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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 27 January 2016



# House of Commons

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*The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### CABINET OFFICE

*The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—*

#### Political Engagement: Young People

1. **Chloe Smith** (Norwich North) (Con): What plans the Government have to increase the number of young people registered to vote. [903284]

7. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What plans the Government have to encourage more young people to engage with the political process. [903290]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose)**: The Government's new online electoral registration system has made it easier and quicker for everyone, especially young people, to register to vote. The process now takes less time than boiling an egg. We are also working with groups such as Bite The Ballot on the national voter registration drive, which is an excellent initiative to persuade more people to register to vote that runs for the whole of next week, in which I encourage everyone to get involved. The British Youth Council's Make Your Mark ballot led to nearly 1 million young people voting throughout the UK and informed the Youth Parliament's debates in this Chamber.

**Chloe Smith**: I welcome the Minister's support for next week's national voter registration drive. Last year's drive helped nearly 500,000 young electors to register to vote. Would he support repeating last year's projection of an image of a ballot box on to the Elizabeth Tower? I understand that you, Mr Speaker, are a fan of that, as am I, so we need to persuade Westminster City Council to allow that.

**John Penrose**: My hon. Friend deserves top marks for creative marketing ideas, but after the use of the Elizabeth Tower for unauthorised projections, including of Australian cricketers and various bits of Gail Porter, I am told that the subject excites strong passions in Westminster council and, quite possibly, the House authorities, so I should probably urge her to discuss her proposals carefully with them.

**Mark Pawsey**: When I visited Harris school in my constituency recently to talk to its pupils about the role of an MP, I met bright youngsters who wanted to learn more about how Parliament works. Does the Minister agree that getting more public figures to talk and answer questions in schools would be a great way of engaging young people with the political process?

**John Penrose**: I do. My hon. Friend has set a great example and shown that public figures—even MPs—can stimulate interest and engagement in democracy.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What further Government or private sector databases are the Minister's Department thinking of using to boost registration among young people?

**John Penrose**: The hon. Gentleman raised this point with me a little while ago and asked about credit reference agencies, among others. We might be able to use other sources of data, but some base a lot of their information on the electoral roll itself, so we would need to ensure that the process did not become circular. There may be things that other people can add, however, and all sources of data offer potential ways to reduce the cost, and improve the quality and speed, of our registration efforts.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): During the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, a huge number of young people became politically active and engaged in Scotland, but the current generation of 16 and 17-year-olds will not have the opportunity to vote in the EU referendum, although they will have to live with its consequences for much longer than most people in the Chamber. Why do the Government not accept that the best way to encourage young people to vote is actually to give them the vote?

**John Penrose**: Since the general election, we have debated this particular question four or five times—perhaps more—and collectively decided against it, with healthy majorities, on every single occasion. We can go over this again, and I am happy to have further debates with the hon. Lady as needed, but the House has made its collective decision plain.

**Gloria De Piero** (Ashfield) (Lab): The Labour party's initial analysis shows big drops in registered voters in many university towns. The figure for Canterbury is down 13%, while those for Cambridge and Dundee West are both down 11% on last year. Those universities that have enabled students to register to vote when they enrol have all seen high levels of student registration. Will the Government issue guidance to all vice-chancellors immediately to suggest that they adopt such a system in September?

**John Penrose**: It is not quite that simple, but I sympathise with the hon. Lady, in that several new approaches that are being trialled in universities throughout the country are extremely promising. We want to pursue those, so perhaps the hon. Lady and I can discuss that further at our meeting later today.

#### Social Mobility

2. **Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase social mobility in the civil service. [903285]

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock)**: Social mobility is mission critical to our plan to ensure that the civil service is fully representative of the nation that it serves and benefits from talent in every part of Britain.

**Lucy Frazer**: I welcome that answer. May I ask the Minister to give the House an update on research by the Bridge Group on social mobility in the fast stream?

**Matthew Hancock:** We asked the Bridge Group to look into social mobility in the fast stream and the people who are joining the civil service, and it will report very soon. I can tell my hon. Friend the number of new apprenticeships in the civil service: 884 since we introduced the scheme in 2013—another part of broadening access to the civil service.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Many young people from working-class estates across the United Kingdom lack the capacity and training skills to join the civil service. What are the Government doing to ensure that they have the greater skills required to get on the ladder into the civil service?

**Matthew Hancock:** Great training is available for people once they are in, but I want to broaden the number of people from different backgrounds coming into the civil service right at the start, which means people from all over the United Kingdom: from all parts, from all groups, from all ethnic backgrounds, men and women, to make sure that we make the very best use of the talent that is available.

**Mr Tom Watson** (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I see that the Minister's right hon. Friend the Chancellor has his own mission critical approach to social mobility. His closest adviser got a 42% pay rise while most public servants got a pay freeze; he has five times the usual number of special advisers while 80,000 jobs have been cut in the civil service; and this week it was revealed by *The Sunday Times* that the permanent secretary in his Department has used a loophole to avoid paying tax on his pension pot. Is it the Minister's view that that is an appropriate leadership approach in the civil service, and is it not true that when it comes to tax, the Chancellor's friends in Google get special treatment, and when it comes to social mobility in the civil service it helps to be a friend of the Chancellor?

**Matthew Hancock:** It is disappointing that we do not have a cross-party approach to improving access to the civil service—who comes into it—to make sure that we have the very best people working for the common aim of delivering the Government's agenda to improve the lives of citizens whom we serve, because that is the job that we focus on.

### National Citizen Service

4. **Dr Phillip Lee** (Bracknell) (Con): What assessment he has made of the performance of the National Citizen Service. [903287]

5. **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What assessment he has made of the performance of the National Citizen Service. [903288]

**The Minister for Civil Society (Mr Rob Wilson):** The National Citizen Service is helping to build a more responsible, cohesive and engaged society. The latest annual figures show a 46% increase in participation, making it the fastest growing youth programme for a century. Every £1 spent on NCS generates nearly £4 of social benefits—something that everyone in the House and the country should be proud of.

**Dr Lee:** What success has the National Citizen Service had in helping to counter violent and non-violent extremism as part of the Government's wider counter-extremism strategy?

**Mr Wilson:** My hon. Friend will be aware that NCS was not specifically designed to tackle extremism in our communities. However, the programme plays a significant role in promoting tolerance by breaking down barriers between communities. NCS helps young people to learn about other cultures and creates positive bonds between people from different backgrounds. In 2014, 27% of NCS participants were from non-white backgrounds compared with 19% of the general population.

**Steve Double:** Through my involvement with NCS in Cornwall I have seen first-hand the truly life-changing experience that the programme provides. Will the Minister join me in thanking and congratulating all those people across the country who deliver the programme successfully, and does he agree that NCS is a clear example that this Government are truly a one nation Government?

**Mr Wilson:** My hon. Friend is a strong advocate of NCS in Cornwall, where 580 young people have recently benefited from a life-changing experience on the programme. A one nation Government helps everyone to reach their full potential. That principle is at the heart of NCS. We support everyone who participates regardless of background, and provide bursaries to those who need financial support. NCS achieves a diverse mix of young people, working together to develop new skills and giving back to their community.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will be aware that many Labour Members are great supporters of the programme, but can we be sure that the content has real, hard substance, such as democratic values and the equality of women in British life? Are those emphasised enough to young people on the programme?

**Mr Wilson:** Yes, the hon. Gentleman can be assured of that. According to the figures, 72% of participants felt more confident about getting a job after they had taken part in NCS. A year on, people are still benefiting from taking part in the NCS programme, according to the research.

11. [903295] **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): In Cleethorpes and north-east Lincolnshire the NCS programme has been doing a lot of work in the local St Andrew's hospice, which has had a great impact on young people. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Lee Stephens, Graham Rodger and their team in north-east Lincolnshire, who do tremendous work?

**Mr Wilson:** Of course I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the people in his constituency and across the country who take part in NCS. To date NCS participants have volunteered an estimated total of 8 million hours in their local communities, developing vital skills in the process. The programme benefits the participants and the local community.

### Freedom of Information Act

6. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): What plans he has to bring forward legislative proposals to amend the Freedom of Information Act 2000. [903289]

9. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What plans he has to bring forward legislative proposals to amend the Freedom of Information Act 2000. [903292]

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock):** The Government are committed to transparency and freedom of information. The independent commission on freedom of information was established to review the working of the Act and we will consider the report when it is received.

**Peter Grant:** There are any number of instances that we can all point to where the publication of information that the authorities would rather have kept hidden has led to significant public benefits. The expenses affair in this place was one example. I do not know of a single case where the release of information through the Freedom of Information Act has caused any significant public damage. Does the Minister agree that any change to the Act should be designed to make it easier, rather than harder, for citizens to find out what the Government are doing?

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman is a softly spoken fellow but I want to hear him very fully—louder in future.

**Peter Grant** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** No, we have heard him now, but subsequently louder is better.

**Matthew Hancock:** I am happy to hear more from the hon. Gentleman because I am a great supporter of freedom of information and the Act, and of transparency. We have to make sure that its workings are accurate and we look forward to listening and seeing what the commission comes up with when it reports in due course.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** Is it not the case that introducing fees for FOI requests would reduce opportunities for exposing injustice and bad practice? Will the Minister take this opportunity to rule out introducing any such fees?

**Matthew Hancock:** The hon. Gentleman tempts me, but I shall wait until the commission reports. We will respond in due course.

**Mr Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I inform my right hon. Friend that the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee will be scrutinising those proposals very carefully indeed? We want to make sure that the judges are interpreting the Freedom of Information Act as Parliament truly intended, but I can tell him that there is no going back on freedom of information.

**Matthew Hancock:** Indeed. The Freedom of Information Act has brought to light many things that it is in the public interest to have in the public domain. I have no doubt that my hon. Friend's Committee will scrutinise

the proposals very carefully, not least to ensure that the will of Parliament is the law of the land. I look forward to working with him on that.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): I did not have to use the Freedom of Information Act because I went on to the gov.uk website to find out that the excellent Mark Price, managing director of Waitrose, is now a non-executive director of the board of the Cabinet Office. May I say what a wise choice that is? What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that similar people are appointed to other Government Departments?

**Matthew Hancock:** Crikey! Where to start? Mark Price is, indeed, an incredibly impressive businessman and I look forward to working with him on the Cabinet Office board. That information was published on our award-winning gov.uk website, which has had billions of hits because there is so much good information to be found there.

**Mr David Winnick** (Walsall North) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that despite all his fine words, there are many, including me, who believe that the purpose of the review is to undermine the Freedom of Information Act introduced by a Labour Government? So many of the abuses that have been revealed have become known to the public only as a result of the Act. The Government should be defending freedom of information, not trying to undermine it.

**Matthew Hancock:** I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was listening, but I said that much information is in the public domain, and it is in the public interest that it is public, thanks to the Freedom of Information Act. That is my position. I look forward to hearing what the commission has to say about the operational working of the Act to ensure that it is working in the way Parliament intended.

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is confusing to hear the Minister claim to be such a fan of transparency, given that the Cabinet Office has set up a commission designed to weaken FOI—an ex-coalition Minister has described that as a “rigged jury”—botched the release of Cabinet papers, watered down consultation rules, and is now being investigated by the Information Commissioner for withholding thousands of items of spending data. If sunlight really is the best disinfectant, why has the Minister now abolished every single senior civil service post with responsibility for transparency?

**Matthew Hancock:** As a matter of fact, we are the most transparent Government ever. What is more, the hon. Lady will be delighted to know that only this morning the Cabinet Office published further spending information to ensure that we keep that mantle.

**Mr Speaker:** Richard Burgon. Not here.

### Major Projects Authority

10. **Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he made of the effectiveness of the Major Projects Authority prior to January 2016. [903294]

**The Minister without Portfolio (Robert Halfon):** The Major Projects Authority—now the Infrastructure and Projects Authority—was set up in 2011 to establish the Government's major projects portfolio and ensure high-quality project assurance and support. Since 2012 it has produced an annual report summarising progress and delivery of major Government projects.

**Meg Hillier:** The Minister for the Cabinet Office talks about the Government being the most open ever. Will the Minister without Portfolio sanction the Infrastructure and Projects Authority to release more information about which projects are green, amber or red so that taxpayers know what is going on?

**Robert Halfon:** The hon. Lady will know, because the Public Accounts Committee, which she chairs, recently questioned the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, that we do publish the information she mentioned. She should be excited by the new Infrastructure and Projects Authority, because it brings together the experience of the Treasury and the Cabinet Office, it saves taxpayers' money, in the light of spending review priorities, and it brings under one roof support for major projects such as Crossrail and the Thames tideway tunnel, as well as major transformational projects such as universal credit.

**Mr Speaker:** We are extremely grateful to the Minister.

**John Pugh (Southport) (LD):** Does the Minister think that it is a matter of regret that one can still become a permanent secretary without being directly associated with a major project?

**Robert Halfon:** As I have said, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority will make a huge difference, transform the way infrastructure projects are done in our country and save taxpayers' money, and it will do a number of other things as well.

### Transparency Agenda

12. **Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab):** What recent progress he has made on implementing the Government's transparency agenda. [903296]

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock):** This morning we published further spending transparency data, which the Cabinet Office is committed to do as part of our agenda to be the most transparent Government ever.

**Carolyn Harris:** I thank the Minister of transparency for that response, but does he not agree that it is very difficult for him to lead by example on the transparency agenda when his own Department is being investigated by the Information Commissioner for refusing to publish routine spending data?

**Matthew Hancock:** It sounds like the hon. Lady wrote her supplementary question before she got the previous answer, because we published that information this morning. What is more, we are publishing Cabinet minutes at twice the pace that we ever saw under the previous Labour Government.

### Chilcot Inquiry

13. **Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP):** What recent discussions he has had with Sir John Chilcot on the final publication date of the Iraq inquiry. [903297]

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock):** The Government continue to publish a wide range of data sets. More than 22,000 are now available on the Government website.

**Ronnie Cowan:** With no Chilcot report, no lessons learnt and seemingly none the wiser, will the Minister agree that the constant delays are unacceptable and are an insult both to those involved in the conflict and to those who lost loved ones?

**Matthew Hancock:** We have had this debate many times. The Chilcot inquiry is rightly independent, so it would not be right for me to comment on the timings, but a timetable has now been published, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman will welcome.

### Topical Questions

T1. [903259] **Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr Oliver Letwin):** The Cabinet Office is responsible for efficiency in reforming Government and helping the Prime Minister to deliver the Government's agenda. This Government have made huge strides in transforming online services for the citizen. I am glad to tell the House that we are now embarking on an ambitious programme to change the culture of public services by using online complaints to deal with problems and sort them out quicker.

**Chloe Smith:** Will my right hon. Friend provide more information on the Government's plans for digital government?

**Mr Letwin:** I am very happy to do that. I do not know whether my hon. Friend has recently had the opportunity to use the gov.uk services, but the universal impression is that for the first time in our country's history one can now quickly get hold of what one needs to online. The service is also hugely responsive and takes account of feedback—something from which previous Governments were not able to benefit.

T3. [903261] **Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab):** The Minister for transparency does talk some utter guff sometimes. How can he be the advocate-in-chief for transparency when his Department has the worst record in answering freedom of information requests?

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock):** We answer freedom of information requests all the time. What is more, we are not only publishing more information but making sure that it is published in a usable way so that people can benefit from it right across this country.

T2. [903260] **Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that taking a public appointment is an excellent way for people across the country to play their part in shaping our society, and that it is important that people from different backgrounds have the opportunity to do so?

**Matthew Hancock:** Right across the public sector, thousands of public appointments are made each year. It is vital that people from all backgrounds, from all ethnicities, and both men and women, from all parts of our country, put their names forward so that they can help in our great mission of improving the lives of the citizens of the UK.

T4. [903262] **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): In the past year, one in seven peers did not speak at all in the other place, despite many of them claiming allowances. If the Government are so keen to reduce the cost of politics, why are they not doing anything about this?

**Mr Letwin:** The hon. Gentleman needs to recognise the invaluable role that the House of Lords still plays in vetting what we do in this House, reflecting on it, and sometimes forcing us to reconsider it. We want to maintain that valuable relationship.

T6. [903264] **Karen Lumley** (Redditch) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Robert Holdcroft, who owns the McDonald's in Redditch, for hosting "snack and chat" events in his restaurant that allow sixth formers to question their Member of Parliament and increase their interest in politics? Perhaps he might like to join me at one of these events.

**Matthew Hancock:** I always love going to Redditch, and even more so if I can go with my hon. Friend. I pass on my congratulations to Mr Holdcroft and all the restaurants that hold "snack and chat" events. As for the idea of a McSurgery in a McDonald's, I'm lovin' it.

T5. [903263] **Yvonne Fovargue** (Makerfield) (Lab): Many people in my constituency have filled out one form for the whole household to register to vote, as happened under the old system. Their registrations are being processed, but will they be counted in the figures?

**Mr Letwin:** The hon. Lady will know that anybody who is not on the register as a result of the individual electoral registration exercise will have been approached on nine separate occasions to try to get them to register individually. Everybody now has the chance to register individually under IER on the rolling register in time for the elections.

T8. [903266] **Nigel Adams** (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): Will the Minister tell the House what plans the Government have to further reduce their property portfolio?

**Matthew Hancock:** We have been making significant savings in Government property, and the estate is already 20% smaller than it was in 2010. We have saved over £750 million in running costs, but there is much more to do. We have far more work to do to make sure that we are as efficient as possible in the use of property, and I look forward to leading that work.

T10. [903268] **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the Cabinet Office could be far more effective in running the Government if it did not have in another Department a Chancellor who goes out and agrees pig-in-a-poke deals with Google, which everybody knows does not pay its fair share of tax, at a time when millions are filling in their tax returns?

**Matthew Hancock:** The tax to which the hon. Gentleman refers was of course due from activities under a Labour Government. It was never paid under a Labour Government, but it has been delivered under this Conservative Government.

T9. [903267] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Again this year, many tens of thousands of young people will benefit from the National Citizen Service programme. However, there are still too many young people who have never been introduced to the programme or had the opportunity to "Say yes" to NCS. Will my right hon. Friend work with colleagues from across the House to make sure that every young person has the opportunity to understand this project and can sign up for this summer's programmes?

**Matthew Hancock:** As my hon. Friend puts it, NCS is a fantastic opportunity for young people. It massively expanded during the last Parliament, and we have ambitious plans to make sure that every young person who wants to do so can benefit from NCS, which does so much to inspire and enrich people's lives.

T7. [903265] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): New research has uncovered that there has been a greater fall in UK civil service employment in Scotland than in any other UK nation. Between 2011 and 2015, 5,000 civil servants working for UK Departments in Scotland lost their jobs. Will the Minister tell me and my constituents whether that is his definition of "better together"?

**Matthew Hancock:** Of course we have had to make savings in the number of civil servants as we have reduced the deficit, but there are far more UK civil servants working in Scotland than civil servants working for the Scottish Government. It just shows that, for Scotland as well as for the rest of this United Kingdom, we are that much better together.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): In supporting citizenship and volunteering, what lessons can be learned from the excellent Team Rubicon UK, led by my constituent General Sir Nick Parker? It involves recruiting veterans and ex-servicemen to do great work, notably during the recent flooding.

**Matthew Hancock:** I want to pay tribute to Team Rubicon and all those who work with it. The role that veterans can play in shaping the future of young people and showing what it is to serve their nation is invaluable, and it is a lesson from which all of us can learn.

**Mr Speaker:** Last but not least, I call Harriet Harman.

**Ms Harriet Harman** (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): The Cabinet Office is responsible for the guidelines on Government proposals. As the Joint Committee on Human Rights discovered when we went to Scotland earlier this month, there is a strong feeling about the consultation on the Human Rights Act 1998. Will the right hon. Gentleman make sure that the voice of people in Scotland is heard, and that they will not be gagged by the fact that the consultation will be issued during purdah following the dissolution of the Scottish Parliament? Will he give such a guarantee?

**Mr Letwin:** As the right hon. and learned Lady will know, the consultation principles, which we have recently promulgated—I spoke to the Joint Committee about them recently—have the effect that every Department should make sure that all consultations are proportionate, and that we make due allowance for any time during which it would be difficult for people to respond so that we get a full and adequate consultation on every occasion.

### PRIME MINISTER

*The Prime Minister was asked—*

#### Engagements

Q1. [903269] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 27 January.

**The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron):** I know the whole House will want to join me in marking Holocaust Memorial Day. It is right that our whole country should stand together to remember the darkest hour of humanity.

Last year, on the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, I said we would build a striking national memorial in London to show the importance Britain places on preserving the memory of the holocaust. Today, I can tell the House that this memorial will be built in Victoria Tower Gardens. It will stand beside Parliament as a permanent statement of our values as a nation, and it will be something for our children to visit for generations to come. I am grateful to all those who have made this possible, and who have given this work the cross-party status that it so profoundly deserves.

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

**Peter Aldous:** I echo the Prime Minister's sentiments regarding Holocaust Memorial Day. We must never forget.

The North sea oil and gas industry, on which many people in my Waveney constituency are dependent for their livelihoods, is facing very serious challenges at the current time. The Government have taken steps to address the situation, but more is required if the industry is first to survive, and then to thrive. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he recognises the seriousness of the situation, and will he do all he can to get the industry through these very difficult times?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this. I do recognise the seriousness of the situation. The oil price decline is the longest in 20 years and nearly the steepest, and this causes real difficulties for the North sea. We can see the effects in the east of England, of course across Scotland, particularly in Aberdeen, and in other parts of our country, too.

We discussed this at Cabinet yesterday. I am determined that we build a bridge to the future for all those involved in the North sea. We are going to help the sector export its world-class expertise. We are going to help such economies diversify. We announced £1.3 billion of support last year for the North sea. We are implementing the Wood review. I will be going to Aberdeen tomorrow, where we will be saying more about what we can do to help this vital industry at this vital time.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Lab): On behalf of the Opposition, I welcome the remarks the Prime Minister made about Holocaust Memorial Day. It is the 71st anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. We have to remember the deepest, darkest days of inhumanity that happened then and the genocides that have sadly happened since. We must educate another generation to avoid those for all time.

Independent experts have suggested that Google is paying an effective tax rate on its UK profits of around 3%. Does the Prime Minister dispute that figure?

**The Prime Minister:** Let us be clear what we are talking about here. We are talking about tax that should have been collected under a Labour Government being raised by a Conservative Government. I do dispute the figures the right hon. Gentleman gives. It is right that this is done independently by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, but I am absolutely clear that no Government have done more than this one to crack down on tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance—no Government, and certainly not the last Labour Government.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** My question was whether the Prime Minister thinks an effective tax rate of 3% is right or wrong. He did not answer it. The Chancellor of the Exchequer described this arrangement as a "major success", while the Prime Minister's official spokesperson only called it a "step forward". The Mayor of London described the payment as "quite derisory". What exactly is the Government's position on this 3% rate of taxation?

**The Prime Minister:** But we have put in place the diverted profits tax, which means that this company and other companies will pay more tax in future. They will pay more tax than they ever paid under Labour, when the tax rate for Google was 0%. That is what we faced.

Let me tell the right hon. Gentleman what we have done. We have changed the tax laws so many times that we raised an extra £100 billion from business in the last Parliament. When I came to power, banks did not pay tax on all their profits—allowed under Labour, stopped under the Tories; investment companies could cut their tax bill by flipping the currency their accounts were in—allowed under Labour, stopped under the Tories; and companies could fiddle accounting rules to make losses appear out of thin air—allowed under Labour, stopped under the Tories. We have done more on tax evasion and tax avoidance than Labour ever did. The truth is that they are running to catch up, but they haven't got a leg to stand on.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** It was under a Labour Government that the inquiries into Google were begun. In addition, as a percentage of GDP, corporation tax receipts are lower under this Government than under previous Governments.

I have a question here from a gentleman called Jeff. *[Interruption.]* You might well laugh, but Jeff speaks for millions of people when he says to me:

“Can you ask the Prime Minister...if as a working man of over 30 years whether there is a scheme which I can join that pays the same rate of tax as Google and other large...corporations?”

What does the Prime Minister say to Jeff?

**The Prime Minister:** What I say to Jeff is that his taxes are coming down under this Government, and Google’s taxes are going up under this Government. Something the right hon. Gentleman said in his last question was factually inaccurate. He said that corporation tax receipts have gone down. They have actually gone up by 20% under this Government because we have a strong economy, with businesses making money, employing people, investing in our country and paying taxes into the Exchequer.

If, like me, the right hon. Gentleman is genuinely angry about what happened to Google under Labour, there are a few people he could call. Maybe he should start by calling Tony Blair. You can get him at J. P. Morgan. Call Gordon Brown. Apparently, you can get him at a Californian bond dealer called Pimco. He could call Alistair Darling. I think he’s at Morgan Stanley, but it’s hard to keep up. Those are the people to blame for Google not paying its taxes. We are the ones who got it to pay.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The problem is that the Prime Minister is the Prime Minister, and is responsible for the Government and therefore responsible for tax collection. Google made profits of £6 billion in the UK between 2005 and 2015 and is paying £130 million in tax for the whole of that decade. Millions of people this week are filling in their tax returns to get them in by the 31st. They have to send the form back. They do not get the option of 25 meetings with 17 Ministers to decide what their rate of tax is. Many people going to their HMRC offices or returning their forms online this week will say this: why is there one rule for big multinational companies and another for ordinary small businesses and self-employed workers?

**The Prime Minister:** All those people filling in their tax returns are going to be paying lower taxes under this Government. That is what is happening. I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman, he can, if he wants, criticise HMRC, but HMRC’s work is investigated by the National Audit Office, and when it did that, it found that the settlements that it has reached with companies are fair. That is how it works. *[Interruption.]* The shadow Chancellor is pointing. The idea that those two right hon. Gentlemen would stand up to anyone in this regard is laughable. Look at their record over the last week. They met the Argentinians; they gave them flying pickets. They met the Argentinians; they gave them the Falkland Islands. They met a bunch of migrants in Calais; they said they could all come to Britain. The only people they never stand up for are the British people and hard-working taxpayers.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** We have had no answers on Google; we have had no answers for Jeff.

Can I raise with the Prime Minister another unfair tax policy that affects many people in this country? This morning the Court of Appeal ruled that the bedroom

tax is discriminatory, because of its impact—*[Interruption.]* I don’t know why Members opposite find this funny, because it isn’t for those who have to pay it. The ruling was made because of the bedroom tax’s impact on vulnerable individuals, including victims of domestic violence and disabled children. Will the Prime Minister now read the judgment and finally abandon this cruel and unjust policy, which has now been ruled to be illegal?

**The Prime Minister:** We always look very carefully at the judgments on these occasions, but of course our fundamental position is that it is unfair to subsidise spare rooms in the social sector if we do not subsidise them in the private sector where people are paying housing benefit. That is a basic issue of fairness, but isn’t it interesting that the first pledge the right hon. Gentleman makes is something that could cost as much as £2.5 billion in the next Parliament? Who is going to pay for that? Jeff will pay for it. The people filling in their tax returns will pay for it. Why is it that the right hon. Gentleman always wants to see more welfare, higher taxes and more borrowing—all the things that got us into the mess in the first place?

**Jeremy Corbyn:** We have not had any answers on Google or the bedroom tax, but I ask the Prime Minister this. Shortly before coming into the Chamber, I became aware of the final report of the United Nations panel of experts on Yemen, which has been sent to the Government. It makes very disturbing reading. The report says that the panel has documented that coalition forces have

“conducted airstrikes targeting civilians and civilian objects, in violation of international humanitarian law, including camps for internally displaced persons and refugees...civilian residential areas; medical facilities; schools; mosques”.

These are very disturbing reports. In the light of this, will the Prime Minister agree to launch immediately an inquiry and a full review into the arms export licences to Saudi Arabia and suspend those arms sales until that review has been concluded?

**The Prime Minister:** As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we have the strictest rules for arms exports of almost any country anywhere in the world. Let me remind him that we are not a member of the Saudi-led coalition; we are not directly involved in the Saudi-led coalition’s operations; and British personnel are not involved in carrying out strikes. I will look at that report as I look at all other reports, but our arms exports are carefully controlled and we are backing the legitimate Government of the Yemen, not least because terrorist attacks planned in the Yemen would have a direct effect on people in our country. I refuse to run a foreign policy by press release, which is what he wants. I want a foreign policy that is in the interests of the British people.

Q2. [903270] **Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): The recent explosion of spurious legal claims against British troops, including those pursued by the law firm that has donated tens of thousands of pounds to the shadow Defence Secretary, undermine the ability of our armed forces to do their job. Will the Prime Minister join me in repudiating the disdain that this shows to our brave servicewomen and our brave servicemen?

**The Prime Minister:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Of course, we hold our service personnel to the highest standards, and it is right that we do, but it is quite clear that there is now an industry trying to profit from spurious claims that are lodged against our brave servicemen and women. I am determined to do everything we can to close that bogus industry down. We should start by making it clear that we will take action against any legal firm that we find to have abused the system to pursue fabricated claims. That is absolutely not acceptable.

**Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP):** I begin by associating the Scottish National party with the comments of the Prime Minister in relation to Holocaust Memorial Day, and commend Governments across the United Kingdom for supporting the Holocaust Educational Trust for the important work it does.

Does the Prime Minister agree that there is no justification for discrimination or unfairness towards women in the private sector or the public sector, or by the Government?

**The Prime Minister:** First of all, I welcome what the right hon. Gentleman says about the Holocaust Educational Trust. I remember as a new constituency MP meeting people from the trust and seeing the incredible work they do in my constituency. They work extremely hard around the clock but this day is particularly important for them. I urge colleagues who have not visited Auschwitz to do so: it is something they will never forget, no matter what they have read, films they have seen or books they have interrogated. There is nothing like seeing for yourself what happened in the darkest hour for humanity.

In terms of wanting to end discrimination against women in the public sector, the private sector, in politics and in this place: yes, absolutely.

**Angus Robertson:** I very much welcome what the Prime Minister says on both counts. He is aware of the state pension inequality that is impacting on many women, and that, on pension equalisation, this Parliament voted unanimously for the Government to

“immediately introduce transitional arrangements for those women negatively affected by that equalisation.”

What will the Prime Minister do to respect the decision of this Parliament and to help those women who are affected—those born in the 1950s—who should have had proper notice to plan their finances and their retirement?

**The Prime Minister:** First of all, the equalisation of the retirement age came about on the basis of equality, which was a judgment by the European Court. We put it in place in the 1990s. When this Government decided—rightly, in my view—to raise the retirement age, we made the decision that no one should suffer a greater than 18-month increase in their retirement age. That is the decision that this House of Commons took. The introduction of the single-tier pension at £155 a week will be one of the best ways that we can end discrimination in the pension system, because so many women retiring will get so much more in their pension which, of course, under this Government, is triple-lock protected, so they will get inflation, earnings or 2.5%, and never again a derisory 75p increase.

**Q3. [903271] Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West) (Con):** Our prisons can still be centres of radicalisation. Will the Prime Minister look at all measures, including those in the all-party parliamentary group for boxing report, for preventing troubled young people from falling into the jaws of those dangerously screwed up and predatory extremists?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is very disturbing that, when people are in our care and when the state is looking after them, on some occasions, they have been radicalised because of what they have heard in prison either from other prisoners, or on occasion, from visiting imams. We need to sort this situation out. The Justice Secretary has put in place a review. I will look carefully at the report my hon. Friend mentions, but, if anything, we must ensure that people who are already radicalised when they go to prison are de-radicalised rather than made worse.

**Q5. [903273] Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP):** Since the Chancellor of the Exchequer took control of the public purse, he has utterly failed to get the deficit under control. To date this year, he has borrowed over £74 billion to plug the gap or—to use the vernacular his party is fond of using for a hypothetical independent Scotland—the monumental financial black hole in his books. Is he now likely to breach his own deficit reduction target for the year by somewhere in the region of £9 billion? Will the Prime Minister finally concede—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I do not wish to be unkind to the hon. Lady, but I think we have the gist.

**Margaret Ferrier** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. That was a polite way of saying that the hon. Lady had concluded her question.

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend the Chancellor, and the economic strategy the Government have pursued, has cut the deficit in half from the record level we inherited. Soon it will be down by two-thirds. We are meeting what we want to see in terms of debt falling as a share of our GDP. What a contrast with the situation Scotland would be facing if it had voted for independence. In just six weeks, we have seen a 94% collapse in oil revenues. Because we have the broad shoulders of the United Kingdom, the collapse in the oil price and taxation will not affect people in Scotland. Had Scotland been independent, it would be a very, very dark day indeed.

**Q4. [903272] James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con):** Recently, I held a mental health forum in my constituency. I brought service users and commissioners together to explore how we could improve mental health services in Dudley and Sandwell. I welcome the Prime Minister's recent announcement on increased funding for mental health services. Does he agree that, despite the fact we have more work to do, his commitments are a clear indication of our desire to have a revolution in mental health services in Britain? He has delivered some commitments on that.

**The Prime Minister:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. There is further to go, but the Government are investing more in mental health. We introduced the waiting times, most recently saying that young people suffering episodes of psychosis should be seen within two weeks. There is funding, there is parity of esteem, there is waiting time. There also needs to be a bigger culture change not just in the NHS but right across the public and private sectors, so that mental health conditions are given the attention they deserve.

Q6. [903274] **Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): From April, a woman who works full time stands to lose thousands of pounds in tax credits if she becomes pregnant with her first child. When will the Prime Minister stop attacking working people?

**The Prime Minister:** What we are doing for women like that is making sure that this year they can earn £11,000 without paying any income tax. If they are on low wages, if they are on the minimum wage, they will get a 7% pay increase because of the national living wage. For the first time, there will be 30 hours of free childcare for those people. That is what we are doing for hard-working people. Do we need to reform welfare? Yes, we do. If the hon. Gentleman had read the report into why his party lost the election—not the one it published, of course; the secret one we all read over the weekend—he would see that, by its endlessly arguing for higher and higher welfare, the British public rightly concluded that under Labour there would be higher and higher taxes.

Q8. [903276] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I warmly welcome the Prime Minister's words on creating a national memorial to the victims of the holocaust. Tonight in Harrow, representatives of the whole community will come together to listen to the people who survived the holocaust. This is the only way we can preserve their memory. My right hon. Friend rightly alluded to the wonderful work of the Holocaust Educational Trust in allowing literally thousands of young people to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau and to see it at first hand. Will he commit the Government to continue funding the Holocaust Educational Trust, so that many thousands more can see the horrors of the holocaust?

**The Prime Minister:** I can certainly make that commitment. We have funded the trust with over £10 million since I became Prime Minister. As I said in answer to an earlier question, it does excellent work. I also think there is a real need now as, tragically, the remaining holocaust survivors are coming to the end of their lives. Many of them—I will be spending some time today with some of them—are now speaking up in the most moving and powerful way. Recording their testimonies, which must be part of our memorial, is absolutely vital. Their description of what they went through and the friends and family they lost, is so powerful and moving we must capture it for generations to come.

Q7. [903275] **Sue Hayman** (Workington) (Lab): In 2013, the Energy and Climate Change Select Committee recommended extending the retention of business rates to include new build nuclear power stations. The Centre of Nuclear Excellence is in my

constituency, and the new build at Moorside is vital for our economic prosperity. Given the Government cuts to Cumbria's councils, does the Prime Minister agree that if we are truly to build a northern powerhouse, our local authorities must retain all business rates from the nuclear new build in west Cumbria?

**The Prime Minister:** I will consider very carefully what the hon. Lady says. We are committed to the new nuclear industry, and we are obviously making good progress with Hinkley Point, but we need another big station to go ahead. I will consider very carefully her comments about business rates retention and business rates more broadly, but the most important thing is to have energy infrastructure that allows for the delivery of new nuclear power stations. That is the Government's position.

### Coastal Towns

Q11. [903279] **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help overcome the social and economic problems facing coastal towns.

**The Prime Minister:** The Government are absolutely committed to regenerating our coastal towns and ensuring that everyone, regardless of where they live in this country, has access to high-quality public services and the very best opportunities. I am happy to reaffirm that to the House today.

**Mr Speaker:** On this question, I call Mr Ian Paisley.

**Martin Vickers** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** I do beg your pardon. We must hear from Mr Vickers first. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Let us hear from the hon. Gentleman.

**Martin Vickers:** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I recognise the initiatives the Government have taken, but the Prime Minister will know that many coastal towns, such as Cleethorpes, suffer from poor educational standards. We have many high-performing academies trying to reverse that and ensure that our young people have access to sport, arts and culture at the highest level. The council is preparing a report with the private sector. Will he commit the Government to working with me and the council to deliver regeneration to Cleethorpes?

**The Prime Minister:** No one, Mr Speaker, could silence the voice of the Humber. That was not going to happen.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am happy to look at the proposal with him. We have to make sure we tackle both failing schools and coasting schools, and there are some in coastal areas of our country. One issue is making sure we get very talented teachers and leaders into those schools, and that is what the national leaders of education service is all about, but I am happy to talk further with him.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Mr Ian Paisley.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): Déjà vu.

Rathlin island is the only inhabited coastal village or town in my constituency. No British Prime Minister has ever had the honour to visit that part of Ulster. When does the Prime Minister plan to visit this remote location, which has considerable economic needs and could generate more employment and tourism?

**The Prime Minister:** I have been the first British Prime Minister to visit many parts of our country—I was the first to go to Shetland for about 30 years—but I fear, if I went to this island, people might like me to stay. I will certainly bear it in mind, however, the next time I visit the Province.

### Engagements

Q13. [903281] **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): Rugby is the fastest-growing town in the west midlands, and work is under way to provide 6,200 much-needed new homes at the Rugby Radio site. My constituents are keen to ensure that public services keep pace with those developments and to see more services at their local hospital, St Cross. Does the Prime Minister agree with the NHS chief executive, Simon Stevens, that district hospitals such as St Cross play an excellent role in the NHS?

**The Prime Minister:** I am a believer in district general hospitals, and I know what a strong supporter of St Cross my hon. Friend is and that there is a new dedicated children's outpatient facility there, which is welcome. If we are to achieve our aggressive house building targets, more houses will be built in most of our constituencies, and it is important that we try, as far as we can, to welcome that and make sure that the infrastructure that goes with these necessary houses is provided.

Q9. [903277] **Caroline Flint** (Don Valley) (Lab): Not everybody is as satisfied as the Chancellor with what for Google is loose change to cover its tax liabilities. On Monday, the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) called on the Government to make companies publish their tax returns. In that way, we can all see how they make the journey from their cash profits to their tax bills. Does the Prime Minister agree?

**The Prime Minister:** I do wonder whether the right hon. Lady ever raised this issue when she sat in the Labour Cabinet when Google was paying zero tax. What we have is a situation where we make the rules in this House and HMRC has to enforce those rules. That is the system that we need to make work.

Q14. [903282] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): As cancer survival rates continue to improve and given that this is cancer talk week, will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming a new state-of-the-art cancer information centre due to open at Royal Bolton hospital, and will he praise the collaboration of Macmillan Cancer Support, Bolton People Affected by Cancer, Bolton hospice and the Bolton clinical commissioning group, which are all making this happen?

**The Prime Minister:** I am happy to join my hon. Friend in that. Everyone in the House knows someone or has a family member who has been touched by

cancer, and many people have lost loved ones to cancer. The good news is that cancer survival rates are improving, and we need to ensure they improve across all types of cancer, not just the best known ones. What I think my hon. Friend is saying is that this is not just an issue for the NHS; it is also about all those big society bodies that want to campaign and act on helping cancer sufferers, which have such a big role to play.

Q10. [903278] **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): In the summer of 2014 when I was the leader of Highland Council, I wrote to the Prime Minister asking him to join the Scottish Government and Highland Council in taking forward a city deal for Inverness. Highland Council has submitted a detailed plan on the theme of “a region for young people”. Will the Prime Minister now commit to giving this the green light in the coming weeks?

**The Prime Minister:** We are committed to examining the city deal with Inverness, just as we have made very good progress on the city deal with Aberdeen. I think these bring together the best of what the Scottish Government can put on the table, but also the best of what the UK Government can put on the table. Without wanting to be too political about it, the two Governments working together can do even more.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for meeting the deposed Maldivian President Nasheed and his legal team in No. 10 on Saturday. Will my right hon. Friend commit to work towards an international consensus on targeted sanctions, so that the Maldivian regime might reconsider its appalling human rights record and its record on democracy?

**The Prime Minister:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. It was an honour to meet former President Nasheed, who I think did an excellent job for his country in cutting out corruption and turning that important country round. He suffered terribly from being in prison, and it is good that he is able to get out to seek medical treatment, but we want to see a change in behaviour from the Maldivian Government to make sure that political prisoners are set free. Yes, we are prepared to consider targeted action against individuals if further progress is not made. Let us hope that the diplomatic efforts, including by the Commonwealth action group, will lead to the changes we want to see. Britain and its allies, including Sri Lanka and India, are watching the situation very closely.

Q12. [903280] **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): Forty-six per cent. of five-year-old children in Bradford suffer from dental decay, compared with just 28% across England. Fewer than half of the children living in the Bradford district have seen a dentist in the last two years. Given that the cost of treating tooth decay far exceeds the cost of prevention, will the Prime Minister look at the lack of availability of NHS dentists in Bradford South as a matter of urgency?

**The Prime Minister:** I am happy to look at what the hon. Lady says. If we take a view across the country, before 2010 we had those huge queues round the block when a new NHS dentist turned up because there were not enough of them. We have seen a very big—

[*Interruption.*] Labour Members may shake their heads, but that is what happened, and some of us can remember it. We have seen a big increase in NHS dentistry since, but I will look carefully at the situation in Bradford.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, the peninsula rail taskforce is set to deliver its report on a resilient railway to Devon and Cornwall. Would he be willing to meet me and a number of colleagues to ensure that Network Rail and the taskforce have enough funding for the two studies into the electrification of the line and the necessary reduction of journey times?

**The Prime Minister:** I had an excellent meeting with the south-west peninsula rail taskforce, which has been working closely with the Government. I will make sure that we continue to liaise closely with it. Clearly, we need to find an answer and we need to find the funding to make it work. We cannot allow to happen what happened in the past when a problem on our railways led to the peninsula being cut off. We cannot see that happen again.

Q15. [903283] **Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating my constituents Dominic and Rebecca from Mitcham on the birth of their daughter Alice. Like every parent, they want their daughter to have better opportunities than they had, but with average London house prices increasing by £40,000 in 2013 alone and the average house in London now worth more than half a million pounds, does he understand their fears that Alice will never have the chance they had to buy her own home in the area she was born in?

**The Prime Minister:** I want to help Alice, and many others like her in London, to get on to the housing ladder. That is why we are introducing shared ownership, which brings housing into the reach of many more people. It is why we have Help to Buy London, which is twice as generous as the Help to Buy scheme in the rest of the country. It is why we are selling off the most expensive council houses and rebuilding more affordable homes. All those measures have been taken under the guidance and drive of Zac Goldsmith, who would make an excellent Mayor of London. That is Alice's best chance of a home: to have a Conservative Mayor and a Conservative Government working together, hand in glove.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Someone who is experiencing a mental health crisis and goes to A&E in desperation needs prompt specialist help. I welcome my right hon. Friend's recognition of psychiatric liaison in his recent speech on life chances.

Does he agree that the provision of 24/7 psychiatric liaison in A&E departments is an important step towards parity of esteem for mental and physical health in a seven-day NHS?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are seeing more mental health and psychiatric liaison in our A&Es. We are seeing it in some of them now, but we need, over time, to see it in all of them, because people so often arrive in a setting that is not the one in which they should be looked after. Whether we are talking about getting people with mental health conditions out of police cells, making sure that they are treated properly in prisons, or, crucially, making sure that they are given the right treatment when they arrive at A&E, that is very much part of our life chances plan.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I commend the Prime Minister for his remarks about Holocaust Memorial Day. In honouring the memory of those who were murdered by the Nazis, we provide the best antidote to extremism and anti-Semitism in our own age.

The biggest challenge facing Europe today is posed by the 3 million refugees who, it is predicted, will flee to our continent in 2016. Many of them will die along the way. Does the Prime Minister agree that the only way in which to challenge a crisis of that magnitude is to start to work with our European colleagues at the heart of a united Europe, and will he take this final opportunity to welcome in and provide a home for 3,000 unaccompanied children, as recommended by Save the Children?

**The Prime Minister:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of taking action to help with the refugee crisis. No country in Europe has been more generous than Britain in funding refugee camps, whether they are in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon or Jordan. However, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's view that the right answer is for Britain to opt into the EU relocation and resettlement schemes. Let me tell him why. We said that we would resettle 20,000 people in our country, and we promised to resettle 1,000 by Christmas. Because of the hard work of my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees, we achieved that. If we add up all that Europe has done under its relocation and resettlement schemes, we find that all the other 27 member states have done less than we have done here in the United Kingdom, because of those 1,000.

Yes, we should take part in European schemes when it is in our interests to do so, and help to secure the external European border; but we are out of Schengen, we keep our own borders, and under this Government that is the way it will stay.

## Points of Order

12.38 pm

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. [*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** We will come to the hon. Lady's point of order, but I should like to be able to hear it, and I should like there to be an attentive atmosphere for her benefit, mine, and that of the House.

**Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con) *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) has no cause for concern. He has never been forgotten before, and he will not be forgotten now. We are storing him up.

**Paula Sherriff:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At Cabinet Office questions before the recess, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster stated in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) that Kirklees Council had

“£200 million in useable and unused reserves”—[*Official Report*, 9 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 979.]

and concluded that the problems that we reported were facing our constituents were, therefore, “not real ones”. I have now had it confirmed, not just by officers of the local authority, that its unused reserves are nowhere remotely close to that figure. Even including reserves that are already allocated and not useable, the figure is nowhere near £200 million. Through a written answer, the Minister with responsibility for local government, the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), has confirmed that according to the Government's own figures Kirklees Council had less than a fifth of that amount in unallocated financial reserves at the end of the last financial year. May I ask you, Mr Speaker, what recourse there is for Members when a Minister has, even if unintentionally, misled this House on a matter that so seriously affects our constituents?

**Mr Speaker:** The short answer to the hon. Lady's question is that every Member of this House, including Ministers, must take responsibility for the veracity or otherwise of what he or she says. If somebody thinks the House has been inadvertently misled by a Member, the Member is responsible for correcting the record. That is the first point. The second point is that the recourse available to the hon. Lady lies in the Order Paper and the advice proffered by the Table Office. What I mean by that is that persistence pays, and if the hon. Lady thinks she has a good point, she should repeat it. She will have heard me make the observation that repetition is not a novel phenomenon in the House of Commons, and if she wants to keep making her point, she can take advice from the welter of sagacious and experienced colleagues around her as to how best to do so; most of them are very practised at the art, as I am sure the hon. Lady will be, too.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The House will have heard many tributes made to Holocaust Memorial Day today and the Holocaust Educational Trust campaign, “Don't stand by.” In the light of that and in that spirit,

do you agree that it was inappropriate for the Prime Minister, in referring to the refugee crisis in Europe, to use language such as “a bunch of migrants”? Do you think that it would be appropriate for the House to ask the Prime Minister to withdraw that language and use much more statesmanlike language about the need to build a cross-party consensus on such a complex and sensitive issue?

**Mr Speaker:** The right hon. Lady speaks with enormous experience in this House and I respect what she says. I completely identify and empathise with her observations about the Holocaust Memorial Day, which she and I on other occasions have marked at events together, so I take what she says extremely seriously. I do have to say to her and the House, however, that the observation in question was not disorderly; it was not unparliamentary. Everybody must take responsibility for the remarks he or she makes in this House and it is very clear that the right hon. Lady would not have used that term. It is open to the Prime Minister to comment on it if he wishes, but I am not entitled to try to oblige him to say anything on the matter. The right hon. Lady has made her point very clearly, however; it is on the record and people will make their own assessments of this matter.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) was becoming moderately agitated, so let's have a point of order from him; let's hear the man.

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At business questions last week I asked a question relating to post-study work visas, an issue that is subject to an ongoing inquiry by the Scottish Affairs Committee. The Leader of the House responded by stating that this was

“an area that was not in the Smith commission report.”—[*Official Report*, 21 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 1566.]

However, I have a copy of the report with me, and page 28 states that

“the Scottish and UK Governments should work together to... explore the possibility of introducing formal schemes to allow international higher education students graduating from Scottish further and higher education institutions to remain in Scotland and contribute to economic activity for a defined period of time.”

May I ask your advice, Mr Speaker, on how the Leader of the House can correct the record and offer a commitment that the Government will now seriously consider this issue, as recommended by the cross-party Smith commission?

**Mr Speaker:** Notwithstanding the serious and statesmanlike countenance of the hon. Gentleman as he rose to raise his point of order, it suffered from the material disadvantage of being many things but not a point of order for the Chair. We can all read the Smith report. I confess that I am not myself familiar with, or do not have an instant recall of, page 28, so the hon. Gentleman has the advantage of me there, but he asks what opportunity there is for him to try to hold the Leader of the House to account, and the short answer is tomorrow at business questions. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be in his place, and if he is, I will see him.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In recent weeks, Ministers have made a number of statements here and in Westminster Hall about the steel industry, and in particular about the crucial issue of the Government's procurement measures. It was therefore extraordinary to get a written answer from the Ministry of Defence yesterday stating that

"the Ministry of Defence (MOD) does not hold a complete, centralised record of steel procurement for projects and equipment, either in terms of quantity or country of origin".

In the light of that extraordinary revelation, Mr Speaker, how would you advise me to gain greater clarity on whether the Government's claims about what they are doing on procurement in the steel industry are actually the case, given that they do not appear even to be keeping records?

