriminated against the LGBT community. As I said earlier, that will send a clear message to young men and women who want to join our armed forces—that they are joining services that I know, certainly from working with them, are not prejudiced in any way against people because of their sexuality, and that goes right from the top through the ranks of the services. I pay tribute to General Nick Carter, who gave evidence

[Mr Kevan Jones]

to the Committee, who embodies that new approach in our armed forces. They want to be inclusive and welcoming. Not only do they want to be an effective fighting force when needed, but they want to give great opportunities to many of our young people throughout this nation of ours.

We also had many discussions about sexual assault. I do not quite want to correct my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins), but the Minister gave a clear commitment in Committee and on the Floor of the House that the sexual assault statistics would be published. That is a good and meaningful step forward, and I look forward to their being published in the next annual report.

I also welcome the changes made to the war pensions committees. I pay tribute to the individuals who volunteer for war pensions committees. They do not get paid; they are volunteers. They give advice free of charge, and a lot of their time is dedicated to ensuring that veterans get the advice they require. The changes made, which will ensure they can now cover not just war pensions but the other compensation Acts, are welcome.

Our armed forces do not have trade unions or representatives—I think it was my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) who made this point earlier—so they are in a unique position. They rely on this House to ensure that, when this Bill comes forward, we make the changes that look after their interests. This Bill will not make major changes, as the 2006 Bill did, but it takes us a step forward and is a way of ensuring every five years that this House can scrutinise what our armed forces are doing in applying the law to themselves.

I would like to finish by paying tribute to the men and women of our armed forces. I had the privilege in

government of working with them. They are dedicated to unselfishness. They are individuals we ask to do remarkable things—things that we would never do. I pay tribute to the men and women from my constituency who serve—not just now, but in the past. I also pay tribute to a group who sometimes do not get mentioned: the families, who support our servicemen and women. Without them, our servicemen and women could not do the job.

With that point, I would like to say one thing to my own party. These people are a very important part of our society. We value them; we entrust them with huge responsibility; we need them. They keep us safe when we are threatened. That is something my own party should never forget.

6.24 pm

Mr Anderson: I want to pick up the point about families, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) closed on. One of the realities of the mesothelioma debate is that the people who have been diagnosed will quite possibly die before April. However, there is a precedent in other compensation schemes—in particular, the mineworkers compensation schemes for diseases such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—for widows to claim on behalf of their partners and vice versa. I plead with the Minister to see whether it is possible to find a way to help those who at the moment look like being excluded because they served before 1987, along with others who might have fallen through the net. If, sadly, they are not here when the law comes into force and the arrangements are put in place, please do not let it end there. The widows and the families will still be there and they still deserve to be looked after, because these people have made sacrifices on our behalf. I plead with the Minister to look at that.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Backbench Business

Local Government Funding: Rural Areas

6.26 pm

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered local government funding for rural areas.

I begin by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this motion for debate this evening and for rescheduling the debate to a time when more colleagues could attend. I also thank my co-sponsors, the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). Their support is testament to the fact that this policy area crosses all party divides.

In my 10 years in the House, I have raised local government funding of rural areas on many occasions, but it would be fair to say that progress has been slow. Somehow, those in the countryside are expected to put up with less, whether it is poorer connectivity with broadband or mobile signals, the availability of neighbourhood policing, or affordable and convenient transport links. Indeed, in most aspects of Government expenditure, rural areas get a raw deal.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Going back to my hon. Friend's first point, does he agree that more and more people are accessing local government services via the internet? That should be a boon to rural areas, but it has not been, because broadband in some areas does not exist, while in other rural areas it is patchy, and overall it is rather slow. He and I have worked together locally on this issue. Will he confirm that there is no reason whatever why an area that is geographically isolated should be, or should remain, digitally isolated?

Graham Stuart: My right hon. Friend is quite right. That is not the main focus of today's debate, but that is the context in which it takes place.

We are here today because the situation I have described is also true in local government, which provides so many of the public services on which our constituents depend. The central facts for the debate are these. Urban residents receive 45% more in central Government grant than their rural counterparts and pay £81 less in council tax per head. One may say, "Well, that'll be because rural residents are better off. They can afford it. It's reasonable. Their needs are less", but the Government's own average earnings figures show that residents in urban areas enjoy higher earnings than their rural counterparts, whereas those living in areas of significant rurality are the very poorest paid. So how can it be fair for poorer rural residents to pay higher council taxes than their richer urban cousins while receiving fewer services? This central unfairness is why, in 2012, along with Liberal Democrat and Labour colleagues, I set up the Rural Fair Share campaign. For many years, rural councils have been underfunded by central Government because of historic political choices and the formidable lobbying power of metropolitan authorities.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): My hon. Friend is doing a great job on this issue. Does he know that in West Berkshire and Wokingham—I am one of the

area's MPs—not only was the adult social care settlement so poor that it went to judicial review, but the Government lost, owe us a load of money, yet will still not pay?

Graham Stuart: My right hon. Friend is right. This story can be found in places right across the country, yet this inequity continues year after year. That is why so many colleagues are in their places to talk about it today.

In order to meet the shortfall in grant, of course, rural councils had to respond in the only way they could—and that was, in the past, by increasing their council tax rates. That is why the council tax base is much higher in rural areas, and modest homes in the East Riding of Yorkshire in my constituency can pay higher council tax than is paid on a £1 million property in Westminster. Under the Government's proposed local government settlement, however, those higher taxes are being used to justify a further shift in support from rural to urban.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's efforts in pursuing this matter and securing the debate. Does he share my view that the impact on social care in rural areas is particularly acute? Large travelling distances, combined with the increase in the minimum wage, increase costs further. Does he share my concern that many social care providers are thinking of withdrawing from the market because they cannot make ends meet?

Graham Stuart: My right hon. Friend is right to say that. Not only are residents in rural areas poorer on average than those in urban areas, but it costs more to deliver services there, they have to pay higher council tax and they are also older, with all the costs that go with it—driving social care. Again and again across government and across our society, we hear about the pressures that will result from having to deal with an ageing population, yet it is rural areas that have the eldest population. However, Government Departments show no recognition of the additional costs of age, as reflected in the demographics of rural areas.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): In my constituency, 25% of the population are over 65, compared with Exeter, a neighbouring urban area, where the figure is only 15%. Many of my constituents are aged over 85, but it is a travesty that many funding provisions do not provide for that very expensive group.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Our campaign has argued from the outset that our councils have to bear additional costs because they serve sparsely populated rural areas. Rural councils face higher transportation costs, for instance, when refuse is collected from sparsely populated villages or when children have to be transported into schools—costs that do not have to be faced in an urban setting. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) mentioned, as we move increasingly towards the digitisation of services, we find that there are additional costs of ensuring fair access for rural residents who do not have superfast, let alone ultrafast, broadband on which they can rely.

[Graham Stuart]

The Government have made a welcome pledge to conduct a new needs assessment preceding the new retention of business rates regime that they are introducing. That is great to hear, but colleagues would be wise to temper their optimism about any changes that might arise. After all, in 2012, the Government carried out a needs assessment and a consultation process. Those involved in the campaign were delighted—hurrah—when proposals were made that recognised the additional costs of delivering services in a sparse area, yet the additional funding that the Government had agreed was necessary was, for the most part, “damped” away. Under the mechanism designed to minimise volatility in funding in local areas, 75% of the gains that the Government had said rural areas should receive were not delivered. This was not damping as in delay, but damping as in totally and utterly removed. That is why our campaign has been calling for the residual amount, which we have calculated to be worth £130 million a year, to be paid in full to rural authorities.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is doing a great job, if I may say so. Does he agree that the rural services delivery grant was a fine innovation by the Government, and does he share my fears that as we move towards 100% of local authority income being levied locally, provisions such as the rural services delivery grant might disappear—to the disadvantage of our rural constituents?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is right to mention the rural services delivery grant, to which I shall return later in my speech.

The complexities of local government finance make it hard for us to get our heads around it. When we hear that there will be business rates retention, we might assume that we are somehow moving into a whole new world, in which taxes raised locally are kept locally, suggesting that we do not need to worry about the residual historical inequities that we are discussing today. But, no, that will not be the case. What is going to happen—it would be useful to hear from the Minister and have him put me right if I am getting it wrong—is that instead of the Government taking all business rates from councils and then giving out grants, they will look at where the business rates are retained and will effectively take the money away from anyone who is getting any more money than the current grant gives to others, while anyone who is getting less will be given more. Although we will have a “new system”, what we will get in effect is—unless the Minister tells us otherwise—precisely the same situation as we started with.

Whenever a Government bring in a new system, they try to minimise volatility, so business rates retention is likely to end up with everyone getting exactly the same money as they get today, which is why it is so important to push for a fair starting place. The danger is that business rates retention will bake in all the old inequities for ever more. There might be the dynamism of being able to retain the growth in business rates, but many of us fear that the ability of rural areas to grow their business rates base and thus make up for any historical inequities is going to be rather less than that of the likes of Westminster to grow its business rates base. I share that with colleagues, and I would be delighted if colleagues have any insights and want to put me right about it.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Let me give a practical answer. My area includes Hinkley Point C nuclear power station, and wants to take a view five years into the future on business rates retention. At the moment, however, we cannot do that. We do not know what we are going to get. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the damping down, because we are not capable at the moment of doing the forward projections in the Sedgemoor area. Does he agree?

Graham Stuart: I do. As the system comes in, there will be equalisation, and because of the different dynamics at work and despite the righteous principle—on this side of the House—in believing people should be incentivised to do the right thing and then keep the money, there will almost inevitably be a revisiting. If it turns out that someone’s huge shopping centre is going to be closed, the idea of them being left with no money is preposterous; similarly, if a huge bounty comes someone’s way, it is pretty likely that the Government will do what Governments have always done and raid it.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): From the perspective of Buckinghamshire, it is no exaggeration to say that this year’s local government settlement is far worse than the worst case and the worst scenario that the county council had calculated. On my hon. Friend’s specific point, beyond 2018-19, when Buckinghamshire loses the revenue support grant, the council has learned that it will effectively lose a significant portion of the business rate top-up grant. In 2018-19, it is set at £1.6 million and in 2019-20, it is £10.95 million. Is this not, in effect, a tax on success?

Graham Stuart: My right hon. Friend makes a strong point.

Returning to my theme of why we should be at least cautiously optimistic about any review promise in future, the Government responded to our campaign in 2014 and promised to conduct research into the additional costs of delivering services in rural areas. They say that they cannot move to recognise it until the evidence is there, and we have long said, “Show me a single service that is cheaper to deliver per head in a sparse rural area than in a concentrated urban one, and we will be delighted to hear it.” I have not heard anything yet. Apparently the current inequities are defensible without any evidence, but any change, even on the most common-sense basis, requires vast amounts of it.

Anyway, the Government conducted the promised research in 2014. They gathered data from councils at short notice, during the month of August. Strangely, there was a shortage of data, and—unsurprisingly—no real conclusions were reached and no appreciable change was delivered. We were told, “We are sorry, but there is nothing to justify any change.” I therefore caution colleagues not to expect jam tomorrow.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government deserve real credit for announcing that they will adopt a national funding formula for schools to ensure that their funding will be delivered on an equitable basis in future, although the formula will be phased in? Should we not simply ask for the same arrangement in relation to wider funding? I am not suggesting any kind of gerrymandering of the system. I am merely suggesting the introduction of simple fairness that would recognise equality of need.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why so many colleagues are here tonight—

Sir Greg Knight: On this side of the House.

Graham Stuart: On this side of the House, but, I am pleased to say, in all parts of the House. They are here because they want a system that is fair to all. Conservative Members represent rural areas, but we also represent suburban and urban areas. We do not want a system that is reverse-gerrymandered, an unfair mirror image of the previous system. We want a system that is demonstrably and objectively fair to all, as far as such a system can reasonably be delivered.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the absence of representation on the other side of the House shows that this aspect of funding does not seem to affect different parts of the country in different ways? Labour Members representing urban areas do not feel the same concern, because their constituents do not have the same worries.

Graham Stuart: Historically, most of the Labour party's support has come from the urban heartlands. That may have led it, when in government, always to use concentrated deprivation as an excuse for moving funds to those urban heartlands, at the expense of rural areas. As I said at the outset, it is important to bear in mind that people in rural areas are not part of an idyll. They are not richer; indeed, on average they are poorer.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate, and on the splendid campaign he has fought on behalf of our rural communities.

May I take up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray)? Some of us were here throughout the long, long twilight years during which the Labour Government brutally transferred money from rural areas to urban areas. As a result of that, Shropshire will receive £325.67 this year, whereas Westminster, where we are sitting tonight, will receive £715.88. However, the settlement would reduce Westminster's funding by 13.9% and Shropshire's by a significant 24%.

As my hon. Friend says, delivering services in rural areas is expensive. Under the last Government we made some improvements, and we should be grateful for that, but the settlement is still extraordinarily unfair. We are exposed as a party. We are now the party of rural England, and we have to put this right. We do not want to ask for a single penny more from the Treasury; we just want a fair settlement within the envelope.

Graham Stuart: I agree with everything that my right hon. Friend has said, except one thing. We are not just the party of rural England. We are the party of the whole United Kingdom, and what we want, what we have pressed for, and what this campaign has always sought on a cross-party basis, is a system that is fair to all.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I do not represent some rural idyll. I represent two large and growing towns, Banbury and Bicester. I feel particularly strongly

about the fact that because of the shortfall in local government funding my council is having to make some very difficult funding decisions that will affect areas of real deprivation. They will affect, for instance, children's centres and health and wellbeing centres. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a worry?

Graham Stuart: Absolutely. It is a worry. The distribution of funds becomes more important, not less, during a period of flat or reduced expenditure. It is a bit like when the sea goes out and all the undulations—the inequities—are suddenly exposed. That is what happens during a period of sustained control over public finances, which Conservative Members recognise as being inevitable following the economic wreckage that was left behind by the Labour party.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his magnificent campaign. Does he agree that we must dispel the myth that there is no deprivation in rural areas, and make it clear that people in those areas are doubly disadvantaged by the lack of access to services such as transport?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Withernsea, a town in my constituency, is among the 10% most deprived areas in the country, and I know that similar stories can be told about colleagues' constituencies throughout England. It is not true that there is no deprivation in rural areas. On average, it is not true. On average, the urban resident receives more. Urban areas do not consist of the most deprived, concentrated communities. They contain some communities of that kind, but on average people in urban areas earn a great deal more than those in rural areas.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): North Hertfordshire District Council is an excellent council which has been making efficiencies for years. Does my hon. Friend agree that expecting it to accept a 57% cut in grant year on year is a very big ask indeed?

Graham Stuart: It is, and where will the pressure fall? It will fall either on services, as it already does, or on the only thing that the council has left, which is council tax.

One of the aspects of this settlement—perhaps the most notable aspect—is the turnaround in the approach to council tax. The rural resident, who is already much more highly taxed, will experience compounded council tax increases. If council tax goes up by 4% in April 2016, and then by 4% a year in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020, that will mean five years of compounded 4% increases before the 2020 general election. I suggest to Ministers that they may wish to think long and carefully before presenting that result to the electorate in 2020, while suggesting to rural England that it should support us again.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): It is not necessarily the election in 2020 that we need to worry about, but the county elections in 2017. During the last Parliament, we managed to perform the really good trick of reducing waste in local government while often holding council tax at zero. However, it is not possible to go on making 30% cuts, which is what Gloucestershire will experience this year, and expect to do the same thing. Inevitably, council tax will rise.

Graham Stuart: As I have said, under this year's provisional settlement, rural councils are being allowed to increase council tax by up to 4%. In order to compensate for the deeper cuts in their central Government grant, many rural councils will be forced to increase council tax by the full amount so that they can provide their statutory services. The impact of that will be that older, poorer residents in rural areas will be faced with an even larger council tax bill, and, more perversely, the gap in the amount of council tax that they and their urban counterparts pay will increase in cash terms.

I am also concerned about the mechanism whereby savings are being made in this year's provisional settlement. At the end of the last Parliament, flat-rate cuts were applied across the central Government grant that every council received. If the Government were saving 11%, every council's grant was cut by that amount. We argued strongly that that was not fair, because we needed to close the gap rather than allowing it to stay the same. This year, however, the Government are proposing to apply their broadly flat-rate cuts to the core spending power of local authorities. That sounds very reasonable and, indeed, natural, but it includes Government grant and council tax. As a result, the authorities that are already most reliant on council tax will experience a steeper cut in their Government grant, whereas those that are more reliant on Government grant will experience a smaller cut. Research by the Rural Services Network shows that, while metropolitan authorities will face a cut in Government grant of around 19% during this Parliament, rural authorities will face an average cut of 30% or more.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. May I enter a plea for semi-rural constituencies? Adur, which comprises most of my constituency, is a local government district. In half the areas within the national park we cannot have the development that would attract the new homes bonus, and the population is concentrated on the coastal strip where there are significant areas of deprivation. We are losing revenue support grant at a much higher rate, and it cannot be replaced by the new homes bonus because no land is available for development except on floodplains.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is right. I remember speaking recently to a North Yorkshire councillor who said, "Given that we have a huge park here, we are specifically barred from development and we are rather restricted in our ability to respond to the incentives that have so generously been put in front of us."

Just as we know all people are created equal and we hold them to be equal under the law, so surely we must insist on equity in the way we impose tax on them and fund the services that support their lives. Beyond imprisonment, taxation represents the supreme expression of the power of the state over the private individual citizen. As Members of this place, we would not accept it if the Government proposed to tax people more and to spend less on them because they were black or white, Christian or Muslim, a man or a woman. There would be uproar. Yet at present we presume to discriminate in this way based on the flimsiest of pretexts—the area in which someone chooses to live, to work and to raise their children.

The rural voice in British politics in some ways resembles our countryside itself. With a few glorious exceptions, ours is not a land of soaring mountains, plunging valleys and jagged peaks. To conjure up rural England is to convey the patchwork beauty of tilled fields, the muted chime of church bells or the majesty of ancient woodland, reflecting man's presence on the land as it has come down to us through innumerable generations. There is a softness and a neatness to our countryside that can be mistaken for cosseted privilege, all ruddy-cheeked squires and roaring fires. Those of us fortunate enough to represent rural areas know that that is not the case and that sleepy villages can be home to people whose lives are characterised by want every bit as intense, or blighted by strokes of ill fortune or ill health just as devastating, as those who dwell in our towns and cities. Yet this local government settlement would tell them once again, as it has done year after year after year, that they must pay more and make do with less.

The rural cause can—must, will—be silent no longer. It is for us in this place to give it a voice. For hon. Friends on my side of the House, I believe that to be especially true. It was rural England that kept the flame of Conservatism alive for a long period—nearly 20 years. Now is the time for those of us who have been loyally returned by rural areas to make good on our contract with our electors. I stand with colleagues to ask, politely but firmly, for fairness, not favours, from Ministers, and to express our unyielding resolution that that should be delivered.

6.53 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The issue of local government finance, particularly in rural areas, is close to my heart, having served for eight years as a councillor prior to my election to the House. Having been leader of the opposition and then council leader on the Highland Council, an authority roughly the same size as Belgium, I have seen my share of financial challenges on both sides of the local debate, and I have great sympathy with right hon. and hon. Members discussing cuts to the budgets of English local authorities.

I would like to take a moment to pay tribute to the men and women who work across our councils. They deliver far more than many people appreciate, often in difficult circumstances, sometimes in distressing situations. Their help is there from before birth, throughout childhood and is weaved into our daily lives. It is even called upon when we die and in support of those left behind. In the light of the recent floods, special mention should go to those council employees across Scotland and the other nations of the UK who went above and beyond the call of duty to assist those in need. The scale of the flooding was exceptional, and the response in Scotland was truly first class.

Local councils, emergency services and other responders worked tirelessly to minimise the impact on communities, to ensure the safety of people and to help local areas to recover. To help them, the Scottish Government had already announced nearly £4 million for the local authority areas most affected by severe flooding caused by Storm Desmond in early December. This week, the First Minister has also announced that in the light of recent events the Scottish Government intend to make a further financial allocation of £12 million, meaning £1,500 per household and an additional £3,000 for businesses severely affected.

Since 2008, the Scottish Government have provided funding of £42 million per year to enable local authorities to invest in flood protection schemes. In my constituency, the Inverness flood relief scheme was successfully completed last year and has not only provided vital protection for Inverness, but regenerated the city's riverside.

The Scottish Government provide funding to the Scottish Flood Forum to work with local authorities, communities, householders and businesses to help them recover from a flood event. A scheme in Whitesands in Dumfries is now included in the published flood risk management strategy for the Solway, and funding will be available to the council via the local government settlement to begin work on a scheme when ready. Funding for the flood forecasting service run by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency has been protected by the draft budget settlement. That is provided directly by the Government and is in addition to the grant in aid that is provided to SEPA. Today, the Scottish Government flood risk action plan was announced, with 10,000 properties being supported by investment of £235 million.

The Scottish Government also activated the discretionary Bellwin scheme in November and December. That exists to give special financial assistance to local authorities as a result of their providing relief and carrying out immediate work due to large-scale emergencies, including flooding incidents. The Scottish Government have also recently legislated to give councils the power to reduce and remit rates bills, which councils could use to target support to the businesses in their areas affected by the floods.

The Scottish Government are investing in rural communities, are seeking to provide better transport infrastructure, and better access to medical care and hospitals, and are mitigating the cuts made by the UK Government with a new rural fuel poverty taskforce.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): The hon. Gentleman mentions fuel poverty. This is interesting. If there is one gleam of light for my constituents at the moment, it is the fact, as I have found recently, that if people fill up their oil tank—many rural constituencies use heating oil—the price is less than half what it was not so long ago. However, the fall in the oil price will have had significant implications for Scottish funding. I wonder whether he would care to reflect on that. He talks about UK cuts. What sort of cuts would have had to follow in the event of independence with the current forecast for the oil price and oil revenues in Scotland?

Drew Hendry: This is a common red herring that is introduced into the debate on Scottish funding. Scottish GDP is roughly the same as English GDP, and oil is a bonus for Scotland. When the price goes back up, obviously, the Treasury will continue to benefit from that bonus.

One of the first things that the Scottish Government did in 2007 was to decentralise local government funding by removing ring-fencing. Today, I am delighted to confirm that the Scottish Government Community Empowerment Minister has announced a £500,000 fund for a pilot scheme for people to take part in participatory budgeting in rural areas, giving people a direct say in how investment should be taken forward in their communities.

Health and social services in Scotland are to be delivered in partnership between health boards and local authorities. The Scottish Government are also taking action to support rural hospitals in recruiting

and retaining their medical staff, ensuring that patients receive safe care. In some areas that will involve rotating staff between rural and urban hospitals to ensure that we continue to provide services close to communities. That work has already delivered early success in supporting general surgical services in Belford hospital. Working with NHS Highland, the Scottish Government are now putting in place a network between Caithness general hospital and Raigmore hospital in Inverness, rotating staff between the two hospitals. This will support the delivery of the majority of surgical care and all out-patient care close to the community in Wick, while NHS Highland engages with local stakeholders to develop options for high-quality, safe and sustainable services throughout Caithness.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has mentioned medical recruitment and retention in Scotland. I do not wish to reflect on the challenges that we have in England, but there are challenges in Scotland in psychiatry and general practice recruitment that are probably worse than those in England. Will he please reflect on whether the increased funding settlement in Scotland compared with that in England is beginning to bear fruit, or whether the challenge has actually worsened over the past two or three years under the current measures?

Drew Hendry: Funding for Scotland has been drastically reduced over the past few years. We recognise the fact that we need more medical professionals, and that is why a comprehensive support package for training is in place in Scotland.

The Scottish Government have also committed to working with local authorities to develop stronger and more productive relationships between central and local government in order to develop real benefits for the people of Scotland. The Scottish budget for 2016-17 for local government has taken place against a backdrop of the toughest public expenditure conditions we have faced. This is the austerity of choice not of necessity, and it has been rejected wholesale by the people of Scotland. Between 2015-16 and 2019-20, Scotland's total budget will be reduced by 4.3% in real terms. Scotland's total discretionary budget will be cut by £1.2 billion in real terms, or 4.2%, and funding for day-to-day public services—the fiscal resource—will be cut by almost 6% in real terms, or £1.5 billion.

Between 2009-10 and 2014-15, Scotland's budget has fallen by around 11% in real terms, with capital expenditure falling by around 34%. This means that our budget has been cut by a staggering £3.5 billion in real terms since 2009-10. As a result of the autumn statement, the Scottish Government's revenue budget will be cut by 5.7% in real terms over the next four years. However, Scottish local government finance settlements have been maintained on a like-for-like basis for the period from 2012 to 2016, with extra money for new responsibilities. This has resulted in a total settlement of £10.8 billion in 2014-15 and more in 2015-16, allowing rural local authorities and others to perform their duties.

Additional funding has been made available for health and social care, local authority school budgets and support to ensure that the council tax freeze is maintained for its ninth consecutive year. I have to say I agree that once we let the genie out of the bottle and increase

[Drew Hendry]

council tax year on year, that is exactly what will continue to happen: it will increase year on year. The sum of £70 million is included in the settlement to continue the council tax freeze for a ninth consecutive year, which in turn continues to fully fund local authorities for the moneys that would have been collected by raising the council tax.

While I am on the subject of the freeze on council tax, it should be remembered that before the Scottish National party came to power and agreed the freeze with the councils, this most regressive of taxes had been going up every single year. That was hitting the poorest households and pensioners the hardest. During the 2007 election campaign, I knocked on the door of a constituent in Fort Augustus who was in tears at the thought of yet another pressure on her household purse because of the threat of an increase in council tax.

This measure has now saved the average family some £1,500 at a time when they find themselves most under pressure. Those advocating a return to increasing council tax should remember that that would be likely to result in a return to the yearly default of ever-higher council taxes, with services remaining under pressure due to the UK Government's austerity obsession. This tax is applied not only to those who can afford a little bit more but to those who cannot withstand yet another squeeze on their ability to put food on the table or to heat their homes.

The net revenue reduction for local authorities next year will be £320 million. That amounts to a reduction of 2% of the total expenditure of local authorities. It is a challenging settlement. However, that does not take account of the additional allocation announced by the Deputy First Minister of £250 million for social care.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The hon. Gentleman mentions a reduction in local government revenue support grant of just 2%. I do not know whether he was in the Chamber when I intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) in his excellent speech to tell him that my local authority of Gloucestershire was likely to face a reduction of 30% this year. Does that not wholly demonstrate what a generous settlement Scotland has had?

Drew Hendry: It wholly demonstrates the fact that the Scottish Government prioritise local authorities to ensure that they have the ability to deliver the services that they need. I have listened carefully to the complaints being made in the Chamber, and I absolutely agree that some of the cuts being faced by English local authorities are devastating. That is why I am proud that the Scottish Government are prioritising these measures.

The net revenue reduction will be £320 million, but that does not take account of the additional allocation of £250 million for social care. Previously, it has been the sole responsibility of local authorities to fund social care. The national health service will now share that responsibility and will next year invest another £250 million in those services.

The funding settlement also needs to be seen in the context of further funding for local authority school budgets. The budget sets aside funds to ensure that we are progressing the work to close the attainment gap.

The £33 million that will be invested next year is part of a bigger programme of £100 million that is being invested over and above local authority school budgets to prioritise improvement in attainment.

Let us compare the situation of Scottish local government with that of English local government. The funding for English local government has gone down by 27% over the past two years while Scottish local government has essentially had a flat cash settlement from the Scottish Government for a number of years. So we are starting from a much higher baseline figure for the provision of local authority services. This underlines the SNP's commitment to supporting local government.

7.7 pm

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): If the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) will forgive me, I will not follow him up the highways, byways and glens of Scotland. I find local government finance complicated enough without adding in a Scottish element. As he has spoken in the debate about local government funding for rural areas, which of course include vast swathes of Scotland, I hope that he will let us know during the course of the evening whether his party will vote in February when we come to discuss the final settlement for these proposals, which may or may not have a direct effect on Scotland. Given the way in which the Scottish nationalists' rhetoric has been going since the May general election, they will no doubt claim that it has an indirect effect on the matter. I am sure that the Government will listen with great interest to whether Scottish National party Members of Parliament will be here on that night in February. That might have some bearing on the Government's thinking.

In the 24 or so years that I have been in this House, I have deliberately never spoken about local government finance because it is an impenetrable subject. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) for having spoken so cogently and clearly on the subject today and for leading our campaign to persuade the Government to treat rural areas more fairly when it comes to local government finance.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend share my view that, in the extremely eloquent speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), he omitted to mention "The Picturesque", which of course comes originally from Herefordshire, as described by Gilpin? Does he also agree that our hon. Friend was the most picturesque adornment present on these Benches as he gave us his presentation? Does my right hon. and learned Friend share my view that the counterpart to the extraordinarily poor settlement that rural areas have received might involve not only an improvement in that settlement on the current basis but also additional capital funding to allow rural areas to develop an economic strength from which future revenue could derive?

Sir Edward Garnier: A number of points flow from my hon. Friend's intervention. First, he confirms why it was sensible of me never to have spoken about local government finance. Secondly, I agree with him that Herefordshire is a beautiful county, and he illustrates

that, but many of us who represent shire counties do not just represent rural areas. For example, my constituency is 90% rural geographically, but 50% of my electorate come from a suburb of Leicester—Oadby and Wigston, a borough in need of special attention from the Government. I have discussed that with the Minister and I will bring the matter back before the House before very long.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) are in their places tonight. Because we represent that bit of Leicestershire outside the city of Leicester—there are seven Conservative Members of Parliament for the county of Leicestershire and three Labour Members for the city itself—it is assumed that we all represent, and all our constituents live in, wonderful leafy idylls. I refer to the pre-penultimate paragraph of the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness there. There are, however, people living in my constituency, for example, in South Wigston, Market Harborough, Fleckney and Kibworth, who are not at all well off. Market Harborough is a market town, as its name suggests, but Kibworth and Fleckney are large villages. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton would agree, there are people living on farms and in little hamlets who are not at all well off. The fact that we represent so-called “shire counties” does not mean to say that everyone there drives around in a Range Rover and is looking forward to the next cheque from the common agricultural policy—life is not like that.