**Mr Speaker:** As I think the hon. Gentleman knows, his salvation lies in further questions and in the pursuit of debate, and there are opportunities to seek Adjournment debates. I say in no spirit of unkindness or discourtesy to him that I think it is evident from his puckish grin that he was more interested in making his point to me than in anything I might have had to say to him. We will leave it there for now.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. A few minutes ago, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), the Prime Minister referred to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) by his first name. It could of course be the case that the hon. Member for Richmond Park has recently been appointed as the Crown steward or bailiff of the Manor of Northstead, or perhaps the steward of the Chiltern hundreds of Stoke, Burnham and Desborough, but I do not believe that that is the case, and he should therefore be referred to in this House by his constituency. I believe that the Prime Minister did it in order to gain electoral advantage on this evening's news coverage in London by using a name that most viewers would recognise. I also believe that the Prime Minister has been disrespectful to the House and to its procedures in seeking electoral advantage for the Conservative party. I wonder whether you concur with that, Sir, and I seek your advice on how we might upbraid the Prime Minister for that discourtesy.

**Mr Speaker:** I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has rather magnified the issue by raising it this way. I do not disrespect him for that; I simply make that point en passant. I would say two things to him. First, Members should of course be referred to by their constituencies and not by their names. Secondly, I think this was almost certainly an oversight. Even the Prime Minister, who is immensely experienced and dexterous at the Dispatch Box, can be responsible for an oversight in the heat of the moment. I think that it was nothing more than that, just as when I momentarily forgot to call Mr Vickers to ask his question. We are all fallible—even, I suspect, the hon. Gentleman, on a bad day.

## Driving Instructors (Registration)

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

12.48 pm

**Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the registration of driving instructors.

The Bill provides for two deregulatory measures to simplify the registration of driving instructors. The first measure allows a driving instructor to request voluntary removal from the register of driving instructors. The second simplifies the process for re-joining the register where a person's registration has lapsed for between one and four years.

To become registered as an approved driving instructor—or ADI as they are known—a person currently has to pass three examinations that test theory, driving ability and instructional skill. They must be medically fit and a fit and proper person to be entered on the register. The total cost of taking all the required tests, obtaining a trainee licence and joining the ADI register is approximately £750.

A driving instructor's name is added to the register on qualification and remains on the list for four years. Once a person is on the register, they are required to take a standards check within four years to ensure that they are still instructing to an approved standard.

Under current legislation, a person can be removed from the register only—I find this quite extraordinary—if the registration runs out or they are removed from the register for conduct, competence or disciplinary reasons. The Bill would allow for voluntary removal from the register in the case of illness or other commitments such as caring for an older relative, maternity leave or a period of residence overseas.

Let me give three examples, which have been brought to my attention, of how the current legislation impacts on ADIs who wish to leave the register. The first is an ADI who was caring for his terminally ill parent and could not attend his standards check. Under current legislation, he had to be removed from the register for disciplinary reasons, which was absolutely ridiculous. To return to the register, he would have to requalify via the three-part qualification route, and his disciplinary record would be taken into consideration.

The second example is a female ADI who felt compelled to renew her registration despite taking a career break from instruction to bring up her two young children. If she had not renewed her registration at a cost of £300 it would have lapsed and she would then have had to undergo the three-part requalification process, which is crazy. The ADI felt that that was discriminatory. She would have preferred to leave the register voluntarily and return at a later date via the shortened route.

The third and final example is of an ADI who allowed his registration to lapse after having a heart attack. At the end of the 12-month period in which he could reregister without requalifying, the ADI was still on medication and did not feel well enough to resume instructing. The registrar did allow him a two-month grace period, but although that was welcome the ADI felt that he had been placed under undue stress, which could impact on his recovery.

[Sir David Amess]

Currently, if an ADI has been off the register for less than a year, they can reapply and will be added back on to the register, subject to conduct and medical fitness requirements. However, if the ADI's registration had lapsed for more than a year at the time they reapplied, they would have to retake the three ADI qualification exams.

The problems caused by the current legislation were brought to my attention by a constituent who runs a driving school that employs 200 drivers. His reasons for contacting me on this issue are as follows. The driving instructor industry is, for a number of reasons, losing driving instructors—I was surprised by this—and the process of qualifying can be a long one due to the waiting times for tests. As a result, the UK has a shortage of driving instructors, of which I am sure that the House was not aware. My constituent's company has a waiting list of some six weeks for pupils to start to learn to drive, which is hindering many young adults in their careers. This is a common issue across the country, and my constituent has spoken to many driving school owners in Thurrock and in Essex more widely who are experiencing the same issues.

As the role of a driving instructor is not a physical one, many ex-driving instructors would like to get back to instructing, but the lengthy requalifying process is making them decide against it, which is a shame as they have much in the way of skills and experience to give the industry. If the ADI is within 12 months of their registration finishing, however, they can just reapply without having to go through the whole process again. To help alleviate the problems of getting ex-instructors back into the industry we need to streamline the process, and, if possible, extend the 12-month period.

The cost of retaking the three qualifying exams and the time taken to complete them are both cited as reasons why such a small number of instructors return to the profession after a break. It is extraordinary that, of the 43,000 registered ADIs, only 25, on average, wish to return each year.

Simplifying the process of returning to the register after a break of one to four years by allowing the instructor to pass a standards check instead would

reduce the qualifying time from 36 weeks to only six weeks and avoid the £194 cost of undergoing the three-part qualification. The standards check that returning instructors would take would be the same as the one that practising ADIs currently take during the period of their registration to ensure their continued competence to instruct.

A person applying to re-join the register by that route would have a maximum of three attempts at passing the standards check. If they failed three times they would have to repeat the full requalification process if they wanted to re-join the register, thus ensuring that the highest standards are maintained. This faster route would not be available to those removed from the register for disciplinary reasons.

The majority of driving instructors in Great Britain—they are in all of our constituencies—are very small businesses or self-employed. The changes to current legislation, which I was told by the Department for Transport were necessary to meet the concerns of my constituent, are outlined in the Bill. They would allow ADIs to be placed on the register more quickly and at a lower cost, benefiting both instructors and driving school owners such as my constituent. There would be no lowering of standards as the returning instructors would be tested to the same rigorous standard as their colleagues already on the register. I should warn the House that it is not my intent to give instructions on how to drive or to set up a school of motoring.

The geographical extent of the Bill will be for Great Britain, excluding Northern Ireland. This Bill will allow instructors voluntarily to leave the register for a period of time for health reasons or for family commitments and provide a simple, cost-effective way for them to return to their profession without compromising instruction standards. I commend the measure to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That Sir David Amess, Rosie Cooper, Martyn Day, Margaret Ferrier, Mr Roger Godsiff, Kevin Hollinrake, Steve McCabe, Wendy Morton, John Redwood, Andrew Rosindell, Dame Angela Watkinson and Mr Mark Williams present the Bill.

Sir David Amess accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 February, and to be printed (Bill 125).*

## Opposition Day

[17<sup>TH</sup> ALLOTTED DAY]

### Housing Benefit and Supported Housing

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) who speaks for the Opposition on these matters, let me say that it may be of interest to the House and useful to those on the Front Benches to know that no fewer than 19 Back-Bench Members are seeking to catch my eye. In deciding on a time limit, I shall have to take account of the length of contributions from the Front Bench, and those on the Front Bench, being ever considerate, will, I am sure, wish to ensure that their contributions are tailored to allow for the views of Back Benchers to be expressed.

12.58 pm

**John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House believes that the Government's planned cuts to housing benefit support for vulnerable people in specialist housing, including the elderly and people who are homeless, disabled or fleeing domestic violence, risk leading to the widespread closure of this accommodation; notes the concern from charities, housing associations, councils and others across the country about the severe effect of these cuts; further notes that supported housing has already suffered as a result of Government spending cuts and policy decisions; notes that the planned changes will apply to all new tenancies from April 2016; notes the clear evidence that the Government's proposal to mitigate these cuts with discretionary housing payments will not work; and calls on the Government to urgently exempt supported housing from these housing benefit cuts and to consult fully with supported housing providers to safeguard this essential accommodation.

We have called the debate to give voice to hundreds of thousands of elderly and vulnerable people whose homes have been put at risk by the Government. It is very encouraging to know that 19 Members from both sides of the House wish to express their concern and to make a contribution to this debate.

We have also called the debate to expose the decision to challenge; and to expose it to compassion and to care. We want to expose it, too, to common sense. In his November spending review, the Chancellor announced that

"housing benefit in the social sector will be capped at the relevant local housing allowance."—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1360.]

With one short, sweeping sentence, he put at risk almost all supported and sheltered housing for the frail elderly, the homeless, young adults leaving care, those suffering with dementia, people with mental illness or learning disabilities, veterans and women fleeing domestic violence. According to those who provide that type of housing, he condemns nearly half of all such housing schemes to closure. He has already caused the cancellation of building work on nearly 2,500 new homes for people in those groups. The shadow Work and Pensions Secretary—my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith)—and I therefore joined forces to use the motion and the debate to draw attention to how the Chancellor's crude housing benefit cut could hit the lives of hundreds of thousands of people who totally depend on such specialist housing, many of whom are the most vulnerable people with nowhere else to turn.

The National Housing Federation says that 156,000 homes—at least that number of people will be affected—are set to close. A survey by *Inside Housing* found that one in four supported housing providers are set to close everything, while 19 out of 20 say that they will close some of their supported accommodation.

Since the spending review, as you might expect, Mr Speaker, I have been asking Ministers for evidence regarding the decision. I asked the Minister for Housing and Planning how many elderly people will be affected by the Chancellor's cut, but he told me that the Government do not know. I asked how many women fleeing from domestic violence will be affected—don't know; how many people with mental health problems—don't know; how many young people leaving care—don't know. The Government do not even know how many people in supported housing receive the housing benefit that they plan to cut.

The Minister did tell me, however, that the Government have commissioned an evidence review. It started in December 2014 and should have been completed by November 2015, but was not. Why not? In response to a parliamentary question, the Minister told me that the delay was due to

"the emerging complexity in the design and delivery of the review"

and "General Election Purdah restrictions". The Minister therefore did not know what he was doing when he commissioned the review, and he must have been alone in the House and the country in not knowing that there was a general election in May last year. He says that the review will be ready later this year, so he does not even know when he will know what, at the moment, he does not know. What a shambles! What a serious dereliction of duty from a Government who should be making policy on the basis of evidence, especially when that policy affects the lives of so many very vulnerable people.

**Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab):** Does my right hon. Friend agree that one helpful thing that the Minister could do during the debate would be to make it clear that the cap applies to housing benefit, not to the service charge applied to so many in supported accommodation?

**John Healey:** I do not often disagree with my hon. Friend, but I do not agree that that is the solution. It is absolutely clear, as the motion says, that the Government need to act immediately and confirm that they will exempt in full supported housing from these housing benefit cuts. They then need to work with housing providers to ensure that such housing can be developed and secured for the future. I hope that my hon. Friend accepts that argument and will back us in the Lobby today.

**Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab):** My right hon. Friend suggests that the Government do not know what they are doing, but does he agree that it could be suggested that they do not care about the people whom they are directly affecting? They should care, however, that the Homes and Communities Agency has estimated that its investment in supported housing results in a net benefit of £640 million a year.

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend makes an important point and I shall come on to touch on that matter, albeit lightly. People will make their own judgments about whether Ministers and the Government know and care enough so that they act to stop the cuts.

The devastating decision has been made with no consultation, no impact assessment and no evidence. This is not a tussle between Government and Opposition Front Benchers because the situation concerns each and every Member of the House. Every MP has in their constituency hundreds of residents in supported or sheltered housing, many of whom cannot pay their rent and service charges for themselves and totally depend on housing benefit to help to cover their costs.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Is not the real unfairness that supported housing, for many of our constituents, is an expensive but necessary choice? Without additional support from the housing benefit system, those people would not be able to afford such accommodation, which is vital to their everyday needs.

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend characteristically puts in a couple of sentences the main point that I am making, and he does so extremely well.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman rightly says that we all have constituents in accommodation such as sheltered housing, and he knows that all Members, irrespective of their party, care about our constituents. Will he dissociate himself from the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) that Conservative Members, in seeking to bring forward changes, do not care, because we do?

**John Healey:** It is down to the hon. Gentleman and his Front-Bench colleagues to demonstrate that case to those who are watching the debate, and especially to the people whose homes and lives are at risk.

As I said, every Member of the House has constituents who are threatened by the Chancellor's crude housing benefit cut. In the Minister for Housing and Planning's local authority area of Great Yarmouth, there are some 258 people in supported housing and at least 139 in sheltered housing. The numbers are even higher for Swindon and Tunbridge Wells. What do we say to these residents and their families? What do we say to the committed charities, churches, housing associations and other groups that provide such specialist housing and are so concerned?

**Mr Stewart Jackson** (Peterborough) (Con): Surely the right hon. Gentleman concedes that this is not a back-of-a-fag-packet policy and that the Government are doing a sensible thing by collating all the information and demonstrable data as part of a proper scoping exercise on assisted housing, with an impact assessment. They have also put aside nearly £500 million for discretionary housing payments and the changes will not take effect until April 2018. Surely that is a sensible policy for the Government to pursue.

**John Healey:** We have not seen the information and we have not seen the evidence—we have not even seen the fag packet. Without the information and the evidence, why on earth did the Chancellor take this decision in

the spending review before Christmas, thus pre-empting exactly what good policy and decision making should be based on?

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Given that the right hon. Gentleman has not seen the evidence, why is he holding the debate now?

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd and I called the debate to give voice to widespread concerns, to try to make the Government think again and to say that they must make exemptions from the cut. I shall set out in a moment why Ministers need to take a decision immediately.

Let me explain how the process will work. The Chancellor's decision caps housing benefit for social tenants at a new rate, which is the same amount that private rental tenants receive through the local housing allowance. For most general council and housing association homes, this will not cause tenants any immediate concerns as their rents are lower than that level. However, specialist housing services and schemes that provide extra care and support involve much higher housing costs, with their higher rents and service charges often covered by housing benefit. The Government know that from their 2011 report on supported housing, which listed the main reasons:

"providing 24 hour housing management cover...providing more housing related support than in mainstream housing...organising more frequent repairs or refurbishment...providing more frequent mediating between tenants; and providing extra CCTV and security services".

That is why rents in that type of accommodation do not mirror the rates in general private rented accommodation in the local area, but that is the level of the Chancellor's cut and cap.

**Chris Leslie** (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend will know that, in Nottingham, the housing charity Framework is appalled at the impact of the change on the supported accommodation it provides for some of the most vulnerable people in my constituency. It says that hundreds and hundreds of spaces will have to close by 2018 if the change goes ahead. This is a very real problem facing some of the most deprived and vulnerable people in the country, and I applaud the fact that he has called this Opposition debate.

**John Healey:** I thank my hon. Friend and applaud his effort to talk to providers in his constituency. The fears that Framework expressed are widely voiced and shared by providers who offer that type of housing and support. I do not know what figures he has for Nottingham, but Homeless Link cites figures in Birmingham that expose the shortfall. The average national rent in a homeless hostel is about £180 per week. The local housing allowance rate in Birmingham is half that figure, at £98.87 a week. The local housing allowance rate for a room in a shared house, which is all that single people under 35 are entitled to, is just £57.34 a week—a shortfall of over £120 per week, per tenant.

Supported housing is not just an emergency bed or a roof over someone's head; the support helps people to get their lives back together. Last year, 1,500—or two in five—people housed by St Mungo's in its hostels moved on from supported housing into individual accommodation. Last year, St Vincent's—the Manchester-based housing

charity—saw 15 of its young Foyer residents go on to university, one to Oxford. For thousands of other people with severe autism, learning disabilities, dementia and mental illness, living as independently as possible in supported housing, there is no alternative but hospital and residential care, which are much more institutionalised for the residents and much more expensive for the taxpayer. This policy risks turning the clock back on people's lives and standards of care by 40 years.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has illustrated his case by referring to people for whom the alternative may be much more expensive and less adequate care. There are other people, such as women fleeing domestic violence with their children, who come to very good accommodation in my constituency, who will have no alternative at all if those places are closed down as a result of these measures.

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend, who chairs the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, understands this better perhaps than anyone in the House. There is no alternative to the supported housing needed by many of the most vulnerable people, and which they have at present. That is why Ministers must act immediately to exempt supported housing in full from the crude cuts and undertake a detailed consultation with providers about how such housing can be secured in future. Before Christmas, I revealed the scale of the problems facing people in specialist supported housing.

**Graham Evans** (Weaver Vale) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**John Healey:** No, I will carry on for the moment.

Since then, we have had a series of half-baked statements from the Government. The first was, "This is unnecessary scaremongering." Not true—we are giving voice to the warnings and evidence from those who have the facts and will have to manage the consequences. Those are organisations the British public trust and respect, including Age UK, Mencap and Women's Aid. Secondly, "nothing will change until 2018."

Not true—the cut and the cap apply to new tenancies from April this year, so the problem is immediate. My local housing association, South Yorkshire Housing Association, has told me that

"it takes time to rehouse anyone, let alone the most vulnerable people. Consultation on scheme closures will need to begin within a matter of weeks".

No one will sign contracts for supported housing when they do not know whether the basic costs can be covered. New investment has already been stopped in its tracks: one in five providers have frozen investment and new schemes, according to the Inside Housing survey. Golden Lane Housing, Mencap's housing arm, had plans for £100 million of investment over the next five years in supported housing across England, but they have been scrapped.

Thirdly,

"Additional discretionary housing payment funding will be made available to local authorities, to protect the most vulnerable, including those in supported housing".

Not true—the fund is run by councils to deal with emergency applications from people already coping with the bedroom tax, the benefits cap, and the cuts in the

last Parliament to the local housing allowance. Awards often run for only a few months. The fund is currently £120 million a year, and it is a short-term and overstretched measure.

Policy costing in the autumn statement scores the cost of the Chancellor's housing benefit cut at £515 million. The Government proposed to top up the discretionary housing payments fund by not £515 million but £70 million. Housing organisations rightly dismiss the idea that the fund is the solution, saying that that is "nonsense and unworkable".

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The insufficiency of discretionary housing payments for the bedroom tax has been shown again and again. I am delighted that today at least one case involving a family of carers has been exempted. Does my right hon. Friend agree that facing this sort of situation preys on the minds of vulnerable people, as they know that they have to apply for a discretionary housing payment and may not get it?

**John Healey:** I think that my hon. Friend is discussing the case in the High Court, which found the Government to be in breach of equality legislation. We have always said that the bedroom tax is unfair, punishing people who often cannot afford to make up the difference, and that it should be scrapped. I hope that today's High Court judgment will lead Ministers to think again about the bedroom tax and to act to stop the housing benefit cut damaging the prospects of many people.

The question for the Minister for Housing and Planning and for the Secretary of State—who was in the Chamber a moment ago, but then scarpered—is: did they discuss the cut with Treasury Ministers before the spending review? Was the Department even consulted? Either they did not spot it or they did not stop it. Either way, the Minister, the Secretary of State and the Department have been disregarded and overruled by the Chancellor.

The Housing and Planning Minister is in the Chamber to try to explain why housing schemes supporting more than 150,000 of the most vulnerable people, with nowhere else to turn, are set to close, while the real culprit keeps his head down in the Treasury. Forced to backtrack on tax credits when a tough stance on benefits backfired, the Chancellor turned to housing benefit cuts across the board to make his fiscal sums add up. With this, he has made the same errors of judgment. He has put politics above good policy and even basic humanity. He announces first, and asks questions later. He is failing many vulnerable people, and he is failing the taxpayer too.

This decision is a big test for the Conservative Government. The Prime Minister said just before the election:

"I don't want to leave anyone behind. The test of a good society is you look after the elderly, the frail, the vulnerable, the poorest in our society."

So will the Government act immediately and confirm that they will exempt in full from this crude, sweeping housing benefits cut those in supported and sheltered housing? Will they work with those who provide that housing to ensure that it is secure for the future? The only decision for Ministers to take on the motion before the House is to exempt that housing—a decision that would be based on evidence, compassion and care.

1.20 pm

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis):** Once again, I stand at the Dispatch Box grateful for the subject chosen by the Opposition for debate. We are always happy to discuss welfare reform, because it is at the heart of the Government's agenda. We make no apology for this commitment to the people of Britain.

Our aim is simple. We need to balance the books and introduce a welfare system that is fair to taxpayers, where work pays and where having a job is always preferable to a life on benefits. The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) speaks as though we are debating in a vacuum. We have to bear in mind where we have come from in order to understand where we are going, and the wider picture. Let us remember that in 2010 we inherited a welfare system that failed to reward work, hurt taxpayers, and was a millstone around the neck of the British economy. During the 13 years of the Labour Government, welfare spending had shot up by 60% in real terms and 1.4 million people had spent most of the previous decade trapped on out-of-work benefits. The result was a benefits system in disarray, which was costing taxpayers an extra £3,000 a year.

**John Glen (Salisbury) (Con):** Was my hon. Friend as surprised as I was when he heard his opposite number talking about good policy, when in the last 10 years of the Labour Government housing benefits increased by 46% in real terms? How could that be considered good policy?

**Brandon Lewis:** My hon. Friend, as ever, makes a powerful point about the way the Labour Government worked to trap people in dependency. We want to work with people to drive aspiration, while giving a fair deal to the British taxpayer.

**Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con):** Does my hon. Friend agree that the contribution from the Opposition Front Bench was long on flannel but short on facts? The independent Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts that despite small initial savings, there will be long-term benefits from capping housing benefit. My hon. Friend may wish to comment on that.

**Brandon Lewis:** My hon. Friend highlights the weakness of the Opposition's position. They never look at the entire picture; they just want to make short-term political points.

**Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab):** Will the Minister confirm that the coalition Government, including the Tory party, spent £130 billion more than the previous Labour Government on welfare, breaching £1 trillion for the first time under any Government? Is that not a fact?

**Brandon Lewis:** The hon. Gentleman highlights the terrible mess that the coalition Government inherited. There was no fairness for hard-working taxpayers in such a system. There was nothing progressive in trapping people in lives without hope for a brighter future. The welfare system that his party left was broken, yet the Opposition have since then opposed every single decision we have taken to fix it. We have never heard from them proposals for alternative reforms, which can mean only

that they oppose making any difficult decisions at all. It is easy to make noise, but much harder to do the right thing by the British people. We have seen one tactic time and again—scaremongering, exploiting the concerns of the very people they claim to represent, and playing politics with the lives of vulnerable people. Today's debate is no exception.

**Chris Leslie:** If the Minister wants a specific proposal to save money on housing benefit and welfare, why does he not look at the £4.6 billion lost through fraud and error in the administration of our housing benefit system? Why does he not get a grip on that and introduce some better credit rating agency checks for applications? That is where the savings should be made, rather than on the backs of the most vulnerable people in our society.

**Brandon Lewis:** We have been clear about protecting the most vulnerable people in our society; I will come to that in a moment. The hon. Gentleman is right. We need to continue to make progress in cracking down on fraud and error, and in local government as well—something that the Labour Government did nothing about.

**Graham Evans:** My hon. Friend is making some powerful points. Will he remind the House that the Government are issuing £800 million to be allocated to local authorities for discretionary housing payments, and that a further £40 million was announced in the autumn statement for supporting the vulnerable, particularly for refugees for beaten women?

**Brandon Lewis:** My hon. Friend makes a strong point. It is rare that I disagree with him, but the figure is slightly better than he says. There is £870 million coming through. He highlights the Government's clear focus on these issues.

**Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con):** Does my hon. Friend share my surprise that until we heard from the former shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, we had not heard, in 25 minutes of listening to the shadow Minister, any suggestion or acknowledgement that housing benefit is now an issue that any responsible Chancellor needs to look at? We spend more on housing benefit than on secondary education and it represents 50% of what we spend on the defence budget. No responsible Chancellor of the Exchequer would not be losing sleep about housing benefit and looking to reform it.

**Brandon Lewis:** My hon. Friend makes another clear and important point. Not just in the past 25 minutes, but in the past six years, Labour has said nothing constructive about how to deal with these issues for the benefit of the British taxpayer.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Brandon Lewis:** I shall make a little progress and then take more interventions.

This Government have always been clear that the most vulnerable will be supported through our welfare reforms. We know that the welfare system is vital for supporting vulnerable people, and we know it is essential that all vulnerable people have a roof over their heads. That is why we have been determined to support their housing needs. We have set aside over £500 million to create a strong safety net against homelessness; we recently pledged £40 million for domestic abuse services,

ensuring that no victim is turned away from the support they need; at the autumn statement we announced a further £400 million to deliver 8,000 specialist affordable homes for the vulnerable, elderly or those with disabilities; and the Department of Health committed to fund up to 7,500 further specialised homes for disabled and older people.

We spent an extra £2 billion on main disability benefits over the course of the last Parliament, and by 2020 we will be spending at least £10 billion a year extra over and above inflation on the NHS, including a record £11.4 billion a year on mental health, which we can do because of the stronger economy that the Chancellor has brought to our country.

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): The Minister is giving us the statistics on how much money the Government have put aside or will be spending. I ask him a straight question: will people currently in supported housing be protected, rather than being turfed out and made homeless? That is a simple question.

**Brandon Lewis:** As I will set out in more detail later, we will make sure that the most vulnerable people are protected. That is what the welfare system is all about.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Minister talks about women's refuges. The manager of Monklands Women's Aid, Sharon Aitchison, has just emailed me. She says:

"There is no doubt that our current set-up with housing benefit is already stretched to the max, so the refuge provisions viability would most certainly be in question and the reality is we would be unable to fund refuge provision if the cap went ahead for us."

What does the Minister say to Sharon Aitchison, the manager of my local women's refuge, which provides a brilliant service for women and children in desperate situations?

**Brandon Lewis:** As I have just outlined, this Government announced an extra £40 million for domestic abuse services.

Funding for supported housing is part of the Government's wider financial settlement to councils, which includes £5.3 billion in the better care fund in 2015-16 to deliver faster and deeper integration of health and social care. That will result in councils being better able to work together and invest in early action to help people live safely in their own homes for longer.

**Barbara Keeley:** I am amazed. The Minister has started trotting out figures for the better care fund. That fund is back-loaded: the money will not reach councils until 2019-20, and is cancelled out by the new homes bonus being taken back at the same time. We have already lost an awful lot of support for older and vulnerable people.

Does the Minister believe, as he seems to have just said, that the most vulnerable will be supported by the welfare reforms? That is just not true, as we see from all the court cases that are going through. How will people in 2,300 units of housing for older people in Salford be protected? I advise the Minister not to talk about discretionary housing payments, as those have been shown to be insufficient.

**Brandon Lewis:** I think that the hon. Lady, in talking about the settlement, is referring to the new £1.5 billion coming through. As I am sure she is aware, our affordable homes programme actually delivers 6% more supported homes a year than Labour's equivalent did.

Of course, the supported housing sector is wide and varied, but all the different kinds of provision have one thing in common: they all provide dedicated support for some of our country's most vulnerable people.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Brandon Lewis:** I am going to make some progress, because many Members wish to speak, but I will give way again shortly.

Many supported housing tenants have multiple physical and mental health problems, histories of offending and dependency issues. They might be elderly, socially isolated or face barriers to accessing employment or living independently. We know that supported housing can also reduce costs to the wider public sector—for example, in health and adult social care or in criminal justice.

I am sure that the whole House will agree that we want all our families, friends and constituents to live fulfilling and independent lives, wherever possible in a home of their own. Some people need more help to do that, and supported housing gives them that assistance. It provides a place of safety and stability. It helps people get their lives in order. It improves their health and wellbeing, and it provides the platform from which they can reach their full potential.

My ministerial colleagues and I have been out and seen for ourselves, over not only the past few months but the past few years, the difference that supported housing can make. Homeless hostels, such as Shekinah in Plymouth, which I visited last January, provide not only accommodation but invaluable opportunities for people in recovery. The same is true for specialised housing for older or disabled people, such as the Lady Susan Court development in Basingstoke, which I have visited. The residents there are delighted with their homes, which have allowed them to maintain their independence. Their only regret is not having moved in sooner.

My colleague Baroness Williams has also seen how domestic abuse refuges, such as the Saheli Asian Women's Project in Manchester, are helping women flee terrible abuse and violent relationships and start new lives. Protecting the most vulnerable in society and supporting their housing needs is just as much a priority as driving down the deficit. There need be no contradiction between those two aims.

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Last week I visited Camberwell Foyer in my constituency, which is run by Centrepunt; I was shown around by Shante and Tia, who live there. The Foyer provides brilliant support for young people who would otherwise be homeless for a period of time. It has expressed grave concerns to me about the impact that the withdrawal of housing benefit from 16 to 21-year-olds will have on youth homelessness, in relation to the demand for their services, which it fears it would be unable to meet, and also on young people who are ready to move on and will not be able to access housing benefit for the homes they need. How does the Minister answer that point?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order.

**Brandon Lewis:** I think there was an intervention somewhere in that speech. The hon. Lady has experience of the excellent work that those organisations do, as do I—I was a trustee of a Foyer. That is why it is important that we ensure that we protect the most vulnerable in society.

**Mr Jackson:** Is not the difference between the two sides of the House the fact that we on the Government side have got 339,000 disabled people into work and off benefits, whereas in 2010 the Labour party, to its eternal shame, presided over a situation in which 70% of people on disability living allowance had never been systematically re-assessed? That is a shocking and disgraceful record.

**Brandon Lewis:** My hon. Friend highlights the difference between the two parties. We want to ensure that we get a deal that protects the most vulnerable in society, helps them out and gives them an aspirational opportunity to move forward in their lives while getting a right and proper deal for the hard-working taxpayer.

In the autumn statement we announced that social sector rents eligible for housing benefit will be limited to the level of the relevant local housing allowance rate, including the shared accommodation rate for single claimants under 35 who do not have dependent children. It will be effective from 1 April 2018, affecting all tenancies that commenced from 1 April 2016. I know that has raised some concerns, so let me be clear that we will always ensure appropriate protections for the most vulnerable in supported housing. We will work closely with the sector, through the supported housing review, to ensure that we do that in exactly the right way.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Brandon Lewis:** I give way to the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee.

**Mr Betts:** The Minister has rightly recognised the importance of supported and specialist housing. He has now just indicated that the Government will somehow protect people in these circumstances. Can he give any indication of how that will be done and when these measures will be announced, given that housing associations are already having to plan for potential change in 2018 that could lead to the closure of existing accommodation and to new accommodation not being built?

**Brandon Lewis:** The hon. Gentleman has effectively asked me to continue my speech, because I was just about to say, as I am sure he will appreciate, that the underlying principles are the bedrock of this policy formation. He, along with the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne, urges the Government to note the concerns of supported housing providers, so let me reassure all Members of the House that we have of course been listening very carefully to those concerns, and we will continue to do so.

My ministerial colleagues and I have met representatives of the National Housing Federation and chief executives of housing associations that provide supported housing. We have listened very carefully to all these representations and noted everything that we have been told. We know that the costs of supported housing provision are higher

than general needs housing and that providers rely on housing benefit funding for support elements such as wardens, security and the up-keep of communal facilities.

**Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I thank the Minister for finally giving way. Could he just point out exactly how he has been helping to protect the most vulnerable in the 34 specialist women's refuges that have shut since the Conservatives came to power? I also wonder whether he would like to join me this afternoon at the all-party group on domestic violence to meet pretty much every CEO from all the Women's Aid organisations across the country and see what they think.

**Brandon Lewis:** I am slightly surprised by the hon. Lady's comments. If she looks back at the *Hansard* report of this debate, she will see how many interventions I have already taken, so she might want to talk to her colleagues about the fact that they got in before her. I am sure that she appreciates that I will always take an intervention from the Chair of the Select Committee first.

The future of supported housing matters, which is why my Department and the Department for Work and Pensions have jointly commissioned a fact-finding review of the sector. This will report by the end of March and will deepen our knowledge and understanding. The research has included extensive consultation with local authorities, supported accommodation commissioners and all categories of supported housing providers, be they charities, housing associations or, indeed, those in the commercial sector. It will provide us with a better picture of the supported accommodation sector.

In the meantime—Lord Freud has written to all interested parties outlining this today—the 1% reduction will be deferred for 12 months for supported accommodation. We will get the findings of the review in the spring. We will work with the sector to ensure that the essential services it delivers continue to be provided while protecting the taxpayer, making sure that we make best use of the taxpayer's money and meet the Government's fiscal commitments. We will look at this urgently to provide certainty for the sector.

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way and for setting out the next steps. I put it to him politely that he ought to have done that kind of research before making the announcement in the first place. In order to give those housing providers certainty, can he now also tell the House precisely what kinds of measures will be implemented to offset the changes in housing benefit?

**Brandon Lewis:** I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that the financial mess in which the previous Labour Government left this country means that we have to make difficult decisions and move quickly to ensure that hard-working taxpayers are properly protected. I am proud to be working with a Chancellor who sees that as one of our first and foremost duties.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): Can I be the first on the Government side of the House to warmly welcome the announcement that my hon. Friend has just made? It makes eminent sense to postpone this decision for one year on the basis of proper evidence and facts. His supported housing review will report at

the end of March. After the review has concluded, will he come to conclusions on the matter rapidly? I was lobbied about this on Saturday by Bromford housing association in my constituency. There is a lot of uncertainty in the sector, so I urge him to come to conclusions rapidly after the review has concluded.

**Brandon Lewis:** As my hon. Friend rightly says, as the findings of the review come in we will look to work urgently with those in the sector to provide certainty for them.

**John Healey:** I welcome this partial step as an indication of progress. It has taken Labour's forcing this debate to get Ministers to take this 12-month backward step on the reduction in rents. However, what about the cuts to housing benefit for supported and sheltered housing? A pause is not enough. It will not remove the alarm or anxiety of residents or the uncertainty for providers, and it will not affect the schemes that have already been scrapped. The Minister must provide an exemption. Will he announce that now?

**Brandon Lewis:** It is almost as though the right hon. Gentleman forgets that when he was a Minister—I think in the DCLG, although he might well still have been at the Treasury—the Government of the time moved the spare room subsidy, which was first introduced under Labour, into the private sector and created the unfairness that we now see. I am not going to stand here and take a lecture from him about this Government doing the right thing in working with the sector to deliver the right outcome and to do what we have always done, which is to protect the most vulnerable in our society. Labour—I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman is guilty of this—simply wants to get a headline by scaremongering around the country.

**Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con):** I, too, hugely welcome the exemption for a year as a really meaningful announcement. Like the £40 million for domestic violence refuges—a tripling of the budget—it is really significant and contrasts with the political point-scoring we have heard from the Opposition.

**Brandon Lewis:** My hon. Friend clearly highlights the difference between the two parties. Labour spends a lot of time on bluster while the Government are focused on getting the job done for the people of Great Britain.

**Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con):** Can my hon. Friend confirm that those who will benefit from this exception from the 1% rent reduction during this year of consideration include those fleeing domestic abuse, and that it affects homeless provision and housing for ex-offenders as well as supported housing for older and disabled people? Does he recognise how much this will be welcomed by many of us? Will he pay tribute to those who are working with him on it, including Homeless Link and St Mungo's?

**Brandon Lewis:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point. A large number of people provide phenomenal services, across the sector and across the country, in working with the most vulnerable. We are keen to work with them to make sure that, as we have said all along, the right protections are in place for the most vulnerable people.

Let there be no doubt: this Government will always protect the most vulnerable and provide them with the support they need and a safe home to live in. We are a one nation Government. We want everyone to have the opportunity to live happy and fulfilling lives, wherever they are and wherever they live. We want workers to earn a living wage and benefit from our strong economic growth. We want to support aspiration, boost productivity, reward work over welfare, and allow people to keep more of the money they have earned in their own pockets. That is our new settlement for Britain—to keep moving from a low-wage, high-tax, high-welfare economy to a higher-wage, lower-tax, lower-welfare country.

On this journey, we will, I repeat, always support vulnerable people and make sure they have a safe home to live in. The whole House should support that aim. Instead, Labour Members are resorting to their favourite tactic of scaremongering for a short-term political headline. It is time to stop that kind of poor politics. It is time to stop playing politics with the lives of vulnerable people while we are working to help to provide the support they need and deserve—and we will provide it.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. I remind hon. Members that there will be a speech limit of six minutes after the SNP Front-Bench spokesperson has finished.

1.43 pm

**Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP):** I rise to support the motion in the name of the shadow Front Bench.

The starting point on issues surrounding housing benefit was the decision made a couple of months ago in a Delegated Legislation Committee to freeze housing benefit for four years. Once again, a decision was made in a Delegated Legislation Committee that should have been made through debate in this House. I am glad that the *Independent* newspaper, among others, has started to highlight this mechanism that the Government are using to bring in their most damaging policies affecting the country. I represent a constituency where 40% of homes are in the social rented sector and 10% in the private rented sector, so any changes in housing benefit will have an impact.

What has been most startling about these proposed changes, and the key thing to note, is that the Government have not produced any statistics on the number of housing benefit claimants who receive the benefit to pay for supported accommodation. In other words, the UK Government are proposing to cap lower LHA—local housing allowance—with no knowledge of how that impacts on women's refuges and sheltered and supported complexes for pensioners, among other types of accommodation. No statistics are available on the number of residents in supported housing who are in receipt of full or partial housing benefit. On 17 November 2015, the Government were asked for the latest figures on the number of supported housing schemes in England that participate in such a scheme. Baroness Williams of Trafford answered for the Government:

“We do not hold this information. More information on the scale, shape and cost of the supported accommodation sector should be available through the evidence review jointly commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Work and Pensions.”

[Chris Stephens]

If the Government do not know the impact of the change, why make it?

This Tory Government must halt their continued assault on housing benefit so as to ensure that those who need supported housing are not literally left out in the cold. Supported housing provides vital help to tens of thousands of people. It plays a crucial role in securing a safe home and supports people to live independently. Supported housing provides the support for older people to maintain independent lives. It provides emergency refuge and support for victims of domestic violence, helping them to stabilise their lives and to engage with other services that they require. Supported housing providers work with homeless people with complex and multiple needs and help them to make the transition from life on the street to a settled home, education, training and employment. In my constituency, I know the work of a charity called Soldiers Off The Street that supports military veterans who are homeless and struggle to meet the challenge of civilian life, having served in our armed forces.

Supported housing assists people with mental health needs to stabilise their lives, recover and live more independently. It supports people with learning disabilities in the longer term to maximise independent living and exercise more choice and control over their lives. The stark reality is that any change to housing benefit can undermine the ability of such tenants to pay their rent, thereby putting their home at risk and threatening their physical and mental wellbeing, as well as posing a threat to the financial stability of housing associations. Single people under 35 will lose out, as well as those who need supported housing. Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies concluded that the savings arising out of this measure would be small in the short run, cutting housing benefit expenditure by £255 million in 2020-21.

The longer-term impact of the change is expected to be more significant. If applied to all social tenants now, housing benefit would be cut by £1.1 billion from a base of about £25 billion, with 800,000 households losing an average of £1,300 per year across the UK. An *Inside Housing* article from 21 January 2016 claims that 95% of supported housing providers would be forced to close their schemes. The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations has arrived at figures that point to the potential cash impact of the policy, as it stands, in Scotland, based on a small-scale piece of research that it conducted with its members in the weeks since the autumn statement.

The proposed changes could have a devastating effect on the future provision of refuge accommodation in Scotland, because that accommodation is in the ownership of either housing associations or local authorities. LHA rates do not take into account the additional cost to refuge providers of leasing accommodation from social landlords and the associated service charge costs. A range of additional costs are involved in providing and managing refuge accommodation for women and children fleeing domestic violence. These costs derive from the more intensive housing management due to the crisis nature of admission, the special vulnerability of the women and children concerned, and the variable lengths of stay and rapid turnover. Other requirements include the need for increased safety and security measures,

and the provision of furniture, bedding and equipment. Many refuges also include additional facilities such as communal rooms for counselling and therapeutic playrooms for children.

An analysis by the Angus branch of Scottish Women's Aid found that in all cases, refuge rent and service charge costs are significantly higher than the LHA rate. It provides the example of a rural area where introducing a cap linked to the LHA rate would result in an annual loss of £5,800 for a two-bedroom refuge flat. In other examples, the annual loss on a one-bedroom refuge flat in an urban area is £7,100 per year, while the loss on a three-bedroom refuge in a semi-urban area is £11,600 per year. In each case, the financial cost will be multiplied by the number of refuge spaces provided. Without the existing level of housing benefit to cover costs, refuges may be forced to close. It is estimated that 62% of housing association tenants rely on housing benefit to help them to pay their rent.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. His point about the protection of refuges is important. In addition to our opposition to the Government measures, is it not quite clear that in Scotland, where housing is devolving—leaving the Scottish Government to protect the general stock, end the right to buy and fund new build housing and new supported accommodation—we need the full devolution of housing benefit to square the circle and to allow us to protect the most vulnerable and our general housing?

**Chris Stephens:** I agree with my hon. Friend. The SNP has been pursuing the full devolution of housing benefit.

The proposed introduction of the under-35s shared accommodation rate in social rented housing means that younger people will struggle to meet their rents, and it places women under the age of 35 at much greater risk of further abuse. The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations has found, based on its own analysis of the figures, that a single person aged under 35 who is reliant on housing benefit would face a weekly shortfall of £6.22, which is £323.44 per year. That translates into a rental loss of £2.8 million per year for housing associations in Scotland. The SFHA comments that that is likely to be a conservative estimate, given that, in August 2015, there were already 67,462 housing benefit claimants in social housing tenancies with housing associations in Scotland under the age of 35.

If women under the age of 35 are unable to access refuge accommodation or move into their own tenancy because of a restriction on their entitlement to housing benefit, that will in effect prevent them from leaving an abusive partner. In 2014-15, the 26 to 30-year-old age group had the highest incident rate of domestic abuse recorded by the police in Scotland. Women in that age group clearly have a significant need for domestic abuse support services, including refuge accommodation.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for making very important points about women in vulnerable circumstances. Does he agree that there are issues about universal credit, in that women in domestic abuse situations may find themselves in difficulty if it is split? That would put them in a vulnerable position, which would be compounded by their not having a refuge to go to.

**Chris Stephens:** That factor would compound the original error. My hon. Friend is absolutely correct to raise that issue.

Discretionary housing payment to top up the gap between LHA rates and the actual costs of providing supported accommodation is simply not secure enough in these uncertain financial times. The autumn statement indicated that additional discretionary housing payment would be made available to local authorities to protect the most vulnerable. This type of discretionary funding for the social sector is far too insecure and uncertain a funding mechanism to allow providers to continue to provide specialised accommodation, such as refuge accommodation. It would mean local authorities deciding at an individual level whose support needs would or would not be met. That would create a postcode lottery, as well as distressing tenants, worrying about whether they would be successful.

The Angus branch of Scottish Women's Aid claims that that would create additional barriers, not to mention risk, particularly for those women and children experiencing domestic abuse who are seeking refuge. In April 2013, Lord Freud responded to Scottish Women's Aid with his commitment to protect refuge accommodation from any unintended consequences of the welfare reforms. In order to ensure that such vital supported accommodation is protected, the UK Government must commit to at least exempting refuge providers from further squeezes. The Department for Work and Pensions has stated that the extent to which supported accommodation, including refuges, will be included within the cap is still to be decided. The DHP fund is a cash-limited annual allocation and the future of the payment is not secure, particularly if the pot is stretched to meet growing numbers. The DHP fund should not be used to top up benefit; instead, the changes—leaving gaping holes in the support for those that need it most to keep a roof over their heads—should not go ahead.

The proposed capping will lock out those who need support from seeking it or being able to afford it. The gap between the LHA paid and the price of supported housing could mean that many at-risk individuals will not receive the support they need from a residential tenancy. The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations argues that uncertainty about the allocation of DHP could leave potential tenants reluctant to take up supported accommodation that better suits their needs. Furthermore, it argues that the uncertainty and distress about access to appropriate support could create a vicious cycle of tenants not accessing support and associations being left with empty properties.

**Alan Brown:** Is it not absolutely contrary of the Government to say that they will protect the most vulnerable by providing additional DHP? The only way in which they can actually protect vulnerable people is by completely exempting them from the proposals for such types of accommodation, rather than by providing additional DHP.

**Chris Stephens:** I agree with my hon. Friend. It was interesting that the Minister, in his response to the Labour spokesman, made no mention of the additional cost of the proposals to the health service and other social services across the board. In some respects, these are penny-pinching proposals, given the higher costs that will arise in future.

The proposed cuts come in the context of additional Tory planned restrictions on housing benefit for some of the most disadvantaged people in society. As part of summer Budget 2015, the Chancellor announced the removal of entitlement to the housing element of universal credit from young people aged 18 to 21, with some exceptions, from April 2017. The regressive rationale is to

“ensure young people in the benefits system face the same choices as young people who work and who may not be able to afford to leave home.”

The measure is forecast to save £40 million by 2020-21. Certain categories of young people will be exempt from the removal of housing benefit, including vulnerable young people, those who may not be able to return home to live with their parents, parents themselves, and those who have been in work for six months prior to making a claim. Organisations such as Shelter, Crisis and Centrepoint have welcomed the limitation of the impact to 18 to 21-year-olds, as opposed to the wider age group of 16 to 24-year-olds, but are actively lobbying against the removal of what they describe as an “essential safety net”, which can offer a lifeline to young people faced with homelessness.

Only with full power over social security can we fully protect individuals in Scotland from future housing benefit cuts. The Smith commission recommended that powers over discretionary housing payment be devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Clause 23 of the Scotland Bill allows for DHP to be paid in exceptional circumstances, where applicants would not normally be eligible. The Smith commission also recommended that the Scottish Parliament have the power to vary the housing costs element of universal credit. Clause 27 gives Scottish Ministers powers to vary the calculation of the housing costs element of universal credit, subject to consultation with the Secretary of State about the practicability of implementation. The Scottish Government are already protecting low-income families from the impact of the bedroom tax, with total funding of £90 million in mitigation of this draconian measure.

I am proud to represent a constituency rich in the history of helping and championing the less fortunate, and of standing up to those guilty of exploitation. In Glasgow South West only a few months ago, we commemorated the centenary of the Glasgow rent strikes, which were led by the great Mary Barbour. As is explained in early-day motion 684, which I commend to all hon. Members, that fight against unscrupulous landlords who increased rents on the home front took place during a time of sacrifice on the western front. It may have been a century ago, but we have come full circle, as exploitation of one of the most basic human needs—shelter and a place to raise a family—is once more a key issue in Parliament. That is why my right hon. and hon. Friends and I will vote for the motion.

1.59 pm

**Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con):** I want to put on the record my support for the one-year moratorium that has been announced, which demonstrates that being in government is about listening to a wide-ranging debate and taking on board the views of the key stakeholders. It is very welcome. Government is about matching policy principles, such as fairness and social equity, with practical policy implementation.

[*Mr Stewart Jackson*]

We have seen the usual hysterical shroud waving from the Labour party. It is working with people in the housing sector to scaremonger and to frighten the most vulnerable tenants.

**Neil Gray:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Jackson:** No, I will not.

The question has to be, where is the Labour party's policy? Where is the coherence? Where is the comprehensive costing? Where is the alternative? It is not there. And this from the party that voted against every single welfare change that we made in the last Parliament. What would it have done? It allowed housing benefit claims to reach £104,000 for a single year. They are the people who saw a 46% rise in the housing benefit bill. They are the people who consigned millions of families to welfare dependency, with a record number of children in workless households. This Government are doing something about that.

**Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con):** Does my hon. Friend recall that Labour Members recently voted against the pay-to-stay policy in the Housing and Planning Bill, under which higher earners in social rented accommodation will pay more and housing associations will keep the revenue to invest in supported housing?

**Mr Jackson:** Exactly; that is a fairness issue. How can it be fair that working families effectively give a direct payment to other people in social housing, who are often not working? That cannot be fair. We have to deal with the issue of welfare dependency.

**Alison Thewliss:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Jackson:** No, I will not.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) said, these are difficult decisions. In the short term, they will deliver £240 million in savings. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that in the long term, they will save £1.1 billion. We have to do this, given the fiscal inheritance that we took on.

The Government have a responsibility—it was a manifesto commitment, so there is a mandate from the people of this country—to deliver welfare reform. The hon. Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) is no longer in his place, but if Labour Members really believe, after reading the report by Deborah Mattinson on the BritainThinks focus group, that the Labour party will ever be trusted on the economy, and particularly on welfare, with the policies it is pursuing—the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) knows that this is the case—they are completely wrong. They have to understand that completely opposing everything the Government do on welfare reform, in favour of more spending, more taxing and more debt, will never deliver another majority Labour Government.

I say gently to housing associations that the 1% cut in rents will have a direct impact on all their tenants in general needs housing. There will be a 12% reduction in average rents by the end of the Parliament. We give £13 billion a year to housing associations so that they can discharge their duty to house people. They have to raise their game and meet the challenge. This is not often commented on, but housing associations are not

subject to the Freedom of Information Act. We need to see that they are as efficient as possible. They are very efficient when it comes to campaigning against the Government, but they are not so efficient in resource allocation to deliver front-line services to the most vulnerable tenants.

**Richard Graham:** On that point, does my hon. Friend agree that over the past five years, large sections of the public sector have stepped up to the plate, delivered more for less and executed changes that have saved the taxpayer money and helped the public finances, and that housing associations should be able to follow that example?

**Mr Jackson:** I agree with my hon. Friend.

There will be an impact assessment and an evidence-based review of the whole assisted and supported housing regime. We do not know what the final decision will be, but it is for local housing associations to stop complaining and to work with planners, developers and other key partners, such as those in the national health service—

**Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Jackson:** Sorry, I would love to, but I do not have time.

Housing associations must work with those partners to deliver the projects that they want to deliver.

I am not wholly supportive of the Government on this issue and I will tell the House why. There has to be a comprehensive and holistic approach to meeting the crisis that the demographic time bomb of older people will bring to acute social care and acute hospital care. We have to reduce those numbers. We have to use the tax system—

**Marie Rimmer:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Jackson:** I will not, I am afraid. The hon. Lady is not taking the hint, but I cannot give way because I do not have time.

We must use the tax system and the expertise that we have to deliver good adult social care and to care for women who have been subject to domestic abuse. That is a massive issue. Of course, we have put £40 million into it. Mention was made earlier of discretionary housing payments, which will assist those tenants directly. Incidentally, we have talked about the spare room subsidy, but those payments were not always drawn down fully by local authorities, often Labour ones, because of inefficiency.

I say to Ministers that the Opposition spokesman made the fair point that we need further clarity. It cannot be the will of the Government to make it more difficult to develop more extra care facilities. We do not want non-viable projects to go forward. It is therefore important that the Treasury, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Communities and Local Government get round the table and work out together how we can deal with this.

We have a duty and a responsibility to deal with the fiscal inheritance, including the out-of-control welfare spending, but we must balance that with practical, pragmatic solutions that deliver adult social care and that are fair to the most vulnerable people in our

society, whom we all care about—memo to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle). Fairness and equity are important, but if we demand tax revenue from our constituents, we must deliver value for money. That is why I will not support the Labour party tonight, but will support the Government.

2.6 pm

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): We are here today for one of two reasons. Either the Government set out, as a matter of deliberate policy, to bring about the closure of specialist and supported housing—perhaps they are not bothered whether such housing units close—or this is an unintended consequence of a wider policy to change housing benefit that we have to deal with today because the Government did not do a proper impact assessment of the policy right at the beginning. We should have had an impact assessment before we began the process, rather than when concerns were rightly raised up and down the country about the potential impact. I welcome what the Minister has said today. It is right that a proper review will be carried out, and that the Government will not simply carry on with this policy and its potential consequences.

Government Members have said that there has been political point scoring and scaremongering by Opposition Members and the housing association movement. That is not true. When I am rung up by Tony Stacey, the chief executive of South Yorkshire Housing Association, who is widely respected by people on both sides of the House because of the work of his association and his personal commitment, and he says that the impact of these measures will be a £2.8 million reduction in the income of the association, out of a £20 million budget, that is a matter of major concern. That would lead to the closure of about 1,000 supported housing places and, because of the financial impact, the housing association would have to start acting on those closures within the next few months and would not be able to wait until 2018. That is not scaremongering; it is the financial reality for an association that has to balance its books over that period. That is why we are here debating the issue today.

Having welcomed what the Minister said, I have one or two questions. First, he talked about a review by the end of March. When is a conclusion likely to be reached to provide certainty for housing associations and others, including local councils, about the impact of these measures or the changed measures that I hope the Government will bring forward? In conducting the review and coming to a conclusion, will the Government talk not only to the National Housing Federation, which they must rightly talk to, but to the Local Government Association, because council schemes and voluntary schemes are also involved? Will the Minister ensure that all relevant parties are consulted? Will he indicate when conclusions will be reached so that there can be certainty?

Secondly, will the changes for new tenants that are due to be introduced in April 2016 now be postponed, or will new tenancies be created in 2016 on the basis of the changes proposed at present, before the review? I hope the Minister will say that no changes will be introduced, and that the full costs of supported housing will be covered through housing benefit for new tenancies from April 2016 until the review is concluded.

Finally, I also welcome what the Minister said about rent increases for supported housing—that the 1% reduction will not go ahead for next year, while the review is being undertaken. Does that mean that the changes in the Budget will not be implemented, that the 1% reduction will not now happen and that CPI plus 1% will be allowed for next year, or that rents will simply be frozen? There is quite a big difference for associations, because even the rent changes, without the housing benefit changes, have an impact on supported housing. Can we have clarification on that as well?

I welcome the direction of travel that the Government seem to be moving in now, back to a more realistic position. Perhaps the Communities and Local Government Committee will want to have a look at this as well. I hope the Minister will fully consult and take on board the real concerns that the housing association movement and local councils have raised about these measures. None of us wants to see supported housing units closed.

2.11 pm

**Graham Evans** (Weaver Vale) (Con): I would like to put it on record that I, too, welcome the announcement on the 1%.

We spend more on family benefits in Britain than they do in Germany, France or Sweden. There is no doubt that social housing is invaluable for hundreds of thousands of people in this country who need help in getting accommodation, but it cannot be right to continue to subsidise people to live in houses that are bigger than they need while there are 375,000 families living in overcrowded conditions. Nor can it be right to subsidise people to live in houses that are out of reach or unaffordable for hard-working taxpayers.

Page 97 of Labour's 2009 Budget summarised the problem:

"Indications...are that some claimants may be able to afford accommodation that is out of reach of working families on low incomes. Furthermore, costs of Housing Benefit have been rising above inflation despite static caseloads."

In fact, between 1999 and 2010, the cost of housing benefit rose by 46% in real terms, reaching £21 billion. Housing benefit was truly out of control, with the maximum housing benefit award reaching over £100,000 a year. Even after the benefit cap, people can seek support for housing up to a rate of £20,000 a year. What would a working family paying tax have to be earning to afford rent of £20,000 a year? They would have to be earning £60,000, £70,000 or £80,000 a year.

Rents in the social sector increased by 20% over the three years from 2010-11 and were markedly higher on average than for like-for-like properties in the private sector. That is clearly unsustainable and helped to fuel the something-for-nothing culture that Labour presided over for 13 years. Some 1.4 million people spent most of the previous decade trapped on out-of-work benefits, while the number of households where no member had ever worked nearly doubled under Labour.

The announcements in the autumn statement followed on from reforms in the last Parliament to better align the rules between social and private landlords, ensuring fairness between those receiving housing benefit and the hard-working taxpayers who have to pay for it.

**Alan Brown:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Graham Evans:** No, I will not.

Those who oppose making difficult decisions on welfare must say what they would cut or what taxes they would put up to pay for it. However, it would seem from some contributions by Opposition Members that Labour and its leader have still not learned the lessons of the past. Their plans to spend more, borrow more and tax more are exactly what got us into the mess before; and, as Labour's great recession showed, it is working people and their families who end up paying the price for it. When we came into government in 2010, the country was borrowing over £150 billion a year. One in every four pounds spent by the then Labour Government was borrowed. Unemployment had increased by nearly half a million. Britain had suffered the deepest recession since the war and had the second biggest structural deficit of any major economy.

We have halved the deficit and are working to eradicate it by 2020. It is a fundamental truth that without sound public finances there can be no economic security for working families and the country cannot pay for the hospitals, schools and housing that people rely on. It is this Government's long-term economic plan that is turning this country into a high-wage, low-tax, low-welfare economy. The Labour party is out of touch with hard-working people. Labour is out of touch, out of ideas on welfare and out of office—and, based on this debate, will be for a very long time.

2.15 pm

**Dr Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I was just about to point out to the House, and in particular to Government Members, that a fairly easy way of finding out what this afternoon's debate is about is to actually read the title. It is about homelessness services and the unintended consequences, or maybe intended consequences, of the cap on housing benefit. It is about the potentially catastrophic outcome of these changes for people in specialist housing, homelessness arrangements or specialist schemes for dependent drinkers, for example—the catastrophic outcome for their rents, their circumstances and, indeed, the organisations that seek to house and provide services for them. That is what this afternoon's debate is about and we need to concentrate on that.

I must say that I was remarkably disappointed by the fact-free bluster that we heard from the Minister. I suppose one can only forgive him that, because there was never any impact assessment of these changes. Therefore, if he has not come here today armed with an impact assessment, he presumably does not really have any facts to defend his side of the argument in the first place. I want to provide a little impact assessment of my own. I want to base it on an organisation that is based in my constituency, but which nevertheless provides services for homeless people, people with severe and enduring mental health problems and people with alcohol or substance misuse problems, as well as specialist services for ex-offenders, in Southampton and around.

That organisation is called the Society of St James, and—[*Interruption.*] Government Members who are playing with their phones might put them to better use by looking up that organisation's website, because if there is any dispute in this debate about who cares, then the Society of St James certainly does care. It cares

deeply about all the people it is trying to house and help, and it assists by housing or helping some 2,500 people across Hampshire.

The Society of St James has looked at the impact of the changes on its various housing schemes across south Hampshire and calculates that the average rent reduction will be 40% across the 300-odd people who are housed at any one time, although that does not include the wider group of people it helps with various schemes, in addition to those it houses. The Society of St James calculates a sum of £1.03 million per annum, which means, quite simply and straightforwardly, that all those schemes are at risk over the next period, because it will not be able to fund them properly.

It has been said that the discretionary housing payment scheme might help in the longer term, but as its name suggests, it is discretionary. It covers temporary situations and cannot give the long-term revenue security that these organisations need to plan their future housing needs.

**Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the discretionary housing fund is already barely covering the number of people applying for it, given the impact of the bedroom tax? What we are seeing is just another attempt to stretch it further, when it is already not going far enough.

**Dr Whitehead:** Indeed, and my hon. Friend makes an important point. I was perhaps being a little kind to the discretionary housing fund, in that so many things are being poured into it that the chances of it having a material impact in this field, even on a limited basis, look to be fairly low.

The other question is what happens with new schemes that develop in future. The Society of St James has recently received substantial capital donations to develop new properties to extend its services, but there is no chance that those sorts of schemes can now go ahead, because there is no prospect of them being funded properly once they have been built. Indeed, it would be deeply irresponsible.

**Marie Rimmer:** I have one experience already from St Helens. Helena housing has stopped four extra care schemes totalling 500 units. The impact of the change on those schemes alone is a £2.3 million deficit.

**Dr Whitehead:** My hon. Friend underlines powerfully the importance of understanding just how early organisations such as the Society of St James and the ones her constituency have to take decisions about what they do in future. In that context, a one-year moratorium will not make any difference to those decisions, because those schemes are concerned about the long-term security of revenue. It is very likely—it is certainly not scaremongering—that those schemes will disappear immediately, not in the future. The whole system will be greatly the poorer as a result.

Whether the Minister thinks in retrospect that the problem was not of his own making because he did not notice it arriving from the Treasury, or whether he was told too late for him to do anything about it, or whether he did something and the Treasury ignored him, there is an issue for him to address right now. The central question for the Minister in my mind boils down to this:

if we assess the impact on the organisations at the heart of the process of caring—in addition, they save the state large amounts of future public expenditure because they keep the people they care for and assist out of prisons, psychiatric institutions and emergency services by securing their accommodation in the community—what will he do immediately that specifically puts the problem right for the Society of St James in Southampton?

If the Minister does not have an answer to that question, he has a great deal of thinking to do about the wider issue. Up and down the country, those organisations—they are voluntary organisations rather than local authority organisations—find themselves holed below the water line. Unless the Minister can come up urgently with either a patch or a new boat, that will be the reality of the situation over the next period. I urge him to take action at the earliest possible opportunity to ensure that important organisations such as the Society of St James can continue their good work in future.

2.22 pm

**Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to talk about this important issue. I am concerned that the shadow Housing and Planning Minister and Opposition Members are confusing general needs housing and supported housing. Currently, no legislation going through will cap housing benefit in supported housing. An evidence review is being conducted. The hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) talked about not having an impact assessment, but that is exactly what is happening. Either Opposition Members do not understand the difference or they are scaremongering.

I am a big supporter of supported housing. I was a cabinet member for housing in a unitary authority under the Labour Government. Funding supported housing at that time was difficult because of the year-on-year cuts to our supported housing grant. We funded sheltered housing blocks—both our own stock, and through housing associations and charities. With those cuts, we had to dip in and find the difference to fund our sheltered housing services. The same applied to our learning disability clients who were funded in supported houses. Let us not pretend that Opposition Members did not cut that money when they were in government.

Up until recently, I was a trustee of a homeless charity. It helps people who have hit rock bottom through drug and alcohol dependency. That may not be of interest to Opposition Members, but it is of interest to people living in those hostels. They are supported not just through rehab, but in gaining independence and in sustaining a tenancy on their own in the long term. Supported housing benefit makes a huge difference.

General needs housing benefit is being capped, but there is currently no change to supported housing benefit—it is under review. Opposition Members need to be clear about that.

**John Healey:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Maria Caulfield:** No, I will not give way.

The Housing and Planning Minister's announcement today that the 1% reduction in social rents will not apply to supported housing for another year must be welcomed.

**Marie Rimmer:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Maria Caulfield:** No, I will not give way because I am conscious of the time and that other Members want to speak.

Let us look at the reasons why we are having to cap housing benefit. It is not just because of the economy, but because of the impact of the local housing allowance in constituencies such as mine. I have the town of Newhaven in my constituency. It is on the same LHA rate as Brighton and Hove, which is a much higher rate than the rest of East Sussex. The shadow Minister does not want to listen to this, but the LHA rate has artificially pushed up private rented rates for the ordinary person who is not on housing benefit. They can no longer afford to stay in Newhaven—the only people who can are those on general needs housing benefit. That has artificially increased the rental market and has not helped young families in my constituency.

If Opposition Members do not want to cap general needs housing benefit, how will they tackle the welfare bill, which they are proud of saying they will be able to manage so much better than the Government? Will they reduce money on the NHS, schools, the police service or the armed forces? They have to make a decision—*[Interruption.]* As an hon. Friend says, they could put up taxes. They need to be honest with the British public on how they would manage that.

To conclude—I know time is tight—I am a passionate supporter of supported housing. In the review that is taking place, will the Minister come to my constituency and visit Newhaven Foyer? We heard just yesterday that money is secure for that housing placement, where young people who have had a really rough start in life can have a secure tenancy for a period of time. They are able to gain skills and get into the workforce. Will he come and meet those young people and see the difference that supported housing is making for them? They are not under threat from the housing benefit cap because it is not currently relevant to supported housing. I will not support Opposition Members—they are misleading the most vulnerable in our society and scaremongering—and I will not support their motion.

2.27 pm

**Yvonne Fovargue** (Makerfield) (Lab): The confusion and lack of clarity on supported accommodation will have a devastating effect on my constituency. It is curtailing homelessness prevention strategies and jeopardising new extra care housing developments. For example, in Wigan, a need of 500 extra units of extra care housing was identified to meet housing needs, and to reduce the reliance on very expensive residential care facilities and future demands on the health service. That housing would allow people to live independently in the community for much longer—all hon. Members would agree that that would be a great outcome for the individual, the family, the local authority and the NHS.

Two years ago, work started on implementing that strategy, and a scheme comprising 130 flats and bungalows with community facilities at a site in Orrell was identified. A partner, Torus, was selected, the scheme was designed and consulted upon, and planning permission was obtained. Funding was obtained from the Homes and Communities Agency, and the valuable site was transferred at nominal

[ Yvonne Fovargue ]

cost. With the support of all, the start date was imminent. I say “was”, because with the change to the LHA rate, the scheme—a £13 million project that we desperately need—has stalled.

That is not the only future project under threat. Eighty units in partnership with Arena in Wigan, and 121 in partnership with Torus in Leigh, are also on hold. What about those projects that are in the process of being built? Wigan & Leigh Homes is building 25 units for older people in Hindley and a 39-unit sheltered plus scheme in Goose Green in my constituency. The financial projections for both those schemes do not now add up unless the Government exempt this type of accommodation from the cap.

I have given some examples of how future schemes are threatened, with the result that there will not be the houses for people to move into the community, but what about existing provision? Adactus Housing and Wigan & Leigh Homes have contacted me about this. Across the borough, approximately 400 properties provide homes for people with long-term care and support needs, ranging from learning disabilities to autism. These are people who are unable to live in, and become a valued part of, the community. Their security, and the ability of others to move from a care setting into this type of accommodation, is under threat due to the high rent and support charges required for such specialist accommodation. In fact, one mother has already contacted Wigan & Leigh Homes about her severely autistic 17-year-old son, saying, “Will I now have to have him in the home permanently?” She had scratches all down her arms where he had attacked her.

**Marie Rimmer:** Does my hon. Friend recognise the case of a 19-year-old with serious mental health problems and autism, who was talked down from a bridge in St Helens, where he was threatening to commit suicide? He was awaiting a mental health bed. The only bed offered to him was in France or Germany. I have written to the Minister about this case and am waiting for a response. What comfort can be given to that young man and his parents?

**Yvonne Fovargue:** I agree with my hon. Friend: there is cold comfort in many constituencies for parents caring for young people with severe autism and mental health disabilities. They are finding their choices on the best place for their sons and daughters becoming limited.

I return to the price that will be paid by people who are homeless or fleeing domestic violence. There will be an immediate impact on some 35 units of dispersed accommodation, which, by their nature, are short-term and for single people, saving them from going into hostels, which are not always the appropriate environment. For example, a young man came to see me whose parents had thrown him out when they found out he was gay. They had also emptied his bank account. All I could find for him was the local Salvation Army hostel, which was not a safe place for him at that time.

A further 100 units of homelessness accommodation, ranging from hostels to young mum and baby units, are threatened. Perhaps I can mention just one of the units I visited. It is a self-contained flat in a block where

young mums aged between 16 and 25 and their babies are supported, for a maximum of two years, to live independent lives. They learn from staff and from each other in a safe environment. They then leave with the confidence and skills to live in the community, and be excellent role models, providers and parents for their children. How can we threaten that type of service? What will be the cost, both human and financial?

Women’s refuges provide a safe haven for those who have suffered emotional and physical abuse. They also provide activities to improve their life and family skills. The Government’s solution to this is discretionary housing payments! That is not a solution. It is an excuse to continue with an ill-thought-out policy. No housing provider can build a business model and forecast finances with any degree of accuracy when their client base has to rely on cash-limited payments that are not guaranteed, but payable after all aspects are considered—that is, at discretion. How will we assist vulnerable people to apply for these payments? What will that cost? How many people will be deterred from living independently?

The policy has not been thought through. I welcome the announcement that there will be a review. As it stands, it will affect the most vulnerable and their families, those charged with making sure the best quality of life is available for all, the old, the ill and those at risk—in fact, anyone who is vulnerable at any stage of their life. It will end with increased costs and burdens on other services, for example the NHS. I urge the Minister to listen and to provide the clarity that is needed soon, and not to rely on discretionary payments, so that my constituents and others across the country can have a home that best suits their needs.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. The speech limit is now five minutes.

2.35 pm

**Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): The background to this debate is the deep changes in our society: a growing population, an ageing population, and more and more of our constituents living with long-term disabilities and illnesses as a result of medical advances. Not all, but many of the speeches from the Opposition have been rather simplistic. In fact, the situation is incredibly complex.

A wide range of our constituents live in supported housing: the elderly, refugees, victims of domestic violence and people living with mental health problems. Some will live in this environment for a matter of months, others for practically their whole lives. Members on both sides of the House have spoken passionately about organisations in their constituencies that work with those people. It is evident that we will need more supported housing. If that is the case, we need to ask very honestly: is this accommodation suitable and are the services that go with it suitable? Is supported living getting the best value for taxpayers’ money? If it is not, it will be unsustainable over the long term. In the end, it will be the vulnerable in our society and in our communities who will suffer.

I very much welcome the fact that this is a consultation. The Government are listening. We see that from the

one-year moratorium announced today. This debate will be a part of that, as will representations from housing associations.

We have to talk about sustainability because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans) outlined, the housing benefit bill increased by 46% between 1999 and 2010. That was not a fair balance between those families living in social housing and the hard-working families who did not quite meet the threshold. Supported housing has to be on a sustainable footing. This policy is still being developed. With that in mind, I would be grateful if the Minister looked very closely at the representations from my local housing association, Progress Housing, which serves people all over South Ribble, but is based in Leyland. It has refuges and supports people with a wide range of difficulties.

I take great issue with some of the statements from those on the Opposition Benches that we on the Government Benches do not care about the vulnerable in our society. It is very easy to throw money at a problem and have a quick fix. We want to put supported living on a long-term sustainable basis, after a thorough consultation, so that it works for everybody—not just now and not just till the next election, but for the next 20 or 30 years. That is a clear plan of action, rather than criticism with no answers.

2.38 pm

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Let me start by saying that I agree with many of the contributions already made from the Opposition Benches and I am happy to speak in support of the motion today.

Surely the mark of a civilised society is that it looks after its most vulnerable, yet here again we have a Government seeking to remove some of the support mechanisms for the most vulnerable in our supposed civilised society.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that supported housing provides the support older people need to maintain their independence? It also helps homeless people with complex and multiple needs to make the transition from life on the street to a settled home and education, training or employment. Surely any change to housing benefit could undermine the ability of such tenants to pay their rent, and threaten both their physical and mental wellbeing.

**Martyn Day:** I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend, and not only does it affect the individuals; it can have a devastating effect on the organisations providing the services.

What is the purpose of the reforms? Is it to save money? According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, any initial savings would be “small”. Indeed, not only will there be little saving to the public purse, but expenditure could rise as a result of the unintended consequences of this poorly thought out measure. This is a classic case of robbing Peter to pay Paul: a small saving on the housing benefit bill might be massively outweighed by the rise in costs associated with providing institutional care, funding an increase in hospital stays, the higher cost of private landlord housing and, in the worst case, the increased costs of imprisonment. This must surely be the very definition of fiscal irresponsibility.

The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations has identified that associations in Scotland could lose between £5 million and £14 million per year. This is completely unsustainable and will inevitably lead to the closure of accommodation that supports some of the most vulnerable in our society. Top-ups from discretionary housing payments will simply not provide the security that accommodation providers require to continue even the current level of specialised accommodation, let alone plan for additional provision in the years to come.

I am concerned about the potential effect of these changes on vulnerable young people. Open Door Accommodation Project, which operates in my constituency, has nine supported flats throughout West Lothian that can accommodate up to 16 young people between the ages of 16 and 21. The flats are fully furnished and most are shared accommodation. The aim is to prepare young people for their own tenancy. When a young person joins the supported flats service, they are allocated a dedicated support worker who works with them to give personal and practical support, helping them to develop the self-confidence and skills needed to live independently.

The young people being supported are already experiencing issues with the time it takes to receive benefit payments, and this wait can have a huge impact on the likelihood of them sustaining their accommodation. A major concern is that there is no longer a seven-day run-on between accommodation, meaning that young people have to move immediately when they sign up for a tenancy, which gives them no time to set up utilities or apply to the social welfare fund for the most basic of necessities. The uncertainty about the reductions in housing benefit can only exacerbate these issues and, worryingly, might even put this vital supported accommodation at risk. How will such organisations plan for the future when faced with yet more funding challenges?

I come now to one of the most serious of the unintended consequences: the impact on the funding for supported accommodation for people with substance abuse problems. Many such organisations are doing amazing work, especially with ex-offenders, helping people to rebuild their lives and rejoin society. Threats to funding for this type of supported accommodation are intolerable. There is a young offenders institution in my constituency. On leaving it, young people will be dependent on the very supported accommodation that is at risk if these draconian funding proposals are implemented.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Might the reforms not be a false economy, given that prison often costs more than £30,000 per year per prisoner?

**Martyn Day:** My hon. Friend makes her point very well. It is a completely false economy, and I believe it will end up costing the public purse far more than the Government are trying to save. Again, we must look at the fiscal implications of a saving in housing benefit that leads to a lack of supported accommodation for young ex-offenders. How many of these vulnerable young people will end up back in prison—the point she just made—at a higher cost to the public purse?

It is my firm belief that the Government must halt the continuing assault on housing benefits, or at least ensure that supported accommodation is exempt from these future changes. Scotland has already had to mitigate

[*Martyn Day*]

the effects of the unfair bedroom tax—a tax that, given today's court ruling, might be illegal. Will this reform to housing benefit be yet another botched Tory attempt at savings that simply moves an increased burden on to Holyrood? Only with full power over social security can we fully protect those in need from future housing benefit cuts.

2.44 pm

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (*Martyn Day*).

I hope all Members agree that housing and homes are important. The security of a roof over one's head—be it owned, or rented privately or socially—or of a place of succour and sanctuary, temporary or permanent, at a time of emergency, is important. For that reason, Labour's position should be condemned. We have heard precisely what we are used to hearing from Labour. I have found this debate slightly annoying. I am annoyed not that the motion has been tabled—[*Laughter.*] If hon. Members would listen, they might hear a view that sheds some light on their prejudice. I am annoyed not that this important issue is being debated, but by the odour of smug hand wringing and crocodile tears from Labour Members.

Labour Members always purport to have a monopoly on caring. They believe that we are the nasty bunch—that we could not give a damn about anything. But we are not. As I said in an intervention on the shadow Minister, we all have constituents in sheltered housing and we all want to ensure the best provision for them. There is nothing kind or caring about trying to prop up an inflated and unsustainable welfare system.

**Dr Philippa Whitford:** Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that it is the ridiculous rents in many urban centres that are inflated? That is the private system. That is why housing benefit is out of control. It is not the social sector.

**Simon Hoare:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making the kernel of the argument for why a cap on housing benefit is important. The absence of a cap—of any control on housing benefit—has been the fuel to the fire of those who have sought to ramp up rents. A bottomless purse—a pit that always delivers the funding—provides the dynamic for higher rents. We believe that a cap will act as a brake on this runaway train.

Whenever a welfare reform is proposed, the default position of many Opposition Members is to say no. It is their eternal cry, the golden thread running through their political approach. As we have heard from my hon. Friends, Labour has not supported a single welfare reform. It has learned no lessons from last May's general election.

**Marie Rimmer:** These schemes have demonstrated clear success in providing a better quality of life for residents and delivering better social care and health outcomes. Failure to provide these schemes in the future will put greater pressures on health and social care services, as housing providers will not be able to deliver good quality independent living places. That means people going back to residential settings, old folks' homes, languishing in hospital beds—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. The hon. Lady's interventions are very long, and this is a time-limited debate.

**Simon Hoare:** The hon. Lady speaks with enormous passion, and I understand that. Of course, service providers want some certainty, and the pressing of the pause button announced by the Government today will be welcomed, but what has added precious little certainty to providers seeking to make short, medium and longer-term financial commitments has been Labour Members' panic-stricken shroud waving. They have been trotting round the country desperately trying to stoke this up for party political advantage.

**Jess Phillips** *rose*—

**Simon Hoare:** I can never resist the hon. Lady. The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (*Marie Rimmer*) is passionate about this issue, but the hon. Lady exceeds her.

**Jess Phillips:** Will the hon. Gentleman recognise that it is not shroud waving? In this term and the last one, the Government exempted this group from every single one of their welfare reforms, having been forced to do so by alleged shroud waving. We are not saying no to the reform; we seek only an exemption for this group.

**Simon Hoare:** As the hon. Lady will have heard, as did we all, that was the point made by my hon. Friend the Minister when he referred to gathering the evidence, talking to experts and then producing a policy in due course. In all seriousness, I would hope that the hon. Lady could draw some comfort and satisfaction from that. She can put her shroud away, contain herself for a few moments and the debate can go on.

On the subject of service providers, I have spoken to all the housing associations covering my constituency. I hope I will not be misquoting them if I characterise their response as follows—things change; systems and procedures change from time to time. New policies usually present new challenges, but my housing associations are saying, "We will meet them. We will reform, change and recast what we do—but the central core of our ethos, and why we are in business, will remain intact." I think that is an important point to make.

The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (*John Healey*), as shadow Minister—he is no longer in his place—had the absolute brass neck to accuse my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of putting politics before policy. If his speech did anything, it was precisely that. We heard the crocodile tears of, "We care for these people who need these sorts of homes." We all recognise that, but it is shameful to drape the issue with the flag of party politics.

At the heart of what Her Majesty's Government are doing is an attempt to provide fairness, equity and equality. In my judgment, it is absolutely right that social sector housing benefit should be capped to mirror that of the local authority level—the same rates as those in the private sector. The reforms seek to align those two sectors and, as I said to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (*Dr Whitford*), to prevent private social landlords from artificial rent inflation. On the Conservative side, we care about getting this right, about fairness for taxpayers and about quality provision of housing. What we do not care for is the shroud waving, the hand wringing and the crocodile tears of Labour Members.

2.52 pm

**Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I have listened and I am afraid that the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) exemplifies the brand “Same Old Tories”.

Let me make it clear from the start that I am a big fan of welfare reform. I believe that as we move to the second half of this decade, we need an active welfare system. However, the difficulty I have with measures such as the bedroom tax, the local housing allowance and caps on housing benefit is that I am not convinced that they are genuine welfare reforms. They ignore the supply problems in housing, rapacious landlords and the lack of specialist supportive accommodation. We treat all tenants as if their circumstances are the same. In fact, we simply passport cuts from the Department for Work and Pensions to the Department for Communities and Local Government without any regard to the consequences.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): This particular measure smacks of what in the 1960s we used to call “Rachmanism”. A lot of families will find themselves destitute on this route because they will not be able to pay those rents. It is a private landlord’s charter to make money.

**Steve McCabe:** Almost everyone now realises that we cannot have action on housing benefit without having action on rents. That is self-evident.

We are having this debate because those who are the targets of this change are not the workshy and the feckless. Too many of them are vulnerable people—the very people that many of us, including many Conservative Members, came into politics wanting to help, such as elderly people no longer fit to wholly look after themselves, veterans, youngsters leaving care and those fleeing domestic violence. The National Housing Federation claims the Chancellor’s changes could cost some people up to £60 a week, enough to force them to leave their accommodation and in some cases add to the growing number of casualties sleeping on our streets as a homelessness crisis sweeps our country like a plague.

The NHF also speculates that the changes may lead to the closure of thousands of homes. The kind of places we are talking about are retirement homes, active elderly establishments designed to improve the quality of life, supported accommodation and temporary accommodation. Is that really the kind of reform that Conservative Members want? There is already a 16,000 shortfall in meeting demand for supportive accommodation, and estimates say that is likely to double by the end of this Parliament.

**Simon Danczuk** (Rochdale) (Ind): I recently had the privilege of officially opening the Hare Hill extra care scheme, which has predicted that if the cap goes ahead, residents there will have to pay an extra £50 a week. That is completely unsustainable.

**Steve McCabe:** We have heard from some Government Members that they have the same fears. A lot now rides on this review.

Without exemption, we are about to witness a housing disaster for those with a clear learning disability who live in supported accommodation. After years of talking about rights and independence, are we seriously going

to banish them to institutions and substandard care homes? Seven out of 10 people with a learning disability would prefer to live by themselves or with friends rather than in a registered care home or with their parents. Are they not entitled to aspire to that? Are they not entitled to that degree of independence? Cannot this society, whatever cuts we want to make, afford to show just a bit of generosity to such people? How will the Government ever succeed in closing places like Winterbourne View and delivering on NHS England’s 2015 strategy “Building the Right Support” without a supported housing plan for those with learning disabilities?

What about young people leaving care? How are they going to make the first step on the ladder to independence? Vulnerable young people, especially care leavers, should be excluded from the under-35 shared accommodation rule. We should hear that announced today. Is the Minister now in a position to tell us when the housing benefit regulations for those aged between 18 and 21 will be published? How, too, have we got to a situation where the cap applies to any tenancy signed after 1 April—only 62 days away—and where housing associations are still not clear about the plans?

The Minister has offered no details of his review, and his party has form on promising things during debates on which it subsequently backtracks. In fact, everyone knows there is a dangerous air of hubris about Government Ministers these days. I believe they might find a degree of support if these measures were intended for working-age adults in general-needs housing only, instead of being such a sweeping threat to the vulnerable.

Allowing for the comment of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) when I intervened on him earlier, I believe that the Minister would ease the situation a little if he could say today that service charges will not be included in the cap. It is obvious that sheltered accommodation, support of housing schemes and extra care measures command higher rents than service charges since they are more expensive to build and manage, yet they bring huge savings to the NHS and other services. Some housing associations, including Midland Heart, as we heard earlier, fear that these proposals could cost a huge shortfall of over £1 million, and in some cases discretionary housing payments will not deal with the problem.

Before this debate concludes, the Minister needs to tell us that he has plans to protect vulnerable people. He needs to give some clue as to what they are, and he needs to demonstrate that he has listened to the plight of those in supportive accommodation. We want to hear that he will definitely exclude them from these measures.

2.59 pm

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe).

These measures are about striking a fair deal: a fair deal for those in accommodation, a fair deal for those who provide accommodation and a fair deal for the taxpayer. There needs to be a balance between the rent increases in the social housing sector and those in the private rented sector. Over the past 10 years, there has been a 60% increase in the social housing sector and a 23% increase in the private rented sector. I therefore consider that the 1% reduction in housing benefit is a

[Kevin Hollinrake]

fair measure. It is fair to the taxpayer and to tenants, but it is also a fair deal for the housing associations, and one that I believe they can manage.

This is, of course, all about balancing the books, which UK Governments have done in only 28 of the last 34 years. That has led to a cumulative debt of £1.6 trillion. The present Government have reduced the deficit from £150 billion to £75 billion, but there is much more to do. In the last eight months, since I have been in the House, the Opposition have opposed every single cut. So how would they balance the books? Would they cut funds for healthcare, the armed forces, welfare or pensions? I invite them to make constructive suggestions.

Housing associations have a responsibility to use taxpayers' money wisely. The top 100 housing associations employ, collectively, 91,000 people, and the number has been growing. Is a 1% reduction per annum feasible in an organisation with 1,000 employees? Yes, I believe it is. It is managed on a regular basis in the private sector.

Not only are these changes fair, but they will result in huge savings. They will save £255 million by the end of this Parliament, and £1.1 billion a year will be saved by future Parliaments. Of course, consolidation and greater efficiency may be needed.

**Anna Turley:** Does the hon. Gentleman not recognise that the impact on supported housing will fly in the face of any notion of economic credibility? When accommodation of that kind is closed, there will be knock-on effects: people will resort to NHS care or more costly residential care, and the impact on the taxpayer will be higher. This is not good economic policy.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** There is no doubt that we need to house vulnerable people in supported and specialist accommodation, and that our homes, hostels, refuges and sheltered housing need such support. They constitute a much more labour-intensive part of the market, involving personal care, supervision and maintenance.

**Dr Philippa Whitford:** May I take up the point made by the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley)? It costs an extra £18,500 to house those with the most complex needs, and most users of supported living are over 70. In our health debates, we talk about trying to get people into the community. As a result of this measure, people will end up in expensive alternatives.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** I accept the hon. Lady's point. We need to ensure that we protect our most vulnerable people, and that is what I believe we will do.

Many of the providers of supported housing and specialist accommodation are part of much larger organisations which are able to blend reductions across their estates, but we want to ensure that specialist providers continue to supply accommodation. This policy is in its early stages, and is currently the subject of consultation. I welcome the Minister's announcement of a one-year delay, or interruption, so that we can get it right. However, it has been referred to before. In September last year, my hon. Friend the Minister for homelessness—the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local

Government, the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones)—said that specialised supported accommodation was likely to be exempted. I do not think that there is any need for Opposition Members to frighten residents and make them fear that they will lose their homes. That is irresponsible.

It should also be borne in mind that, during the current Parliament, there will be £800 million in discretionary housing payments for the most vulnerable tenants, and £40 million for those who suffer domestic violence.

I suggest that Opposition Members should wait to see the results of a policy which I believe will provide a fair deal for the most vulnerable people.

3.5 pm

**Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab):** I have listened to all the speeches that have been made by Conservative Members today, and have found myself wondering whether some of them are attending the right debate. If they consult the Order Paper, they will see that this debate is about supported housing. It is not about housing bills or taxation; it is about a very specific, vulnerable group of people.

We keep being told to wait and see what the proposals are. Would it not have been sensible for the Government to work out the costs of their proposals and establish the issues involved at the outset, and then conduct a review before making their announcement? If they had conducted the review properly, they might have established that the proposals were counter-productive in both economic and moral terms. If they had done their homework first, we might not be having this debate.

To suggest that mine are crocodile tears are very unfair. I rarely cry, but when I do, my tears are real. I assure the House that Labour Members care about people, and we care about people because it is what the Labour party was founded for. As for the suggestion made by some Conservative Members that social housing organisations have pots of money and spend millions of pounds on campaigning, that is absolute rubbish. I have been contacted by a number of housing associations and charities that look after vulnerable people in my constituency, and I assure Members that they do not have money to waste on campaigning. I have visited those places and I know what happens there.

Let me enlighten the House. At least three organisations in my constituency are doing valuable work. The main provider of social housing is Bolton at Home, whose representatives have contacted me—and I speak to them regularly in any event—to say that thousands of children will be made homeless, as well as hundreds of adults. Bolton at Home also provides supported housing, and it is important to remember what “supported housing” means. It means support for the vulnerable, the disabled, the elderly, those with mental health issues, and the young. The suggestion that turfing them out of their supported housing will enable the Government to economise and cut costs is absolute rubbish, because the state will then have to pick up an even bigger tab.

Another organisation in my constituency, St Vincent's Housing Association, is a charity which runs a secure unit for about six adults. It relies on housing benefit to look after those people, who have mental health and drug problems. They are extremely vulnerable. If they

are put on the streets, they will probably commit crimes and end up in the courts or in prison, and that will cost the state even more money.

Emmaus runs a “companions” system. It, too, looks after vulnerable people, using housing benefit to support them. I do not understand why the Government seem to think that their proposed cuts will save money. In fact, they are counter-productive.

**Simon Hoare:** In the words of the late Ronald Reagan, “There you go again.” The hon. Lady seems to be suggesting that she has a monopoly on understanding. Does she not accept that Conservative Members also talk to service providers in our constituencies, and also know what is going on?

**Yasmin Qureshi:** Sometimes I genuinely struggle with the question whether some Conservative Members either care or are bothered. If you were really concerned about disabled and vulnerable people, you would have spent your five-minute speech talking about them, rather than criticising Labour Members for raising this issue and accusing us of shedding crocodile tears. I do not know how many times you used that phrase.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. The hon. Lady is speaking through the Chair, and should not do so.

**Yasmin Qureshi:** I am so sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker; I got carried away.

If Members on the Government Benches were genuinely concerned about the vulnerable, they would be supporting our motion today, because it is only about specific sets and groups of people with a whole range of issues.

Going back to Emmaus and its companions, it gets £132 in housing benefit that it uses for them, but the companions then have to come off other social security benefits. The cost to the charity of providing a home for these people is £1,000, but it does it because it wants to help them learn skills and reintegrate into society. This cut in benefits will mean it will have to find even more money in order to support these people.

If the people in St Vincent’s housing, for example, are turfed out, that will cost the state far more than cutting their housing benefit. So I go back to the question I asked the Minister right at the beginning when he opened this debate: can he guarantee to us that people currently in supported housing will not be turfed out of their home? Will they be supported and protected? I have still not had an answer to that.

3.11 pm

**Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con):** Since my election in 2015 I have worked closely with my main housing association in Bexhill and Battle, AmicusHorizon, which I believe does a superb job in looking after its tenants.

Getting more people into homes was a key election priority for me: we have a huge shortage of properties in my constituency and I am pleased that this Government have set out their ambition of delivering 1 million new homes by 2020, and I applaud the doubling of the housing budget to £2 billion in order to make this happen. While this Government are rightly increasing

spending on the housing budget, difficult decisions must be made if this Government are to deliver a Budget surplus by 2020. With these ambitions in mind, I am conscious that the housing benefit bill has increased by £6.7 billion between 1997 and 2010, to reach a total of £23 billion.

I welcome the Government’s general intention to reduce the housing benefit bill by measures such as reducing the number of weeks a claimant can be absent from this country, reducing some rents by 1%, and requiring higher-income social tenants to pay near-market rents. So while I recognise the concerns raised in this motion, I fully understand the reasons why the Government are looking to cap the amount of rent that housing benefit will cover in the social sector to that of the local housing allowance, thus limiting this to the rate paid to private renters on housing benefit.

I am also conscious that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned, over the past 10 years average social rents have risen by over 60%, compared with 23% in the private rented sector. There have been understandable concerns that ever-increasing costs of rent in the social sector are chasing up the housing benefit bill, and that this needs reform.

However, my leading local housing association provider wrote to me, prior to the Government’s welcome announcement, to express its concerns as to how it will be able to cover the additional funding required for supported housing for those with complex needs. I am further told that, as a result of these concerns, a proposed extra care scheme that is due to open in a new development in Bexhill, the Orangery, could be shelved. Representing a constituency where the proportion of over-65-year-olds is 28%, compared with a national average of 17%, bestows an even greater duty on me to ensure that the sometimes complex needs of my constituents are properly recognised and taken into account. So I welcome the Government’s intention to build a framework to support the most vulnerable at the same time as delivering the reforms to housing benefit, which I also support. To this end, I am conscious that the Government recognise that our new reforms will need time to bed in and will cost millions, and that the Government will have to pump money in to support these reforms, as they did in the last term in respect of housing benefit reform.

In addition to the £465 million of discretionary housing payments that this Government have pledged, they have now pledged an extra £70 million, which I welcome. I would ask the Minister if, as part of this review, it would be possible to build in some form of supported housing LHA which would embrace the concept of the capped amount with some top-up to cover the reasonable cost requirements of housing associations to provide for the most vulnerable. Until this time, I do hope that speculation from this House does not lead to the most vulnerable being driven to worry about what may not in fact occur.

While on the topic of housing associations, I would like to reference the importance of all housing associations acting with care and compassion to their tenants. I have recently acted on behalf of a number of concerned residents from Hilltop in Rye, which falls on the border of my constituency. The tenants of Hilltop were informed last year, in writing, that their landlord, Orbit, was looking to decant the properties. There was scant detail given to residents who had lived in their home for years.

[*Huw Merriman*]

There being no other Orbit properties locally, there was talk of moving these residents out of their town. At a time when this Government are giving housing association tenants a right to buy their property, I was staggered that these residents, who work in their town, educate their children in their town and volunteer in their town—in one case on a lifeboat—could actually lose their homes. I am pleased that the Government, having signed an order paper for the disposal, require that:

“Any tenants decanted from properties to be sold under this policy are suitably re-housed to their satisfaction before the date of completion of the disposal.”

In my interpretation, this means that the test of whether alternatives are “suitable” is a subjective one from the perspective of my constituents and I will be working on their behalf to achieve a better outcome than that feared.

I use this example because I feel it is essential, in circumstances where this Government are rightly giving rights to tenants to buy their own housing association properties, that the law of unintended consequences does not kick in to deprive tenants of these new rights.

In conclusion, I welcome the desire of this Government to make savings in the housing benefits bill and use these proceeds to build more houses. I also welcome the fact that the Government are looking at how they can support housing association tenants who are vulnerable and need additional support. I look forward to continuing to champion the needs of all my constituents who live in housing association properties.

3.16 pm

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this important debate and congratulate Labour on bringing it before the House today. I also commend the excellent contributions by my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day). I also support the pertinent points and questions posed by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), and I hope the Minister was taking note and will respond to them. I also recommend that the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) and some others on the Government Benches look at the Library briefing on this subject and the Chancellor's autumn statement, as I do not believe their speeches bore any resemblance to either of them.

A secure, warm and fit-for-purpose home is a right we should all enjoy; it should never be threatened, least of all by the state. Yet I am afraid that this Government are doing just that. We have already seen what they are capable of through the expansion of the bedroom tax, and we are again seeing it here in the proposals to cut housing benefit.

On the subject of the bedroom tax, we hear today that the Court of Appeal has ruled in two cases that the policy is discriminatory. In the light of this ruling—and the overwhelming evidence of how detrimental this policy has been—the UK Government must now think again on the bedroom tax, and indeed on this proposal to cut housing benefit, and not just think about it for a year, but do so for good. They should get back to the drawing board and start again from a basis of supporting people in their homes, not threatening to evict them.

In Scotland, the SNP Scottish Government have committed to building 50,000 affordable homes over the course of the next Scottish Parliament should the SNP be returned. Those homes will provide much-needed capacity in the social rented sector, because we recognise the need to build houses, not cut support to housing benefit recipients. The Scottish Government have also taken the necessary steps to mitigate the draconian bedroom tax by providing funding of £90 million to more than 70,000 households, which have escaped rental arrears and the threat of eviction. The Scottish Government have done this despite the overall budget being cut by 12.5%—by one eighth—since the SNP came to power in 2007. In Scotland we realise that a house is a home, and it would serve the UK Government well to bear that in mind as well.

This cut threatens the very roofs over the heads of housing benefit claimants. The House of Commons Library briefing for this debate estimates that over 800,000 families across the UK will be affected by these cuts, costing them on average £1,300 a year. Where will this shortfall in annual rent bills be found? It cannot come from discretionary housing payments as this type of discretionary funding for the social sector is far too insecure and uncertain a funding mechanism to allow such providers to continue to provide specialised accommodation such as refuge accommodation. The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations has estimated that a single person under the age of 35 who is in receipt of housing benefit will face a weekly shortfall of £6.22, which equates to an annual loss of £323.44 and a total loss to the housing associations of £2.8 million a year.

The area in which this cut is of greatest concern is women's refuges. Scottish Women's Aid wrote to Lord Freud last week about the impact these cuts will have on its ability to provide a refuge service for women and children fleeing domestic violence. In its letter to the Minister, Scottish Women's Aid highlighted information that, frankly, the Government should have been aware of. Had they carried out an impact assessment, it would have been as clear as day to them. There is a range of additional costs involved in providing and managing refuge accommodation for women and children fleeing domestic violence.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West and Scottish Women's Aid have eloquently outlined, local housing allowance rates bear no resemblance to the actual costs incurred by women's aid groups, such as Monklands Women's Aid in my constituency, or to the way in which they provide refuge facilities. I have been working closely with Sharon Aitchison, who manages Monklands Women's Aid. It operates on very fine margins to provide a brilliant service for incredibly vulnerable women and children in their time of desperate need. It has already had its funding challenges, but this cut to housing benefit will put it out of the game. That will be the consequence of the Government's latest cut. While I am on this subject, I hope that the Chancellor will reply to my letter of 26 November last year regarding his announcement on the tampon tax fund. To date, I have not had so much as an acknowledgment.

Brilliant work has been done in recent years to highlight and tackle domestic violence and to provide better support for women and children fleeing from abusive relationships. All that work will be undone at a stroke as a result of this cut, because Monklands Women's Aid

will not be the only refuge that is forced to close. This is a cut that will once again hit those who need our support the most, and it is time that it was scrapped.

3.21 pm

**Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Let us all ready ourselves for some “shroud waving”. I rise to speak as perhaps the only Member here today—and perhaps the only Member in the whole House of Commons—who has run one of these precious services. Let me tell you, it has been so frustrating today to listen to the lack of understanding of the practicalities and the reality of how these services actually work. It has been mind-boggling, so I apologise if any of my comments come out as aggression.

There are many women, and even more children, who have lived in a refuge who stick in my head, but none more so than Amirah. You learn to live with it, but she was the only woman who brought tears to my eyes. Amirah, who was pregnant, was found on the side of the road after she had drunk bleach in an attempt to end her life. She had been kept chained to a table and fed scraps like an abused animal by her perpetrator. In the refuge, we had to teach her to eat again, with small portions. It was slow progress. When her beautiful daughter was born, it was a refuge worker who held her hand while she was in labour and a refuge manager who picked her up from the hospital and took her back home. The women in the refuge became her family. Refuges are amazing.

I think back to the Conservative Members I walked round the women’s refuges where I worked and where Amirah lived. I remember drinking tea with the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) and the then Minister Francis Maude in the playroom of one of our refuges. That playroom, in which the Minister so delighted in posing for his photo opportunity, will not be there if these changes come to pass. The likelihood is that they would not have had a refuge to visit at all if those measures had been in place then.

They were not our most eminent guests, however. That accolade goes to the Home Secretary, who was a keen visitor to my domestic violence services. If the Government’s plans to reduce housing benefit do not exempt this group, Ministers will be letting the Home Secretary down in a big way. In every safety net that she tries to put in place, these proposals without exemptions will snip a hole that women and children will fall through. Ministers here today should make no mistake that when people slip through these safety nets, no amount of hard work or personal responsibility will help them. They will face danger, abuse and, in too many cases, death.

The coalition Government and some Departments in this Government have shown their commitment to these families. The Home Office, while by no means perfect, has tried to invest pots of money and to create schemes for improved access to services. It has taken a good hard look at laws that will help these victims. There is a lot more to do, but it is not that the Home Office is not trying. I believe that its Ministers care, but they are being woefully let down by other Government Departments, which fail to recognise the Home Office’s role in the fight to end domestic abuse. There is no greater offender than the Department for Communities and Local

Government, whose brutal cuts to local authorities have already closed 34 specialist women’s refuges since 2010. Just before the election last year, facing “shroud waving” from Women’s Aid, the Department suddenly had an epiphany and released a fund to stimulate increases in the number of refuge bed spaces.

**Anna Turley:** Does my hon. Friend agree that these constant references to “shroud waving” are an insult to those refuges and housing associations that are genuinely concerned that they are going to have to close accommodation for the most vulnerable people? For example, Thirteen, which does great work in the Tees valley with veterans, ex-offenders, women fleeing domestic violence and people recovering from addictions, is going to have to close supported accommodation. If the Conservatives are so genuinely bothered about scaremongering and shroud waving, they could put an end to it by doing something about this policy today.

**Jess Phillips:** I could not agree more. The simple thing to do is to exempt this category. I think we all know that the Government are properly going to do that. We have waved our shrouds and, do you know what, in every single case, they listened. So stop me having to talk about this! Stop making me a shroud waver! Just do it!

Anyway, the 10 million quid over 12 months that the Government gave just before the election was intended to create new beds, and I have heard Ministers stand at that Dispatch Box and talk about the number of extra bed spaces that they have created. However, I know that every single bid that was put in for that fund will have made its calculation based on the existing rates of housing benefit. I also know that every bid, as part of its sustainability plan beyond the 12 months, will have contained calculations based on the existing rates of housing benefit. Without the housing benefit-plus settlement, the £10 million offered would have been completely meaningless. I know that because I helped to write three of the successful bids.

I have run refuges that survived solely on housing benefit contributions, without any recourse to the now non-existent Supporting People funds. At my charity, when times were tough and our refuge funding was cut in half, we sucked it up, made tough decisions and found new ways and new funds. We worked on different models to bring in support staff to our refuges. None of that would have been possible without the existing system of housing benefit. We got all those Tories coming to see us because we had done such a great job of cutting our cloth to suit our needs, but we were only able to do it because of housing benefit. Day one of this change would have closed at least 20 of our bed spaces. That would have resulted in turning away more than a hundred women and at least as many vulnerable children every year.