As has been mentioned, school funding in our area is second bottom of the Whitehall funding list, although it costs just as much to educate a child in rural or semi-rural Leicestershire as it does in the city of Leicester. Indeed, many schools in the borough of Oadby and Wigston, which abuts for three or four miles the city of Leicester, are educating city children, who come across the boundary into the county of Leicestershire because, by and large, the schools in my constituency, and no doubt in the equivalent parts of the county around the border of the city of Leicester, are, on average, better than those in the city. Yet we have to pay for the education of those children from the city of Leicester with the much-reduced county funding. That is just an illustration of the problem we face year on year.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): In a rural area such as mine, where my local district of East Lindsey covers 700 square miles, most of which forms my constituency, there is an added problem with transport. It costs Lincolnshire County Council millions of pounds to transport children across the county to their nearest school, a cost that, happily, most city centre children do not have to bear.

Sir Edward Garnier: I agree on that, and my hon. Friend illustrates the sparsity factor. I am getting into the jargon now—you might almost think I am beginning to enjoy myself, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I do not want you to get that impression. On the sparsity factor, getting schoolchildren from parts of rural Lincolnshire or rural Leicestershire to the town centres where the schools are is an expensive activity and the county councils are finding it increasingly difficult to subsidise it, to the concern of the parents of those children.

I do not wish to think of this as being as complicated or difficult as the Schleswig-Holstein question, but I sometimes think that either I am either dead or mad, or I have forgotten the answer. Lord Palmerston, one of our greatest Prime Ministers, said that only three people knew the answer to the Schleswig-Holstein problem—one was dead, one was mad and one had forgotten the answer. That is a diversion, I hope.

I am relying heavily here on a note provided by the excellent Conservative leader of Leicestershire County Council. The council recognises that the Government wish to use “spending power” as the only means of discussing the funding available to local authorities and that there are financial constraints—there is a limit on the amount of public money available. In government jargon, “spending power” means Government-funded spending power—I know this gets very exciting, Madam Deputy Speaker—which means core spending power minus council tax. It consists of the settlement funding assessment, the new homes bonus and the rural services delivery grant, and from 2017-18 it will also include the improved better care fund—would that Lord Palmerston were with us now!

The Government’s proposed changes to the revenue support grant, designed to limit reductions in funding for the local authorities most dependent on RSG, such as inner-London boroughs and cities, will have a significant impact on Leicestershire and other similar counties. They will mean a £6 million additional loss of RSG, making a total reduction for the county council of £19 million in RSG for 2016-17. The additional loss to all counties amounts to £160 million. The Government’s proposals also will mean that £2 million of retained business rates will be lost to Leicestershire in 2019-20 as those are redistributed—guess where, oh Conservative Government—to cities and inner-London boroughs. I am not making this up. These changes can fairly be seen as the latest in a series of “compromises”—I say that politely—made by successive Governments.

Let me quickly illustrate how the system is not working now. The RSG does not take account of the needs of the local population. RSG per head in 2016-17 in Leicestershire, which includes the seven or eight district councils or borough councils outside the city of Leicestershire, is £67, whereas the figure for Islington is £246 and the figure for the city of Westminster is £251. Council tax per head at band D in 2015-16 for Leicestershire, including the districts, was £490, whereas the figure for Islington was £416, with the city of Westminster figure at £352. One sees straightaway from those examples the imbalance that the campaign led by my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness has been so successfully highlighting.

Spending power—I referred to that complicated compendium a moment ago—is apparently how the Government define income to a local authority. The Government headlines around the provisional settlement and the so-called “good news” are directed towards the position right at the end of this Parliament, in 2019-20, and not to the current year. My colleagues in the county council welcome the principle of a four-year settlement, but not if its certainty increases the savings required and compels further service reductions in the short term, and does not take account of spending pressures at the end of the four years, when a projected 3.5% increase in spending power for Leicestershire will be totally inadequate.

[*Sir Edward Garnier*]

That sort of increase would simply not meet the needs of the over-65s, an increasing school-age population and the cost of the living wage. For example, the cash increase in spending power for Leicestershire County Council by 2019-20 equates to £12 million, but that is the context of living wage costs to the council by 2019-20 of £20 million. The 2% adult social care precept equates to £22 million, which compares with the increase in adult social care costs, including the living wage, of £50 million over the same period.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend is making some very good points, particularly on adult social care. We are finding that, increasingly, people choose to retire to rural areas, where life expectancy is higher. Adult social care is the part of the upper tier local authority budget that is increasingly suffering from great strain. Does he agree that, when we are looking at local authority budgets and at the demographic needs of rural areas, the increasing pressure on adult social care budgets and the increasing number of people requiring adult social care in rural areas because of that demographic shift to an older population is something that needs to be put into those budgets today? We also need to future-proof those budgets and the projected increases in Government spending in the years ahead.

Sir Edward Garnier: I am sure that that illustration applies both to my county of Leicestershire and to my hon. Friend's county of Suffolk. As a doctor, he will have seen how that matter touches on his constituents directly. Certainly in Leicestershire, 50% of the £350 million revenue budget is spent on adult social care. If my hon. Friend is right, that percentage can only go up as we move through this Parliament and beyond it, so the points that he makes have even greater purchase than perhaps he might have initially thought. It seems, too, that the scope for savings is necessarily restricted. As a result of the provisional settlement, Leicestershire needs to save £28 million in 2016-17, increasing to a total of £83 million by 2019-20 just to ensure that it is living within its means. That is on top of savings that the county has already achieved of £130 million.

I do not pretend to have an instant solution to any of this; I do not suppose that any one of us does, but I urge the Government to think a little more intelligently about how it deals with local government finance and how it distributes what is accepted to be a limited pot of money across the country. Without wishing to be rude to the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, I urge Members to forget about Scotland for the moment—it is a difficult thing to do, but we will do it just for this evening—and to call on the Government to work out what is fair. A poor person in Harborough is no better off than a poor person in inner-city Leicester. A poor elderly person in Harborough needs as much financial support as a poor elderly person in the city of Leicester. I appreciate that there will be rough edges and that there is no perfect solution to the problem, but I am reasonably sure that there is a better solution than the provisional settlement that we are looking at now.

Leicestershire is a well-behaved Conservative council—I do not mean that in a pompous way, although I have been accused of many things and pomposity may be

one of them. It believes in using taxpayers' money well and in getting good value for every public penny spent. We are not about to initiate some sort of riot or revolution in Leicestershire County Council. We are just asking for a bit of fairness—not a difficult thing to ask for. Although I do appreciate that that is hard to deliver, I none the less think that the Government should try just a little bit harder.

7.23 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) for securing this debate. I was absolutely delighted when he asked me to co-sponsor it, because this matter is so important for many, many rural communities, including my own in Cumbria.

This debate is about fairness. It is about local authorities in rural areas receiving fair funding. Wherever we live, we pay a fair amount of council tax, from which we as a resident or a business in that community expect to receive decent, accessible services. Currently, rural communities tend to pay higher council tax bills, receive fewer Government grants and have access to fewer services than communities in urban areas. One thing I have always thought is that those of us who have been brought up in rural communities have lower expectations about what services we are entitled to, and we should not have; we should demand what we pay for.

Cumbria, where I live, is a truly rural area. Aside from the small cathedral city of Carlisle, it is the market towns that grow our economy. Some 95% of our businesses are small and medium-sized enterprises, most of which employ fewer than 20 people. Other rural economies are hinterlands to city regions and they have very different expectations, problems and challenges to the ones that we face in Cumbria.

Cumbria has one of the largest land mass areas in the country. To illustrate my point, I ask Members here to imagine a map of London and its surrounding areas. If we laid Cumbria over that map, it would cover an area from Cambridge in the north, all the way down to Hampshire in the south, across to Oxfordshire in the west and over to Essex in the east. I do not think that many people really appreciate the size of the county. Given that alongside that we have a population of only 500,000, delivering services for our local authorities is a real challenge.

The real difficulty for Cumbria is that the business rates retention model is based on growth in business premises. I have already mentioned the number of SMEs and the small number of people they employ, and because of that many of them are based at home; they are residential businesses. Many, for example, are bed and breakfasts. We have only a limited amount of business growth that will be reflected in an increase in business rates income. To put it simply, we cannot increase our income from business rates in the way that can be done in urban areas; we simply do not have the capacity. As I am sure many Members will agree, it is also more problematic for those areas that have two-tier authorities, such as Cumbria.

Let me focus on some of the challenges. First, there is transport, which has already been discussed today. In Cumbria, we have 7,000 miles of roads, and that does not include all the footpaths that the local authority has

to maintain. The geography and our weather conditions mean that a huge amount of resources are required to maintain those networks. The large number of visitors we receive also puts a lot of pressure both on the roads and the footpaths. In fact, under the current funding formula, Cumbria does not get any extra money for dealing with its visitors, who increase the population hugely during the summer.

We also need to think about the weather. Everyone has seen the recent flooding in Cumbria. Our roads always suffer very, very badly from the weather, which again puts increased pressure on the council's funding. We now have huge problems to resolve. I know that we get extra funding from Government for the flooding, but it does not come close to what we need, particularly given the recent council cuts. Our transport budget has been cut by a third, so the roads are already in dire need of extra help.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: I have a lot of sympathy with what the hon. Lady is saying, but is she as disappointed as we are on the Conservative Benches that she is the sole voice from her party for this very important debate?

Sue Hayman: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I am grateful that I have two of my hon. Friends in front of me, but I take her point. To me, rural issues should not be party political issues. Everyone who lives in a rural community is entitled to be represented by both parties, by the Scottish National party and by other parties that are not represented here today. I have discussed these issues with other Members. I know they are interested and I would have liked to see more of them in the Chamber this evening. I cannot deny that.

On another transport-related issue, let us look at the impact that lack of funding has had on our bus services. Owing to the reduction in funding for Cumbria county council, we have unfortunately lost a number of bus services as the county could no longer afford to pay the subsidies. In a rural area that is a real worry. In Cumbria, anyone who cannot afford to buy and run a car, or who cannot drive, is cut off from accessing services or even from being able to get a job and go to work. In the village where I live, we have a bus to Cockermouth on a Wednesday, which is fine for people who want to do a bit of shopping or meet some friends, but is not much good for anyone who needs to get to work. That service is now under threat. We could lose that important lifeline for the elderly people who live in my village.

My daughter was unable to get a job until she passed her driving test. It is not cheap for a young person to pass a driving test and it is not easy to do so—it took her three goes, but she passed and she now has some work. That situation puts extra pressures on our young people and does not encourage them to stay and live in our communities.

These huge costs of transport make it difficult for the local authority to deliver services across the board. Those transport costs are a factor in the delivery, for example, of social care, as has been discussed. Another example is waste collection. Studies have shown that it costs almost double the amount to collect a bin in a rural area, compared with an urban area. It is not just a little bit more expensive; it is much more expensive.

The public health funding model does not take into account the significant cost of running services in rural areas—again, because of the transport costs and the

distances that need to be covered—so we risk letting down the people who live furthest from the centre. The people on the edges are often missed because of the difficulty in delivering those services. That is exacerbated by the fact that our population is ageing. If our population is ageing, does not want to drive and is experiencing more health problems, it seems crazy to me that we do not have sufficient funding to allow older people proper access to the health services that they need.

We have had a campaign running in Cumbria for some time to ensure that services from West Cumberland hospital are not moved to Carlisle and beyond that to Newcastle. It is still a long way for people in my constituency to go to Whitehaven to access services there. If we lose that, it becomes more problematic. Recent events in Cumbria and the number of road closures and bridges damaged show the paucity of our roads infrastructure and the further problems that that causes. We need proper funding so that the county council-maintained roads can be properly managed; otherwise, there is the risk of dreadful isolation in communities in rural areas.

Hon. Members have spoken about rural poverty. Pockets of rural poverty are very real, but often missed. If we do not have proper outreach services, we do not know what people need. As I said, people in rural areas tend to be quieter about their requirements. We could go down a dangerous route if we are not careful. We need to make sure that everyone has the services they need and that they can access employment properly. Unless we do that, we simply pile on the deprivation and do nothing to support those who need help most.

I shall move on to another issue, which I wish I did not have to do. The Government have suggested on a number of occasions that local authorities can make cost savings by prioritising internet-based services and advice. I do not know what it is like for other hon. Members, but I do not want to get bogged down in the lack of access to broadband in my constituency. It makes me want to tear my hair out.

Dr Poulter: The hon. Lady makes an important point. Broadband access, as we know, is not as easily available in rural areas as it is in urban areas. Also, given the demographic issues that have been discussed during the debate, we know that there is a challenge with the very elderly, despite the best efforts of local charities and outreach groups in many of our constituencies to get them to engage with digital technology. That is not to say that all older people do not engage, because some do, but with the very elderly there is a particular challenge, and those people can be the among the most vulnerable in our communities.

Sue Hayman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important point.

One of the problems with broadband is that too many assumptions are made about what we can achieve in rural areas. What I find most frustrating is that as the superfast broadband connection is rolled out in some areas, where we are not getting superfast we are getting super-super-slow as the speed goes down and down. By making it better for some people, we are creating a huge problem for others. I urge the Government not to tell hon. Members and their constituents that they should be accessing internet-based services, when it is incredibly difficult and frustrating to do so. We should either fund broadband properly or accept that we need to look at different solutions.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Lady may be a sole voice, but she is making a powerful and important speech, particularly given that it is from the Opposition Benches and grounded as it is in her constituency experience. Does she agree that the inability of rural councils to deliver services more cheaply and more conveniently digitally because the infrastructure is not there, as she has just described, is another reason why a further increase in the gap between urban and rural is untenable?

Sue Hayman: Absolutely. Our difficulty in accessing decent broadband acts as another block on enabling rural businesses to develop and grow. That reduces access to increased business rates, as we have heard.

Drew Hendry: The hon. Lady is indeed making some fine points and I agree with many of them. Does she agree, though, that the issue is not just rural broadband and accessing those services? She made the point about rural businesses. In many rural areas, they cannot even get a mobile phone signal. That further hampers rural communities' ability to do business and look after themselves.

Sue Hayman: That is correct. I do not get a mobile signal at home, so I understand that point. Another point that has been made to me by a number of rural businesses recently is the inability of people who have gone to markets to sell, for example, to use the hand-held card things because they do not have the signal to be able to operate them. I do not know the technical term, but that causes them problems when they try to sell.

In conclusion, I would like to ask the Government to look again, as other hon. Members have requested, at the way the funding is allocated. Robust rural proofing must be applied to all funding formula decisions right across Government to ensure that we have equality of treatment and sustainability of services.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a passionate speech. Does she agree that it cannot be right that our elderly, vulnerable rural residents, who have paid their taxes like everyone else all their life, may be faced at the end of their life with moving to an urban area so that they can access the normal services that they should expect in rural areas?

Sue Hayman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. It comes back to the lack of bus services, for example. A number of elderly people in my village use the bus on a Wednesday because it facilitates a social life; they can go into town and meet their friends. If that bus service goes, where will that leave them? About a year ago one elderly resident fell and broke her shoulder. All she wanted was to get well enough to be able to get back on the bus and go into town. Had she not had that incentive, I worry that she might not have recovered so quickly. These services provide so much more than is indicated by their face value.

In a nutshell, I would like the Government to think about the bigger picture and consider how important access to transport services, and indeed to all services, is for rural communities. Without proper funding for local authorities, those services will deteriorate. We do not want anyone in our communities to be disadvantaged, so I urge the Minister and the Government to reconsider.

7.41 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), who said not a word with which I could possibly disagree, and who underscored in not only what she said, but how she said it, the point my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart)—I thank him, on behalf of everyone in the House, for securing the debate—made in his opening speech: this is not a debate about party politics or affiliation; it happens to be a debate about geography. It is a debate about something that we would all hope underpins everything that any Government do: to strive for equity and fairness.

As a new Member of the House, I rise more in sorrow than in anger. I am disappointed that I find myself incredulous about the proposals that has been outlined for my county of Dorset. I have a bit of form in this regard. About nine years ago the leader of West Oxfordshire District Council—I lived there at the time—called me up and asked me to join his executive committee. I said yes, but I thought to myself, “So long as it has nothing to do with finance.” He then asked me to take the resources portfolio, so for seven years I struggled with the budget. We were all very sensible about it, as I believe most local government—particularly, though not exclusively, Conservative local government—has been in helping the Government of the day respond to the pressing financial challenges and the huge black hole in our national finances. Therefore, those of us who rise with concern about this settlement do so not like an ostrich with its head in the sand—we are not ignorant of the pressures on the Treasury—but because we are keen to ensure equity and fairness for our constituents.

Victoria Atkins: Will my hon. Friend allow me to demonstrate exactly what he has just said by giving the example of East Lindsey District Council? It is a Conservative council that has tried to look ahead and has planned and saved because it suspected that central Government would make funding decisions that would lead to a lower allocation. Those in the council have done their best, but with the latest funding settlement they are holding their heads in their hands and asking what more they can do.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She sets out a repeating pattern of change and evolution that we have seen in local government, and my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) will know of the work that his council did with my old council. Let me give an example of what North Dorset District Council has done. It is a low-spending, low-taxing, Tory-controlled, rural shire district council. It has been on its efficiency journey for well over 10 years, during which time it has developed a mixed economy of services, transferring some services to community groups and town councils. For example, Blandford Forum Town Council chips in £50,000 for the running of the town's leisure centre, which just a few short years ago was the sole preserve of North Dorset District Council. It has transferred other services to commercial operators. Its final asset—the last jewel in its crown—is the council office site, and it has already agreed to dispose of that as part of its survival campaign.

North Dorset District Council is part of the Dorset councils partnership, which is the only tri-council model in the country, covering the constituencies of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin), my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) and myself. We share a chief executive, a senior leadership team and staffing with two other local councils. When the district council started this journey we had 300 members of staff, and we now have 100. This is not about arguing for the status quo; it is about arguing for fairness.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: My hon. Friend mentioned the funding settlement, and I understand about the level of funding, but does he not welcome the four-year budget plan that now gives councils at least the opportunity to plan ahead?

Simon Hoare: No, and for reasons that I will explain to my hon. Friend in just a moment.

If I took Members to my North Dorset constituency—this echoes what my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness, the hon. Member for Workington and others have said—they would see that it looks lovely, and it is lovely. But we have poor public transport, notwithstanding the excellent service that Damory tries to provide with the budget it receives from the county. The majority of my residents are retired. We have poor and patchy broadband. We have an historical low skills base. We have a poor road infrastructure. One of our straplines is, “Come to Dorset; there are no motorways.” Forget motorways; we have no dual carriageway in my constituency. Indeed, a passing place on a B road is greeted like an oasis in the desert. Access to affordable housing is constrained. The average salary of a vast number of my residents is well below the national average—the national average is about £24,000, but in my constituency it is about £17,500. A large number of my constituents are tenant farmers, or those associated with agriculture, living in tied accommodation.

Therefore, although those wonderful rolling hills and green pastures of the Blackmore vale look enchanting, and while the area of outstanding natural beauty of the Cranborne Chase is indeed beautiful, there are pockets of deprivation in those rural areas, for example in Blandford Forum, Shaftesbury and Gillingham, and for some unknown reason no wise expert in either the Treasury or the Department for Communities and Local Government can find a perfect mechanism for measuring that rural deprivation. That is a huge gap in how we approach the settlement.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): My hon. Friend is speaking with his customary eloquence. I simply rise to add to his list of challenges. It is not just public services that challenge us; the inability to access banks and other amenities means that people in our communities have to travel that bit further to do their banking or grocery shopping, and that all adds to the cost, particularly when it comes to public transport.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He can add to that litany the fact that something as simple and mundane as a waste collection service costs far more in a rural area than it does in an urban area. It is far easier for a large rubbish truck to trundle up and down the terrace streets of Cardiff, Bristol, Manchester or Birmingham than to go up hill and down dale, and

from one house here to two farms there, so it is more expensive. The costs of getting children to school on transport provided by the county council is higher. The cost of everything is higher. It costs more to heat homes, because they all predate cavity wall insulation, and because conservation area status and listed buildings simply preclude double glazing, solar panels and the like.

At every step, when we analyse it in the cold light of day, there is precious little reason to live in a rural area today. The difficulties are compounded when a Conservative Government who had had at the heart of their manifesto the firm commitment, on which I certainly stood, of rural-proofing these things, free from the fetters of the yellow peril of the Liberal Democrats—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] The House is free of it now, too. The Government are now suddenly appearing to shirk the task that Conservative Members wish them to undertake.

Let me deal with the three things that I find particularly irritating within the proposed settlement and pick up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray). If only Dorset County Council had four years to deliver the medium-term financial strategy that it had planned—the £13 million-worth of savings that it had identified—but Dorset, like Buckinghamshire, has been given two years, and then its revenue support grant disappears. That is why I am afraid I cannot welcome what my hon. Friend asked me to welcome. East Dorset District Council, in which part of my constituency falls, sees its RSG disappear after one year. With no prior warning, no consultation and no advice, its medium-term financial strategies are now shredded.

That is unfortunate, because the local government of Dorset was significantly reviewing what it did. Exciting proposals were coming forward and a vivid debate was going on about large unitary districts, a combined authority and so on, all with the expressed aim of helping my hon. Friend the Minister and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor achieve what we all want to see—economic efficiency, with services delivered at the best possible price for the council tax payer. All those potential proposals have had to be put on hold while a reduced officer corps desperately tries to focus on which service is more, or less, important and must not just have the fat trimmed off—we have gone through the surface of the bone and, in some instances, are sucking out the marrow.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My hon. Friend and neighbour mentioned east Dorset, part of which falls within my constituency, but he is making a very good case for Dorset as a whole. Does he agree that we are not calling for special favours for Dorset, but simply for fairness, and that the aim should be to reduce the inequality rather than increase it?

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is not special pleading. We are not saying, “Do this because these rural areas all, or broadly, vote Tory.” This is not some sort of banana republic in central Africa where the governing party’s Members of Parliament have more of the lion’s share because they are of the governing party. All we are asking for is equity and fairness—for the same rules to be applied across the piece.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very strong speech. Rural areas, particularly the rural counties, many of them Conservative controlled, have made these reductions to their budgets and run a very prudent house. In Devon, we are cutting back by £28 million. We have had a £2 million increase, and that is welcome, but when the budgets of inner-city and metropolitan authorities are being increased, it is time that we had a greater redistribution. As he says, we now have these seats in the south-west, and across the country, and we expect a really fair deal. Because of roads, transport and schools, we do need that extra money.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is right. His comments have the extra weight of his being Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

The Minister should be clear that this settlement will create some jobs as local government sheds yet more staff and services are cut. I expect to see job advertisements for local government commissioners appearing in lots of publications, because a number of chief executives and leaders will be seeking, in effect, to hand the keys back to the Department, saying, "Look, pal, we have tried our best. We have done what we think we can. We can make no further cuts, hand on heart, without thinking that our electorate and our residents will be unduly hurt."

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: As my hon. Friend said, many of our rural councils have done exactly what the Government have asked. In Gloucestershire, four district councils now share back-office services. We share a chief executive. We have a common Gloucestershire-wide rubbish policy. We share business rates and second home bonuses. We have become super-efficient, yet we are one of the hardest hit local authorities, and we now have very little left to cut.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is right. He amplifies a golden thread that has run through the debate.

I have two further points that I urge the Government seriously to reconsider. The Care Act 2014 implementation grant has hitherto always been free-standing of the RSG—a little bit of icing on the cake. The proposed settlement rolls it into the RSG, and that seems rather unfair. I am happy to stand corrected by the Minister, but it is certainly the collective view across local government in my county that, in essence, the strategy that the Department is setting out has a counter-Conservative mindset whereby every single year council tax will have to increase by below whatever the capping figure is prevailing at the time, so arguably 1.99% today, and that the ring-fenced and extremely welcome—we are grateful to the Chancellor—2% hypothecation for social care will have to be year on year. I urge the Minister to unravel the knitting that the Department has done in meshing the grant with the RSG.

On the implied and presumed increase in council tax, the insult is compounded still more by the situation, as we understand it, on business rates. We cheered my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to the rafters in Manchester just a few short months ago when he gave ground on the localisation of business rates, which local government had been campaigning on for many a long year. I hope that the Minister will be able to clarify this,

but our understanding is that while we will be allowed to set it and will continue to collect it, the centre will determine how much of it we retain and top-slice or cream off that which it believes we do not need in order to underpin and subsidise other, less efficient, authorities. That is, in itself, an insult, but when we add the factored-in, year-on-year increase in council tax of at least 3.99%, things start to get very tricky.

As my late and noble Friend Baroness Thatcher would have said to those three points, taking off her glasses with a sweep, I too have to say to the Minister, "No, no, no." The increase of the rural services delivery grant to £65 million is welcome but way south of the £130 million that the network believes is required. It might just about make a fig leaf for a dormouse but will not add up to anywhere near what is required to service rural local government.

I have some questions for the Minister, for whom I have personal liking and huge respect. I do not envy him his position as he sits like Daniel in the lions' den with the lions not having been fed for many a long month. The questions boil down to this: where is the equity in this proposal?

Andrew Bridgen: My hon. Friend is making an impassioned speech. The people of Leicestershire roared at the prospect of business rate retention, and the settlement for Leicestershire suggested full retention by 2020. The combined Government grant for local and county councils in Leicestershire is £136 million a year, and our current business rates are £226 million a year—a difference of some £90 million a year. I would be interested to hear from the Minister how soon we will be able to retain those extra funds, especially given that North West Leicestershire has Coalville, which is the most deprived town in Leicestershire. North West Leicestershire is vibrant and has high economic growth. We have produced 23% of all the county's business rates and we need those funds for the regeneration of Coalville. If that does not happen, we will be very disappointed indeed.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend makes a valid point and he can speak about Coalville with more detailed knowledge than I can. The underlying point is that there seems to be an incorrect assumption that Tory taxes in Tory shires will have to go up in order for Tory business rates in Tory areas to be relocated to other areas. That is a kick in the teeth and I fail to grasp the logic.

Why is the sparsity grant being back-loaded rather than front-loaded? The money is needed now. We are a two-tier county and the figures for Dorset County Council alone show that it loses 43.3%. The planned reduction was 30%, so it is not as if we did not expect some reductions, but 43.3% seems particularly high. I met district council leaders on Friday and they said that they are being led inexorably to the view that Her Majesty's Government must have a vision for the reorganisation of English local government, but they have not quite worked out what it is yet, and that they are starving them into a form of submission.

Importantly, I welcome the fact that, for the second year running, the Government have delivered the £5 de minimis increase in council tax under the capping regime. If North Dorset takes advantage of that, it will give us an extra £160,000 a year. If we go with 2%, it would give us

only £60,000 a year. I invite the Minister to give serious consideration to embedding the de minimis approach in future thinking.

Could we also end the cat and mouse game—it takes place every year—of, “Will they or won’t they cap the town and parish councils”? It is like baiting the lower tiers of local government. Blandford Forum Town Council in particular has made that plea to me. It wants to step into the breach, as evidenced by the 50 grand it is stumping up to help run the local leisure centre. It wants to help fill the vacuum, but at every step and turn it, too, feels constrained, because it does not know from one year to the next whether it will be capped.

North Dorset District Council’s Conservative leader, Deborah Croney, and its chief executive, Matt Prosser, have asked me whether the Minister will consider giving local control over matters such as local planning fees. At present, the council subsidises its planning function with some £600,000 a year, because of the complexity of planning and the very small fees it is able to set.

Graham Stuart: I have a word of warning for my hon. Friend. I would not wish too strongly for the Government to be given licence to put up council tax and fees even more, because our residents already pay substantially more, even though they are poorer and older. The central feature of the proposed settlement is to stick up an already overly high council tax rate by even more, while subsidising urban residents who are richer and pay less.

Simon Hoare: I find myself pained, because I disagree not only with the settlement, but with my hon. Friend. Although he is absolutely right to say that this should not become a new cash cow for local authorities, surely to goodness most planning applications are either for very large-scale schemes—I speak with some authority, having been involved in that area for a number of years, and am pretty certain that such schemes could absorb a proportionate increase—or for domestic planning applications that will add value to the property. If someone is having an extension built, they will pay a fee of £120 and then possibly add £10,000, £20,000 or £30,000 to the value of the property, so there could be a small increase to the fee. If we believe in the narrative of localism, that would help local councils to set their own agenda.

I have been asked whether the settlement and subsequent measures take into account both the increase in the national minimum wage and the living wage, both of which are welcome. Frankly, I do not know the answer to that, so I ask it as an open-ended question. At a time of significant reduction, when costs are going to go up, that will be a difficult situation. I have already said that the costs of delivering services in a rural area are, by definition and de facto, more expensive than they are in urban areas. The impact on adult social care, particularly in a constituency such as North Dorset, which is predominantly, though not exclusively, peopled by the retired, would, I fear, be lamentable. I fear for the future safety and security of many of my residents, many of whom will live in what Douglas Hurd used to describe as slight decayed gentility, afraid to ask for help but certainly needing it. I fear that all of us are likely to face a tsunami of headlines, both local and national, concerning elderly vulnerable people who have been caught in this

unappetising pincer movement of a reduction in income and being left in their own homes and to their own devices.