This week, I spoke in the debate on childcare and begged once again for the responsible Minister to consider exempting victims of domestic violence from the rules on the 16-hour threshold for increased childcare. He stopped me in my tracks and made that commitment. I am begging the Ministers here today to do what he did, and what the Home Secretary is trying to do, to protect victims of domestic violence and their children.

[Jess Phillips]

The Minister might think that this is hyperbole, but I shall say it anyway: without the exemption, what he is proposing will, for many, be a death penalty. Please don't do it.

3.27 pm

**Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab):** It is becoming increasingly apparent that this Government are one of the most pusillanimous in living memory when it comes to tackling the powerful and vested interests in this country. This pusillanimous approach extends to the interests of the media, the utilities and any companies that replenish the coffers of the Tory party. In fact, it also extends to the international community as well. The obsequious kowtowing to foreign Governments, such as those of China and Saudi Arabia, is cringe-worthy, embarrassing and not worthy of a British Government. It comes to something when the Italian Government have managed to get more taxes out of big corporations than the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and that is saying something.

It does not matter whether a person is young, old, disabled—either physically or mentally—distressed, unemployed, on low pay, or on temporary or zero-hours contracts, they are fair game for this Government. This is a Government who challenge the weak, the vulnerable and the needy and dress it up as a virtue or something that is character building. The trend now is for the Government to discredit anyone who gets in their way, or who they think is getting in their way. The Government could teach the mafia a thing or two about extortion, but without the charm.

The House of Lords, the bastion of the Tory party for decades, challenges the Government, so the Government are now giving thought to how to clip its wings. It is strange that they have managed to do that only now when they no longer have a built-in majority in the Lords.

Let me turn now to the banks and the bankers. Today, we are seeing the continued fall-out from their reckless decisions that led to the crisis, with the Royal Bank of Scotland having to put aside a further £2 billion to cover its incompetence. Ministers sound like a stuck record, as they once again blame the previous Labour Government. Yet those are the people who, in the form of the shadow Cabinet in 2007, wanted to deregulate the banking and financial services sector lock stock and barrel through their “Freeing Britain to Compete” document. Following the banking crisis, which was caused by their friends in the City, they quietly buried that document much to the chagrin of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) who co-ordinated it. Although that document is as rare as rocking horse dung, I do suggest, none the less, that Government Members try to acquaint themselves with it—that is if they can find a copy of it.

I noticed the Prime Minister patting himself on the back today when he talked about the Government's record on tax collection. If that is the best this Government can do, it is no wonder they are having to penalise those who can least afford it. If they cannot get the money off the corporations, they will get it off the dispossessed.

Yet again we are hearing about another policy that has not been thought through. The fact that the Minister has announced some delay in the proposed cuts to

supported housing is evidence of that. The long-term impact on the finances of local government and of the health service are potentially catastrophic. It is significantly cheaper to have elderly people living in supported accommodation than it is to have them in residential care. There is a danger that these proposals will bring forward that cost with the transfer to residential care. Not content with penalising older people for being old, the Government are now on a roll, as they tackle homeless people, those escaping domestic violence and people with disabilities. Around 440,000 homes are potentially affected. Discretionary support will not make up the difference. Charlotte Norman of Place Shapers and St Vincent's Housing Association says that the proposals look like having a more detrimental effect than any other recent housing or welfare announcement. In my own constituency, Anchor Housing will struggle. The average rent in sheltered housing schemes is £123 a week, which will leave a shortfall of £32. There will be a significant detrimental effect on those organisations that support the most vulnerable.

When we talk about the most vulnerable, the Government accuse us of shroud waving. We are not shroud waving; we are telling the facts as they are, or possibly as they could be. Those on the Government Benches can wring their hands and accuse my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) of being a scaremonger, but they are putting their heads in the sand. It is the responsibility of the Ministers on the Front Bench and this House to get a grip of the situation and get the Chancellor to change his mind for the umpteenth time.

3.32 pm

**Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab):** My city of Cambridge is a high-cost area in the grip of a housing crisis. The problem is multi-faceted and complicated, and every single thing that the Government are doing is making it worse. This policy is no exception. We have been asked by Government Members what we would do. Well, I can tell them that three-year tenancies without any unexpected rent rises would be a very good start, and I commend that idea to them.

I have spent the past few days talking to providers of supported housing in Cambridge. What struck me was that every single one of them warned about the dangers of this policy and the effect that it will have on our cities. I will relay a few of the things that I was told. Let me start at the YMCA, which has 80 residents—a mixture of students and people in work—70 of whom receive housing benefit. I was told that if housing benefit is cut, the residents will be turfed out on to the streets. The YMCA does not want to do that, but it will have no choice. That would, of course, completely undermine recovery programmes and cause yet more young people to end up living on not the Conservatives' spin-happy road to recovery, but the street.

What of the local council? Cambridge City Council directly provides or manages more than 100 units of accommodation for homeless households, including three hostels, 22 units of move-on accommodation for adults recovering from mental health conditions, and 13 sheltered housing schemes for older people—more than 460 tenancies. This will be the same story for every Member across the House. The council rightly says that, if this policy goes ahead, it will inevitably result in their tenants facing a

higher net weekly payable rent. There will be no more income to pay the rent, just a higher rent. These are vulnerable people who will struggle to prioritise paying that rent, so we know what will happen: they will either sink into a spiral of debt or lose their accommodation—or, most likely, both.

My council also tells me that its inevitable loss of income will force it to reduce the services that it provides, which means fewer wardens, less support and less preventive work to stop people needing to go to hospital. My local NHS already has severe well-documented problems, which have recently been rehearsed in the Chamber, but the changes will just make that situation worse. We hear about joined-up government—I do not think so—but the policy will cost more money. It will just pass the buck by putting the cost on our hospitals and homeless services, which are already overstretched and working flat out.

Housing associations will also be affected. CHS Group tells me that the overall impact of the LHA cap will be a loss of income of £537,000 a year and that four of its support schemes in Cambridge will be plunged into a significant operating loss. Those schemes house 47 people—vulnerable teenagers, people with learning difficulties, and vulnerable women and older people—yet that provision will be under immediate threat.

Let me be generous for a moment. Perhaps the Government will change their mind, as happened when they thought again on tax credit cuts, after being presented with the facts. We have heard powerful and persuasive arguments from Labour Members today. Maybe the Government did not really understand the consequences of their proposals, but if that is the case, they should listen carefully now.

I shall conclude by being slightly less generous, however. I think that the proposal is part of a deadly cocktail of housing reforms that will decimate the sector and make our country's housing problems worse. There is constantly a gap between what the Government say and what they do. They talk about helping our country to live within its means, but in reality they are just mean. I urge the Government to think again. We all make mistakes, so there is no shame in their admitting that sometimes they get things wrong. It would be far better to change course now than to risk inflicting such harm on so many vulnerable people.

3.36 pm

**Owen Smith** (Pontypridd) (Lab): In my part of the world, often the best thing that is said about the Conservative party is, “You know where you are with them: they may be cruel, but at least they're competent.” Following today's debate, however, and particularly after this week for the Department for Work and Pensions, one must wonder about at least the latter part of that sentence.

We began the week with the Government's defeat in the other place on their ludicrous suggestion that incomes should be carved out of the meaningful measure of child poverty that the previous Labour Government introduced. The Government then had to acknowledge that they should exempt those in receipt of carer's allowance from the punishment of the benefit cap, despite the fact that they spent £50,000 in the courts just a few weeks ago defending the inclusion of carers under the aegis of that cap.

This morning, we saw extraordinary events in the Court of Appeal as the Government found their bedroom tax ruled not only cruel, but unlawful, because it discriminates against disabled people—in particular my friend and fellow countryman, Paul Rutherford, his wife, Susan, and their profoundly disabled child, Warren. He was discriminated against by the bedroom tax for many years, but he had his day in court today. I can only hope that the Government reflect on the meaning of that ruling with a little more grace than the Prime Minister during today's Question Time, and that they will come back to the House to give us satisfaction by getting rid of the bedroom tax.

**Barbara Keeley:** Does my hon. Friend agree that it was always unfair to include carers under the bedroom tax and the benefit cap because their caring role means that they cannot go out to work or increase the number of hours that they do? These 60,000 unpaid family carers already save the state billions, so is it not time for them to be exempted? We call on the Government to take action straight away.

**Owen Smith:** Is not that just shroud waving? We have heard for the past few years—not just months or today—that we are shroud waving about the bedroom tax and its effects on the vulnerable. Indeed, we have been told that it is shroud waving to suggest that the bedroom tax might be unlawful, but it turns out that it is illegal, so the Government must come back to the House to address the situation—[*Interruption.*] The Minister for Housing and Planning is chuntering, but this afternoon there was a welcome yet extraordinary turn of events in the House. Despite Labour Members and others interested in the social rented sector asking him on hundreds of occasions in recent months to make the change, the Minister has only now said that he agrees with us.

We should address the deeply unfair 1% cut to social housing rents which is but part of the problem that the social supported housing sector faces. I welcome the fact that the Minister, without much good grace, conceded that there should be a delay. It is extraordinary that his Government have been looking at the policy not, I have to tell my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), since 2014 but since 2011, which is when they first suggested that they ought to address the question of, in their view, high social rented costs versus local housing allowance. Five years later, they still have not reached a conclusion on what they are going to do. It is incompetence on a gross scale.

In the Welfare Reform and Work Bill Committee, we lost count of the number of occasions on which we were offered excuses as to why the change could not possibly be made, and why the moratorium—or, as we asked for, a full exemption—was not affordable or allowable. In Committee, I believe that the words, “shroud waving” were used on a number of occasions. We were accused of jumping the gun, and told that the measures would not be introduced for a while, so there was plenty of time for the Government to get their papers in order and get the policy right.

**Mr Jackson:** The hon. Gentleman makes an eloquent case. Can he explain to the House why, in benign economic times, his own Government failed to deliver tax breaks to encourage the development of extra care

[Mr Jackson]

facilities and specialist housing facilities? Why did they stand still when there was plenty of money coming in and they had the opportunity to do so?

**Owen Smith:** The National Audit Office concluded that under the Tory and Liberal Government there was a 45% reduction in the amount of funding for the supported housing sector. That is the reality.

**Mr Jackson:** What about your Government?

**Owen Smith:** We have not been in power for six years, and there is only so long that the hon. Gentleman can keep waving that shroud at me. The key point is that under the hon. Gentleman's Government there was a 40% cut, and we face the prospect of the end of supported housing in this country unless there is a change of course from his Government.

There is a lot of misunderstanding among Government Members about what we are talking about. I do not know whether they do not read the briefing from the Whips or the Whips do not tell them the truth, but there are two measures that we are debating. On the first measure—a 1% cut in social housing rents—there is now a one-year stay of execution. The second and more important measure, which the Minister did not address despite the questions raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne, is the equalising of the amount of housing benefit available to people in social rented accommodation with the local housing allowance. That is the biggest, most substantive change that the Government propose to make.

The hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) said that the measure had not been introduced and is not happening yet. She really ought to read the Government's statements. I shall read from the autumn statement, which said at paragraph 1.125:

“The Government will cap the amount of rent that Housing Benefit will cover in the social sector to the relevant local housing allowance. This will apply to tenancies signed after 1 April 2016”.

According to my maths, that is in a couple of months, with housing benefit entitlements changing across the board from April 2018. This is not shroud waving, nor is it jumping the gun: it is the Opposition drawing to the attention of the House and, it would seem, Government Members, a measure that will impact on their constituents in just a few months' time.

**Maria Caulfield:** The hon. Gentleman is being misleading, because the motion is about supported housing. Now he is speaking about general needs housing benefit, and there is a difference. There is no change in legislation: an extensive review is under way on housing benefit for people in supported housing. There is a difference, and I am sorry that he does not appreciate that.

**Owen Smith:** I am, unusually, lost for words. It is extraordinary that the hon. Lady does not understand what we are talking about. Supported housing—specified housing—is caught within the envelope of social housing.

**Maria Caulfield** *rose*—

**Owen Smith:** I will not give way to the hon. Lady. There is no point—she does not understand.

**Brandon Lewis** *rose*—

**Owen Smith:** I will give way to the Minister if he will tell us what he is going to do about local housing allowance.

**Brandon Lewis:** The hon. Gentleman has managed to brush over the fact that his colleague who spoke earlier was a Minister who was involved in bringing in the spare room subsidy originally. Perhaps he could confirm that our affordable housing programme has delivered 6% more supported homes per year than did the Labour equivalent?

**Owen Smith:** It is interesting that the Minister did not ride to the rescue of his hon. Friend the Member for Lewes: he knows that she does not know what she is talking about on this subject.

The hon. Lady could have a further look at the Budget book produced by the Government for the same spending review, which shows clearly that £515 million is the saving anticipated from the cuts. The IFS goes further and says that by the time the cuts are fully implemented, the Government might save £1.1 billion. The largest part of that is the change equalising housing benefit with local housing allowance, not the one-year stay of execution that we have heard about today. Now that I have explained the position, does the hon. Lady wish to intervene?

**Maria Caulfield:** I thank the shadow Minister for his reply. I am even more worried that he does not understand the difference. The supported housing allowance is much higher than the ordinary general needs housing benefit. The Opposition called this debate and we are supposed to be discussing supported housing, not general needs housing. I am shocked that the shadow Minister does not understand the difference.

**Owen Smith:** I have made the point about general social housing catching specified supported housing. That is clear. It is also clear, because Ministers admitted it at the Dispatch Box today, that the hon. Lady is right—supported housing does cost more because it is bespoke and it is intended for people with, for example, complex autistic needs or physical disabilities, women fleeing persecution and violence, or elderly vulnerable people. It costs more money to look after those people because an in-house concierge and other things are needed. That is why it is so wrong for the Government to equalise the amount of housing benefit that they can get with local housing allowances available for the private rented sector. That is the issue we are discussing.

The issue was not raised by us initially. Those in the sector have approached us and Ministers on many occasions. I shall quote a few. Andrew Redfern, chief executive of the specialist housing association Framework, said that the planned cut

“ would mean the end of supported housing. All our schemes would close, and I think all others would as well.”

That seems fairly straightforward. Other housing organisations such as Great Places, New Charter, Hightown Praetorian and Family Mosaic all confirmed that many of their schemes would be unviable if the cut went ahead. AmicusHorizon, which I believe has 119 such supported housing bodies across London, has confirmed

that it will have to close supported housing in London and elsewhere if these changes go ahead. Charlotte Norman of PlaceShapers and St Vincent's housing said:

"We cannot believe that government understands the consequences of these changes and the vast extra costs that would fall to the public purse as a result of scheme closures. Nothing short of exemption for all such housing will be adequate and we very much hope that common sense will prevail."

We heard a lot of common sense from Opposition Members, including from the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and in particular from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chairman of the Select Committee, who asked the central question: what will happen to the LHA equalisation with housing benefit that the Minister failed to mention? Will there be an exemption for supported housing associations and for specified housing? He asked a further question that the Minister failed to answer, which I hope the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People will answer in a moment. If the rents are to go up next year and are not cut by 1%, will they go up in line with the formula, as they would have done ordinarily, or are they to be frozen? I would be grateful for an answer from the Minister.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) talked about the Society of St James, which helps 2,000 people and will lose £1 million. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), drawing on their personal experience and deep knowledge, spoke about what this will mean for their constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) spoke with particular expertise about her experience of running a women's refuge. She explained how these changes would shut that refuge and begged Ministers to listen to her and to the Home Secretary about the value of women's refuges and the damage that will be done to them. My hon. Friends the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) and for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) also spoke.

On the Government side, Members were sanguine. On the Government side, Members dissembled. On the Government side, Members have a choice about what to do today. Will they agree with us that nothing short of the exemption of specialised supported housing is required in order to safeguard the most vulnerable in our communities and that what we have heard today from the Government is welcome but insufficient? When the Minister comes to the Dispatch Box, will he agree with me that it is time for the Government to admit that they got it wrong and, as they have done so many times this week, reverse ferret?

3.50 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson):** This has been a powerful and important debate, and we have listened to the arguments from both sides of the Chamber. A number of important points were raised and questions asked, and I will do my best to cover as many of them as I can.

Our welfare reform is about bringing wide-ranging reforms to the welfare system and bringing the budget back under control after years of overspending by Labour. My hon. Friends the Members for Peterborough (Mr Jackson), for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans) and for

North Dorset (Simon Hoare) set out eloquently how important that is. Our reforms are bringing fairness for hard-working taxpayers, making work pay and making welfare sustainable for the future.

Protecting the most vulnerable is the key part of today's debate. As we have progressed with these important and necessary reforms, we have stuck to our principle of protecting the most vulnerable. As the Minister for Disabled People, I hold that principle to be particularly important. I know how important the right housing is for an individual's needs. I am proud of our record on helping those who need the most support.

I want to remind the House that we have spent around £50 billion every year on benefits to support people with disabilities or health conditions, and that spending will be higher in every year until 2020 than it was in 2010. We are spending £400 million to deliver 8,000 specialist homes for the vulnerable, elderly or those with disabilities, and funding for the disabled facilities grant, which funds around 40,000 adaptations a year, is due to increase by nearly 80% next year. We are providing £870 million of support through discretionary housing payment over the next five years to help those who need support, and the Department of Health has committed to funding up to 7,500 further specialist homes for disabled and older people.

We are also providing support to other vulnerable groups. For example, we are providing £40 million for victims of domestic abuse, which is a tripling of the support, ensuring that no one is turned away from the support they need. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for focusing the House on the absolute importance of the services that refuges provide, bringing real dynamism and realism to the debate. I understand that, because I have done a lot of work with Women's Aid, particularly in the last Parliament, and I pay tribute to the women's refuge in Swindon. It cannot boast about what it does, because it has to be behind closed doors. The hon. Lady has really focused minds, which is an important thing to do. More than £500 million has been spent since 2010 on tackling homelessness, preventing almost 1 million households from becoming homeless.

Let me turn to supported housing. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) and the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), who drew upon their real-life experience and set out some of the challenges and opportunities faced in this area. We recognise the value of the supported housing sector and want to ensure that the essential services it delivers continue to be provided, within the context of driving appropriate value for money. Many Members have put that on the record today and spoken about that support, which is very important. We want to ensure that the sector can continue to deliver the important services it provides, which is why we will be putting in place a one-year exemption from the 1% rent reduction for all supported accommodation. That will give us time to study the evidence from the supported housing review, which is due to report in the spring, and consider a longer-term solution for the sector.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) asked a number of questions, including about what happens to rents for supported housing next year during the one-year delay. They will be uprated by CPI plus 1% up until April 2017, then reviewed after that.

[Justin Tomlinson]

The review will tell us the size, scale and scope of supported housing funded through housing benefits. The policy options will be considered after the report is published, in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, and conclusions will be reached in due course as that is brought together.

**Mr Jackson:** I am reassured by the Minister's comments. Will he ensure that the Treasury and NHS England are involved in this issue, because it is important that there is proper co-ordination between acute hospital care and social care as we face demographic issues in the future?

**Justin Tomlinson:** We all accept that this issue goes far wider, and we must look at all that in the consultation.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) asked me to take on board the comments from Progress Housing, and I will happily do so. The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) talked about the YMCA, which is an important organisation. I am pleased that Denise Hatton, YMCA England's chief executive, has already tweeted:

"It is positive that the Government has listened to the concerns of the sector and we welcome the fact it has taken appropriate action to protect supported housing."

**John Healey:** If the House is to take the Minister at his word that he wants to have the evidence from the review, then a consultation, in order to make these policy decisions, will he place a moratorium on the application of the LHA benefit cut, as he proposes with the rent cut, so that new tenancies from April this year will not be affected in the way that the Chancellor announced?

**Justin Tomlinson:** For new tenants, the change comes into effect in 2016; for existing ones, it will come into effect in 2018. The delay on the 1% is just for supported housing, so I am afraid that I cannot give that commitment.

**Mr Betts:** The question is this: will the Minister defer the change in housing benefit related to LHA for supported housing from April this year so that it does not apply to new tenancies until the review has been completed?

**Justin Tomlinson:** The changes do not come into effect at that point. That is why we said that we will urgently take forward the review based on the points that have been raised.

I can assure Members that DWP and DCLG will work closely together to ensure that the appropriate protections are in place for those in supported housing.

**Mr Betts:** I am sorry, but the changes do come into effect for new tenancies in supported housing from April this year, so will the Minister please defer them?

**Justin Tomlinson:** I have made it clear that, for those in supported housing, the change will be delayed for a year as we conduct the urgent review.

On the rationale for changes in the social rented sector, we will stick to our principles of protecting the most vulnerable. However, these are important reforms.

We inherited a burgeoning housing benefits bill that we had to get control of. We have started to do that, but we need to go further. The housing benefit bill for England has risen by over 20% during the past 10 years, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) said. Part of the reason is that the rises in social rents have outstripped those in the private sector, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). Social rents are up by 60% compared with 23% in the private sector. In the private sector, the local housing allowance curbs the spiralling housing benefit bill, but there is no similar restraint in the social sector. That is why we are going to cap social sector rents in the same way as in the private sector, thereby reducing rents in the social sector. We should remember that this will help the one third of people in this sector who do not claim any housing benefit and whose rents will come down. However, we will continue to protect the most vulnerable.

This is just part of our wider housing reforms. We are improving access, creating more choice and building more affordable homes. We are doubling the housing budget to more than £20 billion over the next five years to help to ensure that housing is prioritised for those who need it most.

**Neil Coyle:** Will the Minister give way?

**Justin Tomlinson:** No. I am short of time.

Under Labour, the number of social and affordable rented homes fell by 400,000, but under the Conservative Government, 700,000 new homes have been built in the past five years, of which 270,000 are affordable homes. We are broadening opportunities for people to access housing through Help to Buy, right to buy and the £8 billion commitment to deliver 400,000 more affordable home starts. This Government are tackling the chronic problems of under-supply and access to housing, which the Labour party failed to do.

In conclusion, we will not fall into the trap of Labour's blank-cheque approach by paying away problems without making any real or meaningful reforms to welfare. Our reforms bring fairness for hard-working taxpayers and make the welfare budget more sustainable for the future, and we are doing that while providing the right protection for the most vulnerable in society.

*Question put.*

*The House divided: Ayes 239, Noes 286.*

**Division No. 177]**

**[4 pm**

**AYES**

Abbott, Ms Diane	Blomfield, Paul
Abrahams, Debbie	Boswell, Philip
Alexander, Heidi	Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Ali, Rushanara	Brock, Deidre
Anderson, Mr David	Brown, Alan
Ashworth, Jonathan	Brown, Lyn
Austin, Ian	Bryant, Chris
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Buck, Ms Karen
Barron, rh Kevin	Burden, Richard
Beckett, rh Margaret	Burgon, Richard
Berger, Luciana	Butler, Dawn
Betts, Mr Clive	Cadbury, Ruth
Blackford, Ian	Cameron, Dr Lisa
Blackman, Kirsty	Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Blenkinsop, Tom	Campbell, Mr Ronnie

Champion, Sarah  
 Chapman, Douglas  
 Chapman, Jenny  
 Clegg, rh Mr Nick  
 Coaker, Vernon  
 Coffey, Ann  
 Cooper, rh Yvette  
 Cowan, Ronnie  
 Cox, Jo  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Crausby, Mr David  
 Crawley, Angela  
 Creasy, Stella  
 Cruddas, Jon  
 Cryer, John  
 Cummins, Judith  
 Cunningham, Alex  
 Cunningham, Mr Jim  
 Dakin, Nic  
 Danczuk, Simon  
 David, Wayne  
 Day, Martyn  
 De Piero, Gloria  
 Dodds, rh Mr Nigel  
 Donaldson, Stuart Blair  
 Doughty, Stephen  
 Dowd, Jim  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Dromey, Jack  
 Durkan, Mark  
 Eagle, Ms Angela  
 Eagle, Maria  
 Edwards, Jonathan  
 Efford, Clive  
 Elliott, Julie  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Evans, Chris  
 Fellows, Marion  
 Ferrier, Margaret  
 Field, rh Frank  
 Fitzpatrick, Jim  
 Ffello, Robert  
 Fletcher, Colleen  
 Flint, rh Caroline  
 Fovargue, Yvonne  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 Gibson, Patricia  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Godsiff, Mr Roger  
 Goodman, Helen  
 Grady, Patrick  
 Grant, Peter  
 Gray, Neil  
 Green, Kate  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Greenwood, Margaret  
 Griffith, Nia  
 Gwynne, Andrew  
 Haigh, Louise  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hanson, rh Mr David  
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet  
 Harris, Carolyn  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Healey, rh John  
 Hendrick, Mr Mark  
 Hendry, Drew  
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen  
 Hermon, Lady  
 Hillier, Meg  
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret  
 Hoey, Kate

Hollern, Kate  
 Hopkins, Kelvin  
 Hosie, Stewart  
 Howarth, rh Mr George  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Irranca-Davies, Huw  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Johnson, rh Alan  
 Johnson, Diana  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Helen  
 Jones, Mr Kevan  
 Jones, Susan Elan  
 Kane, Mike  
 Keeley, Barbara  
 Kendall, Liz  
 Kerevan, George  
 Kerr, Calum  
 Kinahan, Danny  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kyle, Peter  
 Lammy, rh Mr David  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Law, Chris  
 Leslie, Chris  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 Lucas, Caroline  
 Lucas, Ian C.  
 Lynch, Holly  
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona  
 Madders, Justin  
 Mahmood, Shabana  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Mann, John  
 Marris, Rob  
 Marsden, Mr Gordon  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Matheson, Christian  
 McCabe, Steve  
 McCaig, Callum  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McDonagh, Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm  
 McDonald, Stuart C.  
 McDonnell, Dr Alasdair  
 McDonnell, John  
 McGarry, Natalie  
 McGinn, Conor  
 McInnes, Liz  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McLaughlin, Anne  
 Mearns, Ian  
 Miliband, rh Edward  
 Monaghan, Carol  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Mulholland, Greg  
 Mullin, Roger  
 Murray, Ian  
 Nandy, Lisa  
 Newlands, Gavin  
 Nicolson, John  
 O'Hara, Brendan  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Owen, Albert  
 Paisley, Ian  
 Paterson, Steven

Pearce, Teresa  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Perkins, Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 POUND, Stephen  
 Powell, Lucy  
 Pugh, John  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Rayner, Angela  
 Reed, Mr Jamie  
 Reed, Mr Steve  
 Rees, Christina  
 Reeves, Rachel  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Rimmer, Marie  
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret  
 Robinson, Gavin  
 Rotheram, Steve  
 Saville Roberts, Liz  
 Shah, Naz  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Sheerman, Mr Barry  
 Sherriff, Paula  
 Shuker, Mr Gavin  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Simpson, David  
 Skinner, Mr Dennis  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Smith, Angela  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smith, Owen  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Spellar, rh Mr John

Adams, Nigel  
 Afriyie, Adam  
 Aldous, Peter  
 Allen, Heidi  
 Amess, Sir David  
 Andrew, Stuart  
 Ansell, Caroline  
 Argar, Edward  
 Atkins, Victoria  
 Bacon, Mr Richard  
 Baker, Mr Steve  
 Baldwin, Harriett  
 Barclay, Stephen  
 Baron, Mr John  
 Barwell, Gavin  
 Bellingham, Sir Henry  
 Benyon, Richard  
 Berry, Jake  
 Berry, James  
 Bingham, Andrew  
 Blackman, Bob  
 Blunt, Crispin  
 Boles, Nick  
 Bone, Mr Peter  
 Borwick, Victoria  
 Bottomley, Sir Peter  
 Bradley, Karen  
 Brazier, Mr Julian  
 Bridgen, Andrew  
 Brine, Steve  
 Brokenshire, rh James  
 Bruce, Fiona  
 Buckland, Robert  
 Burns, Conor  
 Burns, rh Sir Simon

Starmer, Keir  
 Stephens, Chris  
 Stevens, Jo  
 Streeting, Wes  
 Stringer, Graham  
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela  
 Tami, Mark  
 Thewliss, Alison  
 Thomas, Mr Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick  
 Thompson, Owen  
 Thornberry, Emily  
 Timms, rh Stephen  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Turley, Anna  
 Turner, Karl  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twigg, Stephen  
 Umunna, Mr Chuka  
 Vaz, rh Keith  
 Vaz, Valerie  
 Weir, Mike  
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh  
 Whitehead, Dr Alan  
 Williams, Hywel  
 Williams, Mr Mark  
 Winnick, Mr David  
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie  
 Wishart, Pete  
 Woodcock, John  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Vicky Foxcroft and  
 Sue Hayman**

#### NOES

Burrowes, Mr David  
 Burt, rh Alistair  
 Cairns, Alun  
 Carmichael, Neil  
 Carswell, Mr Douglas  
 Cartledge, James  
 Cash, Sir William  
 Caulfield, Maria  
 Chalk, Alex  
 Chishti, Rehman  
 Chope, Mr Christopher  
 Churchill, Jo  
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth  
 Cleverly, James  
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey  
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse  
 Colville, Oliver  
 Costa, Alberto  
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey  
 Crabb, rh Stephen  
 Davies, Byron  
 Davies, Chris  
 Davies, Glyn  
 Davies, Dr James  
 Davies, Mims  
 Davies, Philip  
 Dinenage, Caroline  
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
 Dorries, Nadine  
 Double, Steve  
 Dowden, Oliver  
 Drax, Richard  
 Drummond, Mrs Flick  
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan  
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain

Dunne, Mr Philip  
 Ellis, Michael  
 Ellison, Jane  
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias  
 Elphicke, Charlie  
 Eustice, George  
 Evans, Graham  
 Evennett, rh Mr David  
 Fabricant, Michael  
 Fallon, rh Michael  
 Fernandes, Suella  
 Field, rh Mark  
 Foster, Kevin  
 Fox, rh Dr Liam  
 Frazer, Lucy  
 Freeman, George  
 Freer, Mike  
 Fuller, Richard  
 Fysh, Marcus  
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Ghani, Nusrat  
 Gibb, Mr Nick  
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl  
 Glen, John  
 Goodwill, Mr Robert  
 Gove, rh Michael  
 Graham, Richard  
 Grant, Mrs Helen  
 Gray, Mr James  
 Grayling, rh Chris  
 Green, Chris  
 Green, rh Damian  
 Greening, rh Justine  
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic  
 Griffiths, Andrew  
 Gummer, Ben  
 Gyimah, Mr Sam  
 Halfon, rh Robert  
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip  
 Hammond, Stephen  
 Hancock, rh Matthew  
 Hands, rh Greg  
 Harper, rh Mr Mark  
 Harrington, Richard  
 Harris, Rebecca  
 Hart, Simon  
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan  
 Hayes, rh Mr John  
 Heald, Sir Oliver  
 Heapey, James  
 Heaton-Harris, Chris  
 Henderson, Gordon  
 Herbert, rh Nick  
 Hinds, Damian  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Hollingbery, George

Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Hollobone, Mr Philip  
 Holloway, Mr Adam  
 Hopkins, Kris  
 Howarth, Sir Gerald  
 Huddleston, Nigel  
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy  
 Hurd, Mr Nick  
 Jackson, Mr Stewart  
 James, Margot  
 Javid, rh Sajid  
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil  
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard  
 Jenkyns, Andrea  
 Jenrick, Robert  
 Johnson, Boris  
 Johnson, Gareth  
 Johnson, Joseph  
 Jones, Andrew  
 Jones, rh Mr David  
 Jones, Mr Marcus  
 Kawczynski, Daniel  
 Kennedy, Seema  
 Kirby, Simon  
 Knight, rh Sir Greg  
 Knight, Julian  
 Kwarteng, Kwasi  
 Lancaster, Mark  
 Latham, Pauline  
 Leadsom, Andrea  
 Lee, Dr Phillip  
 Lefroy, Jeremy  
 Leigh, Sir Edward  
 Leslie, Charlotte  
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver  
 Lewis, Brandon  
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian  
 Lidington, rh Mr David  
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter  
 Lord, Jonathan  
 Loughton, Tim  
 Lumley, Karen  
 Mackinlay, Craig  
 Mackintosh, David  
 Main, Mrs Anne  
 Mak, Mr Alan  
 Malthouse, Kit  
 Mann, Scott  
 Mathias, Dr Tania  
 May, rh Mrs Theresa  
 Maynard, Paul  
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick  
 McPartland, Stephen  
 Menzies, Mark  
 Mercer, Johnny  
 Merriman, Huw  
 Metcalfe, Stephen

Miller, rh Mrs Maria  
 Milling, Amanda  
 Mills, Nigel  
 Milton, rh Anne  
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
 Mordaunt, Penny  
 Morgan, rh Nicky  
 Morris, Anne Marie  
 Morris, David  
 Morris, James  
 Morton, Wendy  
 Mowat, David  
 Mundell, rh David  
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
 Murrison, Dr Andrew  
 Neill, Robert  
 Newton, Sarah  
 Nokes, Caroline  
 Norman, Jesse  
 Nuttall, Mr David  
 Offord, Dr Matthew  
 Parish, Neil  
 Patel, rh Priti  
 Pawsey, Mark  
 Penning, rh Mike  
 Penrose, John  
 Percy, Andrew  
 Perry, Claire  
 Phillips, Stephen  
 Philp, Chris  
 Pincher, Christopher  
 Prentis, Victoria  
 Prisk, Mr Mark  
 Pursglove, Tom  
 Quin, Jeremy  
 Quince, Will  
 Raab, Mr Dominic  
 Redwood, rh John  
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob  
 Robertson, Mr Laurence  
 Rosindell, Andrew  
 Rudd, rh Amber  
 Rutley, David  
 Sandbach, Antoinette  
 Selous, Andrew  
 Shapps, rh Grant  
 Sharma, Alok  
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith  
 Smith, Chloe  
 Smith, Julian  
 Smith, Royston  
 Solloway, Amanda  
 Soubry, rh Anna

Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline  
 Spencer, Mark  
 Stevenson, John  
 Stewart, Bob  
 Stewart, Iain  
 Stewart, Rory  
 Streeter, Mr Gary  
 Stride, Mel  
 Stuart, Graham  
 Sturdy, Julian  
 Sunak, Rishi  
 Swayne, rh Mr Desmond  
 Swire, rh Mr Hugo  
 Syms, Mr Robert  
 Thomas, Derek  
 Throup, Maggie  
 Timpson, Edward  
 Tomlinson, Justin  
 Tomlinson, Michael  
 Tracey, Craig  
 Tredinnick, David  
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie  
 Truss, rh Elizabeth  
 Tugendhat, Tom  
 Turner, Mr Andrew  
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew  
 Vaizey, Mr Edward  
 Vara, Mr Shailesh  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa  
 Walker, Mr Charles  
 Wallace, Mr Ben  
 Warburton, David  
 Warman, Matt  
 Watkinson, Dame Angela  
 Wharton, James  
 Whately, Helen  
 Wheeler, Heather  
 White, Chris  
 Whittaker, Craig  
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
 Wiggin, Bill  
 Williams, Craig  
 Williamson, rh Gavin  
 Wilson, Mr Rob  
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah  
 Wragg, William  
 Wright, rh Jeremy  
 Zahawi, Nadhim

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Jackie Doyle-Price and**  
**Guy Opperman**

*Question accordingly negated.*

## Prisons and Probation

4.13 pm

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House believes UK prisons are in crisis; notes the increasingly high rates of violence, self-harm and drug use in prisons, and the resulting pressure on the NHS; further notes that the last report by the outgoing Chief Inspector of Prisons warned that outcomes across the prison estate were the worst for ten years; believes that no prison staff should have to go to work facing a threat to their safety; notes with concern the decision of the Scottish Government, announced in its recent draft Scottish Budget for 2016-17, to reduce funding for the Scottish Prison Service by almost £40 million in cash terms; is appalled by the disturbing allegations of violence at Medway Secure Training Centre; regrets the Government's inadequate response to the Harris Review and to mental health in prisons; is concerned that re-offending rates are so high; believes the Government lets down victims of crime by failing to enshrine their rights in law; regrets the Government's reckless privatisation of the probation service and the job losses in community rehabilitation companies; and calls on the Government to put all G4S-run prisons, STCs and detention centres into special measures, to immediately review the implementation of Transforming Rehabilitation and to publish the Memorandum of Understanding on Judicial Cooperation with Saudi Arabia.

Prison and probation staff have some of the toughest jobs in our country. With few exceptions, they work with industry, compassion and resolution to protect the public and to help to change lives through rehabilitation. All of us in this House owe them our gratitude. Over six years in the shadow Justice team, but also as MP for one of Britain's most iconic prisons, HMP Wormwood Scrubs, and, in the past, as a criminal barrister, I have visited many prisons and spoken to both prisoners and staff, and to their representatives in the Prisoner Learning Alliance and Napo, to which I also pay tribute.

The inescapable conclusion is that the prison system in this country—I use the term to include both the adult and youth estates—is not working, contrary to the famous pronouncement of the noble Lord Howard. From the Lord Chancellor's statements and speeches so far, I think he may agree. The question for today is: what are he and his Government going to do about it? It is certainly the view of many in his party that prison is not working. We have waited some time for a parliamentary debate on the crisis in our prisons. This will be the fourth in a week. I hope that is a reflection of the new priority that parliamentarians in both Houses are giving to this issue.

**Sir Edward Garnier** (Harborough) (Con): When I was in the hon. Gentleman's position as shadow prisons Minister 10 years ago, I could have tabled a motion in the name of the official Opposition in exactly the same terms as the first four and three-quarter lines of his motion. Why did he not do something about the problem then?

**Andy Slaughter:** I take the intervention in the spirit in which it is meant, but I hope we are not going to have a war over who did what when. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman will see in a moment, we are talking not about the last 10 years, but the last 50 years.

I should make a special mention of the debate on prison reform in the other place on 21 January in the name of the noble Lord Fowler. Lest the Lord Chancellor take exception to the wording of today's motion—

“That this House believes UK prisons are in crisis”—

the noble Lord ended his excellent speech with these words:

“In 1970, we faced a prisons crisis; today, we face a prisons scandal.”

Every speech in that debate was superb, and I hope this House can live up to those high standards today.

Lord Fowler set out five proposals. In concluding the debate, the Minister, Lord Faulks, said he “had no difficulty in supporting any of them”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 January 2016; Vol. 768, c. 910-940.]

I assume the same can be said for the Lord Chancellor. To remind him, the five proposals are: deprivation of liberty, but not to make life as uncomfortable as possible; end overcrowding; reduce the number of people sent to prison; do so by re-examining sentences; and pass responsibility to the governor and staff. The Lord Chancellor has spoken approvingly of the last of those points, but does he agree with Lord Fowler and his Minister on the other four points? More importantly, if he does, how will he set out to accomplish them? That is not a trick question. I do not know whether the Lord Chancellor is in muesli mode or Shipley mode today. He has made some fine rhetorical flourishes on the subject of prison reform and set reviews in progress, but what action do his Government intend to take?

I am happy to give the Lord Chancellor a platform today to add some substance to the rhetoric—it is a platform rather than a scaffold—but I will do so by setting out the scale of the task before him. Let me begin with the basic issue of safety. In the 12 months to September 2015, there were 267 deaths in prison custody—95 suicides, up from 60 in the same period in 2010; 153 deaths from natural causes, up from 123; and seven homicides. There have been the same number of homicides in prison in the past two years as there were in the preceding eight. In the 12 months to June 2015, there were 28,881 reported incidents of self-harm, up by 21% in just a year; 4,156 assaults on staff, a 20% rise from the year before; and 578 serious assaults on staff, a rise of 42% from the year before. Tragically, a prison officer, Lorraine Barwell—it was the first such incident of its type in a quarter of a century—died in July last year after being the victim of an attack in the line of duty one month earlier. We owe it to her and her family to ensure that her colleagues are as safe as possible.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My hon. Friend has started by setting out staggering and appalling statistics on the number of prisoners who have sadly taken their own lives or who are self-harming. Does that not underline the problems of mental health in prisons? What more should the Government do to tackle the serious problem of mental ill health among the prisoner population?

**Andy Slaughter:** My hon. Friend—I know he speaks from a position of knowledge on the subject—is right. I will come to that in a moment.

The prison riot squad was called out 343 times last year—once a day on average—compared with 223 times the year before and 118 times in 2010. Alcohol finds have nearly trebled since 2010. From mobile phones to drugs and legal highs, the list of what people can smuggle into prison at the moment is elastic. According to one prisoner at HMP Oakwood, a prison that the previous Lord Chancellor called

“an excellent model for the future”—[*Official Report*, 5 February 2013; Vol. 558, c. 114.],

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it was easier to get drugs than soap, so there are some restrictions. Earlier this month, seven officers reported suffering ill effects from inadvertently inhaling legal highs. You couldn't make that up.

**Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con): It would be remiss at this point not to place it on the record that the Psychoactive Substances Bill, which passed through the House last week, will make possession inside the secure estate a criminal offence. I think the hon. Gentleman welcomed that.

**Andy Slaughter:** I agree with most, if not all, of the provisions in the Bill. The issue we are dealing with here, however, is smuggling contraband into prisons by a number of means, including the increasing use of drones.

Turning to overcrowding, figures released by the Prisons Minister on Monday showed that 25% of all prisoners are in overcrowded cells. In some prisons, such as Wandsworth, the figure rises to over 80%. It is, in the words of the chief inspector,

“sometimes exacerbated by extremely poor environments and squalid conditions.”

This memorably led one member of staff to tell him, of a cell in Wormwood Scrubs, that he

“wouldn't keep a dog in there”.

In the past 25 years, the prison population has almost doubled, from under 45,000 in 1990 to over 85,000 now. It is projected to increase to 90,000 by 2020. Staff are already struggling, following cuts on an unprecedented scale. There are 9,760 fewer operational prison staff than in 2010, and nearly 5,000 fewer prison officers since 2010. Some 250 prison governors resigned or moved jobs in the past five years.

On education, the Prisoners Education Trust reports that prisoners tell them they have to choose between going to the library and having a shower, because of the lack of staff to escort them. Nearly half of prisoners report having no qualifications and 42% of people in prison say they had been expelled or permanently excluded from school. The Lord Chancellor appointed Dame Sally Coates, the distinguished former head of Burlington Danes Academy, to review prisoner education. Perhaps he will let us know what progress she has made.

On mental health, according to an answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), 60% of prisoners who took their own life last year were not receiving assistance under the assessment, care in custody and teamwork process, which is supposed to identify prisoners at a heightened risk of suicide or self-harm.

**Steve Rotheram** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): My constituency has two prisons—Altcourse, which is privately run by G4S, and Liverpool Walton. Both were inspected recently. The common factor in both inspections was understaffing. Does my hon. Friend think that some of the factors he is identifying are due to the staff numbers at both prisons being the lowest in living memory?

**Andy Slaughter:** The cuts in staff lie at the root of many of the problems I am identifying. The fact that in many cases prisoners now spend 22 or 23 hours in their cell, and have restrictions on work, education and

association, is leading to increased violence and poor behaviour in prisons. That is a very short-sighted development. I think the Government realise that, but perhaps too late.

Turning to probation and reoffending, figures I obtained last month revealed that almost one in 10 offenders are convicted of an offence within 18 days of release. HM inspectorate of probation's fourth report on the implementation of transforming rehabilitation was published on 15 January. It highlighted the disparity in performance between the national probation service, which is still part of the National Offender Management Service, and the 21 community rehabilitation companies managed by private providers. For CRCs, one quarter of the offenders sampled had been convicted of a further offence, whereas for the NPS the figure was less than one fifth. On child protection and safeguarding on home visits, the NPS again outperformed CRCs. Earlier this month, the Lord Chancellor's Department stopped publishing figures relating to staffing figures at CRCs. Why was this, except to conceal the hundreds of experienced probation staff being laid off across the country to promote the bottom line for the CRCs' owners?

Let me turn to the youth estate, and in particular the role of G4S. We welcome the measures announced yesterday by the Lord Chancellor to effectively put Medway secure training centre into special measures. This is unsurprising, as they are exactly what I called for in an urgent question two weeks ago. I also welcome the decision by the director of Medway to stand down. However, individuals should not bear the entirety of the blame for what looks like corporate failure by G4S. I have now written to the Serious Fraud Office to ask that it investigates the allegations, made in the BBC “Panorama” programme on Medway, that instances of disorder were concealed to avoid G4S incurring fines under its contract. This is in addition to the ongoing SFO investigation into G4S and Serco's manipulation of the tagging contracts for financial gain.

G4S has a truly dismal record of managing public contracts here and abroad. At Rainsbrook STC, six staff were dismissed and the contract was terminated last September, following an inspection report that said some staff were on drugs while on duty, colluded with detainees and behaved extremely inappropriately with young people. The company taking over the contract is MTCnovo. It is a name not well known in this country because, in origin, it is a US prison firm. As such, it presided over a riot in an Arizona state prison and ran a youth facility in Mississippi that a judge described as

“struggling with disorder, periodic mayhem, and staff ineptitude which leads to perpetual danger to the inmates and staff.”

It probably left that reference out of its application, along with the fact that its directors helped to set up Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad.

The problems of the youth estate go way beyond G4S, however, which is why the chief inspector of prisons has called for an inquiry into the failings at Medway and the implications for the wider youth justice system.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): On the Justice Committee, we interviewed the chief inspector and found his answers on ministerial interference in his reports very interesting. Does my hon. Friend agree that, to the outside world, the fact that the chief inspector's

contract is not being renewed makes it look like he was doing an effective job in holding the MOJ to account, and is now being silenced?

**Andy Slaughter:** My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point, and one that I will come on to.

If the Lord Chancellor is a prison reformer, as he is now billed, we are prepared to work with him. He could start with the Prison Reform Trust report, "Correction or care? the use of custody for children in trouble", published last year, which looked at successful models around the world. Successful prisons are becoming smaller, more focused and more rooted locally, which is why he is right to abandon his predecessor's plans for a new borstal. Although he is also to be commended for wishing to close unsuitable prisons, if, as a consequence, prisons are built a long way from friends and family or we move from local to titan prisons, that will have its own drawbacks.

We need prison watchdogs with real teeth and independence. The outgoing inspector, Nick Hardwick, has done a great job in spite of, not because of the Government. This brings me to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq). The reports last week that the MOJ had tried to control or muzzle him were outrageous. I welcome the Lord Chancellor's announcement yesterday that he will retain Mr Hardwick's expertise as head of the Parole Board, but let us use this opportunity to shake things up. We need a stronger, more independent inspectorate that is able to produce reports with total independence from the MOJ and to conduct more frequent and unannounced inspections.

**Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman paints a bleak picture. Of course we must always do more, but does he accept that, according to a recent report by the chief inspector, outcomes for women have improved and the number of children in custody has fallen?

**Andy Slaughter:** I accept entirely what the hon. Lady says. I am painting a realistic picture, as the necessary starting point for the improvements that Members on both sides of the House wish to see. There have been improvements. The decline in the number of people in youth custody, from more than 3,000 to less than 1,000, is extremely impressive. It has happened under successive Governments. We are concerned, however, about the condition and treatment of the young people still in custody and the type of facility they are in. The incidents at Medway and elsewhere are examples of how things are failing in that sector as much as elsewhere.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) wrote in response to a prison report:

"Too often we see the response to a poor inspection report centre on the appointment of a new governor or the assertion that things have improved dramatically since the poor inspection took place."

It is time we put much greater effort into preventing people from getting involved in crime in the first place. We need a renewed focus on education and stepping in to divert young people from a life of crime. We must do better for trans people in our prison system. The "Dying for Justice" report, by the Institute of Race Relations, and the Harris review both revealed that black, Asian and

minority ethnic people were over-represented at every stage of the criminal justice process. Yesterday, I spoke at a meeting here on the discriminatory effects of joint enterprise charging decisions on BAME individuals and groups, and asked the Lord Chancellor to examine that area of law, which his predecessor failed to do.

In the light of the number of Members wishing to speak, I shall terminate my remarks. I welcome the change in tone on prisons since the Lord Chancellor's appointment, but so far that is about all it is. It is possible to be tough on crime, to put the protection of the public first and to make sure prisons play their role in punishment as well as in rehabilitation, but it is also true, to quote Dostoevsky, who knew a thing or two about crime and punishment, that,

"the degree of civilisation of a society can be judged by entering its prisons."

It is in the self-interest of every citizen that prisoners, having served their time, become productive members of society and do not continue to pose a risk through reoffending. The Lord Chancellor may not be "a muesli muncher", as he put it yesterday, but he is the Minister for porridge—and it is about time he served up something substantial.

4.31 pm

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Michael Gove):** Coming as I do from Aberdeen, I know that porridge is not necessarily something that we consider to be unattractive. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) might be relieved to hear that.

Let me first congratulate the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing this debate. I thank him for the serious way in which he laid out the scale of the challenge that my Department faces—and, indeed, that faces all of us in this House. He rightly drew attention to the fact that this is the fourth debate on prisons and probation in the last week. He was absolutely right to draw attention in particular to the excellent debate conducted in the other place last week. It was a debate on a motion initiated by Lord Fowler, a former Conservative Cabinet Minister, and it is striking that so many Conservative colleagues are here today. It is important to recognise across the House that the cause of prison reform is one that is shared by people from every political party and should not be regarded as the province of any particular political organisation or caucus.

In thanking the speakers in the House of Lords, I draw attention to the fact that the hon. Member for Hammersmith, as well as most of them, took the opportunity in the time allowed to them to thank those who work in our prisons. It is important for us all to place on the record if we have time—I recognise that many want to contribute to the debate—our gratitude for the courage and the idealism of those who work in our prisons. I mean not just prison officers, but chaplains, volunteers, teachers and others.