Sue Hayman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Simon Hoare: In a moment. The Government have been absolutely right to pursue a policy that says that adult social care, particularly of the elderly, is best delivered in the home, not a home, but the reduction in the moneys available to county councils to deliver adult social care turns that welcome policy firmly on its head and renders it undeliverable.

In summary, this is a very poor and disappointing deal for my county of Dorset. My residents and councillors, and the officers who work flat out in my county and district councils, are only asking for equity and fairness. The current proposal delivers neither. It would reduce local government to being neither sustainable nor deliverable. In its current form, I cannot support it.

8.7 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare). I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to hold this debate on rural funding, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), who, for all the time I have been in this House, has been a strong voice and strong leader on behalf of our rural communities and fairer funding.

I will not go into as much detail on rural funding as my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset, but I will say that I was a Cornwall county councillor from 2001 and I can remember the changes introduced by the then Labour Government, which severely disadvantaged places such as Cornwall. I acknowledge that the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), and his predecessors in the last Parliament have done their best to rebalance the situation.

I am going to focus on rural transport. I was born and grew up in a small village in my constituency, where I currently live. When I first entered the workforce—I worked for the South Western Electricity Board in Plymouth—I had to get a bus, then a ferry and then another two buses to get to work. It took me some time just to get there in the morning and I would have problems if bad weather caused the ferry not to run, as I could not afford a car and therefore could not drive around to the Tamar bridge.

Today I can go downstairs from this place to the station, not look at a timetable and still see a train within a couple of minutes. In many villages, it can take two hours—sometimes days—before there is a train, and some small communities are not served by trains at all. Many work routes are impossible because of the timetables. Although it is clear that a large percentage of the population drive, it is also important to have an alternative. Everyone has periods during which they cannot drive, whether because the car has broken down, because of their age, or medical or judicial reasons, or because they simply cannot get back from the pub as it would be illegal to drive. Unlike in towns, where a local can be found a few hundred metres from home, the same journey in the country is frequently one of a few miles.

[Mrs Sheryll Murray]

Train stations are often at a great distance and transport must frequently be found to go to a station, which means that stations cannot be a solution in their own right. There is simply not the demand for train services in rural areas. My nearest station is 8 miles away. In the neighbouring constituency of North Cornwall, there are no train stations at all. Such forms of transport cost money, especially for those who can least afford them and those who cannot drive.

Although many children in cities can walk to school, the transport infrastructure in the country is far more costly. Children often live a considerable distance from school, and because of their age, they cannot drive. That means a considerable burden on school transport, which often needs to be borne by the local authority before a child can be educated.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): One of the things my local authority—like my hon. Friend's, it is a poor one—would like is the right to allocate the less popular bus routes with the more popular routes so that bus companies can still make a living. That power needs to be devolved.

Mrs Murray: That is something my hon. Friend the Minister could consider.

There is also a problem with specialist schools, which are often a considerable distance away from where children live. Facilities can also be more difficult to get to. As well as having to travel many miles to the local swimming pool or to see a film at a cinema, we have to look at essential amenities, such as doctors, dentists and hospitals. I worked as a doctors' receptionist at one of my rural practices for more than 21 years, and I used to try to arrange people's appointments around the bus timetable, but that was not always possible. My nearest hospital is over the Tamar in Plymouth, and getting there involves a ferry or a long trip around by the Tamar bridge. Google Maps shows it takes one and a half hours to get there by public transport.

Such matters create considerable transport costs for anyone in a rural area, and especially for any local authority that must help people to get around these vast areas. It is simply not financially viable for the private sector to run such services on a regular or affordable basis, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) said. These rural communities, such as my own, need assistance with that extra burden. Last week, I spoke on the importance of food security, and I remind my hon. Friends that it is in these rural areas that we produce our food.

I want to finish with a complaint from one of my long-standing councillors. Councillor Armand Toms from Looe wrote to me recently, although I acknowledge that he must also raise this matter in Cornwall Council. He said in his email:

"Year on year the revenue from the Cornwall Council car parks in Looe is going up hitting the local community and tourism. Yet the town gets very little if nothing in return and has taken on public conveniences which will cost over a million pounds in the next ten years."

I remind the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset that when town councillors have the ability to increase a precept without being called to

account for it, that often has the same effect as raising council tax revenue by the back door. In Councillor Toms' words:

"I believe that Cornwall Council is treating Looe's car parks as cash cows."

Those are his words, not mine. He is a Cornwall councillor, but I point out that he is not a Conservative one.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that that is the case right across Cornwall and not just unique to Looe? Newquay in my constituency, which raises more money from car parks than any other town in Cornwall, is just the same. The council keeps putting up the car parking charges, but the town gets very little back.

Mrs Murray: I completely agree. Cornwall Council seems to be taking revenue from its revenue-raising amenities, but offloading the costly amenities we provide in tourist areas on to town and parish councils.

Simon Hoare: Does my hon. Friend share my view that when town and parish councils take on public conveniences, it would be enormously helpful if they became exempt from business rates?

Mrs Murray: That is another thing I fully support. If we are providing a public facility, we should at least help town and parish councils to run them—but I digress.

Councillor Toms has claimed, of the whole issue of car parks:

"With the last minister saying that he would do something about this I was wondering what the new minister will do. Can you ask and see what can be done because there is a problem and coastal towns are being hit?"

It is important to find a funding solution for our transport issues in rural areas, rather than to slam these costs on to the motorist time and again. I have some sympathy with the Minister. As a councillor in the early 2000s, I saw the effects on rural areas of the changes made by the Government of the time, and we must rebalance those changes, although I appreciate that that will take time.

I remind the Minister that many people see the car as an essential in rural areas. I certainly could not do my job without access to one. I ask him simply to evaluate these important issues and to reflect on them when he considers local government funding.

8.17 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the beautifully presented case made by my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray).

I am a former businessman, and fairness was a guiding principle of my business career. I think it will be the most commonly used word in this evening's debate. Like many of my colleagues, I stood on a platform of getting a fairer deal for our rural areas. They do not get a fair deal today.

The provisional settlement is the opposite of fair. In effect, there will be a 37% reduction in North Yorkshire County Council's budget, versus an average reduction for metropolitan areas of 19%. Compared with what would happen under a flat-rate reduction, counties

across the UK will be £161 million worse off in cash terms in 2016-17, while metropolitan authorities will be £73 million better off. That is a massive redistribution. In effect, council tax increases in my constituency and others like mine will be supporting London and metropolitan areas.

North Yorkshire County Council is one of the biggest losers, on the back of what is already a bad deal. A band D taxpayer in North Yorkshire pays about £1,430 a year, whereas one in Westminster pays £670 a year. Nationally, as my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) pointed out, people in rural areas pay about £81 a year more in council tax, but get about £130 less in their settlement funding allocation. We pay more, we earn less and we get fewer services.

Services are harder to deliver in rural areas. We have many bus passes in Thirsk and Malton, but very few buses because it is so difficult to provide buses on a commercial basis and it is getting more challenging to do so. All we are asking for is a fair deal. We welcomed the increase in the rural services delivery grant to £65 million a year, but that is back-loaded. Effectively, in 2016-17 it will deliver only about £4.5 million. The gap is widening, not narrowing. That is happening on the back of other areas where we do not get a fair deal, be it healthcare or schools, although huge progress has been made in this Parliament to remedy that situation.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the Government's promise to bring in fair school funding. We all welcome that. However, in the last Parliament, when reductions were made in local government funding, they were uniform. If the Government saved 11%, everybody's grant was cut by 11%. That did not close the gap, but there was the development of the rural services delivery grant. In this Parliament, the proposal is that metropolitan areas will see their local government grant reduced by less than 20%, but in his area it will be reduced by 30%-plus. Does he agree that that is not acceptable, as it will make an already invidious situation even worse?

Kevin Hollinrake: I absolutely agree. I hope that this campaign will be as successful as my hon. Friend's campaign for fair funding for rural schools.

This debate is not about the size of the cake. Local authorities need to share the burden of balancing the books. Governments of both colours have run deficits for 28 of the past 34 years. We are still running a deficit this year of about £75 billion. We need to make cuts. The challenges ahead will be about increasing social security budgets. Sixty years ago, social security accounted for 11% of spending. It now accounts for 28%. Health spending has gone from 7% of spending to 18%. Those issues are particularly profound in rural areas. We know that we need to make cuts. There is no alternative that will balance the books.

This debate is not about the size of the cake, but about how the cake is divided. North Yorkshire expected a flat-rate cut, which would have meant a 27% reduction. That is a challenging reduction. In the words of our chief executive, it would be "tough but understandable". The proposed 37% reduction, which amounts to £23.7 million, is £6.9 million worse than a flat-rate reduction. The social care precept on the council tax

will raise only £4.8 million, so we will be £2 million worse off, and that money is supposed to help our adult social care—another very profound issue in my constituency, which has seen huge increases in the elderly population. There will be a 20% increase in the number of over-65s and a 50% increase in the number of over-95s in the next five years.

We need to make sure that we get a fair deal. Of course, local authorities need to play their part in that. They need to develop greater synergies and more efficiencies. In the local authority area of North Yorkshire County Council, there are nine local authorities. I do not know how sustainable that number is in the longer term. I fully support reorganisation. At a time when we are losing services, local government must be more efficient.

One could say that local authorities should use their reserves, but many of those reserves are committed, particularly to flooding schemes, for which we have seen an increased need in my area over the past few weeks, and to supporting the roll-out of broadband, improving our roads and filling in potholes. There is a feeling among my constituents that we are not getting a fair deal, so I call on Ministers to revise the proposal to ensure that there is fairness for people in both urban and rural areas.

8.24 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) on securing this debate and on the fantastic work he has done in this area, particularly on the Rural Fair Share campaign, of which I am very proud to be a patron.

I will address my remarks principally towards North Devon, but will start with some general comments. We must remember from the outset that we are talking about taxpayers' money, so it is right that we take careful decisions. I get that. All areas of spending have to be reviewed. The Government are making considerable progress in putting the nation's finances on a sound footing, compared with what we inherited. I get that too and the people of North Devon also get it.

However, this settlement raises considerable concerns for North Devon. First, the overall grant for North Devon District Council is reducing from £4.9 million this year to £4.18 million in the next. That does not sound like a big figure, but it is a significant reduction for a small local authority. I have met the leader of the council, Councillor Des Brailey, and he has left me in no doubt whatever that he faces some very difficult decisions as a result of the settlement.

I want to pick up on a couple of points that have been made by hon. Members on both sides of the House that are relevant to the challenge faced by North Devon District Council. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) is co-sponsoring the debate. It is good that it is a cross-party initiative, although the Liberal Democrats are conspicuous by their absence. None the less, the hon. Lady made a very good point about visitors to her area and mine. North Devon prides itself on being a very popular tourist destination, but we get not a penny more for the extraordinary increase in, in effect, the population of North Devon that occurs for several weeks of the year. This settlement does not take account of that fundamental unfairness.

[Peter Heaton-Jones]

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) made a very good point about areas of deprivation and coastal areas in particular, as did my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray). He said that we have areas of coastal deprivation that often go unnoticed. I have invited the Minister to visit Ilfracombe in my constituency. I am sure that his response is in the post. In Ilfracombe, I have one of the most deprived wards in the south-west. That is something that North Devon District Council has to deal with, but this settlement does not allow it to do so.

We must also consider the extra money that the Government give to rural areas such as North Devon. Yes, I am delighted that that is being increased nationally to £65.5 million in the next four years, but it is being back-loaded, not front-loaded, and there will be only marginal benefit to North Devon next year. The total figure is considerably lower than the £130 million increase that was calculated by the Rural Fair Share campaign, and it will simply get us to a standstill—it is considerably less than what is required.

The settlement figure for Devon County Council has also been reduced, which is a worry because that will simply add to the pressures on local services and council tax payers in North Devon. To set a balanced budget for 2016-17, Devon will need to make savings of more than £34 million, on top of savings made in the past five years, which amount to £174 million. That is a huge reduction and a huge challenge for Devon County Council.

The two authorities to which I have referred—North Devon District Council and Devon County Council—are both well-behaved, competent, Conservative-controlled councils. That is the point: councillors and officers are working hard to deliver good services and value for money for the taxpayers of North Devon. The Government should be helping them to do that, although I fear that with this current settlement, they are not doing so.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: The system in Devon is slightly different from that in Cornwall because we have a unitary authority and Devon has a two-tier primary authority system. Does my hon. Friend notice that his constituents are having excessive council tax imposed on them by services being offloaded from the district and county authority on to town and parish councils, as is happening in Cornwall?

Peter Heaton-Jones: We could happily spend considerable time on the debate about unitary versus multi-tiered authorities, but my focus is to ensure that whatever system we have presents value for money to council tax payers. That is what is being delivered by Conservative-controlled North Devon District Council and Devon County Council, and the Government need to assist them in that.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a great point on behalf of his local councils, which very much mirrors my own experience in High Peak. Almost 10 years ago we entered into a shared service review with Staffordshire Moorlands, thereby saving our council tax payers a lot of money. It was a trailblazing scheme across regions and across the county, yet we have all the problems that my hon. Friend mentions about tourism and we do not even qualify for

the rural services delivery grant. We are being kicked twice, and it is making life extremely difficult for what is a prudently and well-run Conservative local council in the High Peak area.

Peter Heaton-Jones: My hon. Friend makes a strong point on behalf of his area which, as he says, is mirrored in North Devon.

In 2016-17 some specific grants were included in the funding base for Devon County Council, and if those are excluded to give a more accurate like-for-like comparison, the reduction in grant for that council is 17.4%, compared with an average of 16.6% for the shire counties. Not only do we as a rural area do worse in comparison with urban areas, we are even doing worse in comparison with other rural areas. That seems something of a double whammy for Devon.

At the other end of the local government spectrum, let me echo a point that was ably made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset—he has just retaken his place. He noted how one of his town or parish councils had complained how difficult it was to plan ahead because of the annual “will they or won’t they?” capping saga, and exactly the same point was made to me by Barnstaple Town Council, which has the same horror to face every year. That is stopping it planning ahead and adequately providing the services that it needs to provide, and I urge the Minister to consider that.

There are some beneficial aspects to the settlement. I accept that the rural urban funding gap is gradually closing, and the longer, four-year settlement period is welcome as it will help local authorities considerably with their forward planning. We will not have that worried look at the Advent calendar every December to wonder when the settlement will come and what it will be, and I welcome those two points.

Graham Stuart: I hate to interrupt my hon. Friend as he moves to his peroration, but I do not believe that there will be any closing of the gap. The proposal is precisely for lower reductions in the central Government grant for metropolitan areas than for rural areas and, even with the increase in the rural services delivery grant, we will see a widening, not a closing, of an already iniquitous gap.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I am sure the Minister will clarify that. I was coming on to say in my concluding remarks that although those two elements appear to be welcome, they are not enough. I say that quite plainly to the Minister.

I am disappointed overall. I believe there is more we can do as a Government to assist areas such as North Devon. That is why I have written to the Secretary of State. I have in my hand a piece of paper: a letter I have written to the Secretary of State. It is designed to be helpful and to suggest ways in which we could, as a Government, help areas such as Devon, in particular North Devon. I hope we can achieve a fairer settlement for these areas. I look forward to working with the Minister, his colleagues and other colleagues in areas similar to mine to help to make that happen. I say this gently but firmly to the Minister, and, I have to say, with some regret: at the moment, the Government have got

this wrong. We have time to put it right and I appeal to the Minister that we do so, for the sake of North Devon and other rural areas.

8.35 pm

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): I would like to start by introducing a bit of balance, to make the Minister aware that we are not all entirely against him, and welcome the commitment the Government have made to equalise spending on schools. My hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) secured an excellent debate in Westminster Hall at the end of last year in which we were able to advance our views. We had some very encouraging responses from the Minister's colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah).

We very much welcome the investment the Government are making to tackle poor broadband connections in rural areas, their commitment to encourage the mobile phone industry to tackle "not spots", their welcome commitment—this is particularly important in Somerset—to improve flood defences in our county, and some very important improvements to our road and rail network, so it is not all bad. While imperfect, these Government funding commitments are very welcome and will be an important development to our local economies. It would just be great if they could be accelerated.

That said, Somerset is among the worst-funded local authorities in the country. Currently, those in Hackney receive well over three times the amount per head than residents in Somerset. I do not doubt there are plenty of challenges in Hackney, but it is important that the House recognises that there are plenty of challenges in rural areas too, many of which have been articulated well this evening. I will come on to talk about some of those challenges in my area, but it is important to realise the real deprivation in rural areas too. Some of the most deprived wards in the south-west of England are in my constituency, yet they are in towns and villages that, if I were to list them, would make people picture something very different from the reality of some of the lives of their residents. There is digital exclusion, too, and an isolation that is not felt in urban areas. Lower average earnings, a deteriorating demographic, and poor road, rail and bus connections add to the deprivation I have just mentioned.

Given the challenges we face in Somerset—and in Dorset, Devon, Cornwall and all the other places represented here this evening—one would imagine that the funding formula would be set to close the gap. Sadly, that is not the case. Urban areas will lose about 21% of their funding in the next five years, but in Somerset we will lose 26%. There will be Members in the Chamber whose counties will be losing even more than that. As a proportion, the gap is widening not closing.

It is important to place it on record that our local authorities in Somerset are guilty of good behaviour. They have already been riding to the instructions the Government have set. Sedgemoor District Council recently announced a co-operative working arrangement with South Somerset District Council, which crosses the partisan divide. There is a sharing of chief executive

and there are greater synergies in the back office. Mendip District Council has a fantastic hub in its council offices, which brings together police and other local services so they can all take advantage of that council building and achieve a saving. Indeed, it has been outsourcing many of its functions to achieve greater cost-effectiveness.

Somerset County Council, too, is guilty of good behaviour, having worked incredibly hard to tackle the enormous debt left by the previous Liberal Democrat administration—no matter how much the latter try to forget it when criticising the council. It is heavily involved in joint working with Devon, North Somerset, and Bath and North East Somerset, and is considering the smarter use of buildings. Particularly successful is how it is trying to use libraries: Glastonbury library will soon be overhauled and be a place not only for books and the internet but to see the police, the citizens advice bureau and local council and public health representatives—all sorts of things delivered under one roof, achieving a welcome saving for local government.

This evening, we have heard many examples of the challenges of rural life and the expense, both public and private, to our constituents. On a particularly pressing issue, Glastonbury, which Members might consider to be a significant place, has recently discovered that all three of its remaining banks are to close within 12 weeks of each other. It is an extraordinary thing to happen in a place as important and internationally famous as Glastonbury, yet it is going to happen. All those who walk to the bank in Glastonbury, many of whom are elderly or less mobile, will now have to get the bus to Street or elsewhere. The banks will say, "You can do all this online", but these are the people, even if they have the connectivity, who are least comfortable online. They will travel on the bus, requiring a public service they would not have needed if at least one of the banks had stayed.

We in rural areas pay the same for our mobile phones and internet connections as those who live in urban areas, yet we get so much less, and we travel further for our healthcare. Some appointments are inaccessible for those who rely on public transport. There are parts of my constituency from which one cannot reach Taunton, Yeovil, Bath or Bristol for an out-patient appointment, or from which it is extraordinarily difficult to reach a GP surgery or health clinic. I have met constituents who allowed minor conditions to fester because they put off making the journey until it became sufficiently urgent that they needed an ambulance to hospital. That cannot be right.

I have met young people in my constituency who allow the cost of public transport, or their inability to access a council-funded bus pass, to influence their decisions about the qualifications and education they seek post-16. It is ridiculous that they should limit their life chances because they cannot afford a bus pass to get to college to complete their A-levels, apprenticeship or something else.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) spoke eloquently about carparks. Free parking is very important to the rejuvenation of our high streets, yet local authorities are over a barrel because parking has become an essential part of their revenue generation, meaning they cannot free up free parking because they would risk no longer being able to balance their books. That is a real challenge.

[James Heappey]

Adult social care, which we have spoken about already, is a huge and growing expense. The south-west, and Somerset in particular, is a popular place for retirement. I welcome that and think we should celebrate it—it is because it is simply the most beautiful region in the UK—but that growth in the retired population comes at an extraordinary cost. I met a carer before Christmas who told me that her clients for a day were spread over 300 square miles. That means that that carer can see fewer people than her counterpart in an urban area, which means that the cost of adult social care is so much greater in our part of the world.

Sue Hayman: Very briefly on vulnerable older people, I was shocked to discover that nearly 300 elderly people died in Cumbria last winter because they did not have proper heating or were not able to look after themselves properly. If the cuts to rural authorities continue, I am concerned that carers will not spot these vulnerable people as they have in the past and the problem will be exacerbated. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

James Heappey: I very much agree with the hon. Lady. I, too, have been struck by what I have heard when I have met social care providers in my constituency. While I trust absolutely that they would deliver first-rate care on their visits, they have been imploring me to get permission for them to visit people just once a day for 30 minutes, rather than twice for 15 or 20 minutes. That might make sense, in that ultimately the person will be getting one, better quality visit, but it would reduce the contact that these vulnerable people have with the outside world and extend the length of time they go without seeing anybody who is supposed to be keeping an eye on them. That is a challenge we face, and we may have to go for what the care providers are suggesting, but it would come at considerable risk.

That is an example of just how expensive it is to do these things in our parts of the world, and the Government need to recognise that in the way they fund local authorities. We understand well—certainly those of us on the Conservative Benches—the Government's need to balance the nation's finances. I have been struck by the sentiment expressed this evening, which is very much not that we expect more from the Government but that we expect fairer spending in what they have already committed to spend. I implore the Government please to implement the rural services delivery grant not in part but in full, and as early as possible; to incentivise our councils by confirming that they can keep all that they raise in rates; and to commit to ending the inequality between urban and rural funding, albeit not by asking rural residents to bridge the gap by paying higher taxes, when, as I have said, they are already enduring a higher cost of living, and on lower wages too.

Above all else, let us certainly commit to ensuring that the gap will not widen on this Government's watch. Sparsity ensures that the cost of doing things in places such as my constituency is more expensive than doing them elsewhere. As I have said, carers spend longer in their cars. School buses are required to carry more pupils over longer distances, which requires more fuel, and the same goes for rubbish and recycling trucks. Less can be done online because there simply is not the

connectivity. We pay more in tax and receive less in Government spending, and all to achieve the minimum in local authority service provision. We are asking Somerset County Council to achieve something akin to alchemy. While I applaud it for doing a very good job indeed, it is little wonder that things such as bus services, libraries, road improvements and myriad things besides—things that we would think of as essential to providing the grease for rural life—are coming to be seen as discretionary.

In rural areas we face deprivation, isolation, higher taxes and a contraction of the local services that are so valued and needed by our constituents, and we risk making that worse, not better, under this Conservative Government. I urge the Government to find another way. We must spend our money more fairly and bridge the gap between rural and urban.

8.49 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I am glad to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), not least because the name of his constituency is easy to remember and pronounce.

Fair funding for rural areas is something we have argued for in west Cornwall for as long as I can remember. The truth is that over successive Parliaments we have received less money per person than many urban areas. Over the years, this has affected our ability to care for our elderly, educate our children, provide public transport, deliver our health services, care for people with severe learning difficulties, police our streets, invest in our infrastructure and deliver council services, including refuse collection, public toilets and maintaining rural roads. All those have suffered as a result of years and years of underfunding.

This matters because my constituency continues to have some of the most deprived communities in the country. This debate, it seems to me, has largely been a competition about what level of deprivation can be found in each constituency. What I can say for Cornwall is that we are so deprived that the whole of Europe recognises it by giving us shedloads of money to try to put it right! It is fair to say that west Cornwall and other Cornish councils probably have the most deprived areas.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that a failure of the European scheme is purely and simply the fact that Cornwall is in the third tranche of getting a handout because we are an area of deprivation?

Derek Thomas: I welcome that intervention, as it raises a point that I was just about to make.

Over the years, rather than give us fair funding, Government grants and generous handouts from Brussels have attempted to address deprivation, but the reality is that unless people can plan properly for the future, get fair funding and properly invest in public services, we cannot address the issues surrounding deprivation and how to lift people out of a poor environment. We need proper funding and we need to know that it is going to be fair to help us to plan for the future.

Three things provide encouragement and convince me that we can address the challenges that a rural area such as west Cornwall faces. The first is that the Government recognise the additional costs of delivering services in more sparsely populated areas. The second is that this

Government have begun to address the gap between funding in urban and rural areas. The third is that people who deliver services in Cornwall are now working hard together to a greater extent than at any previous time, and that there is the political will to bring about the necessary changes to secure good services for the future. However, the provisional local government settlement announced just before Christmas threatens that good work and has the potential to undo all the work that has been done to deal with the problem of fair funding for rural areas.

I welcome this Government's recognition of the additional costs of delivering services in more sparsely populated areas. I welcome the extra £65 million made available through the rural services delivery grant. By the Government's own calculations, however, that should be £130 million. The truth is that rather than close the gap in funding between urban and rural areas, the provisional Government funding settlement widens the gap over the next four years, which is a disaster for areas such as mine. Cornwall Council, which Cornish MPs met on Friday morning, has the opportunity to charge a 2% levy, but it learned that 75% of that would be taken up just to meet the commitment to the living wage. It has the power to increase council tax by 4% each year.

Mrs Murray: Does my hon. Friend agree that the comment from Cornwall Council was quite strange in the light of the fact that last year the Liberal Democrat/Independent-led Council put out a press release claiming to be paying its staff the living wage?

Derek Thomas: That does seem peculiar, but this Government have introduced a generous living wage that will give many people the opportunity to earn more money and increase household incomes.

The reality is that if we ask council tax payers to contribute an extra 4% each year, without taking into account any increases that town and parish councils might have to include, it will have a detrimental effect on one of the poorest areas of the country. For years, the Conservative-led Government and the Conservative-led Cornwall Council froze council tax, but unless this Government properly address the issue of underfunded rural areas, councils will have little choice but to increase council tax to the max. Thus my constituents, many of whom are among the poorest in the UK, will have to pay 20% more in council tax in 2020. I said earlier that Cornwall has the leaders and the political will to reform public services. However, true reform requires extra cash, not less, if councils are to improve services today and save money tomorrow.

Now is the time to give fair funding to councils such as mine, rather than increasing the gap further. I ask the Government to reconsider the settlement so that councils such as mine have the money they need to deliver the services we need, and so that they feel valued and part of the optimistic future in which we all want to share. I say to the Government: please do not leave Cornwall behind any longer.

8.55 pm

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): I, too, thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the opportunity to debate a very important issue.

I share many of the concerns that have already been expressed by other Members. The historical imbalance between the Government's funding of rural communities and their funding of urban areas is stark. One aspect of many rural communities is remoteness. All counties are distinctive, but the Isle of Wight is particularly remote. That, of course, is due to our unique separation from the mainland by the Solent.

The Government are doing their best in very challenging circumstances, and Isle of Wight Council is also doing its best. Most councillors understand that they must make difficult decisions, and that just moaning does not solve anything. The council is currently led by a group of independents, and that makes its position even harder. There is no underlying political philosophy pulling the group together; it consists of individuals whose views encompass a wide political spectrum. I do not envy the council's leader, Jonathan Bacon, who must try to pull them all in the same direction.

The council recently asked to meet the Minister, and I was glad to arrange a meeting. Councillor Bacon very sensibly invited the leader of the largest opposition group, Conservative councillor Dave Stewart, to join the delegation. They outlined the problems very clearly to the Minister, who recognises the island's uniqueness and the challenges it brings, and also realises that the council cannot do some things that mainland authorities can do to save money. The council will now make some suggestions, which were discussed as a formal response to the consultation on the draft settlement, and I hope that some amendments will be made as a result.

I have never been a supporter of the European Union. It is a meddling, costly, unnecessary bureaucracy, and we should leave at the earliest possible opportunity. However, since as far back as 1997, the remoteness of islands has been an important European issue. The conference that adopted the treaty of Amsterdam recognised

"that island regions suffer from structural handicaps linked to their island status",

and acknowledged that

"specific measures may be taken, where justified, in favour of these regions".

We want the Government to look at the problems facing the Isle of Wight in the round. When necessary, unique answers to our unique problems should be considered. The challenges faced by the Isle of Wight, in common with other island communities, include difficult employment conditions with much seasonal work. The high cost of cross-Solent transport handicaps economic growth, limits access to mainland opportunities and affects tourism, which is a key plank of our local economy. Visitors to the Isle of Wight numbered 1 million last year alone. We also have a high proportion of elderly residents with very high costs of care. Education standards are low, and, although a ministerial directive to bring in support from Hampshire has helped, there is still a long way to go. Isle of Wight residents deserve access to high-quality services every bit as much as people on the mainland. Isle of Wight Council has made some suggestions. I urge the Government to work with the council to help it to deliver for islanders.

I would like the Minister to set out what would happen should any council be unable to meet its statutory duties. It is not always clear when that might be—in effect, where the "tipping point" is. For example,

[Mr Andrew Turner]

some services must be at “reasonable levels”; similarly vague wording is also used. Who is to judge when “reasonable levels” across a range of statutory services cannot be met? Once such a judgment is made, what happens? We are dealing with, among others, vulnerable people. In such a scenario, what becomes of them? I am not the only one asking such questions and the Library has been unable to answer my question. I look forward, therefore, to hearing a great deal more about that in the closing speeches.

9 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) on securing this important debate through the Backbench Business Committee. It is a critical topic. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s responses to the many excellent points that have been made across the House.

I represent Croydon North, which is perhaps not the most rural constituency, but at heart the debate is about fairness, and that is a matter that concerns us all, wherever we represent in the UK. The most unfair aspect of the Government’s spending review is how they have targeted the biggest cuts on the poorest areas. They have placed the greatest burden on those least able to bear it. Our rural communities are among those that have been the hardest hit.

There are real issues of poverty in rural areas. We have heard Members talking eloquently about those issues during the debate. Households in rural areas are more likely to be in fuel poverty than those in urban areas. People living in rural communities find it harder to access key services such as schools, hospitals and shops. As my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) said, often that is because of poor, limited public transport. Housing costs are spiralling out of many people’s reach, yet despite all that the Government’s latest spending plans do little to address the growing pressures on rural communities.

Social care has been referred to in the debate. It is a particular problem. The proportion of older people is higher in rural areas than in urban areas; I was impressed by the comments by the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) in that respect. That means these communities will be hit the hardest by the £1 billion funding gap in social care that the Local Government Association, which is Tory led, estimates still remains. That is assuming that every council in the country levies the Chancellor’s 2% council tax precept, and that is not a foregone conclusion.

Families in rural areas spend almost £800 more than the national average on transport. Under the Conservatives, rail fares have gone up by almost 25%, yet complaints about train services are rising in all parts of the country. Services in rural areas are often unreliable, where they exist at all, and rolling stock is often out of date.

Fares have gone up by 27% since the Prime Minister first entered Downing Street, yet fewer than half of all small rural settlements have a regular bus service. Rural communities should be able and should have the power to regulate their own bus services, as London can, helping to ensure that the right services are available at the right fare.

Low pay is endemic in many rural communities. The gap between urban and rural wages has grown by £1,000 since 2010, yet the Government have abolished the Agricultural Wages Board. Research shows that, after London and Oxford, starter homes are least affordable in rural areas. Housing costs are soaring while the Government have allowed rural wages to decline. Now, to make things worse, the Government are forcing councils to sell off what little affordable social housing remains.

Cuts in funding have had detrimental effects on all sorts of services. We have seen youth services close in rural communities. Communities have been plunged into darkness when councils have been forced to switch off street lighting during the night. Neighbourhood policing has been decimated to such an extent that Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary has reported that car crime has been all but decriminalised, and cuts in vocational training and further education mean that people are unable to develop the skills they need for taking up employment opportunities in rural communities.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech; it is incorrect in only one way. Earnings have not dropped in rural areas; they simply have not grown as fast as they have in urban areas, such has been the economic success of this Government. The case he is making illustrates the need to close the gap between urban and rural areas, whatever the Treasury sets as the overall budget. Is it now the Labour party’s official policy to reduce and close the gap in spending power between rural and urban areas?

Mr Reed: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is a decline in wages relative to the cost of living in those areas. The Labour party is looking for fair funding across the Government, and I will say more about that later if he will allow me.

Pulling all that together, we are seeing a toxic cocktail of rising fares for worsening public transport, inaccessible public services, demand for services rising faster than funding, fewer good job opportunities, falling wages and soaring housing costs. People are being priced out of living and working in rural areas.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: I think I am hearing the hon. Gentleman confirm that Labour would reverse the changes it made in the funding formula in the early 2000s. Am I correct?

Mr Reed: What the Labour party is seeking is fair funding so that all communities and all parts of the country can benefit.

Simon Hoare: These are simple questions that require a yes or no answer, and the hon. Gentleman cannot hide behind the obfuscation that he wants to see fair funding. Does he believe that the allocation of funding should be done on a fair and equitable basis? Does he believe that the gap between rural and urban authorities should be closed? Yes or no?

Mr Reed: I am afraid that I can insist on fair funding. I believe that when resources are available, they should follow need. Unfortunately, that is not what is happening under this Government. I spent a few happy days in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency over the new year—I spotted a marvellous picture of him on the notice board

in Milton Abbas—but I understand that such areas are suffering because the Government have not managed to get this right.

Previously we have heard the Government talk about an alleged improved funding settlement for rural areas, and perhaps we will hear that again from the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) this evening. That is not what we have been hearing from his own Back Benchers today, however. The Government have been trying to play off poorer rural areas against poorer urban areas, but this cannot be a race to the bottom. This should be about helping communities in every part of the country to thrive.

James Heapey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Reed: I will not, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me. I am supposed to take only 10 minutes for my contribution.

Despite a string of assurances from the Government, we still have no idea how they will ensure a fair share-out of funding once business rates are localised. They have failed to make any announcement on how an equalisation mechanism might work, despite promising that such an announcement would be made during the autumn statement. Rural authorities remain concerned that the localisation of business rates could work against them, depriving them of funding and allowing them to fall back in relation to non-rural areas.

James Heapey: I thank the shadow Minister for giving way. I understand from the Chair that there is no time limit, so he has time to take our interventions. I say this to him in the softest way, because tonight's debate has been refreshingly non-partisan. Rural Britain is listening, and it is not clear that you are advocating a rebalancing to close the gap. My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker—I have just committed a deadly sin! It is apparent to me that the shadow Minister is not committing to a rebalancing between urban and rural areas. I invite him one more time to commit to that, so that we can all be clear that that is Labour policy.

Mr Reed: I do not think either rural or urban Britain would welcome the hon. Gentleman's implication that this should be a race to the bottom, with one part of the country competing against another. Resources should follow need, fair and simple. That is what will lie at the heart of a fair funding mechanism, which I hope the Minister or someone from the Government will be able to announce to us before very much longer.

The rural authorities that have the concerns I have expressed are right to be worried. Westminster City Council, which covers the major shopping centres in central London, collects 8% of all of England's business rates income—that is more than Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Liverpool and Bristol combined. Without a fair redistribution system, rural communities, like other communities in the country, will simply be left to sink. As my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) pointed out, many businesses in sparsely populated rural areas pay little or no business rates. The Government have failed to invest in the world-class broadband infrastructure that could and should be a catalyst for business growth in those areas. There is simply no capacity to replace funding that will be lost when the revenue support grant goes.

The Government like to talk about their commitment to devolution, but we know that that is not real from the fact that the Secretary of State who sponsored the Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill is also sponsoring the Housing and Planning Bill, which contains more than 30 measures taking power away from local communities and centralising it here in Whitehall. Rural communities are feeling the gap between reality and Government rhetoric the most. The biggest devolution deals have been agreed with city regions, leaving most county areas and rural areas to fall behind yet again. Those areas need to be a full part of the devolution agenda, too; they cannot just be a footnote to city deals.

Rural areas have had a raw deal for a long time; they have been cut out of funding, investment and new powers. I welcome this debate, in which some excellent and interesting points have been made by Members from all parts of the House, and I hope that this evening might mark a turning point in the Government's neglect of rural Britain.

9.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): It is a pleasure to respond to this important debate, and I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) and other Members on securing it. I pay tribute to their valuable contributions and, in particular, to the great passion that my hon. Friend and colleagues have shown for our rural areas. I would like also to take this opportunity to recognise the hard work and dedication of rural authorities across the country over the past five years and their contribution to improving local services in challenging times. It is local knowledge, experience and capability that will help to overcome the challenges faced by rural communities, to improve local services and to grow rural economies. We are committed to supporting rural areas in fulfilling that role.

We recognise that rural communities face particular issues, and that some rural councils with low council tax bases face particular pressures. That is why we are determined to continue tackling the deficit to secure the country's economic future, while also providing help and support to rural authorities. We want rural areas to contribute to and benefit from economic growth. The rural economy is worth £210 billion. Our rural development programme for England has invested more than £400 million in projects to support the rural economy, and we are investing a further £3.5 billion by 2020. We are also investing £780 million for areas that commercial broadband coverage will not reach. To support areas further, we will grow the local growth fund to £12 billion by 2021.

In December, the Secretary of State announced an historic four-year settlement for local government, on which we are consulting until the end of this week. Our proposal is designed as a sustainable pathway to transform over-centralised Britain into one of the most decentralised countries in the world. By 2020, local government will be entirely funded by its own resources—council tax, business rates, and fees and charges—which was never thought possible until very recently.

Since the beginning of this Parliament, we have been honest about the fact that this change must be fiscally neutral, and that we would phase out Government

[Mr Marcus Jones]

grants and give councils new responsibilities. We are currently consulting on the settlement, and all councils, including those from rural areas, and Members of this House are welcome to respond. Indeed, we can take many comments made by Members this evening as representations to that consultation. I have also already met a large number of local councils, as well as the Rural Services Network today, as part of that consultation. We had a very constructive discussion and I encouraged them—as I have encouraged all local authorities—to set out in full their detailed observations and suggestions in relation to the consultation.

We want to be candid about our proposal. It does require continued savings from local government in order to meet our deficit target, which should not come as much of a surprise to anyone. The unanimous view across local government is that the biggest cost pressure is on adult social care, which a number of Members have mentioned. Our introduction of the 2% social care precept flexibilities for adult social care and the additional £1.5 billion of extra funding for the better care fund, which will all go to local government, will help to address that, but we do not underestimate the challenges ahead. That is why we argued for the possibility of a four-year budget deal, so that authorities that are affected can look at ways in which they can smooth the path over the four years and use reserves, if they feel that that is appropriate and can be justified to the local authority. However, we also want to make it absolutely clear that, despite invitations to do so, we have made no assumptions in our published figures that councils will use their reserves, whereas the Office for Budget Responsibility assumes that councils will continue to add to their reserves during the spending review period.

Graham Stuart: Many rural residents will ask why it is that, given the need to make savings, the reductions in central Government spending power are disproportionately reducing more in rural areas than in urban areas. By 2019-20, Government-funded spending power in the East Riding of Yorkshire will be £214 per head, while in Kingston upon Hull it will be £468—a 14% reduction in Hull and a 28% reduction in the East Riding of Yorkshire. How is that right or fair?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend has made that point a number of times. It is a significant contribution to the current consultation. I will come on to that point, but the package that we have put forward for local government will continue, notwithstanding his comments, to see a narrowing of the gap between the core spending power for rural and urban authorities.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Jones: Let me make some progress, before I take any more interventions.

Simon Hoare *rose*—

Mr Jones: Yes, I will give way.

Simon Hoare: I am enormously grateful to my hon. Friend. The four-year period to reduce and remove the RSG is understood across the local government piece. Will he advise me what I can say to Dorset County

Council, and indeed what colleagues from Buckinghamshire can say to their county council, about what happens in two years' time when the RSG disappears? All their budgetary planning is now shredded.

Mr Jones: That brings me back to why we introduced a four-year settlement. In a moment, I wish to talk about the move to full business rate retention. Hopefully, within those comments, I will be able to reassure Members that, at this point, it is by no means a done deal.

We have given careful consideration to the challenges that rural areas face. That has led us to propose an increase in support for the most sparsely populated rural areas by increasing the rural services delivery grant from £15.5 million this year to £65 million in 2019-20.

As hon. Members know, the new homes bonus was due to come to an end, but our view is that it has been a useful contributor to the increase in planning permissions being granted, with payments since its introduction in 2011 totalling just under £3.4 billion, reflecting the building of more than 700,000 new homes and the bringing back into use over 100,000 empty homes. We have been able to retain the new homes bonus, subject to reforms on which we are consulting and on which views are being encouraged.

Overall, our proposals are fair. Core spending power for councils will be virtually unchanged over the Parliament—£44.5 billion in 2015-16, and £44.3 billion in 2019-20. This is a substantially slower pace of spending reductions than councils had to deliver between 2009-10 and 2015-16.

The rural-urban funding gap has been falling year on year. Between 2012-13 and 2015-16 it went down by over £200 million, decreasing from 11% to 6% for unitary authorities and from 19% to 11% for districts. Our proposals mean that it will continue falling throughout this spending period, and core spending power will increase by 0.2% for rural areas, compared with a 0.7% reduction for urban areas, by the end of the Parliament.

James Heapey: Will my hon. Friend confirm that if the gap between urban and rural is closing, albeit slowly, unfortunately that is happening on the back of an increased council tax burden in rural areas?

Mr Jones: I hear what my hon. Friend says. Council tax is now 11% lower in real terms than it was in 2010. The Government's assumptions do not assume a 2% increase in council tax, but a consumer prices index inflation increase in council tax. The calculations also show that once we get to the end of this Parliament, if councils were minded to take up the flexibility that has been offered, council tax would still be lower in real terms than it was in 2010.

Sir Edward Garnier: My hon. Friend is doing the best he can and is doing exceptionally well, I am sure. He said that the increase would not be as high as anticipated, but what is the expected increase in council tax that the Government are planning for? That is what we want to know.

Mr Jones: It is down to local authorities whether they feel it right to increase council tax. As I said, the increase that has been built into the figures is 1.3%,

which is currently the rate of inflation, and that does not factor in, as I said, an increase up to the 2% referendum principles.

Let me deal with the issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness raised in relation to full business rate retention. I can assure the House that a number of consultations are still to be undertaken on full business rate retention. No details have been finalised on how that system will work. Obviously we need to ensure that no areas are left behind when we move to the new system, which has been welcomed, as hon. Members have said, and that includes safeguarding a number of rural authorities that are not in as strong a position as many urban authorities when it comes to raising business rates.

We also need to ensure that we incentivise local areas to increase their business rate base and increase growth and the jobs that come with it. We need to look at that in the context of balancing that reward with the risk associated with challenges on revaluations and when business rates are no longer collected. Such instances were mentioned earlier in the debate. I just want to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness that the Government are considering that very carefully for the future.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier) made an extremely powerful case for county areas that include both rural and urban areas. The hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) put the case for Cumbria and mentioned the challenges faced by rural authorities, particularly those affected by the recent flooding. The Government obviously have a great deal of sympathy for the people facing those challenges in Cumbria. We have put forward a significant support package of £60 million to help people in places, such as Cumbria, that have been significantly affected by the recent flooding.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) raised a number of issues. He said that he would like to see more opportunities for district councils to implement a £5 increase in their council tax, rather than the 2% referendum principle. He mentioned the challenge around local planning fees, which I am sure is something we will take on board. He also mentioned the importance of adult social care, as did my hon. Friends the Members for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and for St Ives (Derek Thomas) and a number of other colleagues. As I said earlier, the Government are putting forward an additional £1.5 billion through the better care fund. I would like to reassure hon. Members that, unlike the current iteration of that fund, the £1.5 billion will all be going to local government.

I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) that car parking should not be used, as she put it, as a cash cow. The figures we have prepared certainly do not take into account any increase in fees and charges that local authorities might wish to make.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) made a number of points, one of which was the need, in his view, for local government reorganisation. The Government are willing to listen to proposals, but I am sure that he will know that they must be local proposals that are brought to the Department.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) made a number of points. He mentioned coastal deprivation, which is an extremely important point. He will be glad to know that the coastal communities fund has been extended for another three years, with £90 million. He invited me to visit Ilfracombe, and I look forward to doing so the next time I am in that neck of the woods. During the summer I spent several periods in Cornwall and Devon on visits. I was extremely impressed by the approach of many areas, particularly how local government was trying to deal with the challenges that are currently faced.

Sue Hayman: We have deprived coastal communities in west Cumbria as well. With regard to the retention of full business rates, one of the areas that we get the most funding from is the nuclear industry, from which we retain 50% of business rates, but the proposal for new build is that the Government would take 100% of business rates. Will the Minister confirm that that will be looked at as part of the funding formula?

Mr Jones: Obviously we are looking at the whole of the funding that comes from business rates. I hope that the hon. Lady will be supportive of the nuclear industry, because there seems to be some confusion about that. I hope that she will also support Trident, which is also an important part of industry in this country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) set out the challenges that the island faces. I thank him for bringing representatives of his council to see me last week.

The hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) set out a number of challenges that the Government face in this regard, but he did not say anything about the main reason we are in the position of having to make extremely difficult decisions—the deficit that his party left behind when last in government.

We have recognised the challenges faced in rural areas and agree with many of the points made today. We are committed to supporting our rural areas, even at this time when there are some differences in opinion about how that is achieved. We want to give rural areas as much power as possible to grow their local economies and support their communities. This is a time of big opportunity and expectation of reform in local government. I assure hon. Members that we are listening carefully as we prepare the final settlement and consider how the transition towards 100% business rates retention happens. As I say, we are in a period of consultation. We will add the representations made in this debate to that consultation. I encourage right hon. and hon. Members and their councils to make written representations by Friday. We are listening carefully to colleagues. I have listened carefully to what has been said in the House today, and we continue to listen carefully to our colleagues in local government.

9.32 pm

Graham Stuart: This debate has been a breath of fresh air throughout which there have been tremendous contributions from Members across the House. I am delighted that thanks to the Backbench Business Committee we were able to have this discussion.

Throughout his career, the Minister has been thoughtful, listening and insightful—[*Interruption*] And eloquent—I thank the Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for Skipton

[*Graham Stuart*]

and Ripon (Julian Smith). Prompted by him, I am sure that more kind blandishments can be sent the Minister's way. I am grateful for the Minister's response and for the fact that he and the Secretary of State have listened to us.

The Minister said that he would treat this debate as part of the consultation, which closes this Friday. I have two asks on that. First, he should speak to his ministerial predecessor, who is sitting next to him—my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis). When he was Minister, we were not very happy that there was an equal imposition of reductions in central Government funding to every council when there was such a discrepancy between rural and urban areas. We wanted that gap reduced, and he said, "These are tough times and we have inherited a deficit—I've got to do something that's manageable and realistic." So there was an equal cut in local government grant—11% was being saved and it was done uniformly to everybody. Unfortunately, that will go out of the window in this year's proposed settlement. Metropolitan areas will see a 19% reduction in central Government funding over this Parliament, yet rural areas will see a 30%-plus reduction.

That cannot be right, for all the reasons set out brilliantly, it has to be said, by Labour Members—not only the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) but the shadow Minister, who, I am delighted to say, recognised that rural areas are facing the greatest hit. Anyone who wants to can look at *Hansard* tomorrow and see the Labour spokesman saying that. It is a shame that he did not go further and say that he wants the gap to be closed. Then again, given the Corbynite north London elite who are gathering behind him, it is not surprising—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I think that the hon. Gentleman has inadvertently provoked what seems to be a voluntary identity parade, for which there is no requirement at this late hour.

Graham Stuart: I apologise, Mr Speaker. Anyone who introduces more schizophrenia to the Labour party deserves to be told off by you and others. It is a shame that the logic of the argument so brilliantly espoused by the shadow Minister did not lead to a Labour commitment to do the right thing and close the gap.

My first ask is that, if we are going to make savings—and we Conservative Members say that we do—let us do it equally everywhere, so that there is no discrepancy

between urban and rural when there is already a big gap between the two. As we have established, people in country areas are older, poorer, pay higher council tax and receive fewer services. It has to be right to close the gap, and the way to do that is by delivering, in this Parliament, an increase of £130 million, not £65 million, in the rural services delivery grant.

I think I speak on behalf of Conservative colleagues when I say that, if there is equal pain for everybody and an increase of £130 million in the rural services delivery grant in this Parliament, we would be happy. Our council leaders would still have enormously tough jobs to do, but they would feel that we were all sharing the burden fairly. If the Minister can go to the Secretary of State and deliver that, he will be not only applauded by Conservative Members, but, perhaps more materially to him and his colleagues, supported in the Lobby when we vote on the issue next month.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered local government funding for rural areas.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, I propose to take motions 3 to 6 together.

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

DANGEROUS DRUGS

That the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Temporary Class Drug) (No. 3) Order 2015 (S.I., 2015, No. 1929), dated 23 November 2015, a copy of which was laid before this House on 25 November, be approved.

LEGAL SERVICES

That the draft Legal Services Act 2007 (Claims Management Complaints) (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 17 November, be approved.

INVESTIGATORY POWERS

That the draft Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Interception of Communications: Code of Practice) Order 2015, which was laid before this House on 4 November, be approved.

That the draft Equipment Interference (Code of Practice) Order 2015, which was laid before this House on 4 November, be approved.—(*Margot James.*)

Question agreed to.

Feminism in the School Curriculum

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

9.37 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Last year's AQA board A-level exam paper for politics included the question:

“‘Legislation has failed to deliver equality of outcome in respect of gender and ethnicity.’ Discuss.”

Given that the Department for Education's draft revised version of the A-level politics course was published quietly last year with sections on feminism and gender equality removed, there is a real danger that the issue will be more significant than ever before for future students and, paradoxically, banned in a future version.

I declare an interest, having taught at universities: I taught humanities and social sciences in the red brick and ex-polytechnic sectors between 1998 and my election in May. In my experience, feminism, in all its different varieties—first wave, second wave, radical, black, post-feminism—was always one of the most popular topic options for students, both men and women. The apparent abolition of the whole lot of them in politics courses—how odd that sounds—and their hasty reinstatement, if we are to believe what we are hearing on the grapevine, demonstrates confusion in Government thinking.

As an educator as well as an MP and a woman, I say that any dilution of feminism from the intellectual armoury with which young people need to be equipped to face the modern world should be strongly resisted. In fact, there is an argument to embed and entrench it much more deeply across the whole breadth of the curriculum, beyond the obvious disciplines of sociology and politics.

This tinkering arose in the other place before the Christmas recess. The Education Minister there declared that exam boards were sifting through responses to a public consultation. We still do not know and are none the wiser about where we are with that. The shadow Education spokesman, Lord Watson, noted a “pattern developing”. Earlier this year, we saw women composers put on the A-level music syllabus for the first time, because of a campaign by my constituent Jessy McCabe, who has travelled here to witness the debate tonight. Lord Watson cheekily asked whether

“the Government have any plans to drop the female reproductive system from the biology syllabus”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 22 December 2015; Vol. 767, c. 2448.]

There is a serious point, however, because we must not write women's perspectives and contributions out of our political history.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing tonight's debate, which matters greatly to her. Does she agree that the fact that the Secretary of State for Education, who also holds the women's brief, has ignored the place of women in the curriculum is a travesty, especially as she sits at the very heart of Government policy making?

Dr Huq: I completely agree. You couldn't make it up. “Minister for Women abolishes feminism from politics” does not make for a very good headline.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I discovered feminism through doing my A-levels—not A-level politics, but A-level sociology—which opened my eyes to the inequality that women face. Does she agree that women's voices are often silenced in political debates, and that seems to be a way to silence the women from the past as well as those of the future?

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend makes a very correct point, and anticipates part of my speech. Women's studies should not just be for women; this matters to all of us.

The proposed syllabus implies that women do not belong in politics and that their contributions are not significant. That toxic message has been condemned roundly by loads of people, including the girl guides, whom one would not usually think of as a dangerous radical group. *The Daily Telegraph*, which is normally a loyal, cheerleading Conservative paper, has reported that there will be concessions after, in its words, “plans to drop feminism backfire”.

I am encouraged by the story in *The Independent on Sunday* that feminism will be taught at A-level, and by a tweet from *The Telegraph* today saying that it will be made compulsory.

I would like assurances from the Minister about what is actually going on—to quote Donald Trump involuntarily, “What the hell is going on?”—because this should not be left for us to make inferences from press rumours and the Twittersphere. The Government must now be clear and confirm the number of women thinkers on the new syllabus, their names and whether feminism will be fully reinstated. This is not the first Government U-turn in matters curricular that I have witnessed since becoming an MP.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I must declare an interest as a strong feminist and as a member of the Fawcett Society. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does she agree that it is totally unacceptable that only one female political thinker is identified among the 16 political thinkers mentioned by name in the curriculum? Does that not clearly demonstrate the need for the continuation of feminism, particularly with a clear identification in relation to political education?

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. One out of 16 means 94% are men, which implies that women account for 6%, which is shameful and shocking given that we are 50% of the population. As I say, there is a strange sense of déjà vu, because the Government have also caved in over women composers on the music syllabus, so this has happened twice. On this particular feminist issue, another petition with close to 50,000 signatures has been organised by another constituent of mine. I am blessed to have such gender warrior constituents, both of whom are teenagers, but it should not be left to teenagers to write Government education policy. School kids should not be pointing out the error of the Government's decisions again and again.

What are we talking about? Any good answer to an essay question should start with a definition of terms. The noble Lord Giddens from the other place calls feminism

“the struggle to defend and expand the rights of women”.

[*Dr Huq*]

He traces its history back to the eighteenth century, citing the 1792 volume “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” by Mary Wollstonecraft. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) mentioned, she is the one female thinker who has survived on the key list in the draft syllabus.

Removing feminism from the curriculum is entirely incongruous with the claim the Prime Minister made across the Dispatch Box at Prime Minister’s questions to me only a few weeks ago that he is a feminist.

A-level politics covers other concepts that include sex and gender, gender equality and patriarchy. It covers a knowledge of the core ideas, doctrines and theories of feminist thought, traditions and distinctive features. When the Government announced plans to revise the politics A-level curriculum, that section had been completely removed, as had the ideologies of nationalism and multiculturalism. As the Minister is here, I would like to know the status of those concepts as well. The supposed compensation for the axing of feminism was the inclusion of a section on pressure groups. On a generous interpretation, feminism survives there in a reference to suffragists and suffragettes as examples of pressure groups—a lot of lateral thinking and mental gymnastics are needed there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne mentioned the Fawcett Society. It has come out strongly against the proposals. It dates from Millicent Fawcett, whose work as a suffragist goes back to 1866. The Fawcett Society made a submission to the consultation to which the Government are yet to respond.

When this question arose in the other place, the Minister replied that those who want their feminism fix should do A-level sociology. It is unacceptable to think in that compartmentalised way. Feminism should be widened, not narrowed, within and between disciplines.

The mooted rewriting of history is nothing short of sinister. It is deleting women. The e-petition at Change.org, which has received close to 50,000 signatures, was started by my constituent June Eric-Udorie—another 17-year-old. It states:

“We must show women to be inspired by and be taught that the ideas of feminism and gender equality are important.”

It says that otherwise,

“we only get half the story.”

This is by no means the first time that the Conservative party has caved into sixth formers or the first time that Labour has held the Government to account on gender blindness and something has had to be cobbled together retrospectively.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I am delighted to be in a minority as a man participating in this debate. Recently on the Treasury Committee, we doubled women’s representation from one to two. That tells us something about this problem. Does my hon. Friend agree that when school groups visit Parliament, one of the things that we all need to do—I certainly do this—is to encourage women, people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and people from other under-represented backgrounds to put themselves forward? Does she agree that the absence of feminism from A-level politics sends the worrying message that somehow politics is not for women?

Dr Huq: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. He makes an excellent point. Whenever I have school parties in and we do the Q and A session afterwards, the first thing they say is, “Why are there so few women here?” In some senses, we internalise this and treat it as normal because we work here every day, but to the outside world, the gender imbalance here is bizarre.

In 2016, women’s representation in politics and public life is still, as my hon. Friend points out, woefully inadequate. The contribution of women to our political history is vital. Some people argue that it should be much more her-story than history—get it? Learning about that is vital so that young people grow up knowing that it is not bizarre and far-fetched that women can contribute to our society and our country and can make history.

The Fawcett Society submission points out that the figures that my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne quoted equate to 94% of key thinkers being men. It states:

“Presenting men as the default political thinker...contributes to gendered stereotypes which limit women’s participation in politics. Only 29.4% of MPs are women, as are 33% of councillors, 35% of MSPs, 40% of AMs, and 19% of MLAs.”

As Labour Members have cautioned and as the noble Lord Watson has said, this proposal is part of a pattern. The Government’s policies are hugely unbalanced and damaging, with women bearing the brunt of the cuts. Some 81% of the “savings”—that euphemistic term—have been made from tax and benefit changes since 2010, for which women have paid the price. My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) pointed out that his Committee has a good record of women members, but the Department for Education has only two women on its board and is one of the worst in Whitehall.

Over the Christmas break there were indications that the Education Secretary was considering adding more women to a list of political thinkers, but we need clarity on that. If what looks like a U-turn has occurred—we are in the dark about that—it has been forced to happen only because of Labour pressure. Last year my hon. Friends the Members for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) jointly wrote a letter to the Education Secretary, and co-signatories to that letter included Frances O’Grady from the TUC, Laura Bates of the Everyday Sexism project, and the president of the National Union of Teachers, Christine Blower—I believe she is a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). They urged the Government not to scrap feminism in the A-level politics syllabus, and stated:

“The new draft syllabus has all but erased any reference to feminism... This sends a very worrying message to both young men and young women that feminism has little to no place in politics”.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank my neighbour and hon. Friend for securing this debate. Does the fact that Edexcel has bowed to pressure from 17-year-old Jessy McCabe to include more women composers in the music curriculum send a strong message to the exam boards of other subjects—in particular politics and history—that we need more women on the curriculum and across the board?

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend puts it well. Jessy McCabe is with us this evening, and her e-petition—a very modern way of petitioning the Government—obtained nearly

4,000 signatures. When I pointed that out to the Prime Minister during Prime Minister's questions, he congratulated her. However, that should not have been an afterthought. Why do these things go so far that they have to be brought back from the brink?

Last month, the Department for Education said that feminism could still be studied as part of the reforms to the A-level sociology curriculum, and that the proposed move

"tied in with school autonomy and trusting heads".

It is not good enough to leave it to chance in that way. Teaching and learning strategy should enrich students because, as many Members have pointed out, feminism informs history and globalisation. This is not just one of those theoretical "isms" as many of these things are; feminism affects us all every day. As young people go on to study at university across different disciplines, having the compass of feminism and an understanding of unequal gender relations to navigate their path is critical, and we must make the classroom responsive to, and representative of, society. The syllabus should not be gender-blind, because that is denying reality. We could also include world thinkers on an expanded list, such as Simone de Beauvoir from France, or the American black feminist, bell hooks.