In tandem with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who is the prisons Minister, I had the opportunity last year to visit Manchester prison, or Strangeways as it used to be known. I spoke to a young man who works in the segregation unit and I asked him why he had chosen to work with some of the most challenging offenders. He explained movingly that

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he had come from a part of the city that was particularly affected by crime, and he wanted to do something in his own career and profession to help make his community safer. He chose to work with those challenging prisoners in the segregation unit because he believed that the personal relationships he could form with individuals there might be able to change their lives for the better while making his community safer. I believe that sort of idealism is typical of those who work in our prisons, and it reinforces an essential point: the quality of the relationship between those who work in our prisons and those for whom they care is not soft or in any way a retreat from public safety, but critical to ensuring it.

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman may be aware that the number of attacks on our prison staff has increased by 42%, and these range from severe cuts to damages to internal organs and fractures. In order to keep safe the people who, as he has outlined, work so hard in our prisons, will he order a review into safety at work for prison staff?

**Michael Gove:** The hon. Lady makes an entirely fair point. I do not deny the scale of the problem revealed in the statistics that she and her hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith deployed. The National Offender Management Service runs a violence reduction programme that involves studying precisely why there has been this upsurge in violence. Factors, which have been acknowledged by Members on both sides of the House, have contributed to that. One is the pattern of offenders. Prisons contain more people who have been convicted of violent and other challenging offences. It is also the case that the spread of new psychoactive substances—which have been misleadingly called “legal highs”, but which the Under-Secretary has more accurately termed “lethal highs”—has contributed to a lack of self-control and to psychosis, increased mental health problems and violence in our prison system. We must make some difficult choices to ensure that we limit the currently widespread availability of those drugs, and also keep people safe in our prisons. I shall talk about one or two of those choices shortly.

I agree that we face a problem—let me emphasise that—but I do not wish to use the word “crisis”, for two reasons. First, I think that it has the potential to undermine the morale of the people who work in our prisons. Secondly, I think that it might draw attention away from the incremental changes that we need to make, which can add up to a significant programme of prison reform. If we allow ourselves to be panicked by headlines and scared into overreaction, we may not be able to take the solid incremental steps that we need to take if we are to improve the present situation.

I was struck by the concern expressed by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) about prison staff numbers. Those of us who care about not just the safety of staff but the effectiveness of the prison regime are understandably keen for our prisons to be staffed effectively, but let me make two points. First, the number of prison officers has increased by more than 500 in the last year. Secondly, there is no absolute correlation between the number of prison officers and

the nature of the regime, and the number of violent incidents. I do not deny for a moment that we need to ensure that prisons are properly staffed and prison officers are safe, but the extent of the security that individuals enjoy in a prison is a consequence of a number of factors.

**Steve Rotheram:** The Secretary of State is absolutely right. Not only should there be safe staffing levels, but we have a duty of care to ensure that that is the case. However, it was Her Majesty’s chief inspector of prisons, not me, who identified the correlation between low staff numbers and the propensity for drug-taking on the prison estate.

**Michael Gove:** The hon. Gentleman is right to say that, if we are to deal with this problem, we must be vigilant in ensuring that we have not just staff but the training that is needed to support them.

The hon. Gentleman’s mention of the chief inspector of prisons gives me an opportunity to repeat what I had a chance to say only briefly yesterday, and again to express my gratitude to Nick Hardwick for the role that he has played. His latest annual report certainly does not make comfortable reading for someone in my job, but I would far rather have someone who told us the truth, and ensured that we performed our duties as elected representatives and as Ministers in the full knowledge of the truth, than someone who felt, for whatever reason, that they had to varnish or edit the truth. As I think most people would acknowledge, Nick Hardwick and I do not come from exactly the same point on the ideological spectrum, but because I am committed to using every talented voice and experienced pair of hands that I can find in order to improve our prison system, I am delighted that he accepted my invitation to chair the Parole Board.

It is understandable that, during an Opposition day debate, the hon. Member for Hammersmith should point the finger at failings that he alleges are unique to the Conservatives, and it is understandable that he should focus on the trends and statistics that appear to have worsened under a Conservative Government. However, it is also appropriate to recognise that, as was pointed out by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier), there were problems under Labour as well. For example, the incidence of reoffending—which I think provides a real index of the effectiveness of our prisons—is broadly unchanged. I do not say that because I want to make a partisan point; I say it merely because I want to emphasise the difficulties that we all face in improving our prison and probation service. In 2009, 46.9% of those who served custodial sentences went on to reoffend. The figure is now 45.1%. If I wanted to make a partisan point, I would say that the number of reoffenders had declined, but in fact the difference is statistically insignificant, and it is a reproach to all of us.

**Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend has made an important point about reoffending. I wonder whether he has had a chance to consider my suggestion that the probation and police services should be merged so that offender management outside the prison estate becomes the responsibility of the police, who, in the end, are having to pick up the

pieces. Might we not see a step change in the numbers that he has just outlined if we made that move, as well as quite a large financial saving?

**Michael Gove:** I thank my hon. Friend for the work he did as Deputy Mayor of London, when he was responsible for policing and crime and made a significant contribution to reducing knife crime on our streets and in deploying the Metropolitan police more effectively. I think all of us would agree that prisons and probation cannot work effectively unless there is a close working relationship with the police service. However, I would caution against making a change at this point of the kind my hon. Friend suggests. It is a fascinating idea, and it has been put to me by others whom I respect, but we are just 12 months into the transforming rehabilitation programme initiated by my predecessor, and it is only appropriate that we acknowledge that that programme has already seen an increase in the number of frontline probation officers, again of more than 500.<sup>1</sup> Yes, it has brought in commercial expertise, but it has also brought in the charitable and voluntary sector and, for the first time, there is a direct requirement to provide support for those prisoners who leave after serving sentences of 12 months or less.

I think that was a humane and wise decision on the part of my predecessor, because we know that people who serve shorter sentences are more likely to reoffend. We can debate the factors that drive that, but what is undeniable is that if someone has served a shorter sentence—if they are part of that cohort more likely to reoffend—they deserve the support of probation just as much as, if not more than, other offenders.

The situation that used to prevail, where these offenders would be given £46 and left to their own devices as they went through the prison gate, was replaced by my predecessor and it is only appropriate that this House, whatever other criticisms it directs at this Government, acknowledges that that was a step forward for which he was responsible.

**Andrew Gwynne:** The right hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the persistent failure in reducing reoffending rates. Of course part of the challenge in successfully rehabilitating a prisoner is making sure their health and welfare are looked after while they are in prison and also that, when they are released from prison, there is adequate support in the community, particularly for their mental health needs. What more does the right hon. Gentleman think should be done, that is not being done at present, to improve that?

**Michael Gove:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, and let me answer it by saying a little more about my analysis—our shared view on the Front Bench—of what contributes to crime, and therefore how we might reduce it.

There are more than 85,000 people in our prisons; 5,000 of them are female prisoners, and almost 10,000 are foreign national offenders, and we obviously want to try to reduce that number by having as many as possible serving sentences abroad. Of the remainder, some have made a conscious decision to do the wrong thing; they have crossed a moral line and society has to make it clear, with a serious punishment, that they should not be let out. It is not just that they are a danger to others; we have got to enforce the principle—the

clear, bright line between right and wrong. But there are others in our prison system who will be suffering from mental health problems, and sometimes very serious personality disorders, and while they pose a danger to the public, they also pose a danger to themselves. We need to ensure we improve what is called diversion and liaison—the early detection of these problems and making sure there is an appropriate health solution—and if we do need to keep them safe, whether in a secure hospital or a prison, we also need to ensure that there is the right mental health provision for them.

One of the things I have been doing in the last two weeks is talking to the Secretary of State for Health and the Minister with responsibility for prisoners' health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), and I am due to talk to Simon Stevens, the director of the NHS, in order to ensure we can develop a more sophisticated approach. I am also grateful for the work done in this area by Lord Bradley, whose report on offenders' mental health under the last Government contains a number of powerful recommendations.

**Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab):** I have done work in my local area of Tyneside with a veterans group, many of whom are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. One thing we have done is develop work in the United States, which has a veterans' treatment course. The course in Buffalo is the best example; it was the first to be set up and, out of 300 cases, not one reoffended. Will the Secretary of State meet the people involved in this work to try to see if we can make this work, in everybody's interests?

**Michael Gove:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. We already take seriously the position of veterans in the criminal justice system. At the behest of my predecessor, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) has produced a report on the care of those offenders, and the Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice, is carrying forward that work. In particular, he is working with Care after Combat, a charity that supports offenders who have been in the military.

The hon. Gentleman's point about problem-solving courts is also powerful. When I had the opportunity to visit the United States of America, I saw how veterans courts, drugs courts and problem-solving courts can make a real difference in keeping people out of jail and helping them to put their lives back together, so I would be more than happy to ensure that the Minister talks to the hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Gentleman's intervention brings me on to my next point. Yes, there are some people in our prisons who deserve to be there because they have done wrong. Yes, there are some people in our prisons who are there because of mental health or personality disorders. And then there are other people who have made profound mistakes, crossed the line and committed crimes, but whose actions deserve to be placed in context. I am not for a moment suggesting that the pain a victim feels is any less as a result of the difficult circumstances that some people have been brought up in, but if we want to ensure that there are fewer victims and less pain, we need to ask ourselves what led that young man or woman into criminal activity.

1. [Official Report, 23 February 2016, Vol. 606, c. 3-4MC.]

[*Michael Gove*]

In many cases, the individual will have grown up in a home where violence was the norm. They might have witnessed domestic violence in their very early years. Their brain development might have been arrested by a failure to ensure that there was a loving and secure attachment to a parent or carer who put them first. There might have been an absence not only of love but of loving authority—perhaps no one cared enough about them to teach them the difference between right and wrong. Someone who grew up in such circumstances could go to primary school ill-equipped to benefit from good teaching and go on to secondary school still unable to read.

Such people could find in the culture of gangs on the streets a warmth, a false camaraderie and a sense of self-esteem that they had never found anywhere else. That individual could then go on to commit crimes. Of course, once that individual has broken the law, justice must be done. However, as well as ensuring that justice is done in our courts, we must also ensure that social justice is done on our streets. That means looking at some of the root causes—family breakdown, substance abuse, domestic violence—that contribute to the difficulties that these young people grow up in.

**Kit Malthouse:** My right hon. Friend is making a profound and powerful point, with which I agree. Does he also agree that the involvement of alcohol is one of the largest drivers of short sentences, and that it often tips people over the edge? He will be aware of the compulsory sobriety project, which has been running in Croydon with powerful results. Now that he has licensed its use across the country, will he put some of his Department's resources into spreading this disposal, which avoids the need for people to go to prison altogether and is a much more effective treatment for the problem? In removing alcohol, it removes offending.

**Michael Gove:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The Minister for Policing has been closely involved in that pilot. So far as we can see, sobriety tags have made a significant contribution to reducing reoffending, and we hope that they will be able to form part of a significant extension of what is known as electronic monitoring, or tagging—in other words, ways in which individuals can be monitored to ensure that they stay on the straight and narrow, as far as possible, in a cheaper and more effective way that can often enable them to maintain their links with work, family or education, which are critical to improving their lives.

That brings me to the hon. Member for Hammersmith's challenge: what are we going to do about these things? I will be honest: I came into this job not expecting to be in it, but I have found it fascinating and challenging and I have found some of those with whom I have to work inspiring. In contrast to the time that I spent at the Department for Education—I had three years to shadow; when I came to office I had a clear plan that I wished to implement, although not one that necessarily recommended itself to all parts of the House—I have deliberately set out to listen and to learn. I have asked people whose idealism is not in doubt and whose ability is clear to explore the landscape for me. That is why I asked Sally Coates, who cares about the education of

the disadvantaged, to look at education in our prison system. Her report will be published in the next couple of months.

It is already clear, as a result of a decision made at the time of the autumn statement, that money that was previously spent by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills will now be spent by us in a way that suits prisoners and the needs of offenders and of wider society rather than the requirements of a further education framework that was not appropriate for all offenders. More will be said by Sally in due course and by Charlie Taylor, who has devoted most of his career to working with some of the most difficult young people and who, in his review of the youth estate, has drawn preliminary lessons similar to those highlighted by the hon. Member for Hammersmith.

Yes, it is the case that young offenders are, in many cases, better cared for in smaller environments. Yes, it is the case that they need structure and discipline in their lives, but they also need a clear path towards educational attainment. One problem in our prisons is that, for many, educational attainment is capped by the way in which qualifications have been funded and educational providers have been procured. Prisoners have had diet after diet after diet of level 2 qualifications, which initially may give them a sense of purpose and renewed hope, but ultimately end up with them on a hamster wheel where they are not making the progress—in terms of education and of rehabilitation—that we would like to see.

I have addressed the issue of improving education. I have also asked the Under-Secretary to lead a programme to ensure that we can get more prisoners working fruitfully. That will mean: building on the success of organisations such as Halfords and Timpson that have done so much to recruit offenders; incarnating the lessons that the Mayor of London pointed out last week when he said that many employers found that ex-offenders are more honest and more reliable than many of those whom they hire; and providing new incentives for prison governors to give their inmates meaningful work. We must think hard about how we can expand the use of release on temporary licence.

We need to give governors more power to ensure that offenders, at a particular point in their sentence when the governor is as sure as he or she can be that that individual's risk to others is diminishing, have the opportunity to go out during the day to work or to acquire educational qualifications to prepare them for life on the outside. Almost every prisoner will be let out at some point; we cannot keep every criminal in jail forever. If we are to release prisoners at some point, it is far, far better that they have, by a process of acclimatisation and growth, learned what it is to work responsibly in an appropriate environment or to work hard to acquire the educational qualifications that will give them a new start.

As well as giving governors more power over release on temporary licence, we want to give them more autonomy overall. In offering governors more autonomy, I know that there will be some—perhaps it will be colleagues in the Prison Officers Association—who think that this is a Trojan horse for privatisation or for a bigger role for the private sector. Let me say two things. First, the private sector has had something to offer in prisons, and that is something that unites both Front-Bench

teams. There was a growth in the number of private prisons under Labour, and private prisons such as G4S's Prison Parc in Bridgend do an exemplary job. That is underlined in every inspection.

I want to see governors who are currently in the system—people who joined the National Offender Management Service because of their idealism—given more freedom within the state sector to do what they do best. Baldly, my model is one of academy principals or of the chief executives and clinical directors of NHS foundation trusts who have shown that, with increased autonomy within a structure of clear accountability, they can achieve significant improvements.

I began by saying that I was grateful for the tone in which this debate was opened by the hon. Member for Hammersmith and I am looking forward to hearing and reading as many of the contributions as possible. Let me apologise to the House for the fact that I will have to leave the Chamber at 5.30, although I hope to return at 6.30. Every single contribution to this debate matters. All 85,000 of the prison population, which is so often out of sight and out of mind, are individuals whom we should see not as liabilities but as potential assets. Many of them have led broken lives and many of them have brought pain and misery into the lives of others, but we want to ensure that, in the future, they can contribute to our society rather than bring more pain and misery.

We are tough on crime in the Conservative party, and we appreciate that really being tough on crime means being intellectually tough enough to wrestle with the problems of why crime occurs and how to stop criminals from offending again. What is truly soft on crime is being intellectually soft and reaching for easy, simple soundbites instead of intellectually rigorous solutions, and that is why I commend the Government's prison reform programme to the House.

4.55 pm

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): The question of how prisons cope with offenders safely and securely is incredibly important, so I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. The concern that prisons are becoming an increasingly dangerous environment for staff and prisoners must be addressed. On the one hand, we have people with the incredibly tough job of regulating and ensuring the safety of those in prisons and, on the other hand, we have offenders who are themselves vulnerable, especially in relation to their mental health. The claim by the outgoing chief inspector of prisons for England and Wales that prisons are at their worst for 10 years is therefore alarming. Deaths in prison custody, incidents of self-harm and assaults on staff are grave issues, so it is important not only that they are tackled, but that we discover their root causes and develop legislation that aims to curb negative behaviours.

Prisons are a devolved issue in Scotland, and the approach of the Scottish Government is distinct from that for England and Wales. While we might be dealing with similar challenges on crime and punishment, we respond to offenders differently. The strategy in Scotland reflects our reshaping of penal policy. The decision not to proceed with the women's prison in Inverclyde highlights the fact that the Scottish Government are listening and want to reform prisons to make things better for those

serving their sentences and the people who work there. Funding will instead go to alternative initiatives further to reduce reoffending with an emphasis on rehabilitation and effective reintegration. Reducing reoffending is a key aspect of resolving the problems faced by the prison system and society as a whole. Reoffending costs about £3 billion a year. It creates victims, damages communities and wastes potential.

The Scottish Government recognise the specific needs of female offenders. Some £1.5 million of community-based justice services for women and support for specialist services for female offenders have been costed. They are based on recommendations by the commission on women offenders and include intensive support to overcome problems caused by alcohol, drugs, mental health and domestic abuse trauma, as evidence shows that they can be drivers of offending behaviour.

The change of policy has been widely accepted. Sharon Stirrat, the director of operations west of Sacro, the community justice organisation, voiced her support of the Scottish Government's plans. She said that Sacro supports

“the use of credible alternatives to imprisonment for women, many of whom present with multiple and complex issues. The strong focus on recovery, improved partnership working and the investment in community-based services offer an encouraging way forward.”

The Scottish Government believe that short-term prison sentences are ineffective and contribute to several of the problems cited in the motion, yet community-based alternatives such as electronic monitoring and community support initiatives can curb the violence, abuses and ill mental health associated with prison life. Such an approach has already been successful in Scotland.

The Scottish National party's vision for Scottish penal reform reflects our aim of trying to mitigate some of the effects of austerity on vulnerable people. Through such reform, the SNP offers a safe and effective alternative to the prison system with a focus on rehabilitation, reintegration and a reduction in reoffending. The policy is deliverable within the Scottish budget and tackles the root causes of the very issues that Labour opposes in its motion.

4.59 pm

**Mr Kenneth Clarke** (Rushcliffe) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier) said that some of the dire descriptions of the state of affairs in the prison system could have been given in the House several times in the past few decades. Twenty-five years ago, when I was Home Secretary, and responsible for the prison system, we had debates such as this one, and we have not made enough progress since then, I quite agree.

I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor has provided a new impetus with positive new ideas, and the tone of his speech—and the tone of his speeches since he began to address the issue after, as he said, studying the subject and propounding the way he meant to go on—has been extremely reassuring. The prison system is what we are all rightly concentrating on, as that is where the problems are. I agree with what has been said: the prison system serves two purposes. One is just retribution and punishment, both for serious crime where people have deliberately decided for personal

[*Mr Kenneth Clarke*]

advantage to defy the law, and for people who commit dangerous and violent acts when they lose, or fail to keep, self-control.

The second principal purpose of prison is to try to reform prisoners and to try to ensure that as many of them as possible are cured of their former behaviour when they leave prison so that they find a new purpose in life and do not offend again. Every prisoner reformed means fewer crimes and fewer victims in future. I am delighted that in his approach to his task the Lord Chancellor has put rehabilitation of offenders, where offenders are prepared to take advantage of the opportunities, at the forefront of his aims.

I made speeches in the last Parliament when I was Lord Chancellor covering much of this ground, but I will not repeat any of that. Those fascinated by my ancient views can go back and read them again. My right hon. Friend has spoken about raising the standard of education in prison. Far too many prisoners do not attain any basic standards of literacy or numeracy. Raising skills levels for outside employment is important, as far too many prisoners have never had a job in their life, and we should bring yet more businesses in to join the existing excellent businesses that give proper skills training to prisoners in prison.

We need to tackle drug abuse, which remains scandalously high in prison. We must deal with mental health problems, which are the biggest single issue in raising the healthcare standards of people in prison. I agree with all of that, and I support my right hon. Friend's enlightened policies. Rehabilitation has been the Government's agenda ever since we were first elected. Looking back at our performance, I concede that I am disappointed by the progress we have made. Prison management in the Ministry of Justice is infinitely better than it was 25 years ago, and some things have improved. Staff are keen to see the progress described by my right hon. Friend, and there are successes in the treatment of women offenders and young offenders, despite the problems in some institutions, as has been said.

The test that I apply is on the success that we have achieved in rehabilitation. No one shrinks from the fact that we still have to confess that 45% of adult offenders reoffend within 12 months of release. For offenders who serve sentences of less than 12 months, the figure, I believe, is 58%, which means that the prison system is not working as effectively as it should to protect honest citizens outside.

No one knows exactly why that problem is so persistent, but I remain strongly of the view that part of the trouble, if we look at enlightened policies not delivering the results—that is the test we should consider—is the fact that there are too many prisoners in prison. We cannot deliver these policies in squalid overcrowded slums where we do not have the space or the resources to deliver education, training, proper healthcare and better attitudes of the kind we wish to give.

A few years ago when I was Lord Chancellor I complained that the prison population had doubled since I was Home Secretary, despite the fact that the level of crime in the country had markedly dropped. I do not think there was any relation between the two because crime has dropped across the entire western world, in those countries that have shortened their

incarceration rate and in those that have extended it. We now have the highest incarceration rate in democratic Europe. We are second only to the United States, where many states now are making determined efforts with even right-wing leadership to get the incarceration rate down and get out of the prisons the people who should not be there.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

**Mr Clarke:** No. I am sorry. I know my hon. Friend's views. That is not the reason that I am not giving way. I look forward to hearing them in the short time available, but I do not want to cut anybody out of this debate.

I believe that we should set out as one of our objectives reducing the prison population. I say to my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor, who is still in his place, that I set out to do that, not only because I believed that there were people in prison who should not be there, but because that reduction underpinned the bold spending commitments that I offered to the Treasury and which it gratefully accepted. I proposed a 30% cut in the budget of the Department that I had walked into, partly based—there were other savings as well—on getting down the ridiculously excessive prison population. I got it sagging, but it has gone up again, and it is about where it was when we came into office.

My right hon. Friend should not shrink from sentencing reform. He should consult my friend Lord Justice Treacy, who is in charge of the Sentencing Council, face up to the fact that mandatory minimum levels of all kinds do not match the reality of the varied circumstances of cases, develop better non-custodial sentences and so on. There is a whole speech to be made on that.

Finally, I shall concentrate on one positive suggestion, on which I think my right hon. Friend could proceed, serving the cause of justice, which above all we have to follow, and also meeting the needs of the moment by reducing unnecessary overcrowding. I urge him to get rid of the last vestiges of indeterminate sentences and those who are still serving such sentences in prison. Those sentences were introduced in 2003, they took off surprisingly, and I abolished them in 2012. They were sentences where a minimum tariff was given to reflect the crime but the prisoner would be held in prison indefinitely until he was able to satisfy the Parole Board that he was no longer a risk, or rather that the risks were manageable. I assumed that once we abolished those sentences so that no more would receive them, we would not keep for long those who were already serving such sentences as they steadily earned their release. That has not happened.

When I was Lord Chancellor, there were over 6,000 prisoners serving indeterminate sentences. The forecast was that there would be 8,000 or 9,000 by 2015. We have over 4,000 still there. Of those, three quarters have now exceeded the tariff—the sentence that the judge gave them for their offence—and 392 prisoners have already served five times the sentence imposed on them. Some of them will never be released unless we change the sentencing system. My right hon. Friend has the power to do so.

I wanted to get rid of those sentences altogether and let people out as they reached the tariff. Senior colleagues were understandably nervous and cautious about that

and I was not allowed to take the step I wanted to take to achieve that. I took the power in the Bill. If my right hon. Friend studies the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, he will see that he has the power to alter the terms of reference for the Parole Board. At the moment, the individual prisoner has to prove to the Parole Board that he poses no risk. Of course, no prisoner could make any of us certain that he will not reoffend when released; we just hope that most of them will not. The burden should be the other way around: we should only keep a prisoner indefinitely—some of them will stay for life if we are not careful—when there is reason to believe that he would pose a risk if released.

There are 4,000 prisoners that my right hon. Friend could steadily and more rapidly get rid of. I think that easing the pressures on the Prison Service would help him achieve all his goals. I very much hope that he achieves them. If he can deliver what he has decided to try to deliver, he will indeed be a great reforming Lord Chancellor.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. After we hear from Ian Lavery, I will put a six-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

5.10 pm

**Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab):** The tone of this debate has been very civil, so let us hope that that continues—I am not sure whether it will. I am reassured by the civil tone taken by the Justice Secretary, a man I have a lot of respect for, as I do for the Prisons Minister, who I have met on many occasions to discuss the prison nearest my constituency. The Opposition's motion is well crafted and spells out clearly the situation facing not only the Prison Service, but the probation service—the debate so far has not focused enough on the probation service.

It is absolutely clear that the Prison Service is in utter chaos. Now, I am not looking to put the blame on anybody. I am not looking to hold these six fingers up and say, "You've been in for six years, so you should have cleared it by now." And I do not want anybody to intervene and ask, "What did you do when you were in power?" That is not the issue; the issue is how we put this situation right. The Prison Service is in utter chaos, and I am not bothered about what anybody says, because I have had constituents coming to see me about it, including prisoners, members of the public, teachers, chaplains, people who work on the prisons estate and members of the Prison Officers Association. It is right to place on the record our high praise for the men and women in the Prison Service and the probation service, who do a fantastic job in the most difficult circumstances. It is important that they realise that Members of this House understand the problems they face.

It was not just the unions or individuals who have suggested that the Prison Service has deteriorated; it was the chief inspector of prisons himself. He said that they were the worst he had seen them for 10 years. At the same time as the prison population continues to increase—a record 85,000-plus people are now in prison—we are seeing a reduction in the number of staff on the prisons estate. We have more prisoners but fewer people looking after them. Surely that is a recipe for disaster.

The Justice Secretary said there have been 500 new recruits over the past year or so, but we must consider the staff reductions on the prisons estate before then. We lost lots of people with tremendous experience from the Prison Service, and the people who filled that hole are on lower wages, have worse terms and conditions and lack any experience in what is an important occupation. We lost that experience from the Prison Service and have not regained that ground.

All of us, as politicians, have deep concerns about this situation, and I will tell Members why. This has been mentioned already, but let us look at the bare statistics on what is happening in the Prison Service as we sit here debating. Deaths in custody are up by 14%, self-harming is up by 21%, and prisoner-on-prisoner assaults are up by 13%. There were 4,156 staff assaulted by prisoners last year—a 20% increase, which has got to horrify everyone—and 572 serious assaults on staff, an increase of 42%, as Members on both sides of the House have said. At the very least, we should be ensuring that members of the Prison Service, who are doing the job that they are paid to do, should be safe in doing so. These rates show that there must be fear and stress every time they get out of bed in the morning or the evening. We are not looking after them—the statistics show that. We have seen the horrific injuries that many of them have received while doing a day's work to put shoes on the kids and bread on the table. We should be looking at ways and means of ensuring that these statistics are greatly reduced.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) talked about reoffending rates. The adult reoffending rate is now 45.8%—that is wholly unacceptable—and the juvenile reoffending rate is 66.5%. We have to get to the bottom of this, because if we do not, the rates will continue to increase and there will be further chaos on the prison estate. It is frightening. I am not being alarmist, but the Prison Service is in complete and utter meltdown and mayhem.

When we talk about the privatisation of prisons, which has happened many times, it is said, "Well, the Opposition privatised prisons when they were in government." That is true—it is pointless my standing here trying to erase historical facts—but that does not make it any better when we see what is happening in some privatised prisons today. Sodexo was the successful bidder to operate HMP Northumberland, the prison nearest to my constituency. Immediately, the Sodexo model was to reduce the workforce from 440 to 270. That frightened so many experienced people—I have mentioned them before—that there was a rush for redundancies and many of them left the service, something that we did not want to see.

People who come to see me are frightened. We hear reports about what is happening in the likes of HMP Northumberland with the drugs and the Spice. Spice must be unbelievable. I am not sure if anybody here will admit to having taken it. Certainly I have not, and it would not be my intention to do so. People reckon that Spice is rife—that everybody in the prison is on it, and if not there is something wrong with them, so they should be on it. How are they getting this stuff into the prison? Why has it been allowed to escalate to the proportions it has? Someone mentioned earlier the Bill on legal highs that is passing through Parliament. It does not matter whether these highs are legal or illegal—we must stamp

[*Ian Lavery*]

them out on the prison estate, because they are causing problems with violence and everything else associated with the things we are discussing.

Alcohol is a huge problem. There is alcohol in the prisons. People are making their own alcohol. Not last Christmas but the Christmas before, there was an emergency situation in HMP Northumberland where the contact room could not get in contact with one of the prison officers. He was a man who had just been employed; he had not even been checked. He was one of the people who had no experience, but he knew from where he lived a few of the prisoners, who were his mates. Those in charge looked for him and tried to contact him—this was on new year's day—and when they eventually went up on the wing, where the doors were open and everyone in the prison was having a whale of a time, they found not the prisoners lying intoxicated on their beds, but the prison officer. The real crime was that the keys for the wing were lying there for anybody to get hold of, which I believe is considered a cardinal sin.

I have raised such points with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who has responsibility for prisons. Similar things are happening. We have people with mobile phones arranging crimes from their cells. That cannot be right, and we must stamp it out. We have discussed such things. We have bullying and intimidation as we have never seen them before. Another incident at HMP Northumberland that we need to look at happened when there were not enough prison staff to ensure the segregation of vulnerable prisoners from ordinary, mainstream ones. That caused absolute mayhem, as hon. Members can understand. Faeces were found in the vulnerable prisoners' food, which cannot be allowed to happen in the modern day.

I will wrap up simply by saying that I hope, in this debate on prisons and probation, that someone will speak about the probation side. Since privatisation, the fragmentation of the probation service has caused lots of problems within the service, which is something else we need to consider.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. There is now a six-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

5.21 pm

**Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con):** It is a pleasure and a privilege to speak in this very important debate. I recognise the serious tone that has been adopted by hon. Members thus far.

I particularly commend the Lord Chancellor for his immensely impressive analysis. He was spot on both about the cause of offending and about the way forward. I commend his analysis to my hon. Friends not just as thorough and thoughtful, but, from my point of view, as profoundly Conservative. As he rightly observed, none of us has a monopoly on understanding the need for prison reform.

The issues are intractable. When I started to make prison visits as a young barrister some 30—nearer 40—years ago, institutions or facilities such as Wandsworth,

Holloway and Wormwood Scrubs were already unsatisfactory and not fit for purpose. They have not got better since, and the pressures have become greater. The pressures of overcrowding and of contraband entering prisons existed then—contraband has long been an issue; what has changed is simply the nature of the technology of the contraband and the means by which it is brought in—so these are long-standing issues.

The Lord Chancellor and his team deserve credit for addressing such issues, and particularly for having the imagination to replace our ageing Victorian prison estate when it is virtually impossible to carry out serious rehabilitative work, and given that dealing with the very real mental health and psychological issues of many prisoners is and should also be a top priority. Now that he has set out a vision, I hope that the Lord Chancellor will very swiftly give the House detailed proposals on how we can move forward.

The Justice Committee is currently carrying out an inquiry concentrating on young adult offenders, which is a particularly difficult subset of the prison population. The inquiry is influenced by the excellent review by Lord Harris of Haringey; in fairness, I should say that his work was done at the request of the previous Lord Chancellor in the coalition Government. The Government have responded to Lord Harris's review, but I would argue that its detail—it goes beyond purely the specifics of young offenders to draw many other lessons—deserves a more detailed and substantive response than has been made so far. Much that is of general application can be taken from the review.

Safety in prisons is a critical issue. I do not doubt the quality of our prison staff. In the course of our inquiry, the Select Committee has visited Holloway prison and the young offenders institution at Aylesbury, where excellent people are working. My concern is that the senior management of NOMS do not always give the impression that, in their operations on the ground, they have worked through in practice the assurances they have given us in the Select Committee or elsewhere. It is important that NOMS has a genuinely flexible and responsive management system. There is scope for further review of the way in which NOMS delivers its laudable objectives in practice. I am sure that the new chief inspector, whom we look forward to having back before the Select Committee in about three months' time, will have a strategy on that matter that he will want to discuss with the Lord Chancellor.

The Select Committee was particularly struck during the inquiry by the evidence we took from the families of young people who had died in custody. It was profoundly moving and demonstrated that there have been repeated and needless failings in some areas, such as sharing information and acting swiftly and decisively on information that could have been addressed. Those things can be put right through fairly basic measures.

There are successes and failings in the prison estate, but neither the successes nor the failings are unique to either privatised or publicly run prisons. We need to be realistic and not simplistic about that. We welcome the evidence that the prisons Minister and the chief executive of NOMS have given to us, but we think that there needs to be a specific programme, with action plans, to tackle violence and self-harm in prisons. I agree that there must certainly be more of an emphasis on rehabilitation.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) was right to refer to the pointlessness of continuing with the so-called indeterminate public protection sentences. Yesterday, I was at the same event as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), where that point, among others, was made powerfully. We could start work on that swiftly.

We should recognise that a structured life and meaningful work are important in prison. Perhaps we should see whether we can remove some of the legal constraints that prevent meaningful and paid employment. Perhaps it would be right for prisoners to do work that is taxable. The money that they earned could be set aside for them and their families upon release. The Lord Chancellor's vision points in that direction and I hope that he will give us more detail on how that might be achieved.

Finally, it is important that we have a robust inspectorate to ensure compliance. I wish the new inspector well. I hope that the protocol that was referred to when the permanent secretary and the outgoing chief inspector gave evidence to us recently will be put in place swiftly to ensure that resourcing and independence are not an issue in the ability of the inspectorate to deliver its important work.

All in all, this is an important and thoughtful debate. Those who believe in genuine reform and not in simplistic sloganising, and those who have spent much of their working lives in the system will welcome it.

5.27 pm

**Jenny Chapman** (Darlington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for his tenacity in at last securing this Opposition day debate on prisons.

In preparing this speech, I thought about the different angles from which I could come at the topic. I could have picked radicalisation, women offenders, mental health, drugs, violence, opportunities for early intervention and diversion, or young people. There are plenty of ways to approach the topic of prisons, but I will talk mostly about staff. I spent five years shadowing prisons Ministers. As one would expect, I visited prisons regularly and met hundreds of prison staff, as well as offenders and victims of crime. I cannot tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, how poorly understood, undervalued and ignored our criminal justice workforce feel and, indeed, have become.

That was brought home to me in the starkest possible way when a custody officer, Lorraine Barwell, lost her life at the hands of a prisoner at work. When serving armed forces personnel lose their lives in the course of duty or when, occasionally, police officers sadly lose their lives in the course of duty, their names are rightly read out at the beginning of Prime Minister's questions that week. No such honour was afforded to Lorraine. I know that no disrespect was intended, but it does illustrate the disparity in the esteem in which prison officers and other uniformed services are held.

Those of us in the House with an interest in prisons policy—it is great that there is so much interest today that there is a speaking limit—have the capability and, I would say, the duty to change that, and change it we must. There is no doubt in my mind that our prisons are in a dreadful state, but, with the right leadership

from the Government, it is prison staff who hold the key to unlocking the rehabilitation revolution that we all want.

Several Government Members have said that it is all very well our presenting this motion to the House, but we could have presented it six years ago, in 2010, when things were just as bad. They should take absolutely no pride or comfort in that fact. I want to be part of a Parliament that sees improvement. The opportunity to deliver the rehabilitation revolution that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) promised us—and that I believe he so dearly wanted and tried to deliver—has been completely wasted in the last five years. We have seen a deterioration of standards in our prisons and no improvement at all.

So how bad is it really? It is my view—and the data from the Ministry of Justice bear this out—that our jails have never been less safe. Further, the interventions put in place by Government have been ineffective in putting prisons on course for improvement. They are getting worse; they are not getting better. Last year there were 95 self-inflicted deaths in prison. That means that, once every four days, someone in prison takes their own life. There have been seven murders in our prisons. These events are devastating for the families concerned, they sometimes leave victims feeling cheated and they can be deeply traumatic for staff.

The secret to safer prisons is in staffing, and I do not mean just staffing numbers—we have spoken about that already—although that is incredibly important. What I am talking about is what our staff actually do. All staff I have spoken to can tell us of occasions when they believed they made a difference, but they can also tell us of many more occasions when they wished they could have done more. I am all for bringing experts and specialists into prisons to help to deliver education, rehabilitative courses and the like—some of them work and do some good—but what we should be doing more of is using the experienced staff resource that is present on the wing, day in, day out. When a visit is cancelled, when news of a loved one dying needs imparting or when a fight breaks out, it is the officers who are there. They are the staff who should be demonstrating, and are demonstrating on a daily basis, how to keep one's cool, de-escalate a situation or sometimes, for example, even just how to take a joke properly. It is not psychologists, counsellors or boards of visitors who are present; it is prison officers. They are undervalued, undertrained and underutilised.

There are undeniably problems with substance misuse and mental health, particularly for women prisoners, when we look at the suicide rate.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I am interested to hear the hon. Lady refer to substance abuse. She will know that the figures indicate that there is a greater incidence of those addicted to substances in prison than there is outside. There is also the issue of how the drugs come in. How does she feel the Prison Service should stop drugs coming through the prison gates—perhaps the Minister could respond to that—and ensure that those inside who were not drug users before do not become drug users when they leave?

**Jenny Chapman:** I am extremely grateful for that intervention. The way we solve that is through staff, because they are there and it is their job to deal with it.

[Jenny Chapman]

There are not enough of them and they are not sufficiently well trained to perform that task to the standard that we want them to. I want our prisons to be safer, because if they are safer, they are doing their job of rehabilitation properly.

I want to raise one thing with the Minister. The Harris report on deaths in custody recommended that the Minister should phone the family of anybody who dies in prison by taking their own life. He has rejected that recommendation, but I would ask him to adopt it today—to phone the family of anyone who takes their own life and any member of staff who finds somebody who has taken their own life. That would focus his attention, but just as importantly it would focus the attention of his officials and senior staff in NOMS. Facing that reality is something that no official wants to do. They certainly do not want to have to prepare their Minister to do it. There is one self-inflicted death every four days. That is not good enough. He needs to take personal responsibility for that. It would be a welcome move on his part if he could commit that small amount of time to contact the family of someone who dies in our prisons, in our care, each time it occurs.

5.35 pm

**Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con): Sadly, I cannot support the motion on the Order Paper, but I agree with parts of it. As the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) said, we have high rates of violence, self-harm and drug use in prisons, which I agree puts pressure on our NHS. I agree that no staff member should have to go to work to face threats to their safety. Who is not concerned with rehabilitation? The question concerns what we do about it.

I want to focus on prisons. Let me begin by reading a short passage to the House:

“The justice budget is far too high. Over the course of the last two decades, the vision for the justice system has been a maximalist one: expanding the reach of the system into people’s lives; expanding state interference through...legislation; expanding the numbers of people entering the courts and, ultimately, entering prison. The justice budget therefore could and should be cut substantially, but it must be cut in the right way.”

Hon. Members could be forgiven for thinking that that is a quote from a Conservative manifesto or a right-leaning think-tank, but they would be wrong. It is the opening paragraph from the 2015 spending review submission from the Howard League for Penal Reform.

I believe that we have a golden opportunity in this country. We have a new Government, a reforming Justice Secretary—my goodness, did he not prove that today?—a tough financial environment and a third sector crying out for a different approach. It is therefore good that the Prime Minister said the following in his party conference speech last autumn:

“We have got to get away from the sterile lock-em-up or let-em-out debate, and get smart about this”.

He was quite right.

Our aim has to be to reduce the incidence of crime and the factors that pull people into the criminal justice system in the first place. Is our reason for doing so money? Yes, it is about money and the need to find big savings in the Department, but it is also about effective government. I believe—this is not often said in the

House—that it is also the Christian thing to do. Nearly half of all inmates go into prison with no qualifications. Many of them come out with none. All the problems that may have led them to that life remain unchanged, including, as the Secretary of State said, drug addiction, mental health problems and childhood abuse. Prison is literally locking poverty into our country and we as a society are paying the bills.

What is the intellectual basis for that? I have never been more sure that prison reform is compassionate Conservatism in action, both financial and social. That is why I would argue that criminal justice policy is not solely about the Ministry of Justice; it is as much about our education and welfare reforms. In my opinion, prison is the ultimate state failure, so a smaller secure estate is a smaller, cheaper and more effective state. That should be a cause that all Conservatives can rally around.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, if we are going to reduce the strain on our prisons, it is essential that we devise community penalties that are more robust and, frankly, more onerous, so that they can command the respect of the public, who rightly expect crime to be punished?

**Steve Brine:** I will come on to that. The community courts that I saw in the United States were a good step towards that. My hon. Friend will find that the Government are very interested in what is happening over there.

The Ministry of Justice is currently a demand-led Department—demand for prison places and probation services is fed by the criminal courts, which are in turn fed by the police and prosecution services, which are in turn fed by the incidence of crime. My view is that we should seek to place the penal system on a more sustainable footing by seeking to reduce demand on the system, particularly in respect of prison numbers, rather than pursuing the old, tired predict-and-provide policy.

If austerity did not force our hand, we should do it anyway. Austerity did not lead to the Right on Crime initiative in Texas, but we should look to it. The Justice Committee of the last Parliament, of which I was a member alongside the current Leader of the Opposition, visited Austin and Houston, where we met Republican state representative Jerry Madden, who is no fluffy liberal—he describes himself as a typical Texan Republican. He told us this:

“30% of the people in prison today we’re scared of - 70% we’re just mad at. We need to lock up the 30 and get a whole lot smarter about the 70.”

I think he is right. Let me be clear before anyone gets excited: this is not about throwing open the doors, but about slowing down the rate at which prisoners come in by providing less costly and more effective alternatives to sentences.

Custody should not be the only means through which society expresses its disapproval. Treatment should be a way of doing that, too. The Texan focus would therefore be to give judges options and to finally tackle the underlying causes of repeat offending. Madden made what must have been a welcome call on the Texas Governor of the time to recommend that he halve the budget earmarked for new prisoners and spend the rest on treatment instead. The drug courts that followed are one of his most striking creations. I spent an afternoon

in Houston in Judge Denise Bradley's STAR drug court in Harris County observing this new justice in action. Every one of the young people coming before it has been in prison before and is now a non-violent reoffender, which is why they are back.

Drug courts are a tough alternative. Offenders live in halfway house-style premises, but they hold jobs and maintain links with their families and, most importantly, their children. Every two weeks they come back to court for a kind of progress report. It is working. Recidivism rates in Texas are falling fast, so it is very welcome that the Government are exploring how we can bring these courts here to England and Wales.

There will always be serious offenders who need locking up and need to stay there. No one, neither here nor in Texas, is arguing any differently, but there are the others and we cannot afford the ongoing rate of state failure that they represent. I agree we should close the old Victorian prisons, but we should not just build more like-for-like. To be clear, I absolutely am saying we should reduce the prison population significantly. The Government should look again at older prisoners, the fastest-growing group in the estate, return to the 82 recommendations from Lord Bradley on the over-representation of people with mental health problems, and look again at Jean Corston's work on women prisoners.

The Justice Secretary said, in his first major speech last summer, that there is

"treasure in the heart of man".

I believe he is right. I believe that, like me, he is an optimist about the human condition. My right hon. Friend will know that Winston Churchill said:

"there is a treasure...in the heart of...man"—[*Official Report*, 20 July 1910; Vol. 19, c. 1354.]

at that Dispatch Box when he was Home Secretary with responsibility for police, prisons and prisoners. We have a much more fragmented system these days, but the basics have not changed. We can lock 'em up and spend a fortune biting off our nose to spite our face in the long run, but it is time to try something different.

5.42 pm

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I welcome the tone of the debate, and I welcome the Justice Secretary's approach in listening to those who work in the prison service and those who experience it. I have spoken to prison officers in my constituency, as well as to social workers who work with young offenders and to education workers in our prisons, in putting together my speech for this debate.

HMP Lancaster Farms is in my constituency and it employs a great number of my constituents. In the summer, I had the opportunity to visit the prison and meet staff and representatives of the Prison Officers Association. It was during that visit that I observed a control and restraint training session. It was clear that the physical requirements of being a prison officer were considerable. A concern raised with me by prison officers—they asked me to raise it in the House—is whether, with the increase in the retirement age to 68, we are expecting our prison officers to remain in effective service until that age, given what they face with incredibly strong, often young prisoners who challenge them physically as well as verbally.

Since November, it has been a criminal offence to throw items into a prison without authorisation, but at Lancaster Farms 36 parcels have been thrown over the fence and retrieved by staff. One such parcel contained a hunting knife—a horrific weapon that could have done a massive amount of damage had it made it into the hands of the prisoner it was intended for. During my visit, I had the opportunity to speak with Sarah Rigby, the POA branch chair at HMP Lancaster Farms. She raised concerns about the reduced staffing levels she has seen in the eight years she has worked at the prison. In the interests of listening to the voices in the profession, I hope the House will indulge me if I read from an email she sent me yesterday:

"the reduced staffing levels do mean that my colleagues and I do not feel as safe or confident in dealing with prisoners as we previously have done. When I first started working at Lancaster Farms there could be between 8 and 10 prison officers to supervise meal time when all of the wing would be unlocked. This meant that if a prisoner became non-compliant, or there was an incident (a fight, an assault for example) there was an adequate amount of staff to deal with the incident and to continue to supervise the rest of the wing. There are now 3 Prison Officers to supervise at meal times when the whole wing is unlocked and the majority of the time it is very difficult to find enough staff to ensure there are the minimum 3 we require before we are able to unlock. This is stressful and impacts on both staff and prisoners alike. It can also mean you deal with a situation very differently if you find yourself isolated with a prisoner threatening you. This would not have happened when we had more staff as there was always someone available to come to your aid. The reduced staffing levels also have an impact on prisoners in that we struggle to deliver as high a level of care as we used to be able to. There is little time for general conversation and for building good staff/prisoner relationships."

The latter point ties in with the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman).

In all my meetings with Sarah, she has always been passionate about her job—she is passionate about the rehabilitation of prisoners—but the reduced staffing levels are clearly distressing for her and her colleagues working with these vulnerable adults and trying to do their best by them. Assault is a fairly regular occurrence. I recently took on some casework on behalf of two prison officers at Lancaster Farms who were assaulted when a mixture of urine and faeces was thrown at them. The prisoner was prosecuted by the police, but when the victims are asked for their victim impact statements after the prisoner has been sentenced, what message does that send to our prison staff? It sends a message to prisoners that staff are there to be abused and assaulted with little or no consequences for their actions. This view is shared by prison officers I have spoken to in my constituency.

This week in Lancaster Farms, three members of staff were injured in an incident when restraining two prisoners who would not stop fighting. Further to this, two female officers have been assaulted in the last week. Sarah told me that

"neither were considered to be 'serious' as there were no visible injuries. Speaking from experience...there may be no visible injuries but these incidents always have a negative impact on staff - it is irrelevant whether or not they are considered to be serious."

These incidents and experiences of prison staff at HMP Lancaster Farms are sadly far from unique. The Government are presiding over a crisis in our prisons. Too many of our prisons are unsafe, overcrowded,

[Cat Smith]

understaffed and violent. It is not right that people go to work fearing violence, but that is the sad reality for our prison officers.

The latest statistics, which have been mentioned, are shocking: a 42% increase in the number of assaults on prison officers in the last year. Does the Minister think it acceptable that any prison officer should have to go to work facing such a threat of violence? We need the best and brightest to enter the profession to rehabilitate our prisoners. What message are we sending people considering this as a career option, when so many of them are being assaulted at work? The state of our prisons is letting down our prison staff, prisoners struggling to rehabilitate themselves, victims of crime and society.

5.48 pm

**Rebecca Harris** (Castle Point) (Con): I am delighted the Government have recognised the problems in our Prison Service that need to be addressed. In order to bring down crime rates, it is vital that we tackle reoffending rates in Britain, which we know are far too high. Those reoffending rates are no coincidence. Many prisoners who reoffend are habitual offenders who have been offered little or no rehabilitation during their time in prison. Often they have already been victims themselves. They have been failed by the inability of successive Governments, of all colours, to address problems such as drug addiction, mental health issues and poor education in wider society and the prison system.

That is why I believe it is vital to open up our prisons to many more outside organisations with new and fresh ideas. I want to mention the amazing work of my constituent, Jackie Hewitt-Main, of whom I am immensely proud, and the charity she founded, the Cascade Foundation, of which, I am proud to declare, I am a patron. The charity does amazing work. It has carried out a pilot at Chelmsford prison in Essex and is now working with the National Offender Management Service and Manchester college in Doncaster prison.

Cascade helps offenders at every stage in prison—from when they arrive, following through with education and then release and beyond, as it houses many prisoners when they leave. The primary focus is on assisting offenders who suffer from dyslexia or other learning difficulties and particularly head injuries, who have often long been overlooked and let down by their early experience in schools. We know that more than 70% of prisoners have low levels of literacy, and it is no wonder they are in prison. Many of them are not even able to take the theory part of the test for a driving licence, which would help them to get some legal work.

It is vital to approach such prisoners, but they have often not been well served by the prison education system. Many had a phobia about the classroom environment, and the novel multi-sensory techniques of the Cascade Foundation are superb for reaching those prisoners in a one-to-one way. Jackie and her team of trained ex-offenders and other prisoners use all kind of techniques, including the use of glitter, toothpaste, sand, even pastry cutters to try to engage these often illiterate prisoners, many of whom might be starting with pre-entry-level English.

By using these means, Jackie has achieved some extraordinary successes. The success stories speak for themselves and are inspirational. That is so much the case that Jackie's work has been honoured by the TV programme "Surprise Surprise", and she even became *The Sun* "wonder mum of the year" for 2015 in recognition of the work she has done with so many of these youngsters.

When Jackie was working on her programme in Chelmsford prison, she had incredible success rates in reducing reoffending. Indeed, the rates plummeted to less than 6% among the people she took on in her cohort. Six years later, the rate was massively below the national average. Three of those who had served more than 40 years in prison did not reoffend. I challenge anyone to discount looking at such an innovative idea that has brought such extraordinary success rates.