In the December debate in the other place, Lord Nash declared that the proposed new content for politics A-level was an improvement on the last one because for the first time it contained political ideologies. However, feminism was not one of the named ideologies, so that is a little inconsistent. The Department for Education justified the move on the grounds of giving more choice to schools, but to us it looked like freedom to downplay the historical contribution of female thinkers. It took reports on the website "BuzzFeed" over Christmas for us to have some inkling that movement was taking place, and such unofficial, if positive, statements, need substantiation tonight.

Today I tried to get clarity from the Department, and I rang up the parliamentary affairs section, which over Christmas was asking me, "What is going in your speech?"—this is hot off the press, so I did not entirely know the content. I did, however, ask whether the rumours in *The Independent on Sunday* were true, and I was given the classic response, "The Minister will be laying out the Government's position in the course of the debate."

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): With the article in *The Independent on Sunday*, I did what one should not do and looked at the comments underneath. Some said, "Feminism equals hate". I would not like to hazard a guess, but I suspect that those comments came from men. Does my hon. Friend agree that we really need to educate men as well as women about feminism? It is not just a women's subject, and we need to clarify to men what feminism really means.

Dr Huq: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. When *The Guardian* had a women's page, I often wondered whether that meant the rest of the newspaper was for men. When academic departments teach women's studies, it makes me think, "Does that mean everything else is for men?" She makes a powerful point very well. It is true what they say: one should never go below the line, where the comments from all the crazy people are. [Laughter.] Not that I am empowered to make a diagnosis.

Sorry, where more exuberant people sometimes post before they have engaged their brain. No, before they have thought of the consequences of their exuberance. [Laughter.] Anyway, we are nearing the end.

An opinion piece in November in *The Times Educational Supplement*, the in-house journal for the teachers of our nation, advised readers to:

"use the topic of feminism in the delivery of subject content. In maths, look at the pay-gap. In science, explore the work of female scientists. In PE, explore the notions of 'female' and 'male' sports. Make gender an explicit part of teaching...Make them cry and make them angry. Then tell them your generation has failed them and it's now on them to go out and change it for the better."

This is all sound advice—from a male head of history at a school in Hertfordshire.

Any curriculum needs to be inclusive, balanced and pluralistic to foster mutual understanding between people of all backgrounds, genders, sexualities, ages, ethnicities, and all faiths and none. Sadly, this sorry shambles where a change is shelved—if that is what is going to happen; we are still waiting to hear—after it should never have got to the advanced state that it did in the first place, is not an isolated incident. A-level music has already been mentioned. A petition with nearly 4,000 signatures pointed out that out of 63 composers, there were zero women. That is even worse than one out of 16, which meant that 94% were men. We do not need a calculator to work out zero out of 63, even if my constituent Jessy McCabe reversed that situation.

On GCSE religious studies, Members may not have noticed—it slipped out at the very end of last year—that in November a landmark High Court judgment ruled in favour of three humanist families who challenged the Government's removal of non-religious world views in their rewritten syllabus for that subject. In the judgment, a High Court judge stated that that was:

"a breach of the duty to take care that information or knowledge included in the curriculum is conveyed in a pluralistic manner."

The British Humanist Association called it "a stunning victory" and pointed out that

"continuing to exclude the views of a huge number of Britons, in the face of majority public opinion and all expert advice, would only be to the detriment of education in this country and a shameful path to follow."

I hope—dare I say pray, as we are talking about religion?—that history repeats itself in this House tonight and we see a U-turn. Women's voices have in the past all too often been silenced. That was meant to have happened in the bad old days, before the right to vote and before the Equal Pay Act 1970. In 2016, we cannot allow women's voices to continue to be silenced. As Mary Wollstonecraft, the one surviving woman from the draft syllabus, put it:

"I do not wish"—

women—

"to have power over men, but over themselves."

How can women have power over themselves if they do not know the voices that have created the foundations on which they stand?

9.59 pm

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to respond to this important debate, which I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing. To quote her, it gives me the opportunity to lay out the Government's position on the A-level reforms and the broader issues raised.

[Mr Nick Gibb]

The Government recognise the importance of feminism and its goals of equality and social justice. Tackling gender inequality at all ages and levels is at the heart of our commitment to extending opportunity for all. As the Prime Minister said in October about measures to eradicate gender pay inequality, opportunity is nothing without equality.

10 pm

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

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

Mr Gibb: We believe that pupils must learn from a young age that treating everyone equally and fairly in all spheres of life is part of the democratic values we are proud to enjoy and uphold.

Ruth Cadbury: Given what the Minister just said about the value the Government place on women's involvement in all areas of society and policy, does he think they have spent enough energy on impact assessments of their policies, particularly their income and welfare policies?

Mr Gibb: That is not an issue for this debate, but yes the Government carry out equality impact assessments in all major areas of policy.

If pupils are to understand their responsibilities as members of a democratic society, it is important that they are exposed to a curriculum and qualifications that not only promote and discuss the concepts of equity and fairness but recognise the huge achievements and contribution of women to our society and history, in politics, science, literature, music and the arts. I am proud that the new national curriculum, introduced from September 2014, does this. It sets out the essential knowledge around which teachers can develop lessons to build pupils' knowledge and understanding of the lives and works of influential women.

We expect schools to highlight the issues faced by women and their contribution as part of their legal duty to provide a broad and balanced curriculum. In the history curriculum, for example, the programmes of study promote examples of the lives and achievements of prominent women. At key stage 1, it promotes the examples of Elizabeth I, Queen Victoria, Rosa Park, Emily Davison, Mary Seacole, Florence Nightingale and Edith Cavell. Furthermore, good schools already teach their pupils about key moments in British history, including the suffragette movement, and highlight the bravery and successes of women from all walks of life and ages in history.

In science, at primary school level, pupils can be taught about the work of Jane Goodall, the renowned anthropologist, and the palaeontologist Mary Anning. At secondary school, they can be taught about the work of prominent female scientists, such as the role played by Rosalind Franklin in the development of the DNA model, and Marie Curie, the only person to be awarded the Nobel prize for physics and chemistry.

As she said, the hon. Lady successfully supported one of her constituents, Jessy McCabe, who last year raised concerns about Edexcel's music A-level specification. I am pleased that the specification now includes a

number of set works by female composers. I am also pleased that Edexcel undertook to review the specifications of its other qualifications to ensure they were diverse and inclusive.

All schools are subject to the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 and the public sector equality duty, which requires a school and its trustees, both in planning and running the school, to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation; to advance equality of opportunity; and to foster good relations between communities. All schools are required to promote the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. This includes challenging prejudice and promoting tolerance.

In addition to the role they play in teaching children about the lives and contribution of women, schools can teach feminism as part of citizenship education, which is in the national curriculum at key stages 3 and 4 and is designed to foster pupils' awareness and understanding of democracy, governance and how laws are made and upheld, of which the suffrage movement is a vital part.

The programme of study for personal, social, health and economic education includes teaching pupils that they have equal rights to opportunities in education and work, and to recognise and challenge the stereotypes that may limit their aspirations. It also makes clear the unacceptability of sexist language and behaviour, the need to challenge it and how to do so. PSHE lessons are also an ideal opportunity to discuss prejudice and open up discussion about gender stereotypes and similar issues. That is why we want all schools to offer high quality PSHE, using trained teachers and drawing on the best resources.

Angela Rayner: As somebody who did not go into further and higher education, I commend everything the Minister has said so far—I think it is absolutely fantastic. However, does he agree that it is completely unacceptable to have only one female political thinker among the 16 identified at A-level? In the light of everything he has just said, will the Government do something to change that?

Mr Gibb: Yes, and I will come to that in more detail shortly.

In addition to the reformed national curriculum and GCSEs, our reforms to A-levels are aimed at equipping all pupils with the knowledge and skills they need to progress to higher education. The proposed new content for the politics A-level will require for the first time that all students study some core political theories in detail. Students will be required to study liberalism, conservatism and socialism—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Yes, we left that in mainly because it is likely to become even more important as the Labour party struggles to find its heart. Students will be required to study those theories and the ideas of their key thinkers, which will enable them to understand these fundamental political theories and provide a foundation for the study of politics at university.

We recognise that the work of female political thinkers was not given due weight in the draft content. The final content will set out clearly those female political thinkers whose work should be studied. Suggestions have included

Simone de Beauvoir, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton, as well as Hannah Arendt and Rosa Luxemburg, to name but a few.

There is always a balance to be struck in designing qualifications between establishing breadth of study, making sure that each of the areas to be studied can be covered in sufficient depth, and avoiding qualifications becoming unmanageably large. Feminism is an optional area of study in current specifications. It was never our intention to exclude the study of feminism from the reformed A-level. We said we would listen to the consultation, which opened on 3 November and closed on 15 December. We have seen the strength of feeling about this issue among those who have responded to the consultation. The Secretary of State for Education, whom the hon. Lady mentioned and who is also the Minister for Women and Equalities, has also taken a close interest in this issue.

As was recently mentioned in the other place, feminism can also be studied within other A-levels. For example, in the reformed sociology A-level, students must study issues of gender. Exam boards are responsible for setting the detailed content of qualifications in their specifications, and schools are free to decide which figures they teach about in their classrooms. Following the consultation on the politics A-level, exam boards are making changes to the final content to respond to the concerns raised. We will publish our response shortly, but I can assure the hon. Lady that the final politics A-level will give all students the opportunity to study the core ideas of feminism.

Promoting the goals of feminism means that we have to go further than teaching pupils about justice and equality. That is why the Government are determined to increase the number of young people studying science, technology, engineering and maths subjects post-16. In particular, we want to encourage more girls to take those subjects.

Dr Huq: Before the Minister moves on to the sciences, will he say how many replies there were to the consultation? I am curious to know how many there were, if the figures of 50,000, and 4,000 on the other petition, are any indication, given that the Minister referred to the weight of opinion.

Mr Gibb: We will respond to the consultation shortly. At the moment, officials are going through all the responses. We have seen a number—*[Interruption.]* I was hoping for some in-flight refuelling on the precise number to answer the hon. Lady's question. On the basis of the responses so far, I believe a large number of people have responded on this point. *[Interruption.]* Unfortunately, it was not very helpful, so I will have to pass on that. The fact remains that the issues will be made public once we have responded to the consultation document. We will set out fairly soon, in great detail, a summary of all the responses, so the hon. Lady will not have to wait long for a full answer to the very reasonable question she asked.

We are funding programmes such as the Stimulating Physics network and the Further Mathematics Support programme to support schools to increase take-up of maths and physics A-levels, with a particular focus on engaging more girls. The national network of maths hubs is also leading a national project aimed at increasing participation among post-16 students in A-level mathematics and further mathematics courses, and other level 3 courses, such as core maths. In this context, many hubs are exploring ways of increasing the proportion of girls studying maths at this level and beyond.

The STEM ambassadors programme raises awareness among children of the range of careers that science can offer. It is worth noting that 40% of the 31,000 STEM ambassadors are women. We funded Engineering UK to deliver a programme of Big Bang Near Me activities—local versions of the national Big Bang fair—that reached more than 100,000 young people, half of whom were girls, in 2015.

Excellent teaching is, of course, vital if we are to engage more girls in STEM subjects. We are undertaking a number of initiatives to support this, including supporting maths and science teachers through the National Science Learning network and the national network of maths hubs; attracting top STEM graduates into teaching through generous bursaries and scholarships; investing £67 million to train an additional 2,500 teachers and upskill 15,000 non-specialist teachers in maths and physics over the next five years; and the triple science support programme, which supports schools to offer three separate science GCSEs.

The Government are also backing the excellent Your Life campaign to increase significantly the numbers taking A-level physics and maths, particularly girls. This is a digital campaign to demonstrate the range of opportunities that maths and science can lead to. Positive signs are now beginning to emerge. Similar numbers of girls and boys take science and maths at GCSE, and achieve similar results. Although fewer girls than boys progress to maths and physics at A-level, we have worked hard in recent years and made some progress. Provisional 2015 results show that since 2010 the number of girls taking maths A-level has increased by just over 3,500 and physics by just under 1,000. Overall, there have been 12,000 more entries for girls in all maths and science A-level subjects.

Our education system has an essential role to play in creating a fair society with opportunity for all. We are confident that our world-class knowledge-based curriculum and other changes that we are introducing will contribute to this goal. I am enormously grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue today. She has made some important and compelling points, and I hope she recognises that the Government understand these concerns, and feels that they are being addressed.

Question put and agreed to.

10.14 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 11 January 2016

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

NHS Bursary

4.30 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 113491 relating to the NHS Bursary.

As of this morning, the petition had 154,390 signatures, which shows the depth of feeling and the concern that student nurses have about the proposed policy. Before the debate, we had a fantastic listening exercise, which involved a number of student nurses and other representatives of the health industry, many of whom are here in the audience. Having filled the Public Gallery, we even have an overspill room elsewhere on the estate where the debate is being shown on television. It is a testament to the importance of the matter that so many Members of Parliament are attending the debate.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I am in no way being critical of the hon. Gentleman, who deserves a great deal of credit for what he has done, but does he agree that instead of using the expression “the health industry”, it might be better to say “the health profession”?

Paul Scully: Of course it would be. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; forgive me.

Let me read the petition for *Hansard*. The title is “Keep the NHS Bursary” and it says:

“At the moment, student nurses do not pay tuition fees, and receive a means tested bursary during their training. We are required, by the NMC, to have done at least 4,600 hours whilst studying, at least half of which are in practice.

Student nurses often work alongside our studies, like most students. But unlike most students, we work full time hours in placement for around half the year, and spend the rest of the time in lectures, without a summer holiday, or an Easter break, as well as completing our assignments. Taking away the NHS Bursary will force more student nurses into working 70 hour weeks, as many already do, it will compromise our studies and most of all, our patient care.”

I am sure that everybody here appreciates the work that nurses do in the NHS. I have had to go to hospital many times with my family. My daughter was born prematurely and had to have a lumbar puncture within hours of birth; my son had his thumb set after he had dislocated it playing rugby—just opposite the local hospital, fortunately—and nurses tended incredibly patiently to my mother when she fractured her hip after a fall late on a Saturday night.

We know the endless hours that nurses work and the endless patience that they show in tending to us when we most need them, and when we are at our most vulnerable. It is important that we pay tribute to them for the work that they do. We must also pay tribute to those who want to enter the nursing service. They do so as a vocation and out of love; they do not do it for preferment, large salaries or anything like that. They do it to pay back and to serve us as members of the public, and for that we are very grateful.

Nurses do incredible work, which is more complex than ever. Many nurses are taking on more responsibilities, whether in adult nursing, child nursing, learning disability nursing or mental health nursing. Often, these days, they have to tell doctors what to do and how to lead on treatment.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Does he agree that we are not just talking about student nurses? We have problems with trainee doctors at the moment, and the situation with the education maintenance grant. There is a big problem, particularly in the medical profession—and outside it, in relation to young people—with the future of care.

Paul Scully: We can always talk about the NHS and the future of care, but we have three hours for this debate, and I suspect most hon. Members want to speak, so I will limit my comments to nurses. I will quickly outline the current system and talk about why I believe it needs to change, then we can debate exactly how it might change.

There are various elements to the NHS bursary. There is a non-means-tested grant of £1,000 per year. There is a means-tested bursary to help with living costs of up to £3,191 for students in London living away from home, £2,643 for students outside London living away from home, or £2,207 for students living at home. Other bursary elements include an extra week’s allowance for courses that run for longer than 30 weeks and three days each academic year. As we heard at the event that we held before the debate, the majority of such courses last considerably longer than 30 weeks; they are often up to 42 or 43 weeks a year. Tuition fees are paid directly to the higher education institution by the NHS. Students can also apply for a non-income-assessed reduced rate maintenance loan from Student Finance England of between £1,744 and £3,263, depending on their circumstances. That loan is reduced in the final year of the course.

Why change? The current system, as some, but not all, student nurses, prospective student nurses and those in higher education institutions that train nurses agree, does not always work as well as it might for students or universities.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Hospitals across the country rely on recruiting nurses from as far afield as the Philippines. If these new measures are introduced, does the hon. Gentleman think that that dependence will increase or decrease?

Paul Scully: I would hope that it decreased. I will touch on some of the costs of recruitment later. Students who receive bursaries under the current structure have less to live on than other students, despite the fact that their courses are longer. They face particular financial hardship in the final year, when funding is reduced. In one London university in 2012-13, 63% of the entire hardship fund went to NHS-funded students, which goes to show how much the system is of concern, and in need of investigation and reform.

Funding for nursing and physiotherapy degrees is lower than for any other subject in higher education, even though the courses put much greater demands on

[Paul Scully]

universities than many other courses in areas such as quality assurance, laboratory space and simulation kit. Universities receive less than the courses cost to deliver in many instances. There is a cap on the number of bursaries, and more than half the people who want to train to be nurses are turned away.

In changing the system from a bursary to a loan structure, the Government propose to remove the cap on places, and they expect the reforms to provide up to 10,000 additional nursing and health professional places during this Parliament. Some people who are concerned about the withdrawal of the bursary are worried about students having no money. Even now, many students, especially in London, with its high housing costs, say that the bursary nowhere near covers their living expenses.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): One thing that concerns many of us is the fact that the students we are talking about are not the same as many other students. They tend to be women or people who are returning to nursing. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the cost of living issue—especially as those people are more likely to have dependents or existing commitments that they are trying to fund while studying—makes the change to the bursary system all the more worrying, because it will prevent even more people from being able to study to become nurses?

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. In a little while, I will cover some of the issues that particularly affect nursing, and look at why some of the concerns about the nursing course are acute for those people. Let me conclude the remarks I was making a minute ago. The loans system, according to the Government, will cover the cost plus more, increasing the money available for living costs by about 25%. Looking at the structure, it seems that there are two avenues of concern. Some issues are particular to nurses, as the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) suggested, but there is also a general student loan debate—rehearsing the student loan debate the House had some years ago, before I was elected. The issue has not affected some prospective nurses, although some have completed a first degree, and I will come on to that in a second.

I will touch on the student loan debate, although it is not something that we need to go over again, having discussed it at some length in various media and in the House a few years ago. When I talk about the debate, I always recommend that people look up Martin Lewis, the financial expert who runs the MoneySavingExpert.com website. He is not uncritical in his acceptance of the current tuition fee regime and loan structure, but he comes up with some interesting mythbusters. For anybody considering the prospect of taking out a loan before studying, he is well worth a read. He talks about not confusing the cost and the price tag of a degree because the main practical issue is how much people have to pay having graduated, rather than the top line figure of the debt. I will go into that in a second. Repayment is effectively based on salary, and repayment costs are 9% of everything someone earns above £21,000. For example, a nurse on a band 5 salary would pay about £5.73 a month in student loan repayments. It is not an up-front cost.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments about Martin Lewis. May I just ask whether Martin Lewis advised the Government when they proposed the plans for the NHS bursary scheme?

Paul Scully: I am a new Back-Bench MP so I was not around then, but I know that Martin Lewis was on a Committee at some point afterwards to determine relationships, but I will take advice on that.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): May I just clarify that figure of paying £5 a month, which is £60 a year? At £60 a year, that loan would never ever come close to being repaid over 30 years—over a whole working life.

Paul Scully: That is on a band 5 salary. I would expect nurses to increase that. The point of the student loans system is that it is a finite time period of 30 years.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I am on the current student loans system as I only graduated a couple of years ago. I am paying it back out of my salary and I am thankful for the opportunity to do that. Does my hon. Friend agree that the current system for nurses limits the number of applicants? The new system, rather than denying thousands of applicants the opportunity to study healthcare subjects at university, will release more people into the system so that we have more nurses. It will also help to sort out the problem of reliance on expensive agency staff and overseas applicants. We will have more home-grown nurses with the new system.

Paul Scully: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. The new system will certainly help with overseas applicants and agency staff and, as is the aim, it will release extra people into the profession. One concern that we need to address and that I will touch on a little bit later is about the placements and opportunities available after graduation. It is important to ensure that those opportunities are there for nurses. There is no point having a paper-based exercise if there are not enough positions for nurses.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): My reading of surveys and academic studies shows the complete opposite of what the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) said. The different funding arrangements for healthcare courses means that they attract applications from a diverse range of people. The average age of people applying is higher than that of most students—higher than 28. Does the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) think that changing the funding arrangements will deter people from different backgrounds from applying for these courses?

Paul Scully: I do not believe so. There were similar predictions for students in general when the student fee loan system came in, but that did not happen. People thought that student numbers would decline. They have not; they have increased. I do not believe that diversity in university courses in general has declined and I do not see any reason why that should be the case with nursing, although I understand the concern. A number of people have raised that concern both in Twitter

conversations that we and nurses have had and in a number of events that have been held in the lead-up to this petition debate, including the one immediately before the debate. I understand the concern but I do not see the evidence.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman will have heard, as I did, in the discussion that we just had with many student nurses that many of those going into the profession are mature students. Sometimes they already have debts from previous degrees or they have families to keep. If we are to maintain diversity and encourage people with considerable life experience to enter the profession, we must incentivise them to do so and not load them with more debt.

Paul Scully: I will just complete my comments regarding student loans in general, but then I will come directly to the hon. Lady's point because it is one of the issues particular to nurses that I mentioned a little while ago. Student loans in general do not go on credit files, so the only way that a loan, credit card or mortgage company will know if someone has a student loan is if they ask for it. Obviously, for bigger loans, they tend to ask. Student debt is not accounted for by mortgage lenders in terms of the total amount owed, although they will look at the affordability of the loan and at an applicant's outgoings. When tuition fees and student loans were first introduced, the Council of Mortgage Lenders confirmed that lenders would not use that or add that total debt to the amount owed when they considered mortgages.

Dr Whitford: Is it not the case that the Financial Conduct Authority has announced that the size of someone's student loan will affect their ability to get a mortgage and will be taken into account?

Paul Scully: Well, I think a lot of it is down to affordability. *[Interruption.]* No, there is a big difference. Someone might have an amount of £50,000 or something like that, for example, but it is about the repayment. Whether someone is paying £5 or £50 a month, that is the figure that lenders will look at to work out whether they can afford to repay the loan. As I said right at the beginning, that top line figure is not the crucial one. The crucial one is actually the amount that someone will pay out of their salary each and every month.

Looking at the current case and at positions that are particular to nurses, we have talked about the fact some people going into the nursing profession may already have a degree and are doing a second one. There are mature students. The average age of those applying to study is about 28 or 29. I believe I have covered my take on people's concerns about the diversity of the workforce changing.

Under the current rules, people cannot usually access the student loans system if they have already done a degree to the same level. The view of the Council of Deans of Health is that the Government should make those courses exempt from that rule. I will be interested to hear what the Minister says about whether that is the case. If it is, in the new system, people would be able to access student loans if they wanted to—that would be an equivalent or lower qualification exemption. As repayment amounts are based on salary and not on the

total loan, the amount repaid would be the same whether someone has one or two loans. Effectively, that makes it a graduate contribution, not a traditional loan. The system is slightly different from a graduate tax, which was discussed a few years ago, because it is finite—it finishes after 30 years, and a graduate tax, as we might have had under other suggestions, would have carried on going past a graduate's retirement. As I said to the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), the introduction of tuition fees and loans for other degree courses has not led to a drop in applications and has not affected the diversity of applicants.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): One of the chief concerns that many student nurses have when listening to these proposals is that, unlike many other students who can take second jobs to help pay back their student loan, student nurses are sometimes working up to 40 hours a week for the NHS. They have no opportunity to make any other money to be able to pay off a student loan, but that is not taken into account. Student nurses are very different from any other group of students, which is not taken into account by the proposal.

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman has not listened to what I have said, because the whole point about the loan system is that the loans will not kick in until after a student has graduated, so the repayments will not start until that point. Student nurses will not be making any repayments while they are studying and doing those placements, but I absolutely take the point that nursing is a very different proposition from a normal degree in so much as placements take up 37 or 38 hours a week and beyond, which is a considerable strain on nurses.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman cites the example of the introduction of fees for other university students, but does he acknowledge that the impact has been patchy and that the one group that has been significantly discouraged from going into higher education as a result of those fees is mature students? Mature students are particularly well represented among nursing, midwifery and allied professions, which we encourage.

Paul Scully: It is beholden on us to explain the system to mature students, because I see no reason why they should be discouraged.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman says that he sees no reason for mature students to be discouraged, which perhaps demonstrates that the Department has not done a full impact assessment. What impact assessment did the Department do before the Chancellor made these proposals in the autumn statement?

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady is asking the wrong person. Perhaps the Minister will respond to that question a little later.

The idea of placements came out of our discussion prior to the debate with the student nurses, who have taken time out to come to London today from as far as Liverpool and elsewhere. We talked about bursaries, and it would be a more honest description to call them a salary because these people are working hours in what are supposed to be supernumerary positions but are

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often not. There are student nurses sitting in the Public Gallery, and we have one person here from Brighton who explained how he was saving children's lives prior to Christmas—it is not a supernumerary position when someone is working with babies. We have other people in critical roles who are working with patients on a range of issues, so we need to be straight about the pressures on nurses and how we reward them.

Alex Cunningham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way to me for a second time. He is talking about bursaries being like a salary. Student nurses are doing real work when they are training on the wards, so are they entitled to some sort of payment for the real work that they are doing while they are training on the wards?

Paul Scully: Absolutely. We are talking about bursaries, but I would rather be straightforward and call it what it should be, which is a salary.

Alex Cunningham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Scully: I will not give way. I am aware that I have been talking for quite a long time, and I am sure that a lot of hon. Members want to speak. With placements, student nurses have less time than other students to do another job because, although it is 50% placement time in theory, they are effectively working 37 or 38 hours a week, so it is difficult for them to have another job to raise money for their living costs, especially as their courses last for 42 weeks a year—many other courses last for only 30 weeks a year.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Scully: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman because I have not yet given way to him previously.

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is being generous with his time. He is making a key argument for introducing a salary for student nurses to remove the burdens and the levels of debt, rather than charging them tuition fees. Does he agree that the right argument is that bursaries were introduced to incentivise people and to encourage those who would otherwise be dissuaded from training for this noble vocation, thereby removing the burdens and the over-reliance on overseas students? Our Health Minister in Northern Ireland, Simon Hamilton MLA, has decided that he will not remove or scrap the bursary for just those reasons.

Paul Scully: I would rather that we re-examined the overall system and reconsidered how we work with student nurses to give them a fair salary. I would rather it be more straightforward, open and transparent, rather than calling it a bursary. Bursaries are effectively gifts, which can be taken away. If someone is working hard in a position that is not supernumerary, we need to examine that. At the end of my speech, when I talk about the petition, I will say that this is the start of an exercise. This is a welcome time to have the petition, because student nurses and the 154,000 people who signed it can

help to shape the policy over the next academic year ready for whatever is in place for the 2017-18 academic year and beyond.

Andrea Jenkyns: We have talked about nursing being a vocation, but does my hon. Friend agree that teaching and being a doctor are also vocations? This proposal puts nurses on the same system as for teachers and doctors—nursing is a vocation, too.

Paul Scully: Absolutely.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is spelling out the case clearly. He will recognise that the introduction of fees for the teacher training year has led to a decrease in the number of people coming forward for teacher training. Perhaps that is a lesson that needs to be learned for student nurses.

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention.

I will bring my comments to an end with a few questions. The system needs to change. Not everyone agrees with me, but a number of people, even people who want to keep a sense of the bursary system, believe that the bursary system is not perfect by any stretch of the imagination. The petition, and the discussion around it, is the beginning of the process feeding into that change. Even those who are not happy with the proposed loan structure can help to shape the system over the next few months—in reality, it will have to be ready for the academic year after next—so that it is ready for students applying for the 2017-18 academic year. Whatever the final structure, student nurses must understand what they are applying for, how they will be funded and what the repercussions will be for repayments. We have a few months to work on it and to raise issues with Ministers.

I have a few specific questions for the Minister that come from the petition. How will specialist courses remain viable under the change? Podiatry, for example, tends to be undersubscribed—places on podiatry courses have to go through clearing year in, year out—so it is important that we consider how we can have viable courses for the services that we need.

Will trusts, especially foundation trusts—foundation trusts have proved that they can work through their own budgets by virtue of being given foundation status—be given the freedom to help repay student loans as part of a pay package, as was suggested by the Council of Deans of Health? As a result of that, what more can we do to retain nurses in the NHS after graduation, perhaps through contract agreements, rather than seeing them move abroad? Will there be enough placements to take on the proposed increase in the number of trainees? We spoke about that a little earlier.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is being extremely generous in giving way so often. Can I press him on that point? Leaving aside the threat of deterring people from entering the profession, we get the sense from what the Government have said that the infrastructure or provisions are in place for those training places. For example, every new nurse and midwife on a training programme needs a supervised or assessed mentor. What sense is there that

those people are in place? If he cannot answer that, perhaps the Minister can. The threat is that we will encounter a bottleneck or that the places will simply not be there, assuming that people apply in the first place.

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman might not be surprised to know that I cannot answer that, so I will pass it on to my hon. Friend the Minister, who I am sure will cover it when he sums up.

As I said earlier, I ask the Minister whether there will be an exemption for loans taken out to cover a second degree. Also, what arrangements will be made for placement expenses, which are a concern for many people going through the process? In Parliament a few years ago, there was some discussion about unpaid parliamentary interns, and a number of changes were made. Greater accountability through the media has led many Members of Parliament to change their practices so that, rather than just getting unpaid interns to do a load of work, they are paying a reasonable wage, even if it is not the full-on salary that someone else might get.

As I have mentioned, the people doing placements are largely not supernumerary. They mostly do full-on nursing work, to our benefit as patients. I will be grateful to hear what the Minister has to say about placement expenses.

Stephen Pound: The hon. Gentleman is being extremely generous. I am sure that I am not the only person to congratulate him on bringing this extremely important matter before the House. On the basis of my 10 years' experience working at Middlesex hospital, may I say that nurses are in an exceptionally unusual position? They cannot simply come and do five days and then go home. Accommodation is an issue. Nurses' homes such as John Astor House at the Middlesex are long gone. How on earth can we ask student nurses or potential student nurses to come to one of the major five teaching hospitals in London—there are now four, obviously, since the Middlesex is gone—without giving them any support or assistance with accommodation? Nurses' homes do not exist anymore. With respect, nurses need more at the moment, not less.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Paul Scully: Well done to the hon. Gentleman for getting audience participation. What I will say in conclusion is that the changes will strike home by giving people more money in their pockets for living expenses. I appreciate that the housing situation in London is particularly acute, but the whole intention of the proposed change is to ensure that student nurses have more money in their pockets to cover their living expenses in a difficult situation where the budget is limited.

I will leave it at that, because I know that a number of hon. Members want to speak. I will be interested to hear the Minister's view when he sums up.

5.3 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am delighted that, thanks to the response of more than 150,000 people, we are having this important and timely debate, which will allow me to raise some of the issues

outstanding from the Adjournment debate that I secured before Christmas and address those that the Government have not yet addressed.

It is encouraging to see three members of the shadow Cabinet here at this debate: the shadow Health Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander); the shadow Minister for mental health, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger); and the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who has shown an interest during the course of these proceedings. This weekend, the shadow Health Secretary and I, along with other right hon. and hon. Members, joined thousands of students, nurses and supporters marching through the streets of London to raise their concerns about the implications of the Government's decision. A statement of support from the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), was well received by all in attendance.

I begin by emphasising that, often as shorthand, we have been discussing the implications of the policy changes for student nurses and midwives, but of course the changes extend to a range of allied health professionals, as I said in my Adjournment debate. It is important not to lose sight of that when discussing the Government's proposed approach.

To recap the Adjournment debate, we are discussing the biggest shake-up in the funding of nursing, midwifery and allied health subjects since the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968. It would mean the end of the non-means-tested grant of up to £1,000, the end of the means-tested NHS bursary of up to £3,191 and the imposition of tuition fees of £9,000 a year, which would burden nurses, midwives and other allied health professionals at the start of their career with huge debts of at least £51,600. Thanks to the repayment threshold, now shamefully frozen at £21,000, they will begin to pay back those debts immediately on starting their career and will face an average pay cut of £900.

Given that such professionals are required to work at least 2,300 more hours across the course of their degree, it is an absolute disgrace that we are seeking to balance the books on the backs of the front-line staff who form the backbone of our NHS. No wonder so many NHS professionals across the board are angered by the Government's approach. It seems to be a trend under this Government. We are seeing it not just in the treatment of nurses, midwives and allied health professionals but in the Government's intransigent approach to the junior doctors dispute, in which people could go out on industrial action, not out of choice but out of apparent necessity.

To follow on from the Adjournment debate, a number of questions are still outstanding. My concerns about the Government's approach involve both the policy content and the process that they are choosing to follow. I asked the Minister during the Adjournment debate whether he could confirm that the Government would consult on the principle of policy changes, not merely their implementation. He told the House that

"we will not consult on the principle, because that has been decided".—[*Official Report*, 14 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 1379.]

Yet, as I will go on to outline, many fundamental aspects of the policy and the detail underpinning it have not yet even been considered by the Government. I am surprised that Ministers are confident embarking on

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such a radical course of action without having thought through the consequences properly. I have asked the Minister what analysis the Government have conducted of students receiving NHS bursaries for tuition and maintenance costs, but have received no answer. I do not believe that the analysis has yet been conducted. I am sure that it is under way, because he has confirmed that the Government will publish an impact assessment alongside the consultation, which he expects to start next month, but was that impact assessment conducted before the Government embarked on this approach, or is the Chancellor just shooting in the dark to balance his books?

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of research by the trade union Unison showing that nine out of 10 student nurses surveyed said that they would not have gone into training if the new proposals had been in place? Given that this month London issued a critical alert after its vacancy rate jumped 26% to 10,000, should the impact assessment not cover the impact on the recruitment and retention of nurses in our system?

Wes Streeting: Those statistics concern me greatly. I should probably have said at the outset of this debate that I am a member and supporter of Unison. I also draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. For completeness, I should also say that I am a former president of the National Union of Students and have a long-standing interest in such issues.

It concerns me that there might be a detrimental impact on recruitment, particularly given that my local NHS trust had to fly nurses over from Portugal to fill vacancies. I have no problem with those Portuguese nurses coming over to help plug the gap, but we have plenty of home-grown talent in the form of nurses who would welcome such a job opportunity. That is felt strongly by local people in my area.

Stella Creasy: My hon. Friend is a near neighbour to Barts hospital trust, which is currently spending £10 million a year at Whipps Cross university hospital, our local hospital, such is the shortage. A hospital that is £941 million in debt due to its private finance initiative loans clearly needs to save money, yet it is having to pay £10 million for agency nurses. Does he think that the policy will make that easier or harder to deal with?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I believe it will make it harder. That concerns me, because Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust covers part of my constituency and the other half is served by the Barts Health NHS Trust. Both trusts are in special measures, and one issue that has contributed to that has been the inability of both trusts to recruit and retain the staff necessary to provide the timely and quality care that residents in Ilford North and other parts of north-east London have come to expect.

Alex Cunningham: It is clear that the professionals are very worried about this issue. South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust has told a midwife in my

constituency and her nurse colleagues that it wants to extend their breaks from 30 minutes to 60 minutes, which means they will have to work an extra shift every four weeks. Many of them cannot take their 30-minute break now, and they are really worried that they will have to work even more hours because the trust will not be able to get the staff it needs if the bursary scheme does not continue. Does my hon. Friend agree that for that reason, the South Tees trust should rethink its plan, and that the Government should do likewise regarding bursaries?

Wes Streeting: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. The Government and the NHS underestimate the extent to which staff at all levels are both working beyond their allocated shifts to plug gaps in the service and going without breaks. Given the settings that those staff work in, it is not in the interests of patients, let alone good for the welfare of the staff themselves, for them to be tired and not taking the breaks they ought to take.

Mr Jim Cunningham: One critical area at the moment is care in the community. Does my hon. Friend agree that the change to bursaries will have a big impact when we try to recruit community nurses for all sorts of illnesses?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point, which I did not raise in the earlier Adjournment debate. Since that debate took place I have seen an article by Crystal Oldman in *Independent Nurse* magazine, which expressed concern about our ability to recruit nurses into community-based settings. If we are trying to prevent patients from presenting at accident and emergency, which is important to alleviate waiting times and the burden on A&E departments, it is vital that people can access timely care and support in the community. I do not believe the Government have fully considered that, but I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

In my Adjournment debate I also asked the Government whether they thought it was fair that students from the most deprived backgrounds should have their grants taken away while some of the wealthiest people in our society received tax cuts. I am not surprised that I did not receive an answer to that question, but it is a fair one. A lot of people wonder how, in straitened times, it is possible for the Government to find money for tax cuts for the wealthiest, but we cannot find money to ensure that people who perform vital functions in the NHS receive the support they need to get them through their training.

I asked the Minister in that debate how much debt the Government expect to write off because those indebted by the reforms are unable to pay their debts in full. That question was not answered. However, we know that in the case of the tuition fees brought in by the coalition Government, the current Government expect that the majority of students will see their debts written off, at cost to the taxpayer, further down the line.

I wonder about the Chancellor. Following him on economic policy at the moment is a bit like following a drunk driver: one minute he tells us that things are fantastic, and then the next minute he tells us that something called "the global economy" might have an impact on our domestic economy. I am glad that he has

finally got that point, but I do not believe that he is currently being straight with the House and the public about how he intends to “fix the roof”, whether the sun is shining or not. It will be no good if some poor Chancellor 30 years down the line has to find huge amounts of money for debt write-off. This Chancellor needs to be clearer about where the money is really coming from.

On that point, I asked in the Adjournment debate which Department—the Department of Health or the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills—would meet the cost of servicing the resource accounting and budgeting charge for student loan debt. That question was not answered, although I am sure the Treasury and both those Departments have a view. It seems that the Government have not reached a clear position, and they really ought to have done so before embarking on this course of action.

I also asked the Minister about the Barnett consequential for health education budgets in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. He told the House that it was a matter for Her Majesty's Treasury, but I am afraid that we did not get any real detail about what the impact on those nations would be.

Will the Minister also say how clinical placements will be funded under the current loans system? He tells us that he has started discussions with Universities UK about that, but we would have expected the Government to have those discussions before embarking on a policy of this nature.

I also asked the Government whether they were at all concerned that applications from mature students might fall, given the detrimental impact that the coalition Government's student finance reforms had on mature and part-time student numbers. The Minister did not give a reply, but we have heard in interventions this afternoon that that is a legitimate concern. We keep being told that all has been well since the coalition introduced the new tuition fees regime, and that student numbers in higher education are excellent. It is true that overall student numbers have gone up, but I do not think that there has been the necessary level of analysis about whether people are being deterred from applying. It is all very well saying that the numbers have gone up, but that does not tell me whether the regime deterred people from applying. However, we know for certain that it has had a particularly detrimental impact on the numbers of mature and part-time students. The issue of mature students ought to weigh heavily on the Government's mind before they decide to proceed down this course on nursing bursaries, because it is clear that there will be big problems for the nursing profession if mature student numbers fall.

Nic Dakin: On that point, it is important for areas such as north Lincolnshire, which struggle to attract new graduates, to be able to grow our own graduates, and mature students are a major part of that. A fall in their number will particularly affect areas such as ours, which new graduates do not see as particularly attractive.

Wes Streeting: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I have another concern. In my Adjournment debate I asked the Minister to confirm whether mature students would be eligible to apply for a second loan, and he confirmed that they would be able to do so. However,

that does not reassure me that the change to bursaries will not have a detrimental impact. If a mature student has already taken out a significant loan for a first undergraduate degree and still has some of that loan debt outstanding, given that they are closer to retirement than the stereotypical 18-year-old entrant, will they really want to take on additional debt? There are major question marks about that, and again, the Government ought to have done the research and analysis on it before embarking on this policy direction.

I am conscious of the time and the number of Members who wish to speak, so I turn finally to the question of process. This Thursday, a Delegated Legislation Committee will be convened to debate the abolition of student grants for all students, including the cohort we are talking about today. It is absolutely appalling that the Government are seeking to use the device of delegated legislation to put through such a major change to student finance. Whatever disagreements I had with previous Labour Governments about their higher education policy, at least they were courageous enough to bring their policies to the House of Commons, put them through the House of Lords, justify them and put them in the full light of scrutiny by right hon. and hon. Members.

This use of a Delegated Legislation Committee is part of a wider pattern of behaviour by this Government, who seek to ignore scrutiny. They seem to believe that a majority of 12 on a minority of the vote gives them *carte blanche* to do whatever they like. The level of public outcry, not to mention the concern expressed by Members from all parties in the House, means that the Government ought to behave far more transparently.

I asked the Minister in my adjournment debate to give the House an assurance that students studying nursing, midwifery and allied health subjects would not see their tuition fees and debts hiked up even further than has been suggested, but I was not answered. We know from newspaper speculation that the Government are considering increasing tuition fees above inflation, and we also know that the Cabinet Office is trying to find ways of avoiding a vote in both Houses, which is shameful.

Similarly, I asked the Minister to give the House an assurance that we would have a full debate and a vote if the Government chose to extend tuition fees to nursing, midwifery and allied health subject courses. The Minister told the House that he could not give us a definite answer to that question yet. I hope that he can do so this afternoon, and that he will confirm that we will have a full debate in the House of Commons and in the House of Lords, and that right hon. and hon. Members and noble peers will have the chance to make their voices heard and to put the issue to a vote.

Finally, I asked the Minister to commit to meeting student representatives to discuss their concerns, and he said that he was happy to do so. I spoke this weekend to one of the organisers of the protest, Danielle Tiplady, who has done a remarkable job in campaigning on this issue and in raising awareness among her colleagues. I hope the Minister will commit today to meeting her and other student representatives, so that he can hear at first hand the powerful testimony that we heard at the demonstration at the weekend.

We should all be concerned about the direction of this policy, and I am glad to see so many right hon. and hon. Members here this afternoon. Given that there are other debates taking place, including on Syria, which is

[*Wes Streeting*]

a really big matter that concerns all of us, it is great that we have had such a big turnout this afternoon. I hope that helps to encourage the Government to think again.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Will Members who want to speak, even if they are on the list, please stand clearly rather than squat, in order that we can work out whether we will have to impose a time limit later? Thank you very much indeed.

5.20 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in such an important debate. I acknowledge that the changes affect all sorts of healthcare professionals, including midwives, physios and speech therapists, but I will keep my remarks mainly to student nurses because I am a qualified nurse and have worked in the NHS for more than 20 years—I was even working as a full-time NHS nurse until just after the last general election.

I trained under the bursary scheme. I was one of the second intake, after the scheme was introduced in the early '90s, so I have first-hand knowledge of how it works. I have met student nurses, the Royal College of Nursing—the RCN—and qualified nurses to discuss some of the issues that the changes raise. I have also met the Minister to express my concerns, and have been reassured that alternatives to a student loan mechanism for entering nurse training are in the pipeline. These might be better than the nurse bursary scheme, and they will certainly be better than the proposed student loan scheme.

Let us not pretend that the bursary system is ideal—I speak as someone who went through that method of training. It started in the early '90s as a replacement for the old-style nurse training system in which student nurses were part of the workforce and were on the payroll. Let us be honest though, the students were used as a spare pair of hands and often there was not a huge opportunity for them to learn on the job. At that time, there were two ways for someone to become a nurse. They could do a two-year course to become a state-enrolled nurse, in which role they could do only so much, or they could do a three-year course and become a fully qualified state-registered nurse, taking on all aspects of the role of a registered nurse. The bursary scheme, when it was introduced, was a move to make nursing more academic, and to create supernumerary student nurses. Or rather, that is what is supposed to happen. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) pointed out, in practice, student nurses are still used as a spare pair of hands and are rarely supernumerary when they are on placement.

Student nurses were, however, taken off the payroll and the bursary scheme was introduced as a sort of income to acknowledge that, although the students were not counted as part of the workforce, they still had to do a huge number of hours while on placement, including night shifts and weekend and evening work. The bursary was supposed to compensate the students for their loss of income, but a bursary is not a wage, and it certainly does not reflect the number of hours student nurses put in during their training.

Let us not miss the point. Someone can do a three or four-year academic nursing degree, but unless they do the clinical placement hours, they cannot register as a nurse. That is the crux of the matter. In addition, a bursary certainly does not reflect the increase in experience and skills that students gain as they go through their training. A first-year student nurse gets exactly the same bursary as someone who has almost qualified and is practically working—under the supervision of a qualified nurse—as a qualified nurse.

The bursary system undervalues the contribution that student nurses make, and it means that student nurses across the country live on little more than £3,000 a year. The system has changed over time—it was not means-tested when I was doing my training, but it is now. Let us not pretend, therefore, that the system is ideal. The bursary has never adequately supported student nurses, and I welcome the chance to change it. Let us look at other professions. I certainly do not want people sitting in the Public Gallery to suddenly rush out and change profession completely, but a trainee police officer has a starting salary of £19,000 and a trainee firefighter starts on £21,000. Airlines are now moving to in-house training. A new pilot with no flight experience training with British Airways is on £23,000 and Virgin has a similar policy, with Richard Branson saying that he welcomes those with no experience to be part of the Virgin family from day one. Yet for student nurses, who take similar life and death decisions every single day, we propose not just that they work in clinical areas for free but that they pay for their training as well.

I believe Ministers when they say that this is not a cost-cutting exercise, because the money will instead increase the number of student nurse placements. Currently, more than 50% of people who apply to become student nurses are turned away simply because the places are not there in the universities. The RCN's figures from only last year show that there were 57,000 applications, of which 37,000 were rejected.

Ruth Cadbury: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will not, if the hon. Lady does not mind, just because I know that so many Members want to speak.

Although not all of those 37,000 will have been rejected because of a lack of places, a significant number of them will. The current system restricts the number of student nurses that enter the profession so, in theory, the changes should increase the numbers of qualified nurses in a few years' time. From my clinical practice I know, however, that what works in theory will have the opposite effect in reality.

My main concerns about moving from a bursary scheme to a student loan scheme are, first, that many nurses go into a degree system simply because there is no other way to become a nurse. They do not necessarily want a degree in nursing; they want to be a qualified registered nurse. If we commit to a student loan scheme, we are committing them to take on debt for years to come. As we have heard, many of them—more than 30%—are mature students, and by mature students we do not mean people in their 40s and 50s. They are people in their mid-20s and early-30s. They have young families; they are single mums; and they have a first degree and have to take on a second one just to become

a nurse. It is a crazy situation. For someone who already has a student loan, and/or a mortgage and/or childcare to pay for, the thought of taking on more debt will definitely put them off entering nursing, and to say otherwise is madness.

The difference between student nurses and other undergraduates is that the starting salary for a nurse is £21,000. Most nurses will only ever be a band 5 or 6, and the maximum they can earn as a band 6 is £34,000—that is if they do not have a break to have children or go part time for some other reason. They will never be in a position fully to pay off their student loan. Student nurses are different, therefore, from other undergraduates, and that has not been recognised in the debate. An issue in the wider debate about graduates is that a graduate is, on average, £100,000 better off than a non-graduate, but that is not the case with nurses. Other graduates earn, on average, more than £40,000 a year, but nurses do not earn anything like that and that difference needs to be recognised when decisions are made.

We have heard how much time student nurses spend on clinical placements—more than 50% of their course, including nights, weekends and evenings—which makes it almost impossible for them to get any other income from part-time work. We must recognise that. Being dependent on a loan is not a great way of life either, but other students are able to supplement their loans by working in pubs and shops, and doing other evening work. Student nurses are not in a position to do that.

My second concern is that, if I am completely wrong and we suddenly have a huge increase in the number of student nurses, the placements will not be able to cope. To qualify as a student nurse, not only does someone have to pass their exams and essays and do the required hours, they also have to be clinically assessed by a registered nurse—not just any old registered nurse, but someone who has done their mentoring and assessing course. I know that there are student nurses now who struggle to find placements because there are not enough qualified nurses able to assess them. That needs to be taken into account as well. It is not just about increasing the numbers; it is about having the support services in place.

When I met the Minister, I was hugely reassured by what he said about other schemes that are being proposed. My plea is that he outlines those schemes so that student nurses are reassured that, in order to qualify, they will be able to use schemes other than the student loan system. Routes such as nursing associates and nursing apprenticeships are being proposed. I am probably getting a little old now—

Stephen Pound: No!

Maria Caulfield: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Those routes sounds like the state-enrolled nurse or state-registered nurse route again, and they worked pretty well in years gone by.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maria Caulfield: I have almost finished, so I will not take any more interventions. The Minister told me that those routes are alternatives to the proposals that have been put forward today. I urge him to highlight those

alternative routes and to give a timescale. If those alternatives are realistic, they need to be in place as the bursary system is phased out, if not before, so that student nurses have choices on how they become nurses. When I was running a clinical team, we used the assistant practitioner role effectively and made some great progress. Some of those assistant practitioners are in the process of becoming qualified nurses themselves.

I have a couple more points to make. One thing that we are missing is a return-to-nursing scheme. Under the proposals, money will be saved from the bursary scheme. Huge numbers of nurses go off to have children or take a break from their career, like me, and they have to do a six-month course and pay for that themselves. An efficient way of building up nursing numbers quite quickly would be to fund return-to-nursing courses, so that we can easily and quickly increase the number of nurses who can get back into the profession. They have huge amounts of experience.

It is hard to be a student nurse. Although it was a long time ago, I still bear the scars of my nurse training. Not only do student nurses have to learn and take exams, but their placement changes every eight to 12 weeks. They go to a new ward, new day unit or new community placement, and they never really feel part of any team. As soon as they start to get that feeling, they are moving on to the next team. They are struggling to survive on less than £4,000 a year and have to rely on family and friends. We are now asking student nurses to take on more debt to do their training. They may or may not come to nursing with a lot of life experience, but they are telling people that either they may die or their loved ones are dying. Student nurses witness death at first hand—sometimes that death is expected and sometimes it is not. They are kept going, however, by the thought that one day they will be a qualified nurse with that bit of paper that says, “You are registered.”

We have an extremely high turnover of student nurses. Many are leaving before they are qualified, and my concern is that, if we add to their financial pressures, the turnover will be even higher. We are spending nearly £12,000 a nurse to recruit from overseas and fill our vacancies, and I would prefer to see that money being used to sponsor nurses to get into their nurse training, whether that is through the associate route, the apprenticeship route, which sounds exciting, or through encouraging and paying nurses to come back into nursing. We need to have that Virgin philosophy, where a student nurse is part of the team from day one. I hope the Minister can give us some positive feedback from the petition.

5.33 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who made a powerful contribution. Many of the points she made echo those raised by my constituents. She gave a devastating critique of the Government’s proposals. I am grateful to the 154,000 people who signed the petition. That reflects their concern about the Government’s proposals, and we should recognise their contribution. Without them we would not be having this debate in quite this way today. When I last checked, my constituency had the highest number of signatories to the petition. Many have written to me expressing their fears about the impact of withdrawing bursaries for student nurses,

[Paul Blomfield]

midwives and the allied health professions. It is important that we recognise the diversity of professions that are impacted by the Government's proposals and the different demographics and the different factors that will have an impact.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to press some of my constituents' concerns on the Government, and I will quote from four. Teri-Lisa Griffiths wrote to me about her mum, who is from a working-class home and was forced to leave school due to family income and family pressures. In her desire for personal development and to be a positive role model for her children, she went to university and trained as a nurse. She said

"attending my mum's graduation was one of the proudest moments of my life and reinforced my aspirations to attend university and aim for a professional career. The proposed changes leave me dismayed at the potential implications both for the NHS and wider social mobility... With a young family to raise, my mother would never have been able to achieve this without the financial support offered through the NHS bursary."

Susi Liles is a graduate nurse who did a first degree in sociology. She drew on that experience, saying that

"the work load for the nursing degree is much more than for a normal degree, and there are fewer holidays".

She also said that

"you couldn't do other work while training."

Other Members have made that point. She pointed out that nurses simply do not earn enough money to repay the loan, and we could contest some of the figures that have been given. She said that the bulk of nurses on band 5 would not find it easy to pay rent, run a car, which is usually a necessity for shift work, and meet all the other costs of living while also repaying their loan.

Jessica Gallagher, whose mother has been a nurse for 40 years and who has been qualified herself for two years, works in an acute and emergency setting. She said:

"I truly love my job but as a 'mature student', I have no doubt that I would not have completed the course had it not been for the bursary support."

Ella Williams is a student midwife in her final year. She told me:

"I have struggled financially as it's not really feasible to have a job as well as do degrees like mine."

Echoing the point that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) made in opening the debate, she also said that, unlike other students,

"although you are learning you are then almost free labour. Sometimes it is disheartening to feel you are working as hard as everyone else, but doing it for free and I think that students would feel that even more were they getting no government assistance. I completely love what I do, but... I'm sure it isn't just me that feels as though I'm headed into a career that is misunderstood and undervalued by the government."

All those women have two things in common in appealing to me as their Member of Parliament: they are not affected by the changes and they have no personal axe to grind. They are not individually going to lose out. They simply want to share their experience of why taking away the bursaries and introducing tuition fees will damage the NHS and the professions of which they are proud, and they make powerful points. We have already discussed the impact on mature students. They have been disproportionately hit by the introduction of

tuition fees and the new regime in higher education as a whole. We know that they are positively disproportionately represented within nursing and in particular within midwifery and allied professions. We also know that they are more likely—my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) made this powerful point—to have dependents, and the changed arrangements will hit them in that regard, too. The changes will be a particular barrier to those from lower income families. Nursing and midwifery have been an important route of social mobility for many who have ruled out university because of the cost. The package is attractive and makes stepping up into a profession more achievable.

My constituents and other hon. Members have made the point that student nurses cannot work outside the course. Before I was elected to this place in 2010, I worked at the University of Sheffield, where I was partly involved in negotiating the contract for the university to take over nursing and midwifery training. From my experience working with those students, I know that it simply is not feasible for student nurses to do what other students do in offsetting the cost of their higher education by working while they are studying, because of the intensity of the course, the time spent in clinical practice and the early, late, night and weekend shifts that are a normal part of their studies. I was under the impression that nursing students have to complete a minimum of 2,300 hours in clinical practice, but the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said that it was more than that. I will take his advice. None the less, it makes it impractical for them to work as other students do and it is wrong to treat them like other students.

I was unsure about the hon. Gentleman's numbers on this, but my understanding is that, for a nurse on a band 5 salary, repaying the loan would cost about £900 a year. In practical terms, that is approaching a 5% cut in salary. The Government's training policy in other sectors is to introduce an apprenticeship levy, and I agree with that, because it says that employers have to take responsibility for training their workforce. That is right. But what are the Government doing when they are the employer? They are saying the reverse: that the employee should take responsibility for training the workforce. They are imposing a 5% cut on nurses to meet the cost of training the NHS workforce. That is wrong.

The Government are stumbling into a potential disaster, not only for the lives of those who will not be able to pursue their dreams of a career in nursing, midwifery or the allied health professions, but for recruitment in the NHS. When I was elected in 2010, I assumed that I would disagree with the Government on a number of issues, and I have not been proved wrong. Nevertheless, I also assumed that, by and large, they would pay attention to evidence when reaching decisions and, on issues as important as this one, listen to that evidence. As has been pointed out already, so far that does not appear to be the case with regard to the serious concerns raised across the professions—those working in and managing the health sector—about the effect of the changes.

If nothing else comes out of this debate, will the Minister at least agree to publish the evidence that the Government considered when they first reached this decision? Most importantly, will he agree to a proper consultation on the full proposals, not just a technical consultation on their implementation? In his opening

speech, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said that this debate was positive because the Government had initiated a discussion that would give nurses and midwives the opportunity to shape future funding arrangements. He said that the current system is not good enough, as did the hon. Member for Lewes. They are right: it is not good enough. But why not come up with a better system, rather than a worse one? If the consultation to which the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam aspires—one that engages with student nurses and midwives to reshape the system—is to mean anything, it must be proper, full and comprehensive. I hope the Minister will commit to that today.

5.42 pm

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard.

With an ageing and increasing population, there is no doubt that we need a stronger nursing workforce in the NHS. I am glad that the Government recognise that. What worries me, and so many others, is the proposed removal of the bursary scheme in England. In moving to a loan-based system, the Government will need to find ways to attract students to a career path that includes irregular and long hours and is often physically and emotionally demanding. We have yet to hear those proposals, although I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for bringing to our attention some examples of what should be done, including having better salaries and apprenticeships rather than bursarships. The Royal College of Nursing has rightly suggested that the bursary system creates a connection between nursing students and the NHS, a potential future employer, from the start of their education. By removing that connection, we risk reducing the motivation for and attractiveness of such vital jobs in the NHS.

More rural and remote constituencies such as mine, the Isle of Wight, need to make jobs in the public sector attractive and provide motivation for qualified nurses who have student loans that need to be paid off. Most importantly, the island's peculiarities must be taken into account, especially the fact that journeys to universities on the mainland take students two hours each way every time they travel. I hope the Minister will address that problem.

5.44 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to take part in this important debate. I commend the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for introducing it as a Petitions Committee member. He had the difficult task of framing the wider debate by drawing attention to a number of the background and contextual issues in the way that he felt was fairest and on the broadest issues. Many of us are in-filling the debate with a different emphasis, taking account of some other considerations.

As a Northern Ireland MP, I am conscious that this debate is about the bursary scheme for the NHS in England. Of course, the scheme recruits students from Northern Ireland who are undertaking courses in England, and as a devolved Administration we also have our own variant of the scheme. In previous contributions on this subject, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) has raised the question of whether there will be an

immediate Barnett consequential to this change to the NHS in England. Even when we get the answer from the Treasury, it changes over time. I have served as a devolved Finance Minister, so I know that in one instance the Treasury will tell you that there is no Barnett consequential, but then a year or two later some new thinking will mean that there is and that the vice has been tightened. Its usual rule of thumb is, "We're the Treasury; we don't need a reason," so it can change at will.

Although, as the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) said earlier in an intervention, the current Health Minister in Northern Ireland has properly set his face against going down the same road as the UK Government on the bursary scheme, the fact is that a significant change such as this has the potential to become the predictable text of future devolved policy. It has a conditioning effect by creating a context, and even when devolved Administrations resist such policy changes it usually adds to their costs, which makes the choice not to make the change harder. There is usually policy opportunity cost elsewhere as well.

We need to ask where the rush to this policy change has come from. Two lines in the autumn statement have heralded a significant change. We are told that a consultation will start this month, so will the Minister tell us how serious, thorough and far-reaching that consultation is going to be? Will it include a comprehensive consideration of all the implications of the change and a proper consultation on all the shortcomings and benefits of the current scheme?

Those of us with concerns are not coming here with a "Little House on the Prairie" picture of how the existing scheme operates. We are not pretending that nursing students and students in the allied health professions currently have a sweet life. They clearly face many serious pressures, but we heard from the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam that the pressures, difficulties and life costs justify the change. In my view, they justify taking great care with any change. We need to address the problems that exist without creating new problems or compounding the existing ones, for exactly the reasons mentioned by other Members, including the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner), who described the implications of changing to a loan-based system.