Jackie is getting amazing results in her current work in Doncaster, bringing people with pre-entry levels of English up to level 2 and beyond within a matter of months. Some make a whole year's progress within a month, having utilised her extraordinary methods. Let me cite what John Biggin, the previous governor of Doncaster prison, said:

"The potential for sustained and often life-changing results for prisoners going through this programme cannot be underestimated... The potential for good that this programme can deliver is not only worth investing in, but embracing as part of the DNA of our prison."

Another great success story from Doncaster prison is about an ex-prisoner called DL, who had spent virtually his entire adult life in prison for 22 years. He was deemed to be one of the most disruptive and disengaged men in the prison. He had had a troubled upbringing and successive school failures, giving him a fear of the classroom. With the use of small spaces and multi-sensory learning, he was taught to read and write the alphabet for the first time, and he subsequently made rapid progress—eight years' progress in eight months! DL says:

"I've spent 22 years in prison. I've beaten up staff and everything. I've just had my 40th birthday and it's the first one outside prison as an adult. Now I can attend job interviews and I'm planning to take the driving theory test which I've always feared to do before."

I would recommend anyone not impressed by those results and the possible transformative effects that can be seen if we change our approach to rehabilitation in prison to visit the Cascade website.

I mentioned Jackie Hewitt-Main not just to draw attention to her amazing work—it is easy to tell that I am very proud of it—but to stress the transformative role that outside independently run agencies can achieve by bringing new ideas into the Prison Service. I also commend Doncaster prison because two ex-prisoners from the previous project at Chelmsford prison—Colin Nugent and Phil Aldis—have trained as teachers. These are the only ex-offenders ever to be able to teach within a prison setting. I commend the work of Doncaster prison, which is run by Serco. I say congratulations on adopting that innovative approach.

I believe that freezing funding for prisons and outside agencies to offer assistance to offenders will be an absolute disaster. We need to do more to open up to further new innovative ideas—supporting the work both of prison staff and prison governors. They should be able to innovate, to bring in new ideas and new organisations, and to experiment. We need to do something

new, because much of what has been done for years has not worked. Anything that works to bring down rates of offending will also bring down the number of victims.

5.54 pm

**Marie Rimmer** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): The corrosive effect of imprisonment on young people, particularly those entering custody for the first time, is absolutely appalling. Is incarceration, in its present form, suitable for the overwhelming majority of young people? I believe that prevention is far better than cure, and that if we catch them when they are young, we can do so much good.

Report after report highlights the vulnerability of most of these young people, who have been bullied, abused and neglected, emotionally, physically and sexually, and it also highlights their lack of education. If prison is to be justified, as a last resort, it must operate in a small, rehabilitative and therapeutic environment. I speak on the basis of my experience as chairman of Red Bank, a small secure children's home in St Helens North, when I was leader of the borough council. The staff and board of the home were absolutely committed to the young people's reform, care and rehabilitation, and they were treated with the respect and empathy that such children need in order to develop trusting relationships and change their behaviour. They were able to learn and understand about society, about why and how their behaviour was unacceptable, and about why they needed to change.

The Red Bank home was given the first "excellent" educational rating that had been achieved in our borough. The children were able to engage in purposeful activities such as cookery, "Dine With Me", car valeting, woodwork and gardening. They took part in discussion groups, and they learnt how to decorate a home and paint murals. When I saw the programme about the Medway secure training centre, I found myself comparing it to the Red Bank.

We were given a grant of £7 million, which we used to create a purpose-built secure education unit, but it became redundant within two years of being opened. Sadly, we did not receive the capital allocation that we needed to replace the appalling living conditions, and as a result we were not awarded a Youth Justice Board contract. It was traumatic and disruptive for those young people to have to move to different places where they were not given the same care and attention, and the purpose-built education block stands empty now.

Prisons do not work. The outcomes are extremely poor. Prisons have revolving gates. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) asked how drugs get into prisons. Well, one answer is drones: there were eight drops last year. Another is potatoes, which are scooped out and filled with drugs before being delivered with other cooking materials. Sometimes drugs are kicked over walls. Visitors are coerced into taking them into prisons, as, of course, are staff. Spice is big business. It is cheap, it does not involve much risk because it is not a crime, and there is a big market for it in prisons. I hope that the criminalisation of the act of taking drugs into prisons, which will take effect in April, will help to reduce the problem.

Last week, along with the other members of the Justice Committee, I had the privilege of meeting some young adults who had been released on temporary

licence. I use the word "privilege" because it heartened me—particularly after the Medway case—to see the good work that was being done. Young people working with the St Giles Trust were involved in all kinds of social work and education. Some were working for degrees, and some were helping other people by, for instance, answering calls. All were enthusiastic and proud of what they were doing, and I was proud to meet and talk to them.

I also met the parents of two young people who had died, and heard about the traumatic times that they had experienced. I heard that they had been let down by institutions that did not hand over the reports that had been given to them, and had been put in inappropriate secure accommodation when they were experiencing mental health problems. Risley remand centre is short of staff, and cannot provide rehabilitation or engage with young people. Older people had also been segregated in inappropriate secure units, for as long as 22 hours a day.

I have often said that my passion is prison reform. I have often asked who would be brave enough to stand up in the House and say what is necessary and to see it through. I listened very carefully to the Secretary of State, and I think he means business. I hope the Government and this House give the necessary support to bring about the change that we owe to society, because at present we are wasting millions and millions of pounds and breeding more hardened criminals. We are doing an injustice to young people who are mentally ill, and we are doing an injustice to their parents who have tried to get help.

There is lots going on in prisons that is wrong, of course; we have all read the reports. I urge that we address the issues raised in the Harris review and the many other reviews. I look forward to being in this Chamber to see, and be part of, the reform and rehabilitation of the punitive system in this country.

6.1 pm

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): First, may I apologise to you, Mr Speaker, and other Members: I have a meeting at 6.15 pm with the relevant Minister about the flooding in my constituency so I will be away from the debate for that time? No discourtesy is intended, and I hope my apology will be accepted.

I want to concentrate on one thing that I believe is seriously overlooked in debates on justice: the use of fixed-term recalls, one of the biggest injustices in the criminal justice system. Most people believe that if someone is let out of prison early—whether halfway through their sentence, a quarter of the way through on home detention curfew, or at some other point before they should be let out—if they reoffend during that time or breach their licence conditions, they should go back to prison to serve the rest of their original sentence at the very least, and some, like me, might argue that they should be sent to prison for longer. Unfortunately, that is not always, or even often, the case.

The Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 amended the Criminal Justice Act 2003 to introduce fixed-term recalls. It was not done because it was the right thing to do; it was done to reduce the prison population when it got out of hand under the last Labour Government and they did not have the necessary capacity. A fixed-term

[Philip Davies]

recall occurs when an offender reoffends or breaches their licence conditions, and as a result they do not go to prison for the remainder of their original sentence; they go back for 28 days—just 28 days.

The overwhelming majority of the public believe offenders should serve the whole of the sentence they were given in the first place. In fact, a poll by Lord Ashcroft found that 80% of police officers, 81% of the general public and 82% of victims believe sentences are already too lenient, but thanks to the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, as of 3 December 2012, the eligibility criteria for fixed-term recalls were relaxed further to make them available to previously denied prisoners. These were offenders serving a sentence for certain violent or sexual offences, those subject to a home detention curfew and those who had previously been given a fixed-term recall for breaching their licence within the same original prison sentence.

I recently asked a parliamentary question and found that in 2014 an astonishing 7,486 people were given this 28-day, all-inclusive mini-break in prison for reoffending or breaching their licence conditions. These included a staggering 3,849 burglars and 546 people whose original offence involved violence against another person, including wounding, manslaughter and even murder.

The sheer number of offenders being returned on these 28-day recalls appears to show that people are being let out when they are not ready to be released into society, yet those who have committed the most serious offences, such as murder, who are released and breach their licence conditions are still required to come back to prison only for a mere 28 days. Anyone who thinks someone on licence for murder should simply be returned to prison for 28 days for reoffending or breaching their licence condition surely needs their head tested. This kind of initiative is ridiculous in an age when public confidence in the criminal justice system is so low.

The Ashcroft poll found that more than two thirds of people—69%—believed that rates of reoffending were high because sentences were too short and prison life was not hard enough. Just recently I was made aware of a case of a local serial offender who was released early on licence for burglary only to commit multiple offences weeks afterwards. That offender was returned to prison, but he was not required to stay there until early 2017, as he would have been if he had had to serve his sentence in full. He was just given his 28-day fixed-term recall. How can that possibly be right? How can that possibly protect the public? That should be the first duty of the Government, rather than making speeches in here trying to make it look to the wider world as though we are compassionate. Do I want people to think that I am compassionate just for the sake of my own reputation? We should be concentrating on how we protect the public from becoming the unnecessary victims of crime.

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Surely, if rehabilitation is effective, it will protect the public and reduce the number of future victims of crime. Is not my hon. Friend making the wrong argument on that point?

**Philip Davies:** According to the Ministry of Justice's own figures—the Minister can confirm this—the longer people spend in prison, the less likely they are to reoffend.

There should be a lesson in there for my hon. Friend. In fact, the punishments with the lowest reoffending rate of all were the indeterminate sentences that were introduced in the name of public protection—the very punishments that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) scrapped, even though he said at the time that his main purpose was to reduce reoffending. Let us stick to the facts about what actually works, rather than trying to make ourselves sound good to our constituents and to the wider public.

An equally staggering fact is that many of the offenders who are released on licence and who then reoffend or breach their licence conditions and are recalled for 28 days and then go on to reoffend or breach their licence conditions again once they have been re-released are still only recalled for 28 days on that second or subsequent occasion. Between September 2013 and September 2014, 1,160 offenders received more than one fixed-term recall, including 49 offenders who were serving sentences for violence against the person and 705 who were serving sentences for burglary. That is absolutely outrageous, as my constituents in Wilsden and Harden, who are facing a spate of burglaries at the moment, will know only too well. Perhaps we should ask them to listen to some of this liberal claptrap while they are having their homes burgled every five minutes by people who have been released from prison on fixed-term recall.

This weak response to reoffending is becoming so well-known in the criminal community that some people are taking their chances and reoffending, knowing that the punishment will be pathetic. Worse still, some are deliberately trying to get themselves back into prison for 28 days, as that is just enough time for them to make money from dealing drugs and committing other crimes on the inside before being released again. They are deliberately going back into prison because they know that it will only be for 28 days, and that they will not have to serve the rest of their original sentence. The concept of the fixed-term recall takes dishonesty in sentencing—which is already bad enough with people only serving a maximum of half their sentence—to a new low. Fixed-term recalls are completely unjust and unjustifiable, and they should be scrapped with immediate effect.

6.7 pm

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The prison system is a source of much frustration for many people involved in justice in Wales, and I welcome this opportunity to raise a number of specific issues. Despite recommendations from the police, unions and independent commissions, as well as from a cross-section of politicians, this remains a reserved matter for the UK Government, and the consequences for Wales are clear. In spite of the excellent work done by many justice officers, our prisons are neither located nor designed with the needs of Welsh citizens in mind. We still do not have a women's prison in Wales—

**Jenny Chapman:** We don't want one.

**Liz Saville Roberts:** I will return to that.

There is nowhere in Wales for women prisoners to go. Young offenders from the north must also be housed in England, as there is no facility in the north of Wales.

What we do have is a plan from the UK Government to build a so-called super-prison in the north, but it is not being built to serve the needs of Wales. It is a priority for an England-centred justice system—a monolithic pack-them-in-and-pile-them-high type of prison to house offenders from all over the north-west of England. There will be around 700 prisoners from Wales, but double that number will be transported in. Its *raison d'être* is to meet the needs of north-west England, not those of north Wales. This is about overcrowding in English prisons. The prison happens to be in Wales as a matter of convenience, rather than being for Wales as a matter of strategic design.

This is not just nation-building from Plaid Cymru. This is about ensuring that young people can be housed in their own country, and that women do not have to cross the border into England, far away from the stability of their families and loved ones, as they will surely have to do if we do not have a women's prison in our own country. Has there been a cold evaluation of the wider cost to Wales, especially to the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, which will carry the cost of providing healthcare to 2,100 prisoners? If healthcare at HMP Cardiff costs £2.24 million, has any estimate been made of the Wrexham care costs, as that prison is set to house two and a half times more prisoners? How much additional money will be made available to the health board by the UK Government via the Welsh Government? What are the wider costs of housing released prisoners, especially those deemed vulnerable and thus with priority housing status, and what indeed of the additional policing costs?

**Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): I represent the constituency in which Wrexham prison is being built. Does the hon. Lady not welcome the fact that there will be a prison in north Wales for the first time? I am as conscious as she is of the pressure on resources. I know that it is vital, and I will hold the Minister's feet to the fire on the matter of resources for health and for other services for my constituents.

**Liz Saville Roberts**: I welcome the presence of a prison, but the size of this prison is over and above the needs of Wales, and it will bring with it many social problems as well as the costs that I have outlined.

We know that the demand for prison places in the north of Wales is around 700, not more than 2,000. If we are to have a new prison, it would surely make more sense to have a conventional prison that responds to the needs of north Wales, with places for 700 prisoners and separate wings for women and young offenders.

Provision for women who commit crimes in Wales needs to be overhauled to become fit for the 21st century. I support the campaign of the former MP for Swansea East, Siân James, to seek restorative methods that recognise that women's criminal behaviour has often different motivations to that of men. Too often these women are the victims of the toxic trio of domestic abuse, mental health problems and substance misuse. Female criminals need different solutions to break the patterns of criminal behaviour.

Society needs not just a roll-call of ever-increasing prisoner numbers, but results. We need a justice system that reforms criminals, not one that merely holds them in captivity and out of sight.

The probation system in Wales is facing extreme pressure at present. The probation service was underfunded and did not have the resources that it needed, and yet it showed itself to be far more effective than short-term prison sentences in rehabilitating offenders. The service has met almost all the targets it has been set in recent years and was even awarded a British quality gold award for excellence, and yet, even though it was not broken, we have seen the changes that it has suffered. It did not need fixing. There was no need for privatisation. It was an ideological choice by the Tories, who have scant interest in results, value for money or public safety. Their interest lies in lining private sector pockets.

We firmly believe that the Welsh Government are in the best place to make decisions for the justice system in Wales. Plaid Cymru is not alone in calling for the devolution of justice. There has been an almost unanimous call from legal experts, who have been giving evidence to the Welsh Affairs Committee during the pre-legislative procedures of the draft Wales Bill, that a distinct legal jurisdiction in Wales should be established, which would, in turn, pave the way for the devolution of justice, including policing, prisons and probation.

I reiterate that Plaid Cymru opposes entirely the building of a super-prison but, in the interests of improving access to justice in Wales, if it is to go ahead, the recommendations and the adaptations that have been suggested, particularly to provide separate wings for women and young people, must be considered.

6.13 pm

**Heather Wheeler** (South Derbyshire) (Con): I rise to speak in this very important debate as the queen of prisons. I have the women's prison of Foston in my constituency, and Sudbury open prison and Marchington prison on my border, so the area of Derbyshire and Staffordshire is well placed for prisons and for understanding prison problems. I do not agree with the motion on the Order Paper, as there is no real understanding of the changes that have been made to the prison system.

I will focus my remarks on Foston women's prison because it is the one in my constituency. A number of changes have been made. There is help for the ladies who have financial problems, and care for those with mental health issues. There is also advice for those who know they will be leaving, and what that will mean in terms of their family—whether they can still stay with them or whether they need to make new arrangements. They have also been given tools to help them not only with their numeracy and so that they are better equipped for reading and writing but, even more importantly, to cope with financial pressures when they come out of prison.

All that has been made possible by tremendous innovative thinking and, specifically, the excellent work of my local citizens advice bureau. We found that people were making repeat visits to the CAB, so it built up a dossier of the needs of women leaving Foston prison, after which it put together a bid, which I was delighted to support. The scheme has now gone out to other prisons throughout the country because it is working so well. The programme is totally cost-effective and it is not fluffy bunny stuff. Talking as the South Derbyshire MP, I can say that unless such a scheme is tried and tested,

[Heather Wheeler]

offers value for money and helps people in our society, it will not get my signature, but the programme ticks all the boxes.

I am proud that our Government are taking such an innovative approach because we do not want people to reoffend. We want people to go back to having a family life. We want them to give something back to society because that is a meaningful part of rehabilitation not only for them, but for their victims. The scheme should be considered even more deeply and I hope that more prisons throughout the estate will get the opportunity to adopt it.

In the couple of minutes remaining, I shall talk about victim support in the context of parole boards and prisons. Regretfully, I know of a horrendous constituency case, of which the Minister is aware, in which owing to a mess in the civil service, an inmate was allowed a second go before a parole board, despite having previously been turned down. He passed the second time, and of course went out and created mayhem, as we knew would happen. Fortunately, he has now been locked up again. I have not heard that the civil servant responsible for the mistake has apologised or been sacked. Even now, I have not heard any apology from the civil service for the fact that the prisoner could get out and create mayhem. I do not want the Minister to apologise today because that would not be fair on him, and that is not what we are here for—we are here to vote against this ridiculous motion. We are here because we want to ensure that people learn from mistakes and that victims are supported to the same extent as inmates through rehabilitation.

6.18 pm

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The motion, which is far from ridiculous, states “this House believes...prisons are in crisis”.

Our prisons are becoming less safe for staff and prisoners. With rising prisoner numbers and fewer staff, will prisons be able to continue to provide programmes and activities, or will rehabilitative work be squeezed out as they struggle simply to contain their populations? The outgoing chief inspector of prisons argues in his annual report that prisons are at their worst for 10 years, with the deficiencies most acute in adult male prisons. In addition, we face the reckless privatisation of the probation service.

The most recent Ministry of Justice statistics show that deaths from natural causes, self-inflicted deaths and homicides in prisons have increased. The rate of self-harm incidents in prisons has increased, as have rates of prisoner-on-prisoner and prisoner-on-staff assaults. Mental ill health is more prevalent among prisoners than the general population. Between April and September last week, 343 prisoners who had been sectioned under the Mental Health Act waited more than 14 days for hospital treatment.

The Howard League for Penal Reform report entitled “Breaking point: Understaffing and overcrowding in prisons” points out that the number of front-line prison officers in England and Wales dropped by 30% between 2010 and 2013 from 27,650 to 19,325. In some prisons, the number of officers has halved in only three years, and many prisons have been forced to operate

with 40% fewer staff. However, the prison population has not reduced. In April 2014, it was 85,264—255 more than in May 2010.

The motion refers to “increasingly high rates” of drug use in prison, and there is clear evidence of inmates developing drug addiction inside prison. Drug seizures from prisoners have hit a new high, with almost 6,000 finds of illicit substances in 2014. As many hon. Members have mentioned, the use of new psychoactive substances is rife in prisons. The chief inspector of prisons published a report last month stating that so many prisoners abused psychoactive drugs that that put a strain on local ambulance services. Additionally, there are some frightening statistics on drug-related deaths of prisoners after their release. Such deaths are seven and a half times higher among UK prisoners in the first fortnight after release. Many of those deaths are due to opiate use, which could be prevented with the use of Naloxone, a synthetic drug that blocks opiate receptors in the nervous system. Prisoners are failed by local authorities that do not provide access to Naloxone for opiate users in the community, disregarding the recommendations of the World Health Organisation and Public Health England. Healthcare provision in all UK prisons should include the issue of Naloxone on release where appropriate, and NHS England, Public Health England and local authorities should develop a joint strategy and funding arrangements for such provision.

The motion is headed, “Prisons and probation”, and I want to say a few words about the probation service. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) has discussed reoffending rates, with one in 12 criminals committing another offence within three weeks of release. The probation service, however, suffers from a staffing crisis as a result of cuts and reforms. The Government have split the service in two, outsourcing the least complex work to privately run groups known as community rehabilitation companies or CRCs. In 2015, at least 1,200 staff left the probation service as a result of planned redundancy, retirement and career changes due to disillusionment. I should like to quote a senior probation officer, who has chosen to remain anonymous:

“Collectively the service is having a nervous breakdown and my guess is that at least 80% of staff are just looking to get out by any means. The damage is done; there’s worse to come and there’s absolutely nothing that can stop it. I’m pessimistic about the future and it will take a couple of serious murders, prison riots or similar for politicians and the public to take the slightest notice”.

Those are the words of someone working in the probation service, and I truly hope that they do not come true. I hope that we can address the crisis in the probation service. The staff and the work that they do are valued, but they are struggling with an excessive workload and loss of expertise, which has had a detrimental effect on complex cases, including those involving sexual and domestic violence.

In conclusion, I am encouraged by the approach of the Justice Secretary. Like him, I am a great believer in the rehabilitation of prisoners, but I was surprised to hear him refer to the prison in Manchester as “formerly known as Strangeways”. I think that we will achieve prison reform sooner than the good people of Manchester stop referring to that building as Strangeways.

6.24 pm

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate, and I am grateful to have been called.

I shall focus on two main areas—first, victims, and secondly, rehabilitation. It is not a case of either/or; the two can go hand in hand. Rehabilitation can protect the public by helping to prevent future victims. There is a clear link between securing employment and a reduction in reoffending. Offenders who leave prison and secure employment reoffend at the rate of 32%, which is still too high. For those who fail to secure employment, the reoffending rate goes up to 69%. There is a demonstrable link.

As the Secretary of State invited us to do, I place on record my thanks to those who work in our prisons. I shall pick out three aspects, all of which have links to Dorset. First, the Footprints project is a volunteer scheme that mentors offenders recently released from prison and those serving community sentences. It serves the area of Dorset, Somerset and Hampshire. Encouragingly, ex-offenders often want and aim to become mentors themselves, such is the success of the scheme.

Secondly, Clean Sheet is an independent charity focused on the employment of ex-offenders. It delivers a “Ways to Work” employability scheme. I know that the Secretary of State has visited Guys Marsh prison and, importantly, the Jubilee wing, which is in my neighbouring constituency, North Dorset. There is a less formal environment there, the regime is less strict, and prisoners are encouraged, for example, to make their own meals. As of 2015, only four out of 58 prisoners had reoffended—a striking example. I invite the Minister to look again at that model and see whether it could be rolled out more widely.

Finally, I would like to mention the work of Peter Jones from the Counselling in Prisons Network. He is a constituent of mine and has produced a document on promoting excellence in therapy in prisons. Through counselling and psychological therapy, he works with victims of sexual violence and trauma who are themselves in a custodial setting. This helps to prevent reoffending.

All three of those initiatives have a link with Dorset, but there is a more important link—the passion to reduce reoffending and ensure that ex-offenders get back on the straight and narrow. For me, there is not a choice between victims first or rehabilitation. It has to be both. Victims are very much at the heart of our criminal justice system, but so too should be rehabilitation. Get that right, and there will be fewer victims.

6.27 pm

**Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I know that others wish to make their contribution so I shall be brief.

It is incumbent on us all to protect the society in which we live. Rehabilitation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) says, is an integral part of that, but rehabilitation is not new. Those of us who worship from the Book of Common Prayer will recognise the words that God “desires not the death of sinners, but rather that they may turn from their wickedness and live”.

That has been with this country for many centuries. It is important that the Lord Chancellor outlined today, as he has done previously, the increasing focus on rehabilitation, but I would like to temper that enthusiasm and that positivity with a note of caution.

We must be mindful of those who do not wish to change, those who show no remorse, those who should be punished so that if they are locked up, they are not a risk to the good people of our country. But to be positive and to return to the agenda that the Government have outlined, it is right that we give those who want to change the opportunity to do that. They should not be written off by society, but should be seen as individuals and given the tools to make a contribution to our country.

A troubling issue at the moment is the number of individuals returning from fighting with so-called Islamic State—the satanic state, as I call it, because those people are not followers of Islam. The number of such individuals continues to rise, so it is inevitable that our prisons will soon be housing unprecedented numbers of extremists. We must address the unfortunate truth that British prisons have in some cases been incubators of extremism. I urge Ministers to ensure that we develop an ever-more successful de-radicalisation programme; one that can both punish and rehabilitate, and transform extremists into more tolerant individuals while they serve their time and repay their debt to society. That is a huge task, but it is a vital one. If properly carried out, not only will it tackle the problem of radicalisation in British prisons, but, if we can show that these abhorrent ideologies can be defeated, it will do much to challenge extremist groups in Britain and across the world.

Since 2010, those who break the law have been more likely to go to prison, and for longer, than they would have been in the past. I cannot support the motion because I do not believe that that is wrong in all cases. I do not believe that rehabilitation is right in all cases, as I have outlined. I believe that prison can give us the opportunity, as a country, to change those who wish to change for the better.

6.31 pm

**Kwasi Kwarteng** (Spelthorne) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for giving me an opportunity to speak in this important debate. There are constraints on time, so I will keep my remarks brief. I want to make three main points, some of which I do not think have been made in the debate.

First, I am very proud to have in my constituency HMP Bronzefield, which is an excellent women’s prison. It is run privately. Some disparaging remarks have been made about privatisation and the involvement of the private sector in prisons. I think the example of HMP Bronzefield belies all those disparaging remarks. It is progressive, highly effective and very efficient. Interestingly, the prison was opened in 2004, seven years into the previous Labour Government. I think that sort of development should be welcomed.

Secondly, and we have not spoken about this enough, it is an incredible success that crime is down 30%. That is the broad context in which our constituents understand the criminal justice system. The figures that really worry the people of this country are the overall crime figures—the likelihood of being a victim of crime. That sits at the

[*Kwasi Kwarteng*]

top of people's concerns. It is to the Government's real credit that those figures have come down considerably over the past five years. That point should always be made.

Lastly, I completely understand the need for punishment, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) mentioned—I share some of his views on these matters, but not all of them. Rehabilitation is clearly a very important part of any criminal justice system. What I will say—I fear that this is a slightly partisan point—is that when times were good we did not invest enough in maintaining our criminal justice infrastructure, by building and modernising prisons and by moving away from the model of the old Victorian prisons. That was a missed opportunity. I am glad that, under the guidance of my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary, we are trying, despite a constrained budget, to bring about reform in this respect. He is to be commended for that.

6.33 pm

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): Helping prisoners to maintain stable family relationships improves rehabilitation and reduces reoffending rates, making a real contribution towards improving the life chances of a prisoner after they leave. There are already a number of positive Government and volunteer projects alive to that and they are seeing exceptional returns on investment. Sadly, however, despite the recognition of the stability and quality of prisoners' family relationships as a key contributor to rehabilitation, NOMS's own review of parenting and relationship support has found that there is considerable variation in the quality of provision across the country, and that only a third of offenders are given help in maintaining family ties.

Will Ministers consider including the issue in the outcomes that governors will be expected to deliver as they have greater autonomy? There are some really good examples that could be replicated more widely, including informal projects such as the family visit days run at Thorn Cross, where prisoners can eat family meals together and do crafts with their children. There is also the involvement of families of victims and perpetrators in restorative justice programmes. It is important for families of offenders to be involved and to hear their apologies. That enables them to see their father, husband or son say they are sorry and show a desire to live differently, and gives them, as a family, the chance to forgive their loved one, too.

There are more formal programmes such as the Stronger Families and Building Bridges programme. The Family Man programme, which, in effect, pays for itself in preventing reoffending, citing returns of £1.33 for every £1 invested, uses drama, group discussions and written work to help to improve relationship skills—skills that we all need and can be learned in the absence of positive role models in early life.

It is also critical that we enable prisoners to maintain contact with their young children. That is vital if we are to improve the life chances of not only the offender but their children, and break the potential cycle of reoffending into the next generation. At present, two thirds of young males separated from imprisoned fathers

in childhood go on to commit crime themselves. The numbers are substantial. A recent report by Barnardo's estimates that 200,000 children have a parent in jail. That is why courses like Time to Connect, the work of family engagement workers, and even the marriage course at HMP Spring Hill are so important in helping families to communicate and understand each other better.

Will Ministers look at how such courses can be replicated in other prisons? Will they take steps to ensure that such initiatives are highlighted to governors and consider how they can be expanded to help offenders to build strong, positive relationships and give their families a better start when they come out of prison?

6.36 pm

**David Warburton** (Somerton and Frome) (Con): I not only join others in celebrating the conduct of this debate but commend the Opposition for their choice of topic.

Fluffy bunnies aside, I think it is fair to say that there is perhaps no greater test of a civilisation than how it treats those who have fallen foul of its laws. Those who do so often come from deprived, or certainly more vulnerable, sections of society. The Lord Chancellor's speeches on this subject over the past twelve months or so, like those of Ministers, have been among the most thoughtful and the most wide-ranging I can remember on this subject, and today's was no exception. The focus on prison education and the redemptive power of work, along with, of course, the necessity for prison to act as a place of punishment, is very encouraging and reflects the importance of answering coherently the question of what prison is actually for. At no time and in no other area will the state have such a direct influence over our lives as with those who are in its care, and it is of course absolutely right that we should be held to the most rigorous standards.

Work and education are the real arteries of rehabilitation. Prisoners are removed from society, but they do not stop being a part of it. Through work and education, they can see beyond the confines of the prison. As my hon. Friend the prisons Minister pointed out yesterday, employers who subsequently hire ex-offenders talk about a higher than average level of commitment and loyalty. Last August, the Government brought in mandatory assessment of maths and English for all newly arrived prisoners. This, combined with the Coates review, which will report in March, and the proposals to give prison governors more control over their own prisons, offers hope to all those who see education as a transformational force within our prisons. Almost half of those in prison were expelled or otherwise excluded from education. It is obvious that a relationship of cause and effect is at work: society is paying the price for its failure to offer these people a route to the future.

Of course there are ongoing problems that we need to address, and, as this debate has shown, are addressing, but we are seeing signs of progress. The £1.3 billion investment in modernising the prison estate, shifting it away from its Dickensian infrastructure and improving the lives of inmates, and a renewed focus on education and work as tools of redemption and rehabilitation, are very welcome, but there is still much more to do.

6.39 pm

**Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) opened the debate by saying that it was not one about blame. He was right to do so because it would be absolutely wrong to suggest that the problems in our prison service can be laid at the foot of a particular Government or that the other party has a monopoly on the answers or on success. Government after Government have grappled with the problem of how to reduce recidivism. Throughout the Blair and Brown years, prisoners reoffended in their tens of thousands.

To understand the problems, it is important to start with some statistics. Some 67% of young people who leave custody reoffend within a year, while 72% of those young people regularly played truant from school and more than half of them do not have any qualifications. Those few facts tell us that it is the disadvantaged in society who end up in prison. The Secretary of State is therefore absolutely right to look into the provision of education in our prisons, as he is doing. We know, as the Centre for Social Justice reported, that prisoners who do not take part in any education or training during their years in prison are three times more likely to be reconvicted on release.

It is important to look not only at the availability of education—it is already currently offered—but at how we can encourage people to take up such education. I hope that Dame Sally Coates will consider in her review whether it is appropriate for education to form part of a prison sentence, and whether a reduction in a sentence might incentivise prisoners to improve their skills.

Nelson Mandela said that

“no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.”

Our nation—our one nation—should hold out a hand and help all those who need a step up and a step out of their current world. However, our ambition should not just end there. We should aim to cut not reoffending, but all offending. For those who are vulnerable, who lack skills and who mix in circles where there is truancy and crime, the other world may be daunting and difficult. Fear is sometimes the greatest prison of all. Victor Hugo said:

“He who opens a school door, closes a prison.”

Let us continue to invest further in the education of the next generation to ensure not simply that our young criminals do not reoffend, but that they do not offend in the first place.

6.42 pm

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. The tone of the debate has been one of consensus. Hon. Members from both sides of the House want improvements, perhaps with the exception of the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). He appears to want to take us back to the penal system of the 18th century. Fortunately, penal policy has moved on since then, and I often think it would be nice if he did so too. There have been many notable speeches, and I apologise in advance that the constraints of time mean I cannot mention everybody.

We heard from the former Lord Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). He said he was disappointed by the progress made on rehabilitation and criticised our ridiculously excessive prison population. He referred to the last vestiges of indeterminate sentences, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister about any plans he has about such sentences. My hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) made a wide-ranging speech, and gave examples of the terrible things going on at HMP Northumberland.

The Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), spoke about the excellent report by Lord Harris, which has not been fully implemented. He referred to the protocol we would like for the chief inspector of prisons. It would ensure that his independence does not become compromised, as was suggested in a recent Justice Committee hearing.

I particularly want to mention the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), who is very experienced in these areas. She talked about the tragic case of Lorraine Barwell, and made two requests of the Minister—about naming prison officers killed on duty at the start of Prime Minister’s questions, and about the Harris report recommendation for a personal telephone call to be made to the family of prisoners who take their own lives and to the officers who find them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) asked whether a retirement age of 68 is too high for prison officers and whether it is safe for them to continue working up to that age. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Marie Rimmer) spoke from personal experience as the chair of a secure unit for children in her borough, and did so with great passion. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) rightly highlighted the problems in probation since privatisation.

The public and victims of crime need to have confidence that justice is being done, that offenders are being punished appropriately and rehabilitated, and that communities are being protected. Making prisons work is not only the right thing to do; it will save us money and make us all safer. What we have heard in this debate is deeply concerning. We have a prison service that is at breaking point, with nearly 85,000 people in our prisons. We have the highest imprisonment rate in western Europe, with an average annual cost per place of over £36,000. There is projected to be an increase in the prison population at a time when the Ministry of Justice is required, under the Chancellor’s spending review, to reduce its running costs by £600 million by 2019-20. That is what it costs to run 30 medium-to-large prisons annually.

It does no one any favours—not the Government, the Ministry of Justice, those working in the prisons sector, taxpayers or prisoners themselves—to ignore the fact that we have, despite what the Justice Secretary said earlier, a crisis on our hands. That crisis was eloquently summed up by the current chief inspector of prisons, Nick Hardwick, whom the Justice Secretary rightly praised yesterday and again today in this House. His annual report stated:

“You were more likely to die in prison than five years ago. More prisoners were murdered, killed themselves, self-harmed

[Jo Stevens]

and were victims of assaults than five years ago. There were more serious assaults and the number of assaults and serious assaults against staff also rose.”

Here is just one example of what that looks like. At Cardiff prison in my constituency, Darren Thomas, who was jailed for breaching an antisocial behaviour order for street begging in the city centre, was stabbed to death with a ballpoint pen in his cell by his cellmate. The perpetrator was convicted of Darren’s murder last year.

We need to look wider than Medway. According to press reports that feature in *Private Eye* this week, the failure of the operators of a G4S-run prison to allow medical assistance to be given to a 37-year-old prisoner meant that he died in his cell because his epilepsy had not been diagnosed. That prison was HMP Parc in Bridgend, which the Justice Secretary singled out for praise this afternoon, so I repeat the Opposition’s call for him to instigate a review of all G4S-run prisons.

Prison staff are not safe either. Serious assaults on staff are up by 42%. The prison watchdog has warned that the increasing use of psychoactive drugs is the most serious threat to the safety and security of jails. The use of those drugs increased by 615% between 2014 and 2015, and the use of the drug Spice has increased by 4,813% over the past four years. I know that the Justice Secretary has said that the legislation on psychoactive substances is making possession within prison a specific offence, but does he really think that that alone will solve the problem in our prisons? As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) has pointed out, the issue is the smuggling of the drugs into prisons.

The combination of a growing prison population, prisons awash with drugs and alcohol, cuts to staffing and prison budget cuts is a very dangerous mix. The former chief inspector of prisons predicted the danger in a report published as long ago as 2010:

“The hidden and incremental pressures this produces should not be underestimated, even though they are at present being contained. As I said...there are two risks: of increased instability in inherently fragile environments, and of reducing prisons’ capacity to rehabilitate those they hold.”

What was predicted has now happened. All of these problems have costs. They cost lives, they cost livelihoods and they cost taxpayers’ money.

We all agree that we need to reduce our prison population. We can solve the problem only through effective prevention. Prisons try to teach offenders to be good prisoners and to be compliant, but it is more important that we teach them to be good citizens and to be able to show initiative and independence to prepare them for reintegration into our communities. That is why the reckless privatisation of the probation service by the coalition Government was such a mistake, artificially splitting responsibility for offenders between two separate organisations based on different levels of risk, while taking no account of how risk levels fluctuate.

**Mr Kenneth Clarke:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Jo Stevens:** I am sorry, I do not have time.

What was predicted by probation professionals, outside experts, Napo and service users has happened: chaos; huge numbers of redundancies—up to 40% of staff in

some community rehabilitation companies—and IT systems not fit for purpose; cases falling through the cracks; and service in South Yorkshire, which the Government gave to a French catering company to run, under threat of renationalisation. Will the Minister tell the House whether the rumours of renationalisation of the South Yorkshire CRC are correct? Decisions on the supervision of dangerous offenders should be determined by public safety rather than profit.

I believe the Justice Secretary is trying his best, and I almost have some sympathy for him. It cannot be easy having to take up his role equipped with a shovel to clear up what I will politely call the residue that his predecessor, now Leader of the House, left him. Perhaps when he has finished shovelling that up—which will obviously take some time—we will see more than just an acknowledgement of the problems or references to prison reform strategy, and instead see concrete steps taken to address the scale of the crisis. This is the third time the Conservatives have promised a rehabilitation revolution. I look forward to hearing soon the Justice Secretary’s explanation of what went wrong last time and what will be different this time round on his watch.

6.51 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Andrew Selous):** We have had an excellent debate, with 22 Members taking part. I want to start, as others have, by putting on record my thanks to the men and women of our probation and prison services. They are outstanding public servants. They are often not in the public eye and do not get the thanks and appreciation they deserve. Probation officers make difficult professional judgments every day, often to tight timescales for the courts and the parole service. Prison officers face unacceptable violence, which we do not tolerate and are determined to reduce.

The Government are not in denial about the problems we face. We are not rehabilitating or reducing reoffending enough in order to keep the public safe. That is why our reforms are so vital, to protect the public by better rehabilitating offenders. That is why I am delighted that we have more support for prison reform from the top of Government than we have had for very many years. Reoffending has been too high for too long. That is why we have brought together the best of the voluntary, charitable and private sectors to join our excellent public service probation workers in bringing in our probation reforms. That has meant that we have extended probation supervision to some 40,000 short-sentence offenders who did not get it before. We have also introduced a through-the-gate service, joining up probation from prison into the community.

We have created the National Probation Service, and I should tell Members that 19 of the 22 CRCs are being run with a staff mutual or a voluntary, charitable or social enterprise sector body alongside their owners. We monitor their performance very carefully indeed, and the October 2015 performance figures showed that we are advancing in performance in almost all areas. South Yorkshire CRC has developed an action plan to deal with the issues it faces, but I can tell the House that no CRC is in a formal remedial plan. I can also tell the House that there are 560 more probation officers than there were 12 months ago. That is the largest intake of newly qualified probation officers for some considerable period.<sup>1</sup>

1. [Official Report, 23 February 2016, Vol. 606, c. 4MC.]

In the Prison Service, we saw a net increase of 540 prison officers in the year to 30 September last year. We have appointed some 2,340 extra prison officers. As of last week, we have increased prison officer training to 10 weeks, to make sure they are able to deal with many of the serious issues that colleagues from around the House have mentioned. We are going to carry on recruiting at that rate to make sure that we run safe prisons.

Many Members raised the very serious issue of self-inflicted deaths. I want to reassure the House that the Justice Secretary and I continue to take it very seriously indeed. We have acted on the vast majority of the recommendations of the prisons and probation ombudsman and will continue to do so. We have put more money into providing safer custody in prisons and at a regional level. We have also revised and improved our case management system for at-risk prisoners, which is being implemented.

We are reviewing early days care—sadly, prisoners often take their life in the first few days of their sentence. I draw the House's attention to our extensive use of the Samaritans-trained prisoner volunteer listener scheme. That is extremely worth while and very much appreciated by prison officers.

I attend every single inter-ministerial group on deaths in custody and will continue to do so. We will carry on learning lessons around the system.

**Jenny Chapman** *rose*—

**Andrew Selous:** I will mention the hon. Lady's points. I regularly meet victims and commit to keep on doing so, but she raises a good point. I will increase the amount of victims that I meet, specifically and particularly the families of those who have lost their life in prison. However, as the prisons and probation ombudsman has said, there is no simple, well-evidenced answer as to why self-inflicted deaths have increased so sharply.

Many Members mentioned violence within our prisons. We are taking a lot of measures to equip prison officers better. We are trialling body-worn cameras in 23 prisons. That evaluation is progressing well, and both staff and prisoners see the benefits of it. We are ensuring that every conversation a prison officer has with prisoners is productive and supportive.

We have better multidisciplinary case management involving psychologists and mental health workers to get on top of violence in prisons. For the first time, we have introduced a national protocol to ensure that the police and the Crown Prosecution Service work as closely as they should with the National Offender Management Service to ensure that cases are dealt with seriously. I will take up the specific case that the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) mentioned, when a victim impact assessment appears not to have been addressed in time. We have given clearer guidance to staff on defending themselves and will do everything to get on top of this issue, which is not acceptable. A positive, rehabilitative culture, with rigorous education, purposeful work and strengthened family links, is absolutely central to dealing with it.

Part of the reason why violence and assaults have gone up is that we have too many drugs within our prisons, specifically the new psychoactive substances. The good news is that this month, at last, we start to test for those new types of drugs, which we have not had the

ability to do in the past. We will extend that testing to all prisons by 1 April this year. We are currently evaluating a full-body scanner in one of our prisons, which will give us the technology to help us to get on top of that problem. We have trained drug dogs and made it illegal to throw anything over the wall—it was not illegal in the past—and we are communicating in every possible way with prisoners about the dangers of those substances.

As many Members have said, there are too many mobile phones within prisons. We are acutely aware of that and are investing in new technology such as metal-detecting wands, body orifice scanning chairs, signal detectors and blockers, and dogs that can specifically find phones. However, we recognise that more needs to be done. We will carry on until we are on top of that issue.

Many colleagues who have spoken today mentioned the prison estate. It is excellent news that the Chancellor committed to invest £1.3 billion to build nine new prisons in addition to the new prison that we are building in north Wales, which has not had a prison for well over 100 years. We will design out the features of the new prisons that facilitate bullying, drug taking and violence, so that we get on top of those problems.

Many Members rightly said that it is not acceptable that people go into prison with educational qualifications and leave with none. We are determined to do better in this area. We want prisoners to have the literacy, numeracy and information communications technology skills they need to get on, get a job and sustain that job. It is excellent that the Secretary of State has got Dame Sally Coates—

**Mr Alan Campbell** (Tynemouth) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

*Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.*

*Question agreed to.*

*Main Question accordingly put.*

*The House divided: Ayes 186, Noes 278.*

**Division No. 178]**

**[6.59 pm**

**AYES**

Abbott, Ms Diane	Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Alexander, Heidi	Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Ali, Rushanara	Champion, Sarah
Allen, Mr Graham	Chapman, Jenny
Anderson, Mr David	Coaker, Vernon
Ashworth, Jonathan	Coffey, Ann
Austin, Ian	Cooper, rh Yvette
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Barron, rh Kevin	Cox, Jo
Beckett, rh Margaret	Coyle, Neil
Benn, rh Hilary	Crausby, Mr David
Berger, Luciana	Creagh, Mary
Betts, Mr Clive	Creasy, Stella
Blenkinsop, Tom	Cruddas, Jon
Blomfield, Paul	Cummins, Judith
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Cunningham, Alex
Brown, Lyn	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Bryant, Chris	Dakin, Nic
Buck, Ms Karen	Danczuk, Simon
Burden, Richard	Davies, Geraint
Burgon, Richard	De Piero, Gloria
Burnham, rh Andy	Doughty, Stephen
Cadbury, Ruth	Dowd, Jim

Dowd, Peter  
 Durkan, Mark  
 Eagle, Ms Angela  
 Eagle, Maria  
 Efford, Clive  
 Elliott, Julie  
 Ellman, Mrs Louise  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Evans, Chris  
 Field, rh Frank  
 Fitzpatrick, Jim  
 Ffello, Robert  
 Fletcher, Colleen  
 Flint, rh Caroline  
 Flynn, Paul  
 Fovargue, Yvonne  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Godsiff, Mr Roger  
 Goodman, Helen  
 Green, Kate  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Greenwood, Margaret  
 Griffith, Nia  
 Gwynne, Andrew  
 Haigh, Louise  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hanson, rh Mr David  
 Harris, Carolyn  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Healey, rh John  
 Hendrick, Mr Mark  
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen  
 Hoey, Kate  
 Hollern, Kate  
 Hopkins, Kelvin  
 Howarth, rh Mr George  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Irranca-Davies, Huw  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Johnson, rh Alan  
 Johnson, Diana  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Graham  
 Jones, Helen  
 Jones, Mr Kevan  
 Jones, Susan Elan  
 Kane, Mike  
 Keeley, Barbara  
 Kendall, Liz  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kyle, Peter  
 Lammy, rh Mr David  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Leslie, Chris  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 Lucas, Caroline  
 Lucas, Ian C.  
 Lynch, Holly  
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona  
 Madders, Justin  
 Mahmood, Shabana  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Mann, John  
 Marris, Rob  
 Marsden, Mr Gordon  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Matheson, Christian  
 McCabe, Steve  
 McCarthy, Kerry

McDonagh, Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonnell, John  
 McGinn, Conor  
 McInnes, Liz  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 Mearns, Ian  
 Miliband, rh Edward  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Murray, Ian  
 Nandy, Lisa  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Owen, Albert  
 Pearce, Teresa  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Perkins, Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Pound, Stephen  
 Powell, Lucy  
 Pugh, John  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Rayner, Angela  
 Reed, Mr Steve  
 Rees, Christina  
 Reeves, Rachel  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Rimmer, Marie  
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret  
 Rotheram, Steve  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Sheerman, Mr Barry  
 Sherriff, Paula  
 Shuker, Mr Gavin  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Skinner, Mr Dennis  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Smeeth, Ruth  
 Smith, Angela  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Spellar, rh Mr John  
 Starmer, Keir  
 Stevens, Jo  
 Streeting, Wes  
 Stringer, Graham  
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela  
 Tami, Mark  
 Thomas, Mr Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick  
 Thornberry, Emily  
 Timms, rh Stephen  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Turley, Anna  
 Turner, Karl  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twigg, Stephen  
 Umunna, Mr Chuka  
 Vaz, rh Keith  
 Vaz, Valerie  
 Watson, Mr Tom  
 Whitehead, Dr Alan  
 Winnick, Mr David  
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie  
 Woodcock, John  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
 Vicky Foxcroft and  
 Sue Hayman

## NOES

Adams, Nigel  
 Afriyie, Adam  
 Aldous, Peter  
 Allen, Heidi  
 Amess, Sir David  
 Andrew, Stuart  
 Ansell, Caroline  
 Argar, Edward  
 Atkins, Victoria  
 Bacon, Mr Richard  
 Baker, Mr Steve  
 Baldwin, Harriett  
 Barclay, Stephen  
 Baron, Mr John  
 Barwell, Gavin  
 Bellingham, Sir Henry  
 Benyon, Richard  
 Beresford, Sir Paul  
 Berry, Jake  
 Berry, James  
 Bingham, Andrew  
 Blackman, Bob  
 Boles, Nick  
 Bone, Mr Peter  
 Borwick, Victoria  
 Bottomley, Sir Peter  
 Bradley, Karen  
 Brazier, Mr Julian  
 Bridgen, Andrew  
 Brine, Steve  
 Brokenshire, rh James  
 Bruce, Fiona  
 Buckland, Robert  
 Burns, Conor  
 Burns, rh Sir Simon  
 Burrowes, Mr David  
 Burt, rh Alistair  
 Cairns, Alun  
 Carmichael, Neil  
 Cartlidge, James  
 Cash, Sir William  
 Caulfield, Maria  
 Chalk, Alex  
 Chishti, Rehman  
 Chope, Mr Christopher  
 Churchill, Jo  
 Clark, rh Greg  
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth  
 Cleverly, James  
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey  
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse  
 Colville, Oliver  
 Costa, Alberto  
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey  
 Crabb, rh Stephen  
 Davies, Byron  
 Davies, Chris  
 Davies, Glyn  
 Davies, Dr James  
 Davies, Mims  
 Davies, Philip  
 Dinenage, Caroline  
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
 Dorries, Nadine  
 Double, Steve  
 Drax, Richard  
 Drummond, Mrs Flick  
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain  
 Dunne, Mr Philip  
 Ellis, Michael  
 Ellison, Jane  
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias  
 Elphicke, Charlie  
 Eustice, George  
 Evans, Graham  
 Evennett, rh Mr David  
 Fabricant, Michael  
 Fallon, rh Michael  
 Fernandes, Suella  
 Field, rh Mark  
 Foster, Kevin  
 Fox, rh Dr Liam  
 Frazer, Lucy  
 Freeman, George  
 Freer, Mike  
 Fuller, Richard  
 Fysh, Marcus  
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Ghani, Nusrat  
 Gibb, Mr Nick  
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl  
 Glen, John  
 Goodwill, Mr Robert  
 Gove, rh Michael  
 Graham, Richard  
 Grant, Mrs Helen  
 Gray, Mr James  
 Grayling, rh Chris  
 Green, Chris  
 Green, rh Damian  
 Greening, rh Justine  
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic  
 Griffiths, Andrew  
 Gummer, Ben  
 Gyimah, Mr Sam  
 Halfon, rh Robert  
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip  
 Hammond, Stephen  
 Hancock, rh Matthew  
 Hands, rh Greg  
 Harper, rh Mr Mark  
 Harrington, Richard  
 Harris, Rebecca  
 Hart, Simon  
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan  
 Hayes, rh Mr John  
 Heald, Sir Oliver  
 Heappey, James  
 Heaton-Harris, Chris  
 Henderson, Gordon  
 Herbert, rh Nick  
 Hinds, Damian  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Hollingbery, George  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Hollobone, Mr Philip  
 Holloway, Mr Adam  
 Hopkins, Kris  
 Howarth, Sir Gerald  
 Huddleston, Nigel  
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy  
 Jackson, Mr Stewart  
 James, Margot  
 Javid, rh Sajid  
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil  
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard  
 Jenkyns, Andrea  
 Jenrick, Robert  
 Johnson, Boris  
 Johnson, Gareth  
 Johnson, Joseph

Jones, Andrew  
 Jones, rh Mr David  
 Jones, Mr Marcus  
 Kawczynski, Daniel  
 Kirby, Simon  
 Knight, rh Sir Greg  
 Knight, Julian  
 Kwarteng, Kwasi  
 Lancaster, Mark  
 Latham, Pauline  
 Leadsom, Andrea  
 Lee, Dr Phillip  
 Lefroy, Jeremy  
 Leigh, Sir Edward  
 Leslie, Charlotte  
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver  
 Lewis, Brandon  
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian  
 Lidington, rh Mr David  
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter  
 Lord, Jonathan  
 Loughton, Tim  
 Lumley, Karen  
 Mackinlay, Craig  
 Mackintosh, David  
 Main, Mrs Anne  
 Mak, Mr Alan  
 Malthouse, Kit  
 Mann, Scott  
 Mathias, Dr Tania  
 May, rh Mrs Theresa  
 Maynard, Paul  
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick  
 McPartland, Stephen  
 Menzies, Mark  
 Mercer, Johnny  
 Merriman, Huw  
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria  
 Milling, Amanda  
 Mills, Nigel  
 Milton, rh Anne  
 Mordaunt, Penny  
 Morgan, rh Nicky  
 Morris, Anne Marie  
 Morris, David  
 Morris, James  
 Morton, Wendy  
 Mowat, David  
 Mundell, rh David  
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
 Murrison, Dr Andrew  
 Neill, Robert  
 Newton, Sarah  
 Nokes, Caroline  
 Norman, Jesse  
 Nuttall, Mr David  
 Offord, Dr Matthew  
 Parish, Neil  
 Patel, rh Priti  
 Pawsey, Mark  
 Penrose, John  
 Perry, Claire  
 Phillips, Stephen  
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric  
 Pincher, Christopher  
 Prentis, Victoria  
 Prisk, Mr Mark  
 Pursglove, Tom  
 Quin, Jeremy  
 Quince, Will

Raab, Mr Dominic  
 Redwood, rh John  
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob  
 Robertson, Mr Laurence  
 Rosindell, Andrew  
 Rudd, rh Amber  
 Rutley, David  
 Sandbach, Antoinette  
 Selous, Andrew  
 Shapps, rh Grant  
 Sharma, Alok  
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith  
 Smith, Chloe  
 Smith, Julian  
 Smith, Royston  
 Solloway, Amanda  
 Soubry, rh Anna  
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline  
 Spencer, Mark  
 Stevenson, John  
 Stewart, Bob  
 Stewart, Iain  
 Stewart, Rory  
 Streeter, Mr Gary  
 Stride, Mel  
 Stuart, Graham  
 Sturdy, Julian  
 Sunak, Rishi  
 Swayne, rh Mr Desmond  
 Swire, rh Mr Hugo  
 Syms, Mr Robert  
 Thomas, Derek  
 Throup, Maggie  
 Timpson, Edward  
 Tomlinson, Justin  
 Tomlinson, Michael  
 Tracey, Craig  
 Tredinnick, David  
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie  
 Truss, rh Elizabeth  
 Tugendhat, Tom  
 Turner, Mr Andrew  
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew  
 Vaizey, Mr Edward  
 Vara, Mr Shailesh  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa  
 Walker, Mr Charles  
 Wallace, Mr Ben  
 Warburton, David  
 Warman, Matt  
 Watkinson, Dame Angela  
 Wharton, James  
 Whately, Helen  
 Wheeler, Heather  
 White, Chris  
 Whittaker, Craig  
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
 Wiggin, Bill  
 Williams, Craig  
 Williamson, rh Gavin  
 Wilson, Mr Rob  
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah  
 Wragg, William  
 Wright, rh Jeremy  
 Zahawi, Nadhim

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
 Guy Opperman and  
 Jackie Doyle-Price

*Question accordingly negated.*

## Business without Debate

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft State Pension and Occupational Pension Schemes (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 30 November 2015, be approved.—(Guy Opperman.)