We must recognise that the roots of nursing education have historically been very different from those of other education. It is only recently that we have seen the well motivated move to ensure that nursing and the allied health professions are truly recognised as professions of degree standard. The problem is that some people take that to mean that we should treat the bursaries in the same way as any other student loan and that that should be the norm. We know, for the reasons that Members have set out, that it should not. The students in question are not just in training but in service in a real, pertinent and highly pressurised way, which means that they do not have the options for covering their maintenance costs that other people have, and that their time is much more precious. Given their life circumstances, they have responsibilities that students on many other courses do not, so we are not comparing like with like.

Where has the support for the change come from? Has it come from the professional bodies that represent nurses, midwives, physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, dieticians, radiographers, chiropodists and podiatrists? No, it has not. They have

[Mark Durkan]

real concerns about the implications of the change for their members and the services they work in. Has it come directly from the employers? Health service employers in Northern Ireland, including in my constituency, constantly talk about workforce problems and the huge pressure to fill places and keep services running. A new radiotherapy unit has opened in a hospital in my constituency, and there will be huge pressure on it to employ and sustain radiologists for the future. Health service employers in Northern Ireland are acutely conscious of the pressures, but none of them has said to me that they believe this change will solve the problem.

The change seems to be sponsored mostly by the Council of Deans of Health, which is responsible for education, because it will perhaps solve a problem for universities. Universities look at their numbers and their funding and ask what the change will do for their economics, given that they have a key role in educating health service professionals. It will solve a problem for them, but not for the services that are meant to be supported or the professions. We must include in the consultation those whose voices have not been listened to and who have not canvassed and pushed for this change. Their voices must be heard, which is why this debate and others like it are so important.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said that something has to give and that the bursaries need to be changed. At one point, he actually said that one reason why bursaries are not good is that they can be taken away, as though that was an argument against bursaries. It is pretty cheeky to justify a proposal to take bursaries away by saying that we should do it because they can be taken away.

Paul Scully: Forgive me, I was talking about the title and the semantics. “Bursary” is a bit of a misnomer when, as had been said, it is more like a salary, albeit an inappropriately low one.

Mark Durkan: I take the hon. Gentleman’s point, which resets the context of his comments. I gladly acknowledge that clarification.

Just as we should not presume that bursaries are a given and cannot be taken away, people cannot afford to presume that the assurances about the loans-based policy are a given. The current rate of 9% of earnings over £21,000 can change—we must remember that the registration fees for people in the nursing and midwifery service have been hiked up. The Government’s justification for that significant hike in percentage terms is that they have been raised from a fairly low base. When people hear the argument that some students will not pay much of the loan or the whole loan, many fear that more money will be sought in the future in comparative and relative loan repayments. People cannot rely on the assurances that have been given and some of the other arguments that have been made. I hope the Minister is able to convince us that the consultation will look at all those issues and that they will be answered properly.

5.55 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am grateful to be able to make a contribution to this

important debate. I congratulate the 154,000 people who have signed the petition and brought this issue to the House for discussion.

I declare an interest: I am a Unite member and an ex-Unite workplace rep in the NHS. I used to work as a healthcare scientist in the NHS. I did not receive a bursary for my training; I was employed in a supernumerary position. I was privileged to be able to do that. In my day, it was recognised that I was making a contribution to the NHS while being trained. The Government should perhaps go back a few decades and have a look at how NHS staff were treated in the 1980s, when I trained.

Members have quoted various figures about the proposed changes. From the reading I have done, I believe that under the proposed changes, students could be burdened with up to a staggering £65,000 of debt by the time they finish their training. Under the current system, the bursary allows those without financial means to study as nurses, midwives and, importantly, allied health professionals—I am grateful that a lot of Members have mentioned AHPs, because it is important that we do not forget them and their contribution to our NHS. Many trainees already struggle to make ends meet, even under the bursary system. As Members have said, the system is not perfect, and we need to look at it, but let us do it properly and put in place a system that actually works, rather than one that appears not to have been tested or consulted upon.

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

Many Members referred to the difficulty of getting part-time jobs. It was a pleasure to listen to the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) talk about her own experience. Given the number of hours that NHS trainees—nurses, midwives or AHPs—are expected to work during clinical placements or at university, plus all the extra hours on assignments, exams, practicals and study, there are not enough hours in the day for them to take on a part-time job.

I was interested to hear the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) refer to Martin Lewis’s MoneySavingExpert.com website. I had a look at it during the debate to see the advice that he gives about NHS bursaries. I could not find anything particularly relevant, but I noticed that, to help students financially, he advises them to get a part-time job. That is obviously not suitable in this situation. The hon. Member for Lewes highlighted the relatively low pay that nurses on band 5 or 6 can expect to earn. Under a loan system, those people, once qualified, will be paying back that debt for their whole career. I urge the Government to consider those points, which have been well made.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that the pressures will be all the more acute in high-cost housing areas such as Oxford, where nurses are already struggling, which will be a further disincentive to recruitment and retention in services that are already under enormous pressure?

Liz McInnes: I thank my right hon. Friend for his important intervention. Housing costs must be borne in mind in any discussions about changes to NHS bursaries. The days when cheap accommodation was available to NHS trainees are long gone. I can remember staying in

a tower block in Greenwich at a reasonable rate during my training, but those tower blocks were sold years ago and are now privately owned.

Replacing bursaries with loans will reduce the diversity of those able to access a career in healthcare. I noted with interest that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam claimed when challenged that that would not be the case, but was then unable to quote any equality impact assessments. I would be interested to hear from the Minister what assessments have actually been performed. The NHS bursary is not a cost but an investment in the health and wellbeing of our society. To lose the bursary would affect not only prospective students but each and every citizen of this country, by which I mean England, because the proposals apply to England only.

In the Budget debate of July last year, I spoke against the change from maintenance grants to loans for young people hoping to go to university. The withdrawal of NHS bursaries, as announced in the comprehensive spending review, directly mirrors that change. As a result of the Budget proposals, our students will be saddled with even more debt. I said at the time that there was a real risk that the Government were experimenting with the future of the current generation of secondary school students, but it now appears that they are also experimenting with the future of current and potential nursing and health trainees. In short, it is an experiment on the future staffing of our NHS that has the potential to go badly wrong.

I put out a simple statement on Twitter regarding the views of the Royal College of Midwives, which opposes the proposals to remove NHS bursaries, and received this response:

“My daughter a single parent budgeted carefully b4 becoming a student nurse, may not be able to complete studies.”

That is an appalling situation into which the Government have put that student nurse. Again, that gives the lie to their oft-repeated claim to be the party of working people. Simply repeating the same line over and over again does not make it true, although that does seem to be this Government's *modus operandi* on so many issues.

As with the Government's conversion of maintenance grants to student loans, I would be interested to read an equality impact assessment, should such a thing exist, of the removal of NHS bursaries. The Government's claim that cutting the bursary will encourage more prospective students into nursing is ludicrous, and even some Government MPs are saying so publicly. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Lewes on Radio 5 live yesterday stating that she would have not been able to train as a nurse without an NHS bursary. Today she hinted at alternatives, including apprenticeships and maybe even a return to the days of state-enrolled and state-registered nurses, and I hope that the Minister will be able to elaborate on them.

The Royal College of Midwives believes that the NHS workforce deserves a better future and says, interestingly, that the Government have

“taken money away from other parts of the health system, including student education, to be able to give ‘the NHS’ more money. According to the King's Fund, spending on health activity that falls outside NHS England's budget will decrease by more than £3 billion in real terms by 2020/21—a reduction of more than 20%.”

The RCM then quotes the King's Fund, which states that

“it is clear that a large amount of the additional increase in NHS England's budget has come at the expense of other areas of health spending.”

The Royal College of Nursing is similarly opposed to the plans and refers to them as “ill thought out”. As the RCN celebrates its centenary, it calls upon the Government to listen to its knowledge and expertise, stating:

“The future of nursing must be protected. Our patients deserve nothing less.”

Unite the union also opposes the plans, highlighting the other health professions covered by the NHS bursary, including occupational therapists, physiotherapists, radiographers and speech and language therapists, to which other hon. Members have referred. Those professions are the backbone of our NHS, and we cannot allow entrants to them to train at their own expense while racking up debt. To do so would be disastrous for our NHS and for future patient care. I urge the Government to reconsider the proposals and, more importantly, to take advice from the professional bodies.

6.5 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) on securing this vital debate on the e-petition relating to the retention of the NHS bursary. I praise those who created the e-petition and the more than 150,000 people who have so far chosen to sign it.

I have no experience of nursing, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) and my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) for their experience. I have never had any interest in nursing, but when my husband was very ill last year I, like many others, gained experience of the nursing profession and how nurses go about their important work. I have nothing but admiration for nurses. However, because I do not have direct experience, I thought it pertinent to seek the views and opinions of some of the exceptional nurses who form the backbone of our NHS and who have first-hand experience of the physical, emotional, mental and financial challenge of successfully completing a rigorous healthcare course.

I asked nurses about the funding arrangements for NHS students and the consequences of the Government's decision to scrap bursaries and charge tuition fees, thereby passing on the full cost of training to the students themselves for the first time. Without exception, these dedicated and essential frontline NHS professionals extolled the immeasurable importance of retaining and improving the existing bursary system and condemned, without equivocation, the Government's decision to scrap it. They each wholeheartedly espoused the long-established reciprocity of the existing funding arrangements, which—albeit weighted in favour of the NHS and its patients—sees student nurses undertake a gruelling 2,300 hours of unpaid work across the NHS for the benefit of us all. In exchange, they are not charged fees for their training and receive a bursary. The arrangement recognises, whether by luck or design, the nature of the nursing course. It is longer than other university courses, with shorter holidays and a demanding work placement, all of which severely limits the opportunities to take on additional work to pay towards studies, to which many hon. Members have alluded.

[Colleen Fletcher]

The nurses to whom I spoke impressed on me how much of an incentive the current funding model is to those applying for a place on a nursing course and how its withdrawal, to be replaced with the huge levels of debt from a loan and tuition fee system, is likely to deter would-be applicants from entering the course in future. They said that that would be particularly true for mature students, who may have young families, caring responsibilities for elderly parents and a mortgage to pay, or those for whom healthcare is a second degree. Moreover, many of those whom I contacted raised concerns that the Government had already actively and wilfully undermined the incentives of a career in nursing, even before they announced the proposed funding changes.

One in particular, Steven, who is extremely proud of being a nurse and recognises the rewarding nature of the job and the positive impact that it can have on people's lives, said that he was none the less aware that the incentives for entering the nursing profession had been significantly diminished in recent years and would be lessened still further by the Government's proposals, which would burden newly qualified nurses with debt of at least £51,600 and an average pay cut of £900 a year due to debt repayments. Steven told me:

"Nursing currently offers very little incentive even if students make it through the three years of training. The well documented staff shortages and increased work load, especially in the winter, coupled with five years of pay freezes, below inflation pay rises, and increased pension contributions does not inspire students to commit to three years of gruelling physical work and financial hardship."

Given the staffing shortages in the NHS, the Government should seek to improve the terms and conditions of employment for nurses, to reward their invaluable work in extremely difficult circumstances and to incentivise more people to enter the profession, rather than exacerbating the workforce crisis as they have done in recent years and as the proposed funding changes will do in future.

I hope that the Government will listen carefully to extraordinary and dedicated nurses such as Steven and, in doing so, recognise the strength of support among health professionals and the wider public for a reversal of the proposals and for the retention and improvement of the NHS bursary. If the Government are not minded to reverse their proposals, at the very least they should pause them before rushing through such damaging changes and take the opportunity to commit to a proper consultation on the full proposals, not simply have a procedural consultation on their implementation.

At this juncture it seems apt to conclude by again quoting Steven, who told me:

"The bursary allows anyone with a caring and kind nature to achieve their dream of being a nurse; it ensures a constant stream of nurses from all backgrounds which leads to a rich and diverse workforce equipped with the skills to deliver care to our rich and diverse society."

The scrapping of the bursary will not only jeopardise that workforce diversity, but is likely to have a negative impact on overall nurse recruitment. Ministers would do well to take heed of his stark warning.

6.12 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I am grateful to have the opportunity to take

part in the debate and I strongly support the petitioners in calling on the Chancellor to keep the NHS bursary for those students who are studying to become the next generation of nurses, midwives and other health professionals.

Before I make further progress, I should declare an interest: my sister is a nurse at my local hospital in Paisley, the Royal Alexandra, to which my mother was admitted only a couple of hours ago. My local university, the University of the West of Scotland, helps to train and educate 4,000 nursing students, one of the largest cohorts in Scotland.

Following the Chancellor's bursary announcement, I spoke to my sister, nursing friends and nursing students to learn about the impact of that reckless decision. They were disappointed, to say the least, to learn of the Chancellor's actions and short-sightedness, but they were not surprised. Since coming to power the Chancellor and his Cabinet colleagues have launched a direct assault on the health service and on the education sector in England. A week does not seem to go by without health workers or students protesting about policies pursued by the Government.

Following my discussions, I decided to raise the issue of the bursary with the Chancellor when he stood in at Prime Minister's questions while the Prime Minister was gallivanting around Europe in his rather pathetic renegotiation tour. I called on the Chancellor to explain to nursing students why he was removing vital support from them. Unfortunately, he was unable to provide any sort of answer, and from that performance it is clear that he will need to improve if he wants to become Prime Minister.

It is important to remember and understand why nursing students receive a different funding settlement from other students. Nursing students usually work longer hours on their course than other students and, alongside their studies on the course, nursing students work 37.5 hours each week in their placement areas. The long hours on placement ensure that nursing students follow the same duty patterns as full-time staff. From speaking to nursing students, I know how much they appreciate that education on the ward, and they benefit greatly from learning alongside qualified colleagues.

We should also remember that the majority of nursing students are women; a higher proportion are mature students; and some have children or other dependants to look after. Many students work part-time to help cover the cost of living, and most of their jobs are low paid. Based on that, we can all appreciate and understand why there is a different funding settlement for nursing and other health-related students.

If we want to improve our NHS, we cannot make reckless decisions like this one. The Chancellor's decision to abolish bursaries should be seen as an attack on the NHS, on the health professionals of tomorrow and on aspiration—the very opposite of what the Government claim they want to achieve. Let us be clear: forcing such students to take out loans to cover the costs of their course will deter people from wanting to enter an NHS career.

A coalition that includes Unison, the National Union of Students, the Royal College of Midwives, the British Dental Association and others states that the proposed new system will lead to students accumulating debt worth at least £51,600. That is a disaster waiting to

happen. Demand for NHS services is growing and we need more nurses and other health professionals; putting barriers in their way will lead to fewer choosing such professions. Instead of removing support for such students, we should look at whether the existing level of support is enough for them to excel in their studies and to develop their career within the NHS.

At the moment, nursing students in England receive up to £4,200 a year to support them through their studies. Given that those students are also working full-time in the ward, they will clearly be earning well below the minimum wage. We have to ask ourselves why the Government have not published the impact assessment that was carried out on the effects of their decision. Have they something to hide?

When summing up, will the Minister tell us why that impact assessment has not been published? Will he tell us what impact the changes will have on those students who come from the most deprived backgrounds? What impact will the policy have on the drop-out rate for students studying on nursing and health-related courses? Those are important questions that need to be answered. I fear that we are creating and debating policy without knowing the full impact of policy created in pursuit of the Government's ideological obsession with austerity.

The Chancellor should seek guidance from the Scottish Government on support offered to nursing and health-related students. Whereas the UK Government want to abolish bursary support for nursing students, the Scottish Government provide £6,578 to students, which is £2,500 more than for students south of the border and all on a non-means-tested basis. Whereas the UK Government want to impose tuition fees of £9,000 on those students, the Scottish Government have abolished tuition fees and preserved the principle of education based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. Whereas the UK Government work against health service and education partners, the Scottish Government work with such bodies, in partnership, ever to improve the education and health services that exist in Scotland. I ask the Minister directly: will he assure me that the cut to bursaries will not result in cuts to the block grant allocation to Scotland? Finally, how will the cuts affect cross-border study?

We seem to have a tale of two Governments: a UK Government and Chancellor fixated on austerity and making life difficult for students and workers alike; and a Scottish Government working with people to protect us from Osborne austerity. However, we in the Scottish National party will not sit back and watch the UK Government attack the next generation of health professionals, including junior doctors. We support those students studying down south who dream about a career in the NHS. We will be a friend to them, a friend to aspiration and a friend to the NHS. We will challenge the cuts at every opportunity.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): If I heard correctly, Mr Newlands, you said that your mother had just been admitted to hospital—our thoughts are with you.

The debate will finish no later than 7.30 pm. The Front Benchers may divide up the time and should not exceed it, so that everyone gets an equal amount of time. It is customary to allow Mr Scully an opportunity to wind up right at the end. I call Philippa Whitford.

6.18 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Evans, and it is an honour to take part in such an important debate.

There is no question but that England requires more nurses. The ratio is 5.8 nurses per 1,000 patients, the lowest in the UK, and yet NHS England cannot fill nursing posts. It is bringing nurses in from overseas and using agency nurses, so that number needs to be expanded. The approach taken is the idea of simply removing the cap, but the challenge is how enough placements will be found. As the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) said, how will that be funded when Health Education England is facing a massive cut? Furthermore, it is not simply a matter of funding the placements; they require the contribution of nurses and other staff on the wards who are already really busy. It is not something that can be dreamt up in an office in Westminster and happen by magic.

There is also the issue of whether, at the end of training, that unlimited number of nurses will all find jobs in our NHS. It is likely that they will not. We will therefore have wasted not just their money in the tuition fees they will pay for the cost of their training, but money invested by the Government in their training. That is short-sighted, because the Government will lose control of workforce planning, which is key, and with only 5.8 nurses per 1,000 patients, clearly that has not worked too well up to now.

There is an argument for re-expanding nurse places, which were at their height in 2004 when we had nearly 25,000 places and reached a low in 2012-13 of 17,500. At the moment, they have just crept above 20,000, but that does not even bring us back to the figures seen in 2001-02. We clearly need more places, but the idea that nursing students should take on the burden is ridiculous.

Hon. Members in the Chamber will know of my interest: I have been a doctor for 33 and a half years. If there had not been free tuition—and grants back in 1977—I could not possibly have become a doctor, let alone gone on to study surgery and work as a breast surgeon for all of those years. England is already losing out on students who have talent but not the opportunity to follow any degree, and medical degrees in particular. Now we are talking about nurses and allied health professionals—as Members have said, allied health professionals are included in that important group.

Some Members have asked about an impact assessment. We have not heard about one and it is clear that there been absolutely no consultation. The Royal College of Nursing reported that there was no consultation with it: I should have thought that that is where one would start.

We need to look at the bursary. As the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) explained, it is not exactly generous: £1,000 is guaranteed. Above that, it is means-tested and it reaches the dizzy heights of £3,091 only for people in London. That is not a lot of money. As my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) mentioned, the bursary in Scotland is £6,578, which is all non-means-tested and non-repayable, because we consider it absolutely crucial to invest in the people we need to run our health service.

The biggest kick for students will be having to pay tuition fees, which are currently £9,000 a year: we do not know what they will reach in the future. That instant

[*Dr Philippa Whitford*]

debt of 27 grand will certainly put people off. Even if I had been told at the age of 18 that I did not have to pay back the loan until afterwards, the idea that someone with no support in the world, as was the case at the time, would be signing on the dotted line to take on what was almost a small mortgage would be hard. People are not going to do that.

The idea that people will not be put off is naive. It will put off the 50% of nursing students who are postgraduates and mature students, and it will put off people from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. It will reduce diversity. We have talked about the need for Parliament to reflect our population, and it is crucial too that nurses and doctors reflect the population that they serve. That will change, because becoming a nurse will be an expensive business.

We need to think about why we moved from the old days of the enrolled nurse and the registered nurse: those were the nurses I used to work with. I have to say that, from the number of stripes on their hat, I knew exactly what experience they had and exactly what they could do. Many of us thought, “Why are we suddenly doing degrees?” but when we look at where our NHS is now, we see the whole point of that, because nurses are now leaders in the NHS and the vision of the future NHS workforce is of nurses leading independent teams, being out in primary care, triaging patients and diagnosing and treating on their own. The idea of the nurse as handmaiden has thankfully long been laid to rest.

The same applies to allied health professionals. About 30% of the patients who come to primary care have a musculoskeletal problem and part of the vision of improving primary care is to allow patients access to a physiotherapist—an expert on their problem—if they have a sore back, hip or knee.

Podiatrists provide care to an increasing number of diabetics. People are probably not aware that the life expectancy of someone with a severe diabetic ulcer is poor, ranking above only lung cancer and pancreatic cancer. That is a real threat to patients, so we need podiatrists who can check feet and treat ulcers at an early point. There are only 3,000 podiatrists for the whole of England, yet student numbers have been reduced from 361 to 326.

We are reducing the numbers of the very people we envisage needing in future—it is like the right hand and left hand are not talking to each other and do not know what the other is doing. As we say in Scotland, two grey cells and they are in a huff; they are not talking to each other. That needs to change. We need to look at the NHS as a whole and the people we expect to provide care in future.

As I mentioned, we have a reasonable bursary in Scotland. I would not say that our students are living the high life on £6,500 a year but, like our other students, they do not pay tuition fees. The hon. Member for Lewes cited a figure for graduates earning £100,000 more, but we must remember that that is over an entire working lifetime, so that is £2,500 a year, which is not a huge amount, and that is reduced by their debt. If students are graduating with £50,000 or £60,000 of debt from their study and living costs and so on, those extra earnings shrink to almost nothing. We will gradually reach the point at which people who might have considered

being nursery nurses or primary school teachers or contributing to society in another way that is not well remunerated will not feel able to take on that debt.

We need to look at what we will need in future. We require physios and radiographers, who they will provide the wraparound care for our ageing population, out in the community, leading their teams and working on their own. I call on the Minister to follow the Scottish example and invest in people. That is the key.

Sadly, what we have seen recently—certainly in my short time in the House—is the debt created by the bankers towards the end of the previous decade became sovereign debt, which is now becoming individual debt. All the time in the main Chamber we hear how we cannot leave public debt to future generations, but we are putting it on future generations as individuals. We need to recognise that. People struggle to get a house, they struggle to get education and they struggle to get a job. We need to change that. In this instance, our return is a coherent, diverse, broad NHS staff made up of people who are committed to what they do. I call on the Minister to answer the many challenges raised today and to say how he will invest in the future workforce that will look after the people of England.

6.28 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and to follow the excellent contribution of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). I also thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for bringing the debate to the Chamber and I pay tribute to the petition’s organisers, because it is no mean feat to get 154,000 signatures.

We have had a good debate, with some excellent contributions. In particular, I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) and for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) for their contributions. I also thank the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) for her insights. She was right to highlight the realities of life for student nurses, but I am afraid I do not share her optimism about the other training routes the Government are developing for nursing staff. She was also right to acknowledge that the bursary is not perfect, but it is beyond me why we should replace it with something worse.

In the short time I have, I want to set out why I think the Government are taking a huge gamble with the future of the NHS workforce and with patient safety. As others have said, the Government’s proposals affect not only nurses and midwives, but those studying radiography, radiotherapy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, podiatry, chiropractic and speech and language therapy. Many of those specialisms face recruitment challenges, and they are all integral to the NHS’s ability to continue functioning.

Before I turn to the problems with the Government’s proposals, we need to understand why the country has a problem with nursing supply in the first place. Shortly after the 2010 election, the Government cut the number of nurse training commissions in an ill-judged attempt to make some short-term savings. Those cuts saw nurse training places reduced from more than 20,000 a year to

just 17,000—the lowest level since the 1990s. As a result, we trained 8,000 fewer nurses in the last Parliament than we would have done if we had maintained training commissions at 2010 levels. At the time, experts such as the Royal College of Nursing warned that the cuts would cause

“serious issues in undersupply for years to come.”

They were right. Hospitals are now forced to rely on recruitment from overseas or on expensive agency staff. That is a key cause of the projected £2.2 billion black hole in NHS finances.

Although the Government have tried to correct the problem and increase the number of training commissions in recent years, even today we are training fewer nurses than we were five years ago. There is therefore a problem. No one disputes that, but no one should be under any illusion about the cause.

The danger with the Government’s proposals is not only that they risk making staff shortages even worse by putting off the next generation of student nurses, but that they are ill-judged and not backed by a shred of evidence. As we have heard today, the starting salary for a nurse is just above the loan repayment threshold, which has, shamefully, been frozen. That means that nurses will start paying back their loans as soon as they graduate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North said, nurses will, on average, take an effective pay cut of £900 a year to meet their debt repayments. How on earth can the Minister justify that? Why is he so sure that burdening nurses with debts of more than £50,000 will have no impact on recruitment or retention?

If the Minister will not listen to me, perhaps he will listen to the stories of some of the student nurses themselves. Just before Christmas, I met four deeply impressive young women who were studying to become nurses—Danielle, Charli, Marina and Sophia. Those women were in their 20s, and their lives have not followed the simple path of GCSEs, A-levels and going straight to university. Danielle left school after her GCSEs, but she went back to do her A-levels. She got a job as a healthcare assistant and then decided she wanted to go into nursing. Marina had a child when she was 16. By the sound of things, she has had a pretty tough life. However, she is clear she wants to be a mental health nurse. When she says she thinks the best people to care for others are those who have experienced hardships themselves, she has a point. My fear about the Government’s proposals is that they will mean that those who end up training to be nurses will be those who are best placed to pay, not necessarily those who are best able to care.

Has the Minister read the testimonies of student nurses past and present, which the Royal College of Nursing collated? It is a hefty volume, and I recommend it to him. Natalie from Sheffield says this about the bursary:

“Without it I wouldn’t have been able to start the course...My mum gives me help when she can, but as a single parent she can’t afford to look after my sister as well as me. I think there will be a huge loss of people taking part in the course, which will further impact on the nursing shortage.”

Daniel, from south-east London, says:

“I would not have taken the course if it were another £20,000 plus worth of debt to incur. To cut the bursary is ridiculous. Student nurses are thrown into the...deep end as soon as their first placement a month into their studies, leaving less time for work that pays. If anything, the NHS bursary should be raised.”

Vicky, from York, says:

“I would not have been able to, or chosen, to study to be a mental health nurse without the bursary for the following reasons...I am a single mum and need support for childcare costs. I have debts from a previous degree. I am a mature student at 33. I would not take on further debts which would be impossible to pay back, and would not be fair on my little girl.”

I say to the Minister that I know about the fear of debt that can be instilled in people by a working-class upbringing. I know what discussions take place in homes across the country about the pluses and minuses of people going away to university and racking up debts when they could just start earning. I know that because I experienced those discussions.

My other main concern with the proposals is that, as others have said, the Government do not seem to understand that student nurses are not like other students. Student nurses are required as a normal part of their studies to spend a significant amount of their course working with patients in clinical practice, including on night and weekend shifts. They have less holiday than other students, and they spend hours on their course caring for patients and, sometimes, keeping our hospital wards running. The changes will, effectively, charge students for working in the NHS. How can that possibly be justified? What the Minister seems to have failed to grasp is that student nurses are far more likely to be mature students. We have only to look at what has happened to applications from mature students under the new student finance system to see what a risk the proposals will be to the NHS.

That raises an important question about the kind of people we want to train to be nurses. The application process is rigorous, and rightly so, but the average age of a student nurse is 28, and many have caring and family responsibilities. Are those not precisely the people we want to attract into nursing? If so, is it not all the more alarming that those people are the most likely to be put off a career in nursing as a result of the changes?

The Minister will stand up and no doubt eloquently argue that I am wrong, and that the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Midwives, Unison and various other stakeholders are wrong. However, every one of the claims I am sure he will make has been questioned by experts. The Government’s case for the changes has been put together on the back of an envelope—they did not even bother to consult anyone before announcing them. The Royal College of Midwives has said:

“The RCM is extremely disappointed that the government did not seek advice or consult with us prior to making this decision.”

The Royal College of Nursing has said:

“This decision was made with no consultation or evidence gathering.”

Talking to organisations that might know a thing or two about nursing is not just good policy making but plain common sense. Will the Minister explain why he did not talk to the Royal College of Nursing or the Royal College of Midwives before the Chancellor made his announcement?

Will the Minister also explain why the proposed consultation is only a technical consultation on the proposals’ implementation, not on the principle behind them? Surely it makes sense to have a proper, detailed look at the matter and to work with all sides to explore how we can improve the support available to student nurses and increase the supply of excellent staff to the

[Heidi Alexander]

NHS. By jumping to a solution that is not based on evidence or facts, the Government are taking a reckless gamble with the future of the NHS workforce, and with patient safety. I serve notice on the Minister today that the Opposition will oppose the plans every step of the way.

6.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): I add my voice to those of other Members who have spoken today to say how much I appreciate the decision of the Petitions Committee to bring the matter to the notice of the House. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for outlining the case as many of the petitioners see it. As both shadow Ministers—the hon. Members for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) and for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford)—said, we had a high-quality debate, and Members raised a huge range of points in a calm and collected but passionate way. I hope Members will forgive me if I address as many points as I can. I hope to finish before the end of our allotted time, so that people can get away, but I am aware of the number of different points that were raised. I am also aware of the intense public interest in this important issue, which is why I want to make sure that I address every point that was raised—including detailed points.

Many Members, including the hon. Member for Lewisham East, were here for the debate on tuition fees in 2011. It was a searing experience. It is the only time I can think of—the hon. Lady and other Opposition Members will remember this—when protests could be heard by those in the Chamber. We all remember, too, having to leave by secret exits because of the riot outside. It was understandable that, at the time, people were so passionate about the change being made. The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) was a central player in the great debate, and he acquitted himself with honour. He explained in great detail his side of the argument—and that of the National Union of Students—at the time of probably the most controversial change made under the coalition Government. Yet every single one of the claims made at the time—the central claims against the changes—has been proven untrue.

I want to address the core point made in the considered speech of the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield)—that the Government should make changes on the back of evidence. My contention is that that is exactly what we are doing. Since the changes made in 2011, there has been an increase in the number of students in every part of the higher education universe. Most importantly, to my mind, there has been a considerable increase in the number coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. That is precisely why, even if it were not for the reasons that I want to come on to about why what we are doing is important for the NHS and for nursing in particular, it is an important change. Nursing students are the only significant group of students not to have been included in the reforms that have so significantly benefited the rest of the university sector.

Paul Blomfield: Clearly we could have a lengthy debate—I am sure you would counsel us not to, Mr Evans—on the merits of the student loan system. I was surprised

by the Minister's unequivocal statement a moment ago. Will he agree that one section of the demographic that has been negatively impacted by the introduction of the new student funding regime in 2012 is mature students?

Ben Gummer: I will not agree with the hon. Gentleman's contention. UCAS figures for mature students in 2011, the year of the change, show that there were 42,170 acceptances. That figure dropped in the following year, as did the figures for all students across the university sector. It then went up to roughly the same figure in 2013, and up again in 2014. In 2015 the figure was 48,690, so the number of mature students has increased, and in percentage terms the increase is, I believe, more than that for university students of the normal age. When we consider the core reasons for the change—expanding the opportunity to go to university, through the number of places; increasing quality, which has improved according to a number of metrics; improving student experience, which has also happened in the past few years; and, most importantly for a university system, creating a ladder of opportunity for those born with least—we see that the reforms have delivered by every one of those measures. It is precisely for that reason that, even were it not for the wider issues that the NHS confronts, I would believe what we are doing to be entirely right. It enables us to spread to nurses the same benefits that have been realised in the rest of the student population.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister for giving way again. I want to challenge him on those figures, which I guess—I do not have them before me—relate purely to full-time students. If we consider full-time and part-time students, we see unambiguous evidence that the number of mature students has fallen dramatically.

Ben Gummer: The numbers do relate to full-time students. I concede that, in the case of part-time students, there have been, for a longer period than the time since 2011, problems in maintaining a rise consistent with that across the population. The Chancellor has accepted that fact, which is why he devoted specific attention and funds in the spending review to supporting part-time mature students. However, in this case we are talking about a nursing degree that is, for the vast majority, a full-time one. For the majority of nurses—I believe the figures are not quite those given by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire, although I do not have them to hand—their degree is a normal undergraduate degree, taken before maturity. For all those people, I want the same benefits that have been provided across the rest of the university sector. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central was a Member in the previous Parliament, as was the hon. Member for Lewisham East, and they made exactly the same claims then as they do now about a reduction in opportunity, a reduction in number of applicants and a reduction in all the areas where we want universities to perform. I am afraid they have been proved wrong and the Government have been proved right, and that is why it is important that we extend those benefits to nursing.

I will address in terms the process by which we have come to this decision, about which the hon. Member for Ilford North raised some detailed questions, and our intention for the wider reform of training routes into nursing. It is important that hon. Members should see

the changes that we are making to university training as part of a wider reform enabling us to increase both numbers and the quality of courses, as well as improving the student experience for nurses entering nurse registration by whatever route. The policy has been worked through in considerable detail in the Department of Health. There has been consultation with leading nursing professionals. The Department of Health is advised by a number of chief nurses. All were consulted and involved in working up policy in this area, which is entirely how it should be.

We have been very open about the fact that we want a full and detailed consultation about how the proposals should be implemented. We want that to be thorough and to involve everyone, whether they oppose or are in favour of the changes, so that we get the detail right. While I will maintain that the overall policy direction is correct for the reasons I have given, it is important to make sure we implement the detail correctly. If we do not get it right, it could have a perverse impact. If we do, this could be an important moment for the nursing profession, because we will be able to do something that previous Governments have not been able to do. Even in the wildest spending realms of the imaginations of some colleagues of the hon. Member for Lewisham East, it would not be possible to commit the resources to expand the training places that the route we have decided on will make possible.

The Opposition must answer a central point when they set out their opposition to the proposal. The fact is that we want to give more training places to people who want to become nurses. Last year, there were 57,000 applicants for 20,000 places. We want to expand the number of places so that people get the chance to become a nurse, but within the current spending envelope—even if we were to increase it more significantly than we propose to over the next five years, and certainly far more significantly than the Opposition propose—it is not possible to do that.

Dr Whitford: Does the Minister not accept, on the basis of invest to save, that if agency nurses are costing the NHS £2 billion, such an investment in future nursing would, in actual fact, save money in the long term?

Ben Gummer: I agree with the hon. Lady that one key thing we have to do is ensure we have a permanent workforce and do not depend across the service on agency and locum nurses and doctors. However, part of that is ensuring we have the workforce numbers trained to be able to fill places. In the past, we have failed to predict workforce numbers with any accuracy, which is something all Governments are guilty of.

No matter what happened to training places, the changes required across the service because of the impact of Mid Staffs on our understanding of safe staffing ratios has meant an increase in the requirement for nurses. At the moment, in the very short term, that requirement has to be plugged by agency and locum nurses, but we want to replace them with a full-time permanent staff that is sustainable. I hope the Opposition are able to bring an alternative view—I would be interested to hear it—but if we are to increase the number of training places, we have, simply put, to be able to afford to do so. The surest way of expanding places is to repeat

exactly what we did for all other university degrees back in 2011, which has seen a massive expansion in training places.

The other point that the hon. Member for Lewisham East and her colleagues must address if they wish to oppose this reform is how they would afford not only the expansion in training places, but the maintenance support for nurses going through training. I completely agree with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield): the current bursary funding is not generous. It is certainly not sufficient for many, especially those with caring duties, to maintain themselves, but how can we find the increase while ensuring we expand places at the same time?

Through reforming bursaries, we are ensuring that we can increase the cash amount by 25%—something that, again, could not be funded out of the existing envelope, even though we are increasing NHS spending more than any other major party promised at the last election. We are therefore able to provide the support that people going through nurse training are rightly asking for.

Paul Blomfield: The Minister makes great play of the comparison between the reforms introduced in 2012 for other undergraduates and this reform. I admire the way he talks—I say that without any irony—about sharing the benefits of the current scheme with student nurses, midwives and allied professions. I am not quite sure they would describe a £56,000 debt as a benefit. Putting that to one side, does he not recognise the sharp difference between other undergraduates and those studying nursing, midwifery and allied professions in terms of the commitment to clinical placements, the shift patterns and everything else that will prevent them from being able to take employment in order to offset the cost of their education?

Ben Gummer: That is the case at the moment. The hon. Gentleman must answer the question of precisely how we increase support for people who are working in clinical learning placements. Converting the bursary regime means that we can increase that support by 25%.

It is easy for the hon. Gentleman to make a play to the gallery about how the reforms might work, but I ask him again to look carefully at the experience of other students and at the 47,000 applicants who are unable to secure a place because of the constriction in places. He is not able to give those people an answer about how we expand places without resources that I imagine he is not willing to commit from his position. The best way of giving those people the opportunity is reforming the education system. I am afraid that it is simply not credible for the Opposition to decry the proposals, which is their right, without providing an alternative of how we might fund the additional places and the maintenance of those who are in position.

Heidi Alexander: The Minister talks about the ratio of applicants to nursing students. Will he say what proportion of the applicants who failed to secure a place met the entry criteria to the course? What guarantee can he give that removing the bursary will increase the number of successful applicants?

Ben Gummer: I will write to the hon. Lady with year-by-year figures, where available—pass rates change every year. The nursing training course is one of the most over-subscribed of all undergraduate courses. Compared with other undergraduate courses, whatever metric we use, it is a significantly over-subscribed course. We know that a significant number will not receive a place on a course, even though they have met the criteria.

Dr Whitford: If the cap is completely removed, the Government will lose any ability to plan a workforce for the future. If all 47,000 applicants are given a place, what will happen when they come out at the other end? There will not be the placements to train them, and there will certainly not be the jobs. Is this just a way of having a flood of cannon fodder nurses, so that their pay can be frozen?

Ben Gummer: The hon. Lady mentioned in her speech, as did the hon. Member for Ilford North, the need by some trusts to recruit from abroad and to use locum and agency nurses. I hope she will understand therefore the internal logic of our argument: even at the moment, we are not able to fill places from the domestic supply of nursing graduates. It is precisely our wish to expand that supply. Planning the workforce will, in large part, be controlled through the placements that Health Education England buys from universities on behalf of the taxpayer and the NHS.

Several hon. Members raised the issue of clinical placements, on which we are now in deep discussions with Universities UK. The hon. Member for Ilford North raised that issue, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes. I urge them both to look at the example of the University of Central Lancashire, and its relationship with Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and Bolton NHS Foundation Trust. They are delivering innovative and exciting ways of providing new placements outside the scope of the existing placement scheme, even without any Government support or change in the rules.

There is an appetite for delivering additional clinical placements, and we will see how that progresses in our discussions with Universities UK. All the while, it is important to point out that the Nursing and Midwifery Council has to register nurses at the end and ensure that the degrees are satisfactory. All of this will have to abide by the NMC's recommendation that the placements are up to scratch, so we are constrained, quite rightly, in anything we might want to do by what it decides in that regard.

Heidi Alexander: The Minister gave the example of the University of Central Lancashire. Does he accept that one reason that pilot is successful is that individuals are guaranteed a job at the end of it, which would not be the case for the students to whom he proposes applying these more general changes?

Ben Gummer: In the course of taking interventions, I am skipping around the points that hon. Members have raised, which I want to address. The hon. Lady is right that the University of Central Lancashire has worked up a really good course, which is partly about job security at the end of it. It is exactly the kind of

scheme we are looking at to improve attrition rates, which were another point that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes raised. We have to do better to help nurses complete their courses, and again, that metric has improved across the rest of the university sector since 2012. I hope that in freeing up nurse training a little through our reforms, we will be able to provide better incentives for foundation trusts and NHS trusts to have an end-to-end training offer for student nurses—if not modelling the one that the University of Central Lancashire has brought in, then a variant on it.

There is a lot of exciting thinking out there in universities, foundation trusts and NHS trusts about how we can implement the reforms to make nurse training better, expand the number of places and solve their workforce problems. My job is to release that thinking. I cannot do it within the straitjacket of the existing system, but I can through the reforms I am able to make.

Dr Whitford: Is the pilot in Lancashire that has been described not an argument for better manpower and workforce planning, rather than for simply throwing things open to the winds, which is what is proposed?

Ben Gummer: I was merely making the point that there is a lot of exciting thinking out there, outside the workforce planning that we are doing. Through our reforms, I hope to be able to encourage more of that. I know that there is some very innovative thinking in my part of the country. People want to get on with it in the NHS and university sectors, but at the moment they cannot, because of the constraints on how nurses are trained and recruited.

I turn to the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam, who introduced the debate on the petition. He asked four specific questions. One was on specialist courses, and the shadow Minister repeated that point. Some specialist courses have suffered shortages for many years. For several years, the Higher Education Funding Council for England has been dealing with the wider attribution of training funds and university tuition funds across the sector, and it will take on responsibility for making sure that very small and specialist courses are properly funded and promoted. In liberating the universities sector a little, I hope that we will be able to excite interest in some of the more specialist courses, which have been suffering for several years, and better match foundation trusts' workforce requirements with universities' ability to deliver.

My hon. Friend asked whether foundation trusts will be able to pay back loans as an inducement. I do not know whether that will be possible for foundation trusts specifically, but they are free to offer pay premiums to aid their recruitment—they have been able to do so for many years. I imagine that will continue.

My hon. Friend asked about the number of placements and the financing of them. That will be determined by the consultation and in discussions with Universities UK. He also asked about the arrangement for placement expenses, and I have heard his point. I know it is a unique problem that is specific to student nurses—although to some extent, it also applies to student teachers—and again, we want to look at that in detail in the consultation to ensure that we get the implementation right. That is why it is not just a matter of pure detail; it is about how the policy works as implemented.

The hon. Member for Ilford North raised a number of points in addition to the ones he raised in his Adjournment debate. I apologise for not having answered all of them previously; I had a short time and he raised a huge number, with his usual eloquence. However, I hope I can answer some of his specific points on this occasion.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the problems of recruiting into community-based settings. There is a shortage in that specialty, which has traditionally suffered from problems in recruiting. I am well aware, just as he is, of the need to improve recruitment into community settings and primary care settings if we are to get the proper integration of primary and secondary care, and more importantly, of social care and the NHS. That is one of the key challenges facing us in the years ahead. Health Education England has a scheme under way called “Transforming nursing for community and primary care”, which it launched just over a year ago, precisely to incentivise nursing applicants into that specialty. Again, I hope that universities will respond positively, as they have in the case of other courses, so that they step up to the workforce demands placed on them as a result of the reforms that we are making.

The hon. Gentleman asked what the amount of debt to be written off was. The long-term loan subsidy—he will understand the phraseology—remains at 30%. That is the figure that the Treasury has set. As a consequence of that and because of, as he put it, reliable reports from newspapers, which he imputed to be fact, he asked whether there would be an increase in student fees above inflation. I can say to him that there are no plans at all to increase student tuition fees above inflation.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether I would be willing to meet those who disagree with my point of view and that of the Government on this matter. I would, of course, and I have done already. I would be delighted to meet anyone whom he wishes to bring to me, including the demonstrators he mentioned.

The hon. Gentleman began his speech, however, by talking about a burden of debt. It is important for all of us here to remember that the loan is an attachment against earnings, which is time-limited and limited according to the ability to earn, so it is not like debt such as a mortgage. We made the same argument back in 2011 and 2012, and it is important that we use language correctly in this place. We saw an uptake in university courses after the 2012 reforms. Once prospective students understood how the financing worked, how they would pay back the tuition fees and that it was not a debt that would saddle them in the same way that a mortgage or hire purchase agreement might, as was suggested at the time, university applications increased significantly. We all have an interest in this place in making sure that the number of people going into nursing increases. It is important, therefore, that even if we disagree with the policy, we do not misrepresent it.

Wes Streeting: After leaving the National Union of Students in 2010 when my term in office expired, I worked with Martin Lewis from MoneySavingExpert.com and the coalition Government to try to communicate the facts behind the tuition fees system, so I endorse what the Minister says about getting the facts across. Martin Lewis and I are concerned that the Government are seeking to apply retrospective changes to the terms and conditions of student loans without a parliamentary

debate and vote. We would have a much better airing of all the issues, and this issue specifically, if we had that debate and vote in the House of Commons. Will the Minister commit to that process now?

Ben Gummer: The hon. Gentleman knows that I cannot commit other Ministers to debates, but I will certainly represent his concerns to the Minister for Universities and Science, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson). He makes a strong point. It seems that I am the only person in this Chamber not to have a close acquaintance with Martin Lewis, but I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman’s points, including the one about the Delegated Legislation Committee—I sat on such Committees for a few years and never received anything nearly as exciting as student grants—are represented to the Universities Minister, so that he can answer him directly.

I wish also to address the points raised by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who talked about equality impact assessments. We have worked up an assessment of the impact that the changes will have on recruitment into nursing—of course we have—as part of our policy generation. That will culminate in a full equality impact assessment and a business case, which will be published at the time of the consultation, not long from now. I hope that that will inform the discussions that take place, so that we can have a robust and evidence-based debate.

The hon. Lady talked about housing costs, which was reflected in an intervention by the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith). Housing costs are a considerable pressure for many students—not only those applying for nursing courses, but those in high-cost parts of the country. That is partly why we want to increase the amount of maintenance we can provide. To return to my central point, within the current spending envelope we can do that by such a considerable amount—25%—only through a reformed system. To do it in other ways would be prohibitively expensive, and I do not believe the Opposition have proposed that.

The hon. Lady asked about NMC registration fees. At the moment, they are incurred at the point of registration when the university course has finished and are tax-deductible. They have risen in the last year, which I know has caused disquiet among nurses. I have spoken to the regulators, including the NMC, and implored them to keep their fees at a sensible level and to avoid rises whenever possible. The NMC has had to deal with a considerable increase in fitness-to-practise cases, but I hope that with internal cost savings it will be able to mitigate further rises. I have certainly asked it to do that, although it is an independent body.

The hon. Lady cited someone she had spoken to who was, if I understood her correctly, halfway through a degree. It is important to state that the change is for new students only, so those on existing courses will not be affected.

Liz McInnes: The Minister has said that the equality impact assessment will be published at the time of the consultation, but what assessment has been made to ascertain the effect of the proposed changes?

Ben Gummer: The hon. Lady probes like an expert, but she should know that there has been a detailed assessment of the impact of the changes as part of the

[Ben Gummer]

policy development, which is still taking place. When we launch the consultation, the full details of the assessment will be made public as part of the process, so she will be able to see very soon what the changes will mean.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes spoke with great eloquence about her own nursing experience. Other hon. Members may not know that she has a master's degree connected with her nursing work. She certainly knows about the full gamut of the academic discipline of nursing, and I take her views with considerable seriousness. She was right to point out that the change is part of a wider package of reform.

Several hon. Members spoke clearly and, in one case, movingly, about people who want to become nurses but cannot, either because they did not achieve the necessary grades earlier in life to go to university—that was a failing of their education rather than because of an innate inability to be a nurse or to pass the exams—or because they have caring responsibilities. We want both sorts of people to be in nursing, because they care and because of their vocational call to be nurses. At the moment, a significant number of them are working as healthcare assistants and cannot progress to being nurses. They are prevented from doing so unless they leave the workforce, go to university and then come back into the system. Even under the existing arrangements, that makes it impossible for many of them, which is profoundly wrong.

That is why it is a priority for me, as I announced a few weeks ago, to open up an apprenticeship route to enable healthcare assistants to move from a band 3 position in the NHS to an intermediate new position—nursing associate—that is part of a vocational route to full nursing registration. The exciting thing about that is that it will provide a dual training route into nursing. There is the traditional nursing undergraduate route, which will still take three years, and there will be the new route—an apprenticeship—which will open up nursing to a whole new group of applicants who are currently precluded from achieving their dream of going into nursing and who do not even count in the statistics of those refused a place.

In the round, we are doing what I hope many Opposition Members want. I share their wish to see the diversity of the workforce, which is already one of the most diverse in the country, improve still further, and to see opportunity expanded, the quality of training improved and support given to people at university. Conservative Members also want all those things.

I appreciate the sensitive way in which hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber have spoken. I also appreciate that they may disagree with how the Government want to proceed to try to improve nurse training. In the absence of alternative ideas, I believe that our proposals really are the way to expand places, improve diversity, increase opportunity, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, improve quality and provide support for those at university.

Mark Durkan: The Minister has criticised colleagues several times during the debate and said that the Government are not hearing alternatives. Will he reframe the consultation so that they can hear alternatives? It is clear that people want to work on a different premise

and to a different agenda, with much better outcomes, including achieving the important goal of better equipment that he referred to. Widening the consultation would allow those alternatives to be heard, but the way the consultation is framed at the moment means they will not be heard.

Ben Gummer: I would be delighted to hear alternatives, and not just via the medium of the consultation. I would very much like them to be offered within the current spending envelope, but if people wish to offer alternatives outside that envelope, they must explain how much they will cost and how they will be funded. Within that spending envelope, the reforms will allow us to expand the number of places and improve quality, support and opportunity.

Liz McInnes: The Minister mentioned introducing apprenticeships to enable healthcare assistants to move on and train as nurses. Before I left the NHS, a similar scheme was being implemented. It was called “Modernising Scientific Careers” and applied to healthcare scientists. There was a long and arduous consultation process, which to my knowledge has still not been completed. How long does the Minister envisage it will take to implement the process for nurses and healthcare assistants?

Ben Gummer: We have a commitment to have 100,000 apprenticeships across the NHS in this Parliament, a significant proportion of which will be for nurses. I am approaching this at the utmost speed, and I and the Government will be judged on whether we deliver in five years' time. I know that the hon. Lady will hold us to account. I will happily pick up on where the consultation to which she contributed has gone—I hope there is not still someone in the basement of the Department of Health working on it—and give her an answer as to what happened as a result of it.

I want to address one final result of the reforms that we are bringing in. It was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) and by the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), both of whom talked about the rurality of their areas and the impact that isolation has on recruitment. I hope that, especially through the introduction of nursing associates—an apprenticeship route through to nursing—we can help address problems of recruitment and retention in specific parts of the country. I recently floated that not far from the hon. Gentleman's constituency, in Hull, where people were receptive of the idea of a different route into nursing that complemented the university route.

This is potentially an exciting moment for nursing. We will be able to expand the number of places and improve support, diversity, opportunity and quality—all things that have been achieved in the rest of the university sector. We will do so quickly, and we will do it even better if we have a good and robust consultation on the details. I will of course write to hon. Members who feel that their points have not been answered, and I once again thank the Petitions Committee for bringing the matter to the notice of the House.

7.19 pm

Paul Scully: Before I make some general points, I would like to clarify the disparity in the repayment figures that the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield)

and I were talking about. I was talking about people at the lower end of band 5. When people first join the profession, the repayment is about £5 a month. I think the hon. Gentleman was talking about the higher end of band 5. I believe that the £900 average that has been discussed relates to a point about midway through band 6, at about £31,000. We are talking about 9% of everything that someone earns over £21,000. It will be two years before this system comes in, then there will be three years of study, then it will probably take about 13 years for someone to go up the grades. It will be 16, 17 or 18 years before it is possible to talk about an average repayment of £900 a year.

This has been a fantastic debate. I am grateful to the Minister for the comprehensive response that he has given us and his commitment to answer in writing the points that have not been answered today.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) and the hon. Members for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), for Foyle (Mark Durkan), for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), as well as the Front-Bench spokesmen, the hon. Members for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) and of course the Minister, who represents Ipswich. However, the highlight for me was the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), because she argued her case incredibly articulately and brought a lot of experience to the debate. What is a fantastic addition to the House is a sad loss to nursing in my constituency, where she practised.

It was a great shame to lose her from there, but it is fantastic to have her in the House as a colleague.

I thank the petitioners and the participants in all the listening events and various other events organised by Parliament, the Petitions Committee and a number of nursing organisations. If I may speak to them through you, Mr Evans, the Chairman of the Petitions Committee, the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), always describes e-petitions as the beginning of a campaign—a process—not the end of it. I know that the audience at the debate and people who have followed things on Twitter, on the television and on ParliamentLive will go away with different conclusions. They may not agree with the conclusions that we have come up with today, but I hope that they can at least take individual points, focus on them and respond in the consultation that the Government are about to undertake to help improve the policy and the lot of prospective nursing students. The proposals are about increasing the number of nurses while ensuring that they have a better level of funding for living expenses while they are studying. I am sure that people will take away enough from the debate that they will be able to raise matters with the Minister, to make the process a far more comprehensive and productive experience over the next few months.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 113491 relating to the NHS Bursary.

7.22 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 11 January 2016

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Foreign Affairs Council (Trade)

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): My noble Friend the Minister of State for Trade and Investment (Lord Maude of Horsham) has today made the following statement.

The EU Foreign Affairs Council (Trade) met twice in Nairobi during the 10th ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The first meeting of the FAC (Trade) took place on the 15 December before the formal opening of the WTO ministerial. The second meeting of the FAC (Trade) took place on the 19 December just before the conclusion of the ministerial. At both meetings, the Council adopted conclusions. Both sets of conclusions are attached to this statement.

The Nairobi ministerial was the first WTO ministerial conference in Africa. WTO members agreed a series of ministerial decisions on agriculture, on cotton and on development, the latter focussed on the interests of the least developed countries.

The decisions in agriculture are on export competition, on public stockholding, on a special safeguard mechanism for developing countries and on measures related to cotton. Decisions were also made relating to preferential treatment for least developed countries in services and in rules of origin.

The ministerial met UK objectives in agreeing substantive outcomes on export competition in agriculture, on cotton, and on development while leaving the way open for WTO negotiations to proceed more flexibly post-Nairobi. The ministerial also welcomed two countries acceding to the WTO, Afghanistan and Liberia.

Within the EU, the expectation is that Council will confirm its position on the Nairobi package at the next meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, under the Dutch presidency, on 18 January 2016.

It is also available online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements>.

[HCWS456]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Neighbourhood Planning

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): On 9 July 2015, I extended for a period of six months the criteria for consideration of the recovery of planning appeals to include proposals for residential development over 10 units in areas where a qualifying body has submitted a neighbourhood plan proposal to the local planning authority or where a neighbourhood plan has been made (Hansard HCWS90); and I am now extending that period for a further six months from today.

[HCWS457]

SCOTLAND

Smith Commission Agreement

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): On 27 November 2014 the Smith Commission published its heads of agreement on the devolution of further powers to the Scottish Parliament. The Smith Commission agreement was the first time that all five of Scotland's major political parties came together to agree the constitutional future of Scotland and was an historic achievement.

In addition to the provisions requiring legislation which are being taken forward in the Scotland Bill, the Smith Commission agreement identified a number of areas for further consideration between the UK and Scottish Governments. In the period since the Smith Commission, the UK and Scottish Governments have held discussions on these matters. The attached table provides information on work in these areas.

The agreement also identified a number of areas where non-legislative action was required. Discussions on the agreement of a new fiscal framework for Scotland and work to strengthen intergovernmental working are on-going. The attached table provides an update on other such areas, including the agreement of memorandums of Understanding in relation to the BBC and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

Attachments can be view online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statements/>

[HCWS458]

Petition

Monday 11 January 2016

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH

Car parking charges at Congleton War Memorial hospital

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the introduction of car parking charges at Congleton War Memorial Hospital by East Cheshire Hospital Trust should be reversed; further that it is a misuse of the Trust's power; further that the enforcement of the charges has been handed to a private company, who has the sole aim of profiting from people who need to use the hospital's facilities; further that charges have resulted in severe distress to unwary patients and their visitors; further that the shock of receiving penalty notices of £70 is potentially harmful to the health of the people receiving them and whose health is entrusted to East Cheshire Hospital Trust; further than Congleton War Memorial Hospital was built from the subscriptions of the people of Congleton, as a memorial to the people who had fought and died to preserve freedom, and was meant for the benefit of those people and others; and further that local petitions on this matter were signed by 583 individuals.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to put pressure of East Cheshire Hospital Trust to remove car parking charges at Congleton War Memorial Hospital.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Fiona Bruce, *Official Report*, 8 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 964.]

[P001596]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer):

East Cheshire NHS Trust advises that its plans for camera-based parking management systems at Congleton War Memorial are currently paused. The Trust has guaranteed to make the first four hours of visitor parking free at Congleton War Memorial hospital, should it decide to install such a system. Therefore, it is unlikely that many patients would have to pay parking charges. The aim of such a system would be to protect the availability of spaces for genuine patients and visitors—as has been done with a similar system at Macclesfield Hospital.

The provision of car parking spaces and the charges that are made to use them are matters for individual NHS trusts, taking account of their local circumstances. NHS Trusts have the power to charge for car parking as provided by paragraph 20 of Schedule 4 to the NHS Act 2006.

Income generated from parking charges is used to pay the costs of providing the parking e.g. maintenance, security and lighting, and to avoid funds being taken from budgets for healthcare services. If any excess income is generated, income generation rules require that it is used to fund clinical services.

The Department of Health published the NHS Patient, Visitor and Staff Car Parking Principles in August 2014. They recognise that NHS organisations must have autonomy to make decisions that best suit their local requirements and are therefore not mandatory. However, they offer clear direction and leadership. They are available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nhs-patient-visitor-and-staff-car-parking-principles/nhs-patient-visitor-and-staff-car-parking-principles>.

The principles state that 'NHS organisations should work with their patients and staff, local authorities and public transport providers to make sure that users can get to the site (and park if necessary) as safely, conveniently and economically as possible'. They help the public hold the NHS to account for any unfair charges or practices. They identify groups that should be considered for free or concessionary parking and require that details of charges, concessions and additional charges should be well publicised. This includes publicising charges at car park entrances, wherever payment is made and inside the hospital. They should also be included on the hospital website and on patient letters and forms, where appropriate.

Some NHS organisations outsource their car parking to commercial companies. This can be a sensible decision as it takes the burden and risk from the NHS. Commercial companies can use their expertise to provide better facilities, leaving the NHS organisation to focus on patient care. However the NHS is responsible for all the actions of its private contractors who run services for them and car parking is no exception. The DH principles are clear on this and help patients hold their local Trusts to account. They also state that 'contracts should not be let on any basis that incentivises additional charges, e.g. 'income from parking charge notices only'.

It has been estimated that the cost of providing free car parking across the NHS in England could be nearly a quarter of a billion pounds every year.

Ministerial Correction

Monday 11 January 2016

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Saudi Arabia

The following is an extract from a statement made by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood) on Tuesday 5 January 2016.

Mr Ellwood: The right hon. Gentleman specifically asked about—or made reference to—judicial co-operation under the memorandum of understanding. I understand

from the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab), that there is no agreement on judicial co-operation in that MOU.

[Official Report, 5 January 2016, Vol. 604, c. 97.]

Letter of correction from Mr Ellwood.

An error has been identified in the answer I gave to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

The correct response should have been:

Mr Ellwood: The right hon. Gentleman specifically asked about—or made reference to—judicial co-operation under the memorandum of understanding. I understand from the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab), that there is no **judicial co-operation taking place under that MOU.**

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