*The Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 3 February (Standing Order No. 41A).*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Pensions Act 2014 (Consequential and Supplementary Amendments) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 30 November 2015, be approved.—(Guy Opperman.)

*The Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 3 February (Standing Order No. 41A).*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 17 December 2015, be approved.—(Guy Opperman.)

*Question agreed to.*

### PETITION

#### Planning and studentification (Chester)

7.14 pm

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): I beg leave to present to the House a petition on planning policy relating to studentification, signed by my constituents and others, including the constituents of my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), who I see in his place. My constituents seek a change in planning law better to secure the character of local communities during expansion of universities.

The petition states:

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Government to make provision for legislation to ensure that local authorities sustainably manage the interests of all parties when considering where student accommodation is developed.

*Following is the full text of the petition:*

*[The Humble Petition of residents of the City of Chester,*

*Declares that Government planning guidance requires amendment to ensure that it includes a statutory strategic studentification policy and to ensure that student accommodation demand is factored into housing assessment made as part of any emerging Strategic Local Plan; further that the Government should make clear all development options and locations concerned with delivery of amenities to meet higher education growth; further that student*

[Christian Matheson]

*accommodation has been and continues to be permitted at inappropriate locations to house increasing numbers of students in the City of Chester; further that this adversely affects the working city and residential local community; further that the Local Authority and Inspectorate decisions taken to allow this accommodation undermines commitments made on the Petitioners' behalf in the recently adopted Strategic Local Plan to bring a growing West Cheshire elderly population and required future workforce into the city; further that this undermines the Government's National Planning Policy Framework commitment to protect the character of local areas and to defend people's rights to tranquillity as well as compromising delivery of required affordable and mixed residential accommodation; further that in Chester the loss of potential inner city development sites are having adverse effects; and further that in 2011 the Council voted in favour of consolidating a significant body of student intake into a single area by way of a student village solution but despite this, student accommodation is appearing in many areas in the city, causing unbalanced outcomes.*

*Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Government to make provision for legislation to ensure that local authorities sustainably manage the interests of all parties when considering where student accommodation is developed.*

*And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.]*

[P001671]

## Flood Defences (Leeds)

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(George Hollingbery.)*

7.15 pm

**Rachel Reeves** (Leeds West) (Lab): The River Aire runs through my constituency on its way through west Yorkshire to the heart of Leeds city centre and towards the East Riding of Yorkshire. The Aire has been central to the life and development of Leeds, and Kirkstall specifically, for centuries. Kirkstall Abbey, a Cistercian monastery founded in the Aire valley in 1152, served as a centre of work, education and welfare for hundreds of years. A corn mill built by the monks on the river's banks survived the abbey's dissolution to power iron production and the manufacture of agricultural tools. Around Kirkstall forge grew engineering works that became a centre for steam train and automotive manufacturing, and the forge is now the focus of a major redevelopment and regeneration scheme which includes the building of a new railway station.

The industry and inventiveness of the local community has seen Kirkstall through the ups and downs of history, and today the area is home to more entrepreneurial people and businesses than ever. On Boxing day night, however, the Aire showed its full force when it rose to its highest-ever level of 5.2 metres—more than a metre higher than it has been since its previous peak in 1886—and its banks burst, devastating local businesses, families and the community. At the latest count, 519 businesses across Leeds were affected, along with 2,113 residential properties and 14 other properties, including the industrial museum at Armley Mills and Rodley nature reserve in my constituency.

In Kirkstall, approximately 250 businesses employing 2,500 people were affected. Businesses of all sizes lost machinery and stock, workers were laid off, and jobs were lost. Many small businesses have not yet been able to reopen, and many have laid off staff. I have heard from some that may never open their doors again. Furthermore, £8 million-worth of key infrastructure across the city was damaged. The A65 Kirkstall Road, one of the main routes into and out of our city, had to close, as did the railway line from Leeds to Ilkley and Bradford.

The clean-up operation that took place so intensively in Kirkstall was a tribute to the community, as well as to Leeds City Council and our emergency services. With nearly 1,000 volunteers in Kirkstall alone, my constituency saw countless acts of everyday heroism that will be remembered by the people of Leeds for years to come. It is at times of adversity that we often see communities at their strongest, and we are reminded that together we can achieve so much more than we can alone. I have never been so proud to represent the people of Leeds West in Parliament.

I intend to focus on the flood defence scheme in Leeds, but let me first touch briefly on two other issues: flood insurance, and the funds that are available for immediate support. There is absolutely no guarantee that the businesses that are able to open their doors again after the floods will be able to gain access to affordable flood insurance. The Flood Re scheme, which is very welcome, applies to residential properties, but will not help small businesses in my constituency.

The Government must immediately review the extent of the challenges faced by businesses, and think about how they can step in to help when markets fail.

**Sue Hayman** (Workington) (Lab): One of the problems with flood insurance for businesses is the fact that they often have to pay huge excesses. It is not just a question of obtaining affordable insurance; it is a question of ensuring that the excesses are manageable.

**Rachel Reeves:** I entirely agree. Many businesses, particularly in Kirkstall industrial park, have spoken of excesses of £8,000 or more. Others were underinsured. Because it was Christmas, a number of businesses had more stock than they would usually have, so their insurance claims will not meet the full extent of their losses.

**Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. The whole of Leeds was affected by these terrible floods. She has highlighted many of the businesses that were affected. Does she agree that one of the greatest tragedies was that of Duffield Printers, which has been in existence for many decades, and which has been forced to close with the shedding of 27 skilled jobs because of the under-insurance and its inability to get future insurance? That is a tragedy for everybody in Leeds.

**Rachel Reeves:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is right to say that Duffield Printers has had to lay off 27 workers. The Sheesh Mahal on Kirkstall Road, which has been open for 26 years, has also closed, and there are fears for the future of those businesses and many others, in part, because of the worries about their being able to access affordable insurance in the future.

The second point I wanted to make was about immediate support. Leeds must continue to receive the immediate funding it needs. The people have played their part in the clean-up operation, and now it is time for the Government to play theirs. The city has received £4.7 million up to 11 January in Government grants to help with the clear-up and recovery efforts from the recent flooding, but that is still not half the overall £11.44 million that is deemed to be needed. I urge Ministers to release the additional funds without any further delay and, importantly, to allow local authorities dealing with these situations as much flexibility as possible in how these funds are spent, so that there are no unhelpful barriers preventing them from assisting local residents and businesses.

Now let me turn to the crucial issue of flood defences in Leeds.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): As well as the river that ran down Kirkstall Road, residents and businesses around the The Calls, Dock Street and Stourton were affected. Given that we have known in Leeds for a long time that there was a risk of serious flooding, which is why the full flood defence scheme was drawn up in 2011, does my hon. Friend agree that the only way to give the city and the economy of Leeds the protection it needs is by having a full scheme now, funded by the Government?

**Rachel Reeves:** I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. He speaks with great authority on these matters, and of course the constituency of Leeds Central was badly affected by the floods. I agree wholeheartedly

with what he says and I will come now to why it is so important that we have a full and comprehensive flood defence scheme in Leeds.

As my right hon. Friend said, in 2011 there were plans on the table for a £188 million flood defence scheme. This would have provided a one-in-200-year standard of flood protection for our city, yet the decision was taken to split the defence scheme into three phases and funding was available only for phase 1. This phase, which has the aim of defending the city centre against a one-in-75-year flood event, is under way with additional funding from Leeds city council.

Phases 2 and 3, which would cover the 12-mile stretch from Newlay bridge through Kirkstall and the city centre to Woodlesford to provide a one-in-200-year standard of protection, was cancelled in 2011. I recognise that the scheme is expensive, but let me also say this: the costs of inaction exceed the costs of investing in infrastructure. A full flood defence system does not come cheap but, according to previous estimates, if the flood had happened on a normal working weekday the cost would have been about £400 million, twice as much as the cost of investing in the first place.

**Greg Mulholland** (Leeds North West) (LD): I praise the hon. Lady for securing the debate and the work she is doing to co-ordinate this matter—the wonderful Kirkstall Bridge inn in her constituency, where a lot of help was necessary, is run by constituents of mine. Does she agree that the statement made by Ministers in 2011 that we did not need this Rolls-Royce scheme for the River Aire, but that a family-car scheme would do, was a flawed decision? We still have not had answers and, considering the damage, it was an utterly false economy.

**Rachel Reeves:** For the reasons I have outlined, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is a false economy not to make these investments in flood defences because of the damage that has been done to businesses and prosperity in cities such as Leeds. The president of Leeds chamber of commerce, Gerald Jennings, has this week also described the failure to invest in flood defences as a false economy, and I agree with him, as do many other hon. Members in the Chamber this evening.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): It gives me no pleasure to say this, but what will my hon. Friend's constituents think when they reflect on the fact that my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) and my predecessor, George Mudie, spoke in this place in 2011 of the flooding that could happen in Leeds if their dire warnings were not heeded? I am afraid that those warnings were not heeded.

**Rachel Reeves:** My hon. Friend is right to say that we gave those warnings in 2011. Many people have been affected by the floods—whether it is their houses or their businesses that have been flooded, or whether they have lost their jobs—and they are all asking how many warnings have to be given and how many times Leeds has to flood before we get the flood defences we need. That is why I am asking the Minister to listen carefully to what we are saying and to make the investments that our city desperately needs.

**Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): We heard in the meeting with Leeds City Council's leaders that, had the flooding happened on a weekday, 27,000 office workers would have been trapped in the city centre with no road or rail exits. Does my hon. Friend agree that we would not tolerate that lack of resilience in any other large city in the country? It is totally unacceptable for this country's third-largest city to be left so vulnerable.

**Rachel Reeves:** I entirely agree with my hon. Friend.

I want to turn now to the economic effects on Leeds of the floods. The workforce in Leeds total 470,000 people, with a huge number travelling into the city from the surrounding areas every day. If the flood had happened on a working day, thousands of people would have been unable either to get to work or to get out of the city, resulting in huge amounts of congestion and countless working days being lost. The disruption to mobile telecoms infrastructure was bad on Boxing day, but it could have been worse. Significant risks have been identified at key infrastructure sites, including the Vodafone site off Kirkstall Road, which provides important communications to the council, the police and the national health service, and the power substation on Redcote Lane in Kirkstall, which powers 50,000 properties. Both were disrupted on Boxing day and for days afterwards. Leeds is also the regional centre for emergency and specialist healthcare, hosting the largest teaching hospital in Europe, and it relies on that infrastructure on a daily basis. For that reason as well, the city needs to be accessible by road and by rail.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In York, 50,000 phone lines went down and vital emergency infrastructure was impacted, including the lifeline that 700 elderly residents depend on. Is it not right that telecoms should now be part of the gold command and silver command operations, to ensure that we have full support for our communications?

**Rachel Reeves:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, whose constituency has also been devastated by the floods.

The point is that important infrastructure sites such as the Vodafone site off Kirkstall Road and the power substation on Redcote Lane were not protected and were badly damaged on Boxing day. In Kirkstall, in my constituency, the consequences for the local economy of having no investment in flood defences is devastating. Businesses will leave, and new businesses will not come. We risk creating ghost towns if we take no action.

Last week, I and my fellow Leeds MPs—all eight of us—along with Leeds City Council leader Judith Blake and the council chief executive Tom Riordan, met the Secretary of State to ask for the reinstatement of the flood defence scheme in Leeds. We welcomed her saying that further flood protection for Leeds was a priority for the Government, but we were disappointed that no firm commitment was made to provide funding—not even the £3 million required to commence urgent design and preparatory work for flood defences over and above phase 1. We need that money for flood defences if we are to turn her commitment into a reality. I fully appreciate the budgetary challenges relating to flood defences, but we must all acknowledge the significance of the flooding arising from Storm Eva and the significant economic

risk that the city of Leeds, and thus the UK economy, will therefore face without adequate investment in flood defences.

**Stuart Andrew** (Pudsey) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, and I am pleased that she has been able to secure this debate. I, too, welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has said that flood protection for Leeds is a priority. I have also had a meeting with the Chancellor, who has promised to look at this matter personally. Although there is a role for Government, does she agree that there is also a role for local councils in looking at where future housing will be built, because the rain that may fall in my constituency could have a severely adverse effect on her constituency?

**Rachel Reeves:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Leeds City Council helped to fund phase 1 of the flood defence scheme in Leeds, recognising that it was important to make that contribution to protect our city. Of course we need to consider where housing is built, and it is right, as the Secretary of State has said, to look at the whole catchment area, and not just at the parts of the river that flood. As the hon. Gentleman will agree, we need £3 million to carry out an urgent feasibility study to see what the flood defence scheme will look like. That said, we need the flood defence scheme to protect our city. Many constituents from Pudsey rely on the A65 and the train links to get to work, so the problem affects both our constituencies.

**Craig Whittaker** (Calder Valley) (Con): On the point about catchment areas, in Calder Valley, which of course has high-sided valleys, it is a case of not just building walls down the river, but looking at the moors above, tree planting, and how we slow water coming down the valley. If we do not stop the water in the Calder valley, Leeds will flood anyway.

**Rachel Reeves:** The hon. Gentleman speaks with great authority and knowledge because of the flooding that he has seen on many occasions in his constituency. Again, I agree that we need to take a whole catchment area approach. It is now more than a month since those floods happened, and we do need those feasibility studies to be quickly carried out, so that we are protected in the future.

In his letter to the Chancellor this week, Gerald Jennings of the Leeds chamber of commerce said:

“As the engine room of the Yorkshire economy, Leeds already plays a major role in driving forward economic prosperity; we have seen significant private sector investment over the last 25 years. The city has created jobs in large numbers as a consequence, which have benefited the entire city region. Without further investment in flood defences, businesses may be forced to reconsider their own investment plans and the ability to attract new investment will be curtailed.”

People's homes, jobs and livelihoods are at stake, and so too are communities, local economies and the future of the northern powerhouse. The community played its part in the immediate aftermath of the floods, clearing up, rebuilding and repairing, but now the Government must do their part, too. They must ensure that there is affordable and available flood insurance; that financial support is available to those most affected; and that they build the flood defences that our city so desperately needs. To fail to do so will let down the people who turn

to Government to harness our collective effort. Let us build the northern powerhouse—let us not sink it before it has a chance even to set sail.

7.32 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart):** I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) for her powerful speech in which she made a very strong case for the unique status of Leeds and its importance as a city—and, indeed, as the hub of a whole city region. That is the nub of the discussion that we are having today. We must strike the right balance between the unique needs of Leeds and being fair across the country to many other communities. I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady that Leeds is unique in many ways and requires unique treatment. I will try to come back to that point, hopefully with some good news, at the end of my speech.

Let me develop a few points to put the whole matter in context. Clearly, the challenge that we face in dealing with a floods budget—it does not really matter how much money a Government have—is being fair across the country and trying to find a way of looking different communities in the face and explaining why we are investing in one place rather than another. There are 250,000 houses in the Humber which are below the mean sea level. If the water were to over-top the defences there, there would be a national emergency. In 1953-54, 400 people were killed there. An investment of £80 million in the Humber would protect 50,000 homes.

The challenge that Leeds faces—we can go back in time to the shadow Foreign Secretary's involvement with this between 2008 and 2011—involves that funding formula, and getting the right balance between the hon. Lady's good points about Leeds's enormous importance as one of our great cities, and the number of houses protected and the level of protection offered to them. I defend the Environment Agency because I think that it works transparently and straightforwardly, and it has always clearly explained how its decisions are made. However, I agree that it is time to look again at Leeds for reasons that I shall come on to later.

I also pay huge tribute to the people of Leeds for their response to this extraordinary event. As the hon. Lady pointed out, flooding of this sort has not occurred on the Kirkstall Road since 1866, so it was very unusual. The 24-hour, 48-hour and monthly rainfall records were broken. In addition to the 1866 flooding, there was flooding on the Kirkstall Road in 1946, but with the exception of those two cases, we have not seen an event of anything like this sort, which was why the historical decision was taken to invest south of the train station. It is absolutely right that £10 million of the £44 million investment has come from Leeds City Council, but that was not the only source of funding. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has put £23 million into flood defences in Leeds. All the protection that covers Asda and the Royal Armouries, and the work on the movable weir and the canal, was done not on the basis of the traditional formula, but through our growth fund, because we recognise the unique importance of Leeds and its real importance to the broader economy.

We should pay tribute to the shadow Foreign Secretary for his work to make that innovative scheme possible.

From the first installations of weirs in 1699 right the way through to 1816, as the canal network developed, the large concern was how to keep water in the centre of Leeds for navigation and to power the wool industry. Those weirs therefore existed to keep water back. There are still navigation needs in Leeds, which means that there has to be a way in which those weirs can remain when the water is low, but we now have a kevlar solution that allows us to demount them and to let the weirs down so that the water can come out. Furthermore, the important Knostrop scheme will benefit constituents further upstream. By taking away the distinction between the canal and the river, we are essentially creating a catchment lagoon downstream that will benefit people a long way beyond the upper walls.

Let us move on from the past because we need to think about the future. The hon. Lady said that she had a good meeting with the Secretary of State. I do not think that I am sharing any secrets when I say that the Secretary of State is genuinely moved by what happened in Leeds. I believe that her parents live there and she is committed to the city. She cares about proving that something can be done in Leeds, so I hope that the hon. Lady sensed that during their meeting.

A cross-party case needs to be made, because we will need to have difficult conversations with other communities throughout the country to explain why we are acting in such a way, but we will build a case together exactly along the lines of what the hon. Lady set out. We need to point out that Leeds is the UK's second, third or fourth largest city, depending on where we put the boundaries. It certainly has the second largest legal centre in the United Kingdom after London. It is one of our leading financial centres, with an economy worth £54 billion. It is an extraordinary transport hub. It has, after London, the second or third busiest commuter train station in the United Kingdom with 140,000 people a day passing through it. If we get this right, there is enormous potential in Leeds for not only existing businesses, but development land. With its many brownfield sites, Leeds has more potential than almost anywhere else that one can think of for the development of new businesses. The headquarters of businesses such as Asda and Direct Line are in Leeds city centre.

Over the next six years, we will invest £2.3 billion in flood defences, and the £44 million for Leeds, or at least our contribution to that, forms part of that investment. To make this new argument, which I am fully behind, we need to focus on a different kind of economic case—not the traditional formula, but a case about how a northern powerhouse requires a great northern city. If we get this right, there could be huge economic benefits, as well as in terms of amenities, because people coming to see the river and canal could bring benefits similar to those experienced by cities such as Newcastle.

We are keen to work with Leeds City Council, and the Environment Agency had another meeting with it yesterday. May I break with protocol, Madam Deputy Speaker, and ask whether the shadow Minister intends to speak, or whether I can take a couple of minutes to develop my argument?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** The shadow Minister is not allowed to take part in the debate. The Minister has nearly five minutes left.

**Rory Stewart:** Thank you very much indeed, Madam Deputy Speaker. In that case, I shall exploit my five minutes.

The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) made a powerful argument as someone who was involved. To some extent, he embraced the £44 million scheme, but he would like much more to be done and a higher level of protection throughout the city. The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) made a powerful contribution, with an argument for an economic centre. We also heard from the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), my hon. Friends the Members for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) and for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), and finally from the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), who made a strong argument about how all of this should be tied together.

**Greg Mulholland:** What about Leeds North West?

**Rory Stewart:** Many apologies. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) also made a good case.

There has to be a cross-party approach, because we need investment from businesses and councils. We have to deal with communities upstream or downstream that are concerned about the impact of the flood defences that we are putting in. We need a communications drive across the country. I am happy to confirm that we will now go ahead with the feasibility study that the hon. Member for Leeds West requested. That money will be made available, and we will make a full analysis of the Leeds scheme. That will allow us not just to complete phase 1 but to look at the future.

We will have to look at various options. Outside the window in the apartment of the right hon. Member for Leeds Central, he would be looking at the possibility of raising those walls that are already going in. There is not much more that we can do downstream, as that

work has already been done with the moveable weirs. Upstream on the Kirkstall Road, we would have to look at putting in walls where walls do not currently exist, and higher than that we will have to look at the possibility of two different types of reservoir: permanent reservoirs and offline reservoirs—in other words, farmland can occasionally be used. We can also look, as my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley said, at the potential of measures on upstream catchments to slow the water coming downstream.

The feasibility study will address the catchment coming through Leeds. It will look at upstream mitigation, reservoirs and the potential for walls to be built along the road, which will involve many hon. Members discussing with local residents whether they are prepared to have their views cut off, how high the walls should go, and to what extent companies want to contribute to those walls. I believe that, after this flooding event, the political will is there and residents will be happy to do that. It will have to go all the way down to the constituency of the right hon. Member for Leeds Central, where we will have to look at raising the walls of that £44 million scheme.

On that, and with great thanks to the hon. Member for Leeds West, I wish to say a huge thank you for all the work that has been done by people in Leeds, including the leader of Leeds City Council, who has put a huge amount of heart and soul into this, and by the thousand volunteers who were mentioned. May I assure the people of Leeds, as was made absolutely clear by the Secretary of State, that Leeds is a priority, exactly because of the unique characteristics that have been raised so powerfully in this debate?

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.43 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

Wednesday 27 January 2016

[MR DAVID CRAUSBY *in the Chair*]

## Disabled People: Support

9.30 am

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the changes to funding of support for disabled people.

I thank you, Mr Crausby, for chairing this important debate, and I thank everyone for attending. I also thank all the organisations—especially the Disability Benefits Consortium—that have briefed MPs on today's debate. *[Interruption.]* I also thank whoever is phoning.

The debate is important. The disadvantage experienced by disabled people is well evidenced. They are twice as likely as other people to live in poverty. The percentage of working-age disabled people in employment has dropped in recent years. Even in work, disabled people are worse off than non-disabled people. According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, disabled men in work face an 11% pay gap, while disabled women face a 22% pay gap.

Disabled people also experience higher routine costs of living. The Scope-facilitated Extra Costs Commission, which began its work in 2014, has set out in detail the hundreds of pounds that many disabled people spend every week as a direct result of living with certain health conditions and impairments. Sadly, Government policies—particularly since 2010—have made things far worse for disabled people and caused them greater difficulty.

As to my personal background on this issue, my mum has schizophrenia, and that contributed to my work choices—I worked for the Disability Rights Commission, the National Centre for Independent Living and Disability Alliance UK among others. The issue is also very relevant to my constituency, because we have a higher incidence of certain mental health conditions, and about 12,500 disabled people—about one in nine of my constituents—live in Bermondsey and Old Southwark, according to the Library. The issue should, however, matter to everyone, because we should facilitate a society in which anyone can contribute, to the maximum of their potential. Sadly, however, that possibility is being undermined.

The debate's timing is useful. Tomorrow is the last day of the Government's consultation on the future of personal independence payments. Fears about disabled people losing work as a direct result of the introduction of personal independence payments are beginning to be realised. Over the weekend, the *Daily Mirror* covered the case of Denise Haddon which is yet another example of a disabled person who uses a Motability vehicle for work, but who could see that vehicle withdrawn, with them being forced out of work as a direct result of Government policy.

Today, colleagues in the House of Lords—certainly, Labour colleagues—will also be pushing amendments on the work-related activity group cuts in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, which will affect half a million disabled people. This afternoon, we will have an Opposition

day debate on supported housing, in which we will call for an exemption for such housing from housing benefit cuts. This debate is therefore very timely.

The Government have their priorities wrong. They keep coming back to disabled people and undermining support, rather than focusing on areas where there is more potential. Just this week, for example, we saw the Google fiasco, which demonstrates yet again that we are not all in this together and that there is a significant imbalance in whom the Government choose to squeeze more out of.

What is worse, the Government suggest that their measures are about supporting disabled people into work or about providing more support to those who need it most. If they believe that any group of disabled people has definitely benefited more as a direct result of any policy since 2010, I would welcome the Minister providing evidence to back that up.

On work, 53% of working-age disabled people were in work in 2010, but the figure is now under 50%. The Library has pointed out that, of the 320,000 disabled people on employment and support allowance referred to the Work programme since 2011, only 16% got a job. Although 43% of those on Work Choice—a more specialised programme—could be supported into work, which is of benefit, the Government have announced that the two schemes will be merged in 2017. It would be useful to have a stronger indication from the Minister whether we will see a levelling up or a levelling down of the support provided to disabled people. Will we see a return to more specialised, localised support, with smaller suppliers who are better able to provide the dedicated support that many disabled people need? We saw good schemes under things such as the future jobs fund and the working neighbourhoods fund, which were more localised and specialised, but which were unable to compete following the changes introduced in 2010.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Does he agree that the issue is sometimes ensuring that training makes the right skills available for disabled people? Many disabled people want to get into work, but they are prevented from doing so by the inability to access the very skills they need to get into the workplace.

**Neil Coyle:** I completely agree that that training needs to be there. It would be useful to hear from the Minister how whatever new programme is put in place in 2017 will make training and dedicated, specialised support available.

Another thing we have seen is that the number of disability employment advisers, who have specialist knowledge, has dropped by 20% since 2010. There is now less than one adviser per 600 disabled people who are meant to be supported, so we are heading in the wrong direction.

People have been in touch with me about the Access to Work programme. For anyone who is unfamiliar with it, it is a specialised programme that helps disabled people to retain or attain work. The Department for Work and Pensions used to accept—it seems to shy away from accepting this know—that, for every pound spent on Access to Work, about £1.48 was returned through things such as national insurance contributions and income tax. However, fewer disabled people are now supported under Access to Work than in 2009-10—the

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figure has dropped from just over 37,000 to 36,700. That needs addressing, and it would be welcome if the Minister told us whether there will be more targeted support under Access to Work to increase those numbers.

In 2014, the Government said they were expanding Access to Work to include work placements acquired by the individual disabled person. I have asked questions about that and received no information to show whether the Government are actually delivering on that. In 2011, the Government said that they accepted all the recommendations of the Sayce review, including those on Access to Work. Perhaps we could have an update on how they are taking forward the review's retention and promotion aspects. In the 2015 spending review, the Government announced that Access to Work funding would support 25,000 additional disabled people by providing IT help, but we have no information on what that means or how it will be rolled out in practice. It would be useful to hear more about that significant target.

The Down's Syndrome Association has been in touch and has provided briefing for the debate to highlight its WorkFit programme. The association says the programme has supported 75 individuals with Down's syndrome into work, but that only three have met the stringent eligibility criteria for Access to Work. The association feels that that needs to change, and it is keen to hear from the Minister whether the Government will take forward its recommendations.

I want to raise the issue of assessments and accessible information. I have a constituent called Norma who lives in Walworth. Her daughter, who is about 50, has learning disabilities and a visual impairment, and she is deaf. The DWP has been contacting Norma to press for her daughter to be assessed, and Norma feels that her daughter is being told she should be working, even though she cannot leave her home without support. Norma feels she is under considerable pressure. I will write to the Minister about this specific example after the debate, and I will encourage him to explain why Norma and her daughter feel they are under such pressure from the DWP.

Disabled people have also been in touch with significant concerns about universal credit. Some projections suggest that universal credit will be about 1,000 years in delivery, so perhaps some of the fears are unnecessary, as we will not be here. However, it appears that the Government have scrapped the limited capability for work element before any disabled person has been able to access it, which will leave 116,000 working disabled people £40 a week worse off. Once again, the idea that the Government want to support people into work is undermined by their policies. Citizens Advice has also highlighted in a report that in-work single disabled people will be worse off because of the scrapping of the severe disability premium, which will leave almost 250,000 disabled people worse off by between £28 and £58 a week. The Children's Society has pointed out that, under universal credit, 100,000 disabled children could also lose £28 a week. I ask the Minister what message that sends to those disabled people.

Employment and support allowance is also a significant concern for many of my constituents, 5,630 of whom receive it. The Government recently announced that a cut of £1.4 billion will affect disabled people in the

work-related activity group; that is £30 a week for half a million disabled people. DWP statistics show who those people are. They include a quarter of a million people with learning disabilities, autism or significant mental health problems. Again, I ask the Minister why those specific people were chosen for that measure. What are the Government seeking to achieve by targeting such a disadvantaged and vulnerable group?

An example given to me by Parkinson's UK shows something of the challenge that disabled people have in accepting that the Government agenda is genuine. In a written answer to a question by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) on Monday, the Minister for Employment revealed that since 2008, when ESA was introduced, 200 people with Parkinson's in the work-related activity group were assessed and given a medical prognosis by the DWP that they would not be able to return to work for at least two years, or longer. The Department is telling people whom it has assessed as unable to work for two years that they will be receiving £1,500 less per year to get them back into work within that period. I hope that the Minister will comment on that. I hope, too, that he will answer the suggestion raised elsewhere that there will be no change for those already in the work-related activity group. Does that include those whose circumstances change, and those who undergo repeat assessments?

The change to ESA follows previous changes, including the time limiting of some support, which has left 280,000 disabled people with no out-of-work benefit. Some have very low incomes, and it is most unfortunate that the Government have managed to pick that group for an increase in poverty. I would welcome a comment from the Minister about that.

I want briefly to cover sanctions. In its briefing, the Child Poverty Action Group highlighted the fact that some sanctions mean that 100% of a person's financial support goes. Those sanctions can last up to three years, under the increasingly automated system introduced by the previous Government. [Interruption.] I am glad that some Members find that funny. I find that very strange. Would the hon. Gentleman like to intervene?

**Paul Maynard** (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): No, because I am about to make a speech, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for the offer.

**Neil Coyle:** The hon. Gentleman is welcome. Perhaps I will enjoy his contribution as much as he appears to be enjoying mine.

The concern that I have about sanctions is the growing number of disabled people who experience them; 70,000 sanctions have been imposed on ESA claimants between December 2012 and June 2015 alone. The Select Committee on Work and Pensions highlighted the fact that safeguards may not always work effectively. My question for the Minister is: if he believes the system is adequate, how has he responded to the Committee's recommendations, and when will the Department publish its own findings of a review of sanctions? Furthermore, as sanctions and benefit changes are specifically mentioned in some people's suicide notes, how does the Department support Jobcentre Plus staff and other agencies in handling suicidal claimants and those who raise the matter of suicide in meetings with Government officials?

Disability living allowance and personal independence payments are a growing concern for many disabled people. In Bermondsey and Old Southwark, 3,600 working-age disabled people will be affected by the abolition of DLA and hundreds more children will be affected as they reach the age of 16. The DWP has revealed that 607,000 disabled people will lose help with the abolition of DLA. That struck me as quite odd, given that a former Minister for Disabled People accused charities of scaremongering, such as when the Disability Action Alliance suggested that half a million disabled people would be affected. Now that the Government have revealed that the figure will be 607,000, perhaps Ministers should apologise to the charities they accused. Instead, the Government attacks charities' ability to challenge the Government agenda, which is most unfortunate.

The Disability Benefits Consortium, among others, recommended that there should be better trials of the new assessment process. The DWP chose to ignore that advice; then the National Audit Office reported that the early operational performance of PIP was poor, and the Public Accounts Committee suggested that early delivery was "nothing short of a fiasco".

What assessment is the Minister making and what monitoring is the Department undertaking of those changes and how they are affecting disabled people's ability to work, in the context of the stories about Denise Haddon and others? What is the impact of the changes on NHS demand, for example? It would also be useful to have an update on the backlog of PIP assessments. Citizens Advice reported in August that PIP has now overtaken ESA as the most complained-about benefit system.

I want briefly to focus on the bedroom tax. The DWP acknowledges that two out of three people affected by the bedroom tax are disabled people. That is 440,000 disabled people. Assuming that average amount is £14 per week since the introduction of the bedroom tax, by the time it reaches its third birthday at the end of April, it will amount to a disability tax of almost £1 billion. Disabled people are also affected by issues such as the freezing of benefit of uprating. Even for those on ESA, the value of the uprating for the vast majority of their benefits is lower than the rises in their energy bills or transport costs, for example.

On housing, I have been contacted by John, who is pleased about this debate and the one this afternoon. He says that he lives in supported housing, which he relies on to live independently. He says that he has "lived securely, independently and safely in a social housing wheelchair designated flat provided by Habinteg for 27 years and this is now potentially under threat."

Many of his neighbours have considerably greater needs and are equally threatened. He finds the threat alone destabilising, let alone what could happen if the changes go through as the Government intend. He believes that the Government's plans will stem the supply of wheelchair-accessible housing, particularly as there is already a shortfall in the availability of genuinely accessible housing. Has the Minister undertaken any impact assessment of how that specific change will affect the supply of accessible housing over time, given that we have an ageing population and growing demand for wheelchair-accessible homes?

On social care, a recent report from the Royal National Institute of Blind People and Age UK suggested that more than 12,000 blind and partially sighted people over 65 lost access to social care between 2009 and 2013.

That is more than a third of those who were previously getting support. The role of the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People should not just be to act as an apologist for the DWP. It should be cross-Government. I am intrigued to know what monitoring the Minister is undertaking with colleagues at the Department for Communities and Local Government, or the Department of Health, about where those disabled people go next if they lose social care. For example, is there a rise in demand for NHS services? Reductions in support for disabled people inevitably mean an increase in the demand for informal carers, who, without adequate support, can go on to experience health conditions and impairments of their own. There has been a rise in the number of children providing support for disabled parents and grandparents, which is a risk to their own long-term prospects if they do not receive sufficient support.

The independent living fund is being abolished. Its 18,000 users are very nervous about what happens next. It would be useful to have an indication from the Minister about how the people who lose it will be monitored, to see where they go next, given that the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services estimates that social care has lost £3.5 billion in funding since 2010. Many councils are losing about 28% of their budget but are spending about a third of their entire budget on social care. Councils cannot pick up the loss; they cannot step in and fill that gap.

I am sure that the Minister will want to mention the better care fund. My understanding of that fund is that it will only support new services, so those losing independent living fund support may not qualify for help. Scope, Mencap, Leonard Cheshire Disability and the National Autistic Society have estimated that one in six care users have fallen out of the system since 2008, and a further 36,000 working-age disabled people could lose access under the latest cuts as a result of the autumn statement. Will the Minister comment on what that loss could mean for other Government services?

Not only have social security and social care services been undermined by changes since 2010, but changes to a whole range of services used and needed by disabled people have had a negative impact. For example, there are 3,000 fewer nurses and hundreds fewer doctors in mental healthcare than in 2010. In my borough, we have therefore seen a rise in crisis treatment—that is, a rise in the number of people with mental health problems arriving at A&E, rather than having the right support further upstream.

In education, we have seen changes to the disabled students' allowance. Randstad provided a briefing for this debate in which it highlights its concerns about both the changes to DSA and the regulatory change to how provision is administered. It quotes its survey of disabled students, which found that almost 28% of disabled students would not have attended university if DSA had not been available. Another third said they were unsure whether they would have attended university. The survey also found that more than three quarters of disabled students said that attending university as a disabled student was more expensive, with 42% saying they were more likely to drop out as a result of losing DSA. Furthermore, 87% of students said they were concerned that not completing their studies would impact on their future employment prospects. Will the Minister try to demonstrate that the Government are taking a

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long-term approach and looking at what DSA changes might mean in lowering income for disabled people and lowering tax contributions to the Government in the longer term?

Even on legal aid, the Government have acknowledged that changes to funding have the potential to discriminate against disabled people unduly. That is borne out in the case summaries since the changes. In 2011-12, there were 7,676 disability discrimination-related cases. That has fallen to 3,106 cases—less than half—in the last year stats were available. That collapse is not due to discrimination ending, though it would be useful if that were so. The Government's concern should be that, without disabled people receiving the right support, the Government will not meet their commendable target to cut the employment gap for disabled people.

I suspect that the Minister will mention in his contribution the £50 billion a year spent on disabled people. The Resolution Foundation estimates that disabled people have lost more than £28 billion in support under a range of funding changes since 2010. If the Minister were to use that figure, he would therefore acknowledge that the Government have cut resources by about one third. That is not a record I would trumpet. It would be welcome if that figure were broken down into the different pots of support it covers. My concern is that it includes social care funding, without taking into account the charges that many disabled people pay to use social services, so it is not representative.

I want to conclude with a reference to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities inquiry into the rights of people with disabilities in the UK, which should report next year. Investigations by the committee are confidential, and the process, extent and scope of the inquiry are unknown, but it is widely believed that it will consider policies introduced by the coalition Government since 2010 in relation to welfare and social security benefits and, in particular, their compatibility with articles 19 and 28 of the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, which cover their rights to live independently and to enjoy an adequate standard of living.

The UK is the first country in the world to be investigated by the UN in relation to that convention. We have moved from being at the forefront of disability rights, respect and inclusion globally to being the first state in the world under investigation for rolling back disabled people's rights and undermining their equal citizenship. I simply end by asking the Minister this: can he genuinely be proud of that position for the UK?

**Mr David Crausby (in the Chair):** I intend to call the three Front-Bench Members starting at 10.30 am. If they could give Mr Coyle an opportunity to sum up briefly at the end, I would appreciate it. I do not intend to impose a time limit, but if Members could self-regulate, that would be best.

9.54 am

**Paul Maynard** (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on his wide-ranging speech and obvious knowledge of the issues concerned.

I have learned in my time in the House that it is often best not to attack an individual Member before they have stood up to speak, just in case that Member might actually intend to be helpful to the cause. At least the hon. Gentleman has saved me that dilemma, in a sense. I learned another lesson today, which is never to have stray thoughts during any parliamentary debate. I was not expecting to be here today—I was due to have a meeting at 10 o'clock, which got cancelled. I had an ironic thought about why it had been cancelled and the chance that I happened to be here, but if the hon. Gentleman in any way took offence at me making an audible noise, I apologise.

Since the hon. Gentleman thought I was referring to sanctions, let us talk about that for a few minutes. Sanctions are a particular concern in my constituency. I was fortunate to serve with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), on the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, where we looked into sanctions. Indeed, I tabled amendments to our Committee's report that went beyond anything even the shadow Minister felt able to table.

The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark mentioned suicide notes citing sanctions. I remain a firm supporter of the idea that where there is any question of the benefits system playing a role in any untoward event, there should be a body—similar in scope to the Independent Police Complaints Commission, perhaps—that looks at the individual's entire journey, from the first day they engaged with any Government Department to the end of their life, to establish what went wrong and where. Often, the fact that people experience a sanction is the end of a process of being poorly served by the benefits system, not the start of a process. I was pleased to see that mentioned in the final report.

I also gently make the point to the hon. Gentleman that much of what the Government brought forward in response to our Committee's report far exceeded my reasonable expectation. I am sure it did not satisfy the shadow Minister, because she and I rarely agreed in our time on that Committee, but it went beyond what I reasonably expected the Government to deliver, so I welcome that.

The other interesting lesson I have drawn today, in addition to how I should keep a straight face during debates, is what happens when I walk past an annunciator. Walking past an annunciator yesterday, I saw that the short title of today's debate was, "Support for disabled people," and I thought, "Gosh! That's very wide, isn't it? That could almost cover anything at all." I see today, however, that the title is actually, "Changes to funding of support for disabled people."

An interesting observation we can make here is that support can never just be financial. One frustration I have found in my six years in this place is that when we discuss disability, we often start from a financial perspective. Most of the critique is about the amount of money going left, right and centre. I do not dispute for a moment that without a stable financial base of support for disabled people and a well run benefits system giving support to those who need it most, anything else is simply window-dressing. We always need to look at the wider picture of disability: support needs to be about more than just the amount of money we happen to give someone in some

way. The Minister's role has to be far more than administering our benefits system. Indeed, the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark pointed out that the Minister's role has to be cross-governmental; it cannot just be located within DWP.

The hon. Gentleman rightly mentioned the Government's welcome commitment to halve the disability employment gap. I said in this place just over a week ago that the Conservative party was the only party to make that commitment. We get a lot of credit from the various component parts of the Disability Benefits Consortium for making that commitment. They want to see it evidenced in policy, and I accept that entirely. I know how hard the Minister is working on the Disability Confident campaign, which may be nebulous in its concept and hard to measure but is fundamental to changing the nature of the debate. Once again, it is about not only the amount of money that the state gives but the amount of money that individuals themselves can obtain through employment, and the benefits that will flow from that.

We need to take other aspects of funding of support for disabled people into account as well. Given the hon. Gentleman's professional background before he came into the House, I am sure that he is aware of Scope's Extra Costs Commission, which reported just before the last election. The commission looked at the issue of the "purple pound", as we like to call it now, and why we often talk about the poverty premium as a disability premium, too. It is a cost that people face.

Although disability living allowance and the personal independence payment are there to cover extra costs faced by disabled people, very often they cannot cover all of them. Scope rightly tried to look at how we can not only increase PIP, but decrease the extra costs. Why is it so hard for charities to perform collective energy price switching on behalf of many of their members and supporters? Why has there never been a Competition and Markets Authority investigation into why aids and appliances seem to have over-inflated prices, compared with the cost of producing them? The commission produced a thick, voluminous report, full of very challenging ideas, many of which can be taken hold of not only by Government but by the market. The hon. Gentleman talked about the Minister having a more wide-ranging role, and that is the sort of thing I envisage.

The hon. Gentleman was right to draw attention to the current controversy over employment and support allowance and the work-related activity group, and I do not disagree that it is a difficult area for Government. His speech was a bit of a Christmas tree of briefings from all the different charities within the DBC, many of which I have met too. They seem to have great unanimity on what the Government are doing wrong, but when it comes to solutions and what we should do instead, I have found great differences in what they are suggesting. Each charity seems to have its own answer about what should be done, even though their analysis appears to have a degree of commonality.

I certainly see a specific problem in my constituency. People may not pass or get the result that they want from their work capability assessment. They may then not accept the judgment and might even reject participation in the ongoing process, but what they do not feel able to do is transition on to jobseeker's allowance, whereby they might get different, more appropriate levels of help that might get them back into work. They get stuck in a

no man's land, because of the financial jeopardy of losing money as they transition on to jobseeker's allowance. I accept that removing that financial gap is not the answer for every single person, but it is an honest attempt, in my view, to solve what I see as a real problem in my constituency.

In the longer term, however, I urge the Government to look at ESA as a whole. To me, it is now one of the last in the suite of disability benefits that was conceived when we saw disability mainly as a physical manifestation. Nowadays, we know about the interaction between mental health and physical health, and I think that benefits now—particularly PIP—are doing much more to look at how mental health comes into the picture.

I think that ESA needs more than just tinkering with; it needs substantial reform, because two people with an identical degenerative condition might be at the same stage in their prognosis but might be responding to that undoubtedly terrible news in very different ways. One might have a positive get-up-and-go approach and the other might be totally bowled over by it and unable to cope. Both responses are perfectly legitimate, but they have a major impact on how that person engages in the workplace. The benefit system has to be able to accommodate both those outcomes, without judging them in any way, shape or form. At the moment, I am not convinced that ESA is able to do that. That is why I would argue for a much more fundamental reform. As with other reviews of both WCA and PIP tests, for which we have the annual review, I feel that all we are seeing is more and more people being placed in the support group, almost as a default doctrine. I do not think that would fulfil the Government's policy objective in the medium term.

I realise that we are trying to keep speeches brief, so I will try to do so. The hon. Gentleman mentioned Access to Work. We are always right to keep pressing the Government about how they are spending Access to Work money, which is a really important pot of money. The fact that there is no cap on it means that I would always argue for more ways to spend it, and he identified a few. I am very keen to see apprenticeships and pre-work situations being brought into the programme's remit. Many people find, for example, that when they leave university they cannot access the help they need to demonstrate that they can do a job, so that they can get credibility with an employer and get the job offer. Bringing that process to a pre-appointment stage might give employers slightly more confidence that the person they want to employ can be employed and supported in the job. I continue to urge that we do far more to use Access to Work to keep people in work. I know that the Minister is doing more on that issue, but I think more could still be done.

The hon. Gentleman talked about IT. In my understanding, that relates mainly to some of the more mental health-focused interventions that Access to Work is now involved in. There has been, if I recall correctly, a 200% increase in the number of people benefiting from mental health interventions. Given the current levels of demand, I suspect that that needs to be 2,000%, but it is a good start none the less.

Finally, when it comes to financial support for disabled people—if we take that as the title of the debate—there is always room for continuous improvement in the delivery of benefits. I cannot think of a single suite of

[Paul Maynard]

benefits that the Work and Pensions Committee could look at and not find recommendations on how it could be improved. I live in a constituency that is perhaps a bit similar to the hon. Gentleman's, with a very high level of transience in the population. Many people do not have addresses that are stable from month to month. The methods of communication are often not suited to those highly vulnerable people, who are often facing addiction challenges of one sort or another. There are always ways of improving how we deliver the benefits necessary to support the most vulnerable, so the Minister's role will always be about continuous improvement, but it cannot just be about managing a benefit system, because financial support has to come in numerous ways. Part of that financial support is considering what else the Government can do to lower the extra costs across the community—it is not just about how we give people more money to meet those extra costs. Both are important, and we need to give more attention to how we meet some of the extra costs through non-benefit means as well.

My speech was not short enough, but it was an attempt at being short, Mr Crausby.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr David Crausby (in the Chair):** Order. If Members can keep their contributions to around seven minutes, they should all get in.

10.7 am

**Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you as our Chair, Mr Crausby. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing this important debate and on the excellent way in which he opened it.

I want to touch on the impact that the Government's policies and proposals are having and are likely to have not only on disabled people, but on their family carers. The toxic combination of cuts to local authority budgets and changes to support are having a significant negative impact on disabled people and on their carers. My hon. Friend gave an excellent analysis of many of those impacts.

Social care is widely seen to be in crisis. The most recent survey by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services reported that 400,000 fewer people are receiving social care services than in 2009-10. Of those who are still supported, a significant number are now getting less care. Most directors expect that still fewer people will get access to services over the next two years.

There have been five years of funding reductions, totalling £4.6 billion and representing nearly one third of real-terms net budgets for local authorities. This year, adult social care budgets will reduce by a further half a billion pounds in cash terms. Taking the growth in numbers of older and disabled people into account, an additional £1.1 billion would be needed to provide just the same level of service as last year. Before the Minister tells us that the Government are putting £3.5 billion back into social care in future years, I should tell him that I see the Government's funding plans for social care as risky, uncertain and late.

Proposed increases to the better care fund are risky, because they are so back-loaded. They do not reach £1.5 billion until 2019, but as I said, demand is growing each year before then and we have already lost £4.6 billion. Funding from the social care precept is uncertain; it can only raise £1.6 billion by 2019-20 if every single council decides to raise council tax by the maximum possible, and they may not do so. However, adult social care is in crisis now and there have been significant cuts since 2010. Local authorities are not helped by Government funding that is too little and that comes too late.

Two months ago, the High Court ruled that the benefit cap unfairly discriminates against disabled people and their carers. I am glad that the Government are finally conforming to the Court's ruling and exempting full-time carers from the benefit cap. However, other changes to social security are still in the pipeline and are causing serious concern for carers. The Government have announced consultation on the possible devolution of attendance allowance to local authorities in England and Wales. I know that Carers UK is deeply concerned about that announcement.

Attendance allowance is an important source of financial support for older people with care needs. It is a gateway benefit entitling the carer to claim carer's allowance. Currently 295,000 people receive carer's allowance or other financial support because they are caring for somebody who is receiving attendance allowance. There are deep concerns that the Government's proposals will mean further delays and variations in people receiving these essential benefits. Local authorities, such as mine, Salford City Council, are still under severe financial pressure due to budget cuts. Salford has had to cut its budget for adult social care by £15 million since 2010.

Without ring-fencing, it is feared that the funding for attendance allowance will be absorbed into local authority social care budgets and then start to be subject to ongoing cuts. It is unclear whether local authorities will be allowed to change the eligibility criteria and level of payment for attendance allowance. If they are given that flexibility, it could lead to eligible carers losing the right to receive their carer's allowance.

I am sure we all accept that carers provide the bulk of the social care in this country and save the state billions of pounds. If carers are unable to claim carer's allowance they may be unable to continue caring and be forced back to work, putting pressure on local NHS and care services. Will the Minister say what steps are planned to ensure that the availability of attendance allowance and the eligibility criteria for it will be protected from local variations? It would be helpful if he told us whether he has assessed how many carers would lose access to carer's allowance as a result of the proposed changes to personal independence payment eligibility. I will come to that.

The proposals to alter the aids and appliances eligibility criteria for PIP may also mean that fewer disabled people will receive the support they need. Currently, 35% of people who are ill or disabled qualify for PIP solely through the aids and appliances descriptors. As PIP is also a gateway benefit for carer's allowance, any move to restrict PIP eligibility will have a significant impact for carers. I understand that the evidence base for the proposed reforms to PIP is based on an analysis of only 105 claimants when over 611,000 people are claiming PIP. That seems to be an absurd evidence base. The PIP

assessment cannot encompass the complexity and fluctuating nature of many health conditions, such as multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease.

The Government's rushed consultation on the changes will close on 29 January. Disability and carer's charities have said that all five of the Government's proposed changes would restrict access to PIP and therefore carer's allowance. Cutting PIP further is likely to put disabled people and their carers at risk. There are currently more than 7 million carers in the UK and hundreds of thousands of them may be hit by the Government's proposed changes to support for disabled people. In a submission to the Government, Carers Trust has said:

"Failing to support carers means failing to protect and secure the longevity of our health and social care system."

Continued underfunding of social care will undermine plans for the NHS and the integration of health and social care. The key point is that it will also damage the health of carers, many of whom—Carers UK reports—are already reaching breaking point.

10.13 am

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate, Mr Crausby. It was also a pleasure to hear the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) setting out clearly what many of us feel about the system that, with great respect, fails the people who need it most. That is what I feel and, in fairness, I believe that it is what everyone in the House feels.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned a number of charities and I will not give a roll-call of them, but they have also contacted me. More than 30, including Mencap, Macmillan Cancer Support, Parkinson's UK, RNIB, the MS Society UK and Mind, have written to the Minister outlining their deep concerns at the cuts in support for disabled people. This is not the first time we have discussed this matter in Westminster Hall. A debate not long ago was initiated by the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard).

A poll by Populus on behalf of charities found that 71% of people think cuts to welfare will make the UK a worse place for disabled people to live. How will the Government address that? The Minister is always gracious in his responses and I know he will provide some answers and information. Just 6% of people thought the Welfare Reform and Work Bill would make the UK a better place for disabled people. In other words, 94% did not think that. Whatever people say about statistics, that cannot be ignored—94% of people are not satisfied or convinced.

We all know there needs to be an effort to make public finances sounder and that we must be careful with the budget for which the House, particularly the Government, is responsible. All Departments are being made to tighten their belts, but it is clear that public opinion sees these latest reforms as an attack on some of the most vulnerable people in our society. I judge society by its attitude to those who are less well off. My duty in the House is to help vulnerable people to manage better and that is also the Government's responsibility.

Despite great services, such as the Access to Work programme, the proportion of people with a learning disability in paid employment has remained stubbornly low and, according to Mencap, which represents people

with learning difficulties, seems immune to economic factors. That is worrying for us all. Indeed, the proportion of learning-disabled people known to social services in paid employment fell from 7% in 2012-13 to 6.8% in 2013-14, so there has been a fall. Perhaps the Minister will give us some idea of how the Government will respond to that and how they will directly address the issue.

The majority of people with a learning disability can and want to work, so let us encourage them and give them the opportunity. The figures are stark when the national employment rate of 76% is compared with an overall disability employment rate of just below 50%. In the Conservative party's manifesto, the Government pledged to halve the disability employment gap. I am sure the Minister will say how the Government are trying to meet that manifesto commitment. Welcome moves have been made to realise that commitment, but the facts show that more needs to be done and more action needs to be taken.

In Northern Ireland, we have a scheme to help to reduce the disability employment gap. In addition to the Access to Work programme, Workable (NI) is delivered by a range of providers contracted by the Department for Employment and Learning. The matter is devolved. These organisations have extensive experience of meeting the vocational needs of people with disabilities. Using them is a great way of advancing social enterprise and supporting the sector. Sometimes, it is necessary to innovate, to be different and to think outside the box. The Minister is aware of our scheme and what we do, so I respectfully ask whether the Government are considering it for the mainland. If they are, it would be good news. Perhaps the Government will look at how the devolved Administrations are working to assist disabled people into work and at the solutions to the long-term problem that can be shared across the United Kingdom's institutions of government.

On the face of it, these changes look completely contradictory to the Government's manifesto promise and are seen not as a genuine attempt to put more disabled people who can work into work, but as an ideologically driven policy. The Minister will give us statistics, which I am keen to hear, but the cuts are at risk of doing the exact opposite of what they are designed to do. Disabled people already find it much harder to get and keep jobs and to access employment compared with non-disabled people. Their chances will be even less if they are unable to pay telephone or broadband bills, or afford smart clothes and transport to interviews or the jobcentre. Those are all necessities for job searching and they will be even harder to afford when the cuts have been made. When someone goes for an interview, presentation is so important. Employers know that, as do MPs who see people who come to us for jobs.

Some £640 million will be saved by 2020-21, but should we really be targeting vulnerable groups to make savings in public finances? It is already hard enough for ESA recipients to survive on £5,300 a year. Expecting new claimants to be more likely to find work on £3,800 is, with respect, nonsensical. In addition to these cuts, Department for Work and Pensions data show that between 2011 and 2015 the number of jobcentres employing a full-time advisor to help disabled people fell by over 60% from 226 to just 90, with reductions in every recorded year. The reduction in jobcentre disability advisers

[Jim Shannon]

is surely contradictory to the Government's commitment to reduce the disability employment gap. The effects of those cuts to services need to be closely monitored to ensure that they are not having an adverse effect on the efforts to reduce disability unemployment.

I will conclude, Mr Crausby, because I am conscious of what you said about keeping contributions to seven minutes. The Government need to look again at the proposals and ask whether this is really the right approach to getting more disabled people back into work, especially when such a plethora of stakeholders are making it clear that the proposals will have the opposite effect to what is intended. That is the opinion of those who are at the coalface and know what is happening; they have concerns. We want the number of disabled people in work to increase, but cutting ESA will only make it harder for disabled people who can work, to find work; and ultimately all the savings will be hindered by the increased payment of benefits when disabled people who want to work simply cannot afford to go on the job hunt itself.

10.20 am

**Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is a great honour to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing the debate. I agree with the sentiment that he expressed in his excellent speech with regard to the UN investigation and I agree with my right hon. Friend the leader of the Labour party, who, at Prime Minister's questions on 21 October last year, said that it was very sad that the UK was being investigated by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, judging by the speeches this morning and from disabled people's accounts of their experiences, it is little surprise that we are in this state.

I am pleased to say that I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group for muscular dystrophy. I would like to highlight how the Government's reforms have affected people who suffer from muscular dystrophy and other muscle-wasting conditions. It is worth bearing in mind that such conditions are serious and progressive; they range from mild to severe disability and even result in premature death. Nationally, more than 70,000 people are affected. That is one in every 1,000 people in our constituencies.

The charity Muscular Dystrophy UK, which works with and for people with muscle-wasting conditions, has called for the Government to abolish the spare room subsidy, which we all know as the bedroom tax, because of its devastating impact on those who are struggling financially while facing the challenges of living with a long-term disability. For many people in that situation, extra space is essential for vital home adaptations and to store equipment, but only those who have been designated as needing 24-hour care and assistance from an overnight carer from outside the family are exempt. That means that many disabled people, who fall outside the exemption, are forced to pay the bedroom tax even though they need the extra bedroom to store essential equipment because of their condition. For many, finding that extra payment from a limited budget is a cause of great stress in their already challenging existence.

A number of those living with muscle-wasting conditions rely on Motability vehicles so that they can live independently and have a quality of life beyond the confines of their home. However, the Government's decision to replace the DLA's 50-metre rule with a 20-metre rule under PIP means that those who do not meet the criteria will not access the enhanced mobility rate and could lose their mobility schemes. Although Motability has devised a scheme offering a lump sum to people who joined prior to PIP being rolled out, it is offering only three "free" weeks to accommodate the mandatory reconsideration and appeal. That means that people will have only a seven-week period to resolve the issue if they feel that they have been inappropriately reassessed, but the reality is that in most cases that will take a lot longer. I ask the Minister what steps the Government will take to support those people whose appeal takes longer than the allocated seven weeks.

Muscular Dystrophy UK has been given many examples showing an alarming lack of knowledge among those carrying out assessments for PIP. For example, one woman, who has a long-term and progressive neuromuscular condition, was told that she might "get better". Sadly, the organisation has found numerous examples showing that people are being treated with a lack of dignity and respect.

The organisation has also found that there are issues with the provision of employment and support allowance. Those have already been outlined by hon. Members. There seems to be a significant lack of understanding of the nature of neuromuscular conditions when cases involve a refusal to award ESA due to the misconception that with physiotherapy and/or other treatments, the condition can improve; it simply cannot.

Most worrying to Muscular Dystrophy UK is the cut of £30 a week for new claimants in the ESA work-related activity group, as it takes away the support that people with progressive and disabling muscle-wasting conditions need in order to look for and secure work.

The total effect of the cuts will seriously affect the ability of disabled people to live independently and play a part in society. Moreover, the cuts will lead to more pressure on health and social care budgets as those with complex needs deteriorate more rapidly without the correct support. The concerns raised by Muscular Dystrophy UK are based on the real experiences of people with neuromuscular conditions, so I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark will not mind if I take this opportunity to ask the Minister whether he will meet some of those people and Muscular Dystrophy UK to discuss their concerns in person and in more detail.

10.26 am

**Dr Eilidh Whiteford** (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on bringing the debate to the House. As he said, it is timely not only because of the debate in the House of Lords later today, but because of yesterday's developments regarding carer's allowance. Indeed, as we have been sitting here in the debate this morning, the Court of Appeal has ruled that the bedroom tax is discriminatory. These things all stack up. They show that the Government's approach to support, including financial support, for disabled people is completely wrong.

**Barbara Keeley:** I had not heard the news that the hon. Lady has just announced, and I am delighted to hear it. I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to exempt carers from the bedroom tax, but Government Members shamefully spoke against it.

**Dr Whiteford:** I thank the hon. Lady for making that point. She has a very strong track record of standing up for carers.

Disabled people and those with long-term health problems have faced huge upheaval and uncertainty during the past few years as the austerity measures have kicked in. For many, the changes to social security have already left them significantly worse off and living in precarious and reduced circumstances.

A couple of weeks ago, I was privileged to meet some of the disabled people who came to Parliament as part of the lobby organised by the Disability Benefits Consortium. I pay tribute to it and the other organisations that brief us on the real experiences of disabled people. We need to listen to them, because their experience should inform policy far more than it does at the moment.

As I mentioned, we are having this debate on the day when the Lords will vote on aspects of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill. There has been speculation that the Government may well face another defeat, on the cuts to employment and support allowance that were mentioned earlier. I moved amendments to the Bill on Report, which I am pleased to say were supported by Opposition parties, that would have removed those changes. They are deeply regressive and punitive on people whose disabilities are so severe that even under the very flawed work capability assessment, they have been found unfit for work.

I would be among the first to acknowledge the shortcomings of the work-related activity group classification. It has not been helpful or effective for anyone, and I echo the wider point made by the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) about the ESA process. However, the key point in our debate today is that people placed in the WRAG are people who are not currently fit for work. There is a wealth of evidence that piling financial or moral pressure on people when they are recovering from illness or living with long-term health conditions does not motivate them to get better any faster; it actually makes them more ill. Living in poverty while too unwell to work simply compounds the challenges that sick and disabled people already face and slows their recovery.

We get to the heart of the matter when we look back at the original announcement. Last summer, during his Budget statement, the Chancellor said that ESA was supposed to end what he termed

“some of the perverse incentives in the old incapacity benefit, but instead it has introduced new ones.”—[*Official Report*, 8 July 2015; Vol. 598, c. 333.]

Quite seriously, that is what he said. He seems to think that ESA creates incentives for people to be disabled or sick. It is the Chancellor’s thinking that is perverse, because there is absolutely no incentive for any person to live with the limitations, the pain, the social insecurity and the material disadvantage of disability. If the Chancellor thinks that £102 a week of ESA creates an incentive, he must be wired to the moon.

Research published by the Disability Benefits Consortium for an earlier stage of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill showed that 70% of the disabled people surveyed by the consortium believed that further cuts to ESA would cause their health to suffer. Other hon. Members have alluded to that. The word “further” is most telling, because we need to understand the context of the cut in the work-related activity component. As others have said, it comes on the back of the Welfare Reform Act 2012, which allowed for the transition from disability living allowance to personal independence payment, cutting the budget for support for disabled people by £1.5 billion a year and significantly raising the bar on who can receive support.

Let us not forget that the bedroom tax was also a direct assault on the incomes of disabled people. Even when the legislation was going through Parliament, the DWP’s impact assessment showed that two thirds of the households that would be affected were home to someone with a disability. In Scotland the impact was magnified, and eight of 10 households affected were home to a disabled person. I am glad that the courts have ruled that the policy is discriminatory, as has been said all along and as hon. Members stated repeatedly in the House at the time. When we talk about the latest cuts, we must remember that the people who are being sanctioned are disproportionately affected by disability. We really should not need courts to determine those things when we have the evidence before our eyes.

We must take cognisance of the fact that the new measures come at a time when disabled people are already struggling on reduced incomes—and they are really struggling. The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) laid out in some detail just some of the practical ways in which that manifests itself. The Disability Benefits Consortium research revealed that 57% of respondents had found that the amount of ESA that they currently received did not cover the extra costs of living with disability, and, as a consequence, many experienced difficulties in paying for essentials like food, extra heating and the extra transport costs that they may incur.

I want to touch briefly on the parliamentary review, “Halving The Gap?” led by Lord Low, Baroness Meacher and Baroness Grey-Thompson, which makes valuable recommendations. The report notes that some 500,000 people with physical or learning disabilities, mental health problems or autism are currently assessed as being unfit for work. I want to emphasise that that is the reality. People in the work-related activity group have been assessed as not fit for work, even under the stringent criteria of the work capability assessment, and slashing their incomes by £30 a week is only punitive. It cannot make them better more quickly. It will not incentivise them back to work. It will only make them poorer. For some, it will damage their health. The Government say that they want to halve the disability employment gap, but the policy is still without substance. We are still waiting for a strategy, and I hope that the Minister will bring forward more substantial proposals.

The barriers that disabled people face in accessing and sustaining employment are real, so concrete support through the social security system is vital. Often, it is financial support that people need. The difficulty is the Government’s track record; they have had to be dragged through legal processes to force them to make changes.

[Dr Eilidh Whiteford]

Last time we debated the matter, I raised the High Court ruling that the DWP had unlawfully discriminated against disabled people on the issue of carers and the benefit cap, as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) mentioned. Yesterday's Government U-turn was not announced in a parliamentary statement; it was sneaked out on Twitter. That is an interesting way to do things.

It is sad that it has taken a legal challenge for the Tories to accept the damage that their obsession with austerity, and their willingness to put disabled people on the frontline of austerity cuts, is inflicting on disabled people. Disabled people should not have to fight through the courts for recognition of their rights, and we should not need a High Court judge or a Court of Appeal judge to determine that the benefit cap and the bedroom tax discriminate against those people. I am glad that the Government have been forced into retreat on the matter, but I hope that they will now take far more seriously the disproportionate impact that their cuts are having on disabled people, who are already disadvantaged.

The inquiry by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is a real indictment of the Government's approach to supporting disabled people. I reiterate the point that the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark made in opening the debate: the UK is the first country to be investigated by the UN in relation to the convention. The Prime Minister has tried to dismiss the investigation by saying that

"when you look at these investigations you find that they are not necessarily all they are originally cracked up to be."—[*Official Report*, 21 October 2015; Vol. 950, c. 600.]

It is completely and utterly shameful for the UK Government not to take the matter more seriously. The UK is being investigated on the world stage for "grave and systematic violations of the Convention", and the Government need to learn some humility.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised some devolved matters from a Northern Ireland perspective. In Scotland, we have made serious efforts to distance ourselves from the UK Government's shameless and regressive approach. We have tried to insulate the most disadvantaged people from the worst aspects of austerity cuts by establishing the welfare fund and the Scottish independent living fund, and by mitigating the bedroom tax in full. No one is complacent about the impact that income cuts and sanctions are having on sick and disabled people, however, and there is a lot more that we all need to do.

The UK Government, first and foremost, need to start listening to disabled people and taking their views on board. They seem to want to bulldoze through cuts to ESA. I strongly urge them to learn from the High Court judgment, the Court of Appeal judgment and the UN, and to think again.

10.36 am

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is lovely to see you in the Chair again, Mr Crausby. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing the debate and making an excellent, comprehensive and thorough speech. I will recap some of the points that he made.

Since 2010, 13 policy measures in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 have reduced financial support for 3.7 million people to the tune of £23.8 billion. I will not go through the list, but it is extensive, and it is there for people to read at their leisure. On top of that, as has been said, the closure of the independent living fund and the transfer of responsibility to local authorities have caused immense distress to many families of people with the most extreme disabilities. Because not all local authorities have chosen to ring-fence that funding, those people have experienced a cut of £1.2 billion.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady agree that we are not just talking about dealing with stress? The cuts are also likely to exacerbate any mental health difficulties that disabled people may have, leading them to feel hopeless and depressed, and, in some cases, leading to self-harm and suicidality.

**Debbie Abrahams**: The hon. Lady makes a good point. One of the woeful things about the measures has been the Government's lack of assessment of their impact on poverty, on disability and on any other health conditions that disabled people experience. That is a real indictment of the Government.

I return to the cuts to social care. We know from the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services that £3.6 billion has been cut from social care, and that figure is likely to increase to £4.3 billion by 2020. That has led to a reduction in the amount of state-funded support for older and disabled people. In 2014, 500,000 fewer people were able to access social care support, and 12% fewer older and disabled people were able to get essential home adaptations through the disabled facilities grant.

Mencap has identified a whole range of issues with health services provisions for people with learning disabilities. Only 49% of trusts have a full-time learning-disabled nurse. In addition to the cuts to social security and to health and social care, there have been cuts to access to justice, 42% cuts to the access to transport funding that enables people with mobility issues to get out and about, and cuts—described as a "ticking time bomb"—to funding for training teachers who provide mental health support to school pupils. It goes on and on. My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark mentioned the cuts in the disabled students allowances. That is a looming threat.

Hon. Members have mentioned other cuts that are on the horizon, particularly as a result of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, which is currently in the Lords. The cuts to the ESA WRAG were mentioned. In effect, there will be cuts of £30 a week for people in that group—people who have been found not fit for work, including 5,000 people with progressive conditions such as Parkinson's and MS, and people with cancer. A survey conducted by the charity Macmillan Cancer Support found that one in 10 cancer patients would struggle to pay their rent or mortgage if ESA were cut. The woeful impact assessment has not assessed the impact of poverty on disabled people and the effects on their health conditions, but we know that half a million people will be affected by the cuts of £640 million in addition to the £23.8 billion I mentioned previously. Of 11 million disabled people, more than 5 million live in poverty. The cuts will exacerbate their plight, as 80% of people who live in poverty do so as a direct result of their disability.

The ESA WRAG cut is just one of the cuts facing disabled people. There is also the freeze in social security support over the next four years. My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark mentioned the cut to universal credit, which will affect disabled people. Liverpool Economics estimates that it will cause an average loss of £2,000 a year to each disabled person.

Friday's closure of the consultation on PIP has been mentioned. A result of that consultation will definitely be another cut, based on a review of 105 of the 611,121 current PIP claimants. That is all in the context of a Tory manifesto that included a pledge not to cut disability benefits. I can only assume that the consultation is the result of the Government getting a little bit anxious that more people will qualify for PIP, because the 105 claimants included in the review were all awarded the daily living component as they would benefit from aids and appliances. I am reminded of a statement made by the Institute for Fiscal Studies just after the spending review:

"The OBR has significantly reduced its forecast of savings from disability benefit reforms—in particular the move from disability living allowance to personal independence payment. This is familiar. Year after year expected savings from this reform go down. In fact this change in forecast would have ensured that the welfare cap in 2020-21 would have been breached."

That is on top of everything else.

A UN committee has been investigating the UK for breaches of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, to which we are a signatory. That is an indictment of our record. The Government's mantra for disabled people of working age is that work holds the key, but we have heard about the lack of support that has been provided with the Work programme, Access to Work and Disability Confident.

My final remark is that my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark is absolutely right: this is down to Government choices. The Government have tried—and I say tried—to regenerate the economy on the back of the poor and disabled. Instead of denigrating social security, we should value it. Like our NHS, the social security system is based on the principles of inclusion, support and security for all, ensuring all of us dignity in the basics of life should any one of us become ill or disabled, or fall on hard times. The Government need to remember that that is the case and stop their attacks on disabled people.

10.45 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) for calling the debate. He is a formidable campaigner with a wealth of experience having been the head of policy at the National Centre for Independent Living, the director of policy at the Disability Alliance and the director of policy and campaigns at Disability Rights UK. His speech demonstrated a genuine and wide-ranging knowledge. I am grateful for the huge range of issues that have been raised. I will do my very best, in a limited time, to cover as many of them as possible and I will keep going until I run out of time. I pay tribute to all the other speakers who contributed to what was mostly a proactive and constructive debate in which genuine concerns were raised and suggestions made about how we can continue to make improvements.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) once again demonstrated his huge wealth of experience, setting out practical solutions, particularly regarding apprenticeships. His point was timely as I am due to meet the relevant Minister from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to discuss that issue. I hope that my hon. Friend will be kind enough to join me in that meeting as I would like to push the subject.

The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) asked whether PIP recognises fluctuating health conditions. I feel that it does better than the DLA. The trained assessors are better at picking up on those conditions compared with the former DLA assessment. The main thrust of her speech concentrated on social care and attendance allowance. I understand that as I spent 10 years as an elected borough councillor, but I support the principle of localising the decisions. As a country, we have agreed that we will continue to devolve more responsibilities, particularly to Scotland, but I trust our English authorities to have the same responsibilities and opportunities. We have introduced the better care fund, the social care precept and the Health and Social Care (Safety and Quality) Act 2015.

**Barbara Keeley:** There is a fear about variations and carers losing their eligibility because some councils are so cash-strapped. The difference is very unfair. Even the social care precept will be different, as authorities can raise different amounts. It is an unfair and varied field now.

**Justin Tomlinson:** I understand, and we introduced the Health and Social Care (Safety and Quality) Act to set those standards. To be fair, this issue could be a debate in itself and I am conscious that there were so many other points that I need to come to. I am happy to discuss the matter further.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was right to highlight the fact that more needs to be done. He is a vociferous speaker; I have never taken part in a debate in which he has not contributed. He is right to challenge and is always proactive in making suggestions, particularly regarding learning disabilities. The proportion of people with learning disabilities in paid employment is typically 6% to 8% regardless of whether the economy is on the up or the down. It is the one stubborn area with which Government after Government have struggled and wrestled to try to make genuine progress. I am interested to hear more about the scheme in Northern Ireland that the hon. Gentleman talked about, and I would be keen to meet him to discuss that further.

I have had a good meeting with the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) previously. I would be happy to meet with the group she described to discuss those issues further. We are taking action on the time it takes for appeals to be considered. First, the mandatory reconsideration process comes in before the independent appeal and picks up the majority of those cases in which new information has come forward and a mistake has been made. We continue to work on how we can access better information because, more often than not, decisions are changed when new information comes to light. To get that earlier would be beneficial for all. On the point about accessible housing, the discretionary housing payment funds will be increased over this Parliament by £800 million. I think everyone would welcome that.

[Justin Tomlinson]

To the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford), to be fair, external groups, cross-party MPs, Lords, stakeholders and charities do get to influence policies. I spend a lot of my time meeting those groups. Her speech contained a lot of criticism. There are opportunities to make changes. We are reforming ESA through the Work and Health programme and the White Paper. Sometimes, it is good to suggest things that could work, rather than just saying which things are wrong. I reassure her that we do not announce things through Twitter. In the modern world, some people would welcome our doing so, but this week's announcement about carers and the benefit cap was not made through Twitter. Lord Freud made the announcement in Parliament on Monday during the passage of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill. I hope that provides some reassurance.

I will address as many of the points that have been made as I can. First, on unemployment, we all welcome the Prime Minister's pledge that we will halve the disability employment gap. Some 339,000 more people with disabilities have been in work over the past two years, which is a good start, but we still have a long way to go. There is a real-terms funding increase in spending to help people with health conditions and disabilities to return to and remain in work. There is support throughout the system, and we are multi-skilling our coaches to ensure that they are all aware how to support people with disabilities. There will be opportunities to make improvements through the White Paper.

The point about smaller, localised, flexible options is important. I get to make many good visits, and I have seen local solutions meeting market needs to create and train the skills where the jobs are. I made an enjoyable visit before Christmas to Foxes Academy, where I was corrected on my inability to cut carrots—it was the hotel featured on Channel 5. Early this week, I visited Ignition, a local brewery that employs people with learning disabilities, where it is socially acceptable to sample the goods at 11 am.

We have introduced the Fit for Work service particularly to focus on helping people remain in work. It is a lot easier to help people remain than to help them back into work. The current figure for Access to Work is 36,760, with four years of growth. It is a demand-led scheme, but a funding increase for an extra 25,000 places has been confirmed, which is significant. We are actively considering the best ways to do that. We have an open mind, and I welcome any suggestions, but obviously greater promotion is key, particularly to smaller businesses where the scheme would be particularly helpful in removing barriers. Specialist employment support has doubled the job outcomes of residential training colleges, which is good progress.

We constantly evaluate PIP, and we work with external stakeholders, charities and users to look at ways we can continue to improve PIP. The waiting time for assessments has reduced by more than three quarters since June 2014. We are now at five weeks for an assessment, and 11 weeks median end-to-end for the process. It is fair to say that the launch of PIP was not good. The reviews highlighted that, and my predecessors will have spent a lot of time in Westminster Hall and in the other Chamber discussing it, but PIP has been in a settled state for quite some time.

**Debbie Abrahams:** Will the Minister confirm whether that will mean a cut to PIP for people?

**Justin Tomlinson:** Will the hon. Lady repeat that last bit?

**Debbie Abrahams:** After the consultation, will PIP be protected, or will people see a loss in their PIP allowance?

**Justin Tomlinson:** The consultation is just completing, and we will analyse what people have had to say. We were right to do that following the Paul Gray review. He highlighted the issue following court judgments. On an earlier point, rather than waiting for the courts to continue to drag it through, it is right and proper that we have a thorough look at it, but I do not want to pre-empt any consultation. We are continuing to look to improve the PIP process, and I look forward to reading the hon. Lady's comments, assuming that she has fed into that consultation.

Only 16% of DLA claimants secured the highest rate, and the figure is now 22.5% under PIP. As a specific example of an area of disability where people have benefited from the changes, 22% of those with a mental health condition would get the highest rate of DLA, but now 68% of mental health claimants are on enhanced PIP.

**Neil Coyle:** But that is not someone getting more support but someone qualifying for exactly the same support that existed previously under DLA, a system that actually cost less to run.

**Justin Tomlinson:** My point is that only 22% of those with mental health conditions would have qualified, and now the figure is at 68%, so more people with a mental health condition are qualifying for the enhanced rate. That is one example, and there are others.

We are in the process of the full roll-out, taking the 1.7 million DLA claimants over to PIP, but please be assured that that is being done in a controlled, measured and timely manner that learns the lessons of the reviews. We are doing the roll-out in a manner that meets the available capacity so as not to repeat the mistakes of when PIP was first launched. The disabled facilities grant currently funds about 40,000 house adaptations a year, and I am delighted that funding is due to increase by 79% next year from £220 million to £394 million.

A number of Members talked about working across the Government, which is a big part of my role. I meet not only Ministers but Opposition Members and Lords stakeholders. I make lots of visits, which is a part of my role that I very much enjoy. My door is always open, and I have met a number of speakers here today.

Some 16,900 have transferred from the independent living fund, of whom 91% already had some form of their care provided by the local authority. The funding was transferred in full. The protection was underwritten by the Care Act 2014. The Department for Work and Pensions, the Department of Health, the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Treasury are keeping a close eye on that as it progresses. I understand the importance of the issue, on which we have had many debates.

We must not forget that ESA WRAG was not a golden solution; it had been criticised by all parties for a long time. Only 1% of claimants a month were coming off that benefit into work. No Government ever invented

could have spun that as anything other than failing the people it was meant to serve. Those already receiving ESA will see no cash loss. Anyone whose capacity to work is limited by severe work-limiting health conditions and disabilities will continue to remain in that support group. Existing claimants who undergo a work capability reassessment after April 2017 and are placed in, or remain in, the WRAG will continue to receive that additional rate.

The Government have invested an extra £1.25 billion in mental health support, and in our area we are doing a series of pilots on group work, telephone support, face to face, online and inside jobcentres to look seriously at how we can do that and scale it across the country to help people as quickly as possible, which is clearly the key. On the disabled students allowance, we recognise that progress has been made since the Equality Acts. Universities, like all public sector bodies, have a duty to comply with the law. We should not be paying for things that they should be doing and are underwritten by law. I have had a number of meetings on that, and I will continue to keep a close eye on it.

Finally, on accessible information, the Royal National Institute of Blind People rightly challenged me because it felt that the Government were inconsistent in how they presented information. It is important that my Department leads on that, as well as pushing the rest of the Government, so I set up a taskforce that includes the RNIB and a number of organisations and people with a wealth of experience who will work through how we communicate our information. I understand that, when people are looking to use services and claim benefits, we need to make their journey as easy and as helpful as possible, and I am delighted that so many organisations are supporting that valuable work.

It is a pleasure to have responded to this helpful debate, which is a credit to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark.

10.57 am

**Neil Coyle:** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I thank everyone who has contributed to this debate. The Minister seems to have left most of my questions unanswered, particularly on unemployment—there was just some indication there.

I share the concern of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that, although we welcome the commitment to halve the gap, there is a reverse-Ronseal approach coming from the Government. The approach is not doing what it says on the tin. The number of people supported by Access to Work, for example, seems to be heading the wrong way.

On DSA and universities needing to do more, it goes back to the point raised by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) and my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). Look at the court case today: the Government do not do what they are meant to do on impact assessing or following their own Equality Act obligations. That from the Department that is directly responsible for representing disabled people and much of central Government disability policy. The Government are not doing enough, and to try to pass responsibility on to universities when the Government are failing to uphold their own responsibilities is crude.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for her contribution. I completely share her concern about the Government's risky, uncertain and late approach, and I thank her for all her work with Carers UK, which is based in my constituency. I consider her an honorary constituent simply because of the amount of time she spends with Carers UK.

The hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) mentioned funding, but the Government still do not seem to co-ordinate a longer-term approach to planning. What happens when disabled people lose support and end up making increased demands on the NHS? He made lots of points about the extra costs of disability and then seemed to suggest, in some kind of sick joke, that disabled people in the work-related activity group of ESA should get JSA, which would be a considerable reduction in financial payment, because it might incentivise them into work sooner when we know they have health issues. That is a completely unacceptable approach, and sadly that is what we see time and again from a Government whose priorities are upside down—tax is not collected where it should be, and they keep coming back to disabled people for more.

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

## Business Transactions: Cash Retentions

11 am

**David Simpson** (Upper Bann) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered cash retentions in business transactions.

As I lead off in this debate, I will say first that I know that some of my own party colleagues and others have indicated that they want to make some form of intervention. Time is limited, so I will try to keep my points to a minimum to allow as many people in as possible, Mr Crausby, if that is okay with you. If it is not possible, I hope that anyone who does not manage to get in will please accept my apologies.

Let me start with this point: cash retentions, specifically in the construction industry, are currently responsible for £30 million of moneys being held back from small firms. Normal guidelines state that cash retentions are calculated at around 5% of the amount certified as due to the contractor. I must add that this 5% is very often the firm's profit margin.

By and large, the lead contractor will get paid in instalments throughout the term of a contract, as very often there is a large turnover on specific jobs. This has been normal practice for many years. However, we then must turn our focus to the issue of subcontractors and fair payment practices.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): This is a massive issue and it is good to see the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise in her place; I hope that she will give a very positive response to the debate. Just today, the news back home in Northern Ireland is that the Groceries Code Adjudicator has found Tesco guilty of holding back moneys and of delaying invoice processing as well. At long last, we have an adjudicator that has teeth. It is just a pity that the legislative power to impose fines was not used, because the inquiry into this case started before it existed. Does my hon. Friend agree that at long last the adjudicator can make companies pay?

**David Simpson:** Yes, I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. We have raised this issue of the Groceries Code Adjudicator in the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee as well. It is good to see some power coming into this area, so that the larger companies can pay this money.

I mentioned subcontractors and fair payment practices. This area is where we begin to see major difficulties and cash-flow problems for companies. I can report in this debate today that £40 million worth of cash retentions were lost by small firms in 2015.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Was he as disappointed as I was last year when the Government failed to act on this issue and did not implement my amendment to the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015, which was specifically about cash retentions? And does he hope that the Minister and the Government will listen as the Enterprise Bill goes to the House, which is another opportunity for this issue to be addressed?

**David Simpson:** I agree that that was disappointing, and I will touch on it further in my remarks later. I think we have a listening ear from this Minister, but we will see when she responds to the debate.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He mentioned subcontractors. May I quote to him a subcontractor in my constituency—Steve Murray, the managing director of W T Jenkins? He told me:

“Cash retention is harming our sector and our company in particular. We have to wait far too long for the retentions, if we receive them at all. We have lost a lot of revenue over the last five years due to many companies going into administration and taking our monies with them.”

On Monday in his office, Mr Murray showed me a shelf full of files about firms that owe him money, in some cases for more than eight, nine or even 10 years.

**David Simpson:** Again, I agree with the hon. Member. I could do exactly the same thing in my constituency and I am sure that other Members could do the same in their constituencies. This situation is unacceptable and we will address it as we go through the debate.

**Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP) *rose*—

**David Simpson:** I will give way to the hon. Lady; I will never be forgiven if I do not.

**Ms Ritchie:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and I congratulate him on securing this debate. Does he agree that although the Government are now undertaking a cost-benefit analysis of the retention system with the express aim of eliminating these retentions by 2025, there is a need for a statutory retention deposit scheme, which could be brought in through the Enterprise Bill and which would be similar to the tenancy deposit scheme as a means of protection?

**David Simpson:** I think the hon. Lady has seen my speech.

**Jim Shannon:** She wrote it. [*Laughter.*]

**David Simpson:** We will deal with that as well—great minds think alike.

The figure that is reported is some £40 million, which is horrendous. Small companies come to the stage where they are forced to write off money they are owed, because the cost of recouping it would be far greater than the sum itself and therefore it is futile for them to try to recoup it.

The Government have been very vocal in leading the business community to look forward and they have encouraged businesses on sustained growth and productivity, which is a good thing. I know that the Minister has done that; she is very pro-business. I have been approached by firms in my constituency, and I know that this is a UK-wide problem. The firms in my constituency say they are on their knees, largely due to the retention of moneys they cannot recover from larger contractors that have already been paid for the job they have done.

A firm in my constituency reported to me only last week that it has had to wait up to four years for retention money when contractual agreements state that 12 months is the limit. They have categorically stated that this situation hinders their plans for growth. In the majority of these cases, the contractor has already been paid but holds on to these moneys to counteract discounts.

A significant employer in Northern Ireland forced a loss of £10 million to a large number of subcontractors and suppliers when it went into insolvency. While that big company faced the headlines, many of the small contractors were simply unable to sustain their business; they simply had to bow down and close their doors, which resulted in significant job losses.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate; he has made some good points. On that point about cash flow, I am a civil engineer and have worked in the construction industry, so I am well aware of the effects that cash-flow problems can have on small firms.

Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the Scottish Government are currently trialling in the area of public procurement the operation of project bank accounts, which are underpinned by legal trust status? The system allows payments to be made into a project bank account, where the money is legally protected for subcontractors, so they actually get their money quicker. Of course, that system can be used to manage retentions as well, completely eliminating the cash-flow problem. Does he agree that the Minister should perhaps consider that system and speak to the Scottish Government about that trial?

**David Simpson:** I thank the hon. Member for that intervention and his point certainly has validity; it is worth looking at, to see whether something could be done in that field to try to resolve this issue for small companies.

I know that the Government are pro-business; the Democratic Unionist party and other Northern Ireland parties have seen our economy in Northern Ireland grow. It is the role of Government, MPs and other politicians to create the circumstances for businesses to develop. I speak as a businessperson myself—my business interests are set out in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—and it has taken my company 36 years to get to where it is today. Government have played their part in that, but this issue of cash retentions goes right to the core of small businesses.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again. I know that he and the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) have been involved in the Patton Group issue. When the Patton Group became insolvent, almost £10 million in cash retention was lost. Does he agree that the reintroduction of the aggregates levy scheme and the exemptions within that scheme would enable and help cash flow?

**David Simpson:** I think so, yes. I will touch on that later. My hon. Friend mentioned a company that I referred to earlier, although not by name. It was a major blow for subcontractors in Northern Ireland. In 2012, poor payment practices were discussed in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), who was the then Minister of Finance and Personnel, was questioned on why Government should intervene. His answer was:

“The reason that it is so important is that the businesses at the receiving end of this unacceptable practice are, more often than not, small and medium-sized enterprises...on which we are depending to help rebuild our economy.”

That is not just the economy of Northern Ireland, but the economy of the whole United Kingdom.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. Does he agree with the points that SELECT, which is the Scottish electrical contractors association, raised with me? If companies are ending up propping up larger businesses, they have less money to invest in education, training and innovation within their own business.

**David Simpson:** That is right, and that is exactly the problem. The issue needs to be addressed. Speaking from Northern Ireland's point of view, it has been a major obstacle to small and medium-sized companies moving forward. To add to that, those SMEs have no protection against cash retentions. Banks do not consider unprotected retentions as sufficient security for lending purposes, and that is a major problem for SMEs. Even though that money is on the books, the banks will not let them use it as security for overdraft facilities. In addition, and perhaps most alarming of all, public bodies and large companies are using millions of pounds of small firms' retentions to boost working capital. That is happening with a lot of the major supermarket chains. They are using the money that they hold back to move their companies forward, to buy premises and to buy land. That has been the story for some considerable time. That is not just speculation; it is happening in today's society while the Government are reviewing the matter but have not yet agreed to legislate, and we need to see that legislation.

My next comment is on a somewhat disappointing matter. In 2015, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Baroness Neville-Rolfe, acknowledged the problem and said:

“issues with retentions go to the heart of the industry's business models...low levels of capitalisation mean that the industry is heavily reliant on cash flow.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 3 March 2015; Vol. 760, c. 127-28.]

In addition, she said that the Government had no plans to legislate to tackle the issue. That point was raised earlier, and I again emphasise that the Government need to look at that.

While the sector is delighted that the Government recognise that there is a problem—they are to be supported in their efforts to eliminate cash retentions by 2025—and I very much welcome their long overdue review of the retentions system, we need to see some action.

**Ms Ritchie:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. He is making a compelling case for the elimination of cash retentions. Would he agree with me that the situation, particularly in Northern Ireland, for those involved in the construction industry was compounded when the aggregates levy credit scheme was withdrawn? That was remedied in the European Commission and the European Court of Justice some months ago, but the British Aggregates Association is now taking a further case against the Commission ruling. That could plunge our industry into further peril and financial difficulties.

**David Simpson:** That is an excellent point, and we have been lobbied on that over the past days and weeks. That case could have a devastating impact on the construction industry in Northern Ireland, so it will be fought tooth and nail. We hope that the Government will support people in that.

[David Simpson]

It is not enough for the Government to talk about removing retentions by 2025; we need to see some form of legislation to stop retentions. We cannot sit back and ignore a potential loss of £360 million over the next nine years, as calculated by the loss of £40 million in 2015, while the Government work towards elimination but have no plans to legislate. That is grossly unfair and frankly hugely debilitating to the construction sector and the UK economy.

There has been huge interest in the debate. I am sure that many Members, like me, have been briefed by the Specialist Engineering Contractors Group, which has been the voice for SMEs on this poor payment practice. Like many here today, I recognise that cash retentions work in theory. They were originally established as a protection against any defects that might have been left when a job was finished or left unfinished. These days, since all contractors have to go through a lengthy pre-qualification process to be able to take on any job, there should no longer be any need for retentions to be withheld. However—this is quite embarrassing for the UK—we still have not legislated to have retention moneys placed in safe keeping. France, Germany, America and Australia are already leading the way and have put in place effective processes to secure the money, should the larger contractors go into insolvency or adopt poor payment practices when releasing the finance to their subcontractors.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. Does he believe that there is a parallel with the legal industry, where a solicitor can exercise a lien over something of importance until the contract is concluded, whether that is deeds, money or cash? That is regulated by the Law Society. Lessons could be learned from the regularised and legislated procedure of a solicitor's lien.

**David Simpson:** That question could only come from a barrister, but my hon. Friend is right. There is a role for that. As MPs, we all have companies that come to our offices or that we go and visit. Time and again, retentions are the issue that is raised, and some companies and subcontractors are begging us to try to resolve it.

I listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) said, and there is an option to look at that, but as the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) said, we already have a suitable model in place under the Housing Act 2004 with the tenancy deposit schemes. Deposits paid in connection with shorthold tenancies must be placed in a Government-authorized deposit scheme. Similarly, retention moneys could be placed in a secure deposit account, as already happens in many other countries. That option is there, so perhaps the Government could look at that to try to ease the burden.

The Government and the Minister know that the construction industry in particular has gone through a devastating time. That is perhaps not so much the case in London and the big cities on the mainland—I think there was something like 12% or 13% growth last year in the City of London alone—but the regions of the United Kingdom have found it difficult to try to get the construction industry moving again. Money is being held back and banks will not take retentions as guarantees. The industry is struggling with cash flow.

I will finish now because I am excited to hear what the Minister is going to say to us, but I must ask the Government why they would object to developing a model for the funds that would allow our SMEs, which I and other Members often champion in our constituencies, to be the backbone of our growing economy. We need protection against poor payment practices and the misuse of SME funds, because it is their money.

11.20 am

**The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) not only on securing the debate but on the powerful speech that he made. There have been many interventions, and powerful points and arguments have been made.

This has been a good debate, although it has not been a real debate, because we have not heard anybody who does not agree that there are strong and powerful arguments for taking action on the problem of cash retentions. Hon. Members are probably getting the drift of the fact that in some ways, they are banging at an open door with this Minister. I absolutely understand the arguments about the need for reform, including the powerful arguments this morning.

I want to mention someone who came to see me, Mr Simon Bingham, who is head of one of the small businesses that the hon. Member for Upper Bann referred to. Mr Bingham's business is just 100 metres over the constituency border in the seat next to mine, which is held by the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), so strictly speaking he should have gone to her, but he came my way because I made an error, and we had a great conversation. He has a company called Caunton Engineering Ltd. He also chairs the contracts committee of the British Constructional Steelwork Association, and he gave me the real-life evidence that the hon. Member for Upper Bann referred to, because he lives in the real world with the outdated way of doing things that we have heard about.

There are good reasons and arguments for having some sort of retention. I do not think any of us disagree with that. We know about snagging, and the faults that exist, and things that have not been done properly that come to light only six months after the completion of work on a contract, or even later. There needs to be provision so that such things can be rectified. As the hon. Gentleman and, I suspect, the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) know, in major construction projects, such as the recent tram project in my constituency, problems occur and we need a device to make sure the job is properly done and finished.

Equally, we know from our experiences that in the case of large housing developments, bonds are put in place at the beginning of the process, before the first sod is turned, to ensure that if the developer or builder gets into difficulty, funds will be available to make sure that the roads are properly finished. I have an example in my constituency, which I will not bore hon. Members with, but bonds are specifically put in place at the insistence of local authorities so that roads are completed and all the other work is done, and so that money is available in the event of somebody going under or some other catastrophe happening.

I cannot understand why a similar scheme cannot be operated in the construction industry. That sounds like good news, but I may be about to disappoint hon. Members. I fervently ask hon. Members not to seek to amend the Enterprise Bill, only because we have launched a review. I am grateful to Andrew Wolstenholme, the chief executive of Crossrail, who absolutely understands the problem and has agreed to oversee the review. It will be an extensive review that will take evidence and look at evidence, but its work will not be completed until the end of this year, when its recommendations will go out for further consultation. I accept that it could be said that that is an inordinate length of time, but I promise that I will look at the time that we have currently given to that review, because there is a growing feeling among all parties that we really need to get on and sort it out.

**Debbie Abrahams:** The review seems like good news. I am sure the SEC Group and others who, like me, have been campaigning on this issue for five years will see it as good news. However, promises have been made in the past, and there will be concerns that this will be seen as yet another prevarication to address the issue.

**Anna Soubry:** It could never be said that this Government would prevaricate in any way or seek to knock things into the long grass.

**Jim Shannon:** The Minister would never do that.

**Anna Soubry:** Never. I can absolutely assure the hon. Lady that I take the issue very seriously and know that we need to make progress. There are reasons why we would want some sort of retention, but not in a way that is onerous, particularly for small businesses. As I said earlier, Simon Bingham came to see me and gave me real-life examples of how some of the bigger companies effectively use retentions for their cash flow. The money can sit with them for year after year, and the small business takes a serious hit.

**David Simpson:** I accept what the Minister is saying, and it will be of some comfort to some companies. However, she will surely agree that large companies should not be allowed to hold on to money and use it to their own advantage to build their own businesses while small companies suffer.

**Anna Soubry:** I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. What happened yesterday with the Groceries Code

Adjudicator has already been mentioned. I am grateful for the comments of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on that. It was a very important day to see the Groceries Code Adjudicator not holding back, not pulling any punches, and absolutely making it clear that Tesco had flagrantly breached the groceries code in a way that was completely unacceptable. That will have consequences for Tesco, although it will not be subject to a fine because the provisions have only just come in. I pay tribute to the Groceries Code Adjudicator. Bigger companies have got to learn and understand that none of us will tolerate their not playing fairly and properly, especially in relation to smaller businesses.

Our definition of smaller businesses, which is accepted by everybody, is any company that employs fewer than 250 people, so they can be quite large small businesses, not just sole traders who might employ one or two people. My officials are keen for me to say that the Government tell various agencies that when they handle taxpayers' money, they must follow guidance and not engage in poor practices. It is not mandatory, but we provide subtle hints and nudges. Apparently the Highways Agency does a good job, but not everybody does, so there is much more work to be done. I undertake to take the matter forward with my officials to see whether we can make progress.

Good points have been well made today. Such practices must be brought into 2016. We must make sure we do the best thing by our small businesses.

**David Simpson:** We can all sympathise with the companies in their difficulties with banks and so on, but sympathy does not get the job done. That is what the companies tell me when I meet them. I can go on to the next case or deal with another constituency issue, but they want action. I am grateful for what the Minister has said thus far, and I trust that the Government will deliver on it.

**Anna Soubry:** I could not have put it better. I will definitely see what progress we can make. I am happy to continue to work with the hon. Gentleman and with the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth to try to sort this out once and for all and as soon as possible.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.29 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Syrian Refugees: Resettlement

[MR JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the resettlement of Syrian refugees.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank the Minister and all hon. Members for their attendance to discuss this subject, which seems particularly fitting on Holocaust Memorial Day.

I am told that Syrian refugees arriving in Britain are asking three questions in particular: when can I learn English; when can I work; and when can my child go to school? A family who arrived in Kent in December already has an answer to the third of those questions. Their six-year-old daughter has now been at school in Ashford for four days. She proudly says that she has made a friend and learned how to write “dog” and “cat”. Her parents only wish that her sister could be at school, too, but her sister died last year in a refugee camp of a lung infection.

**Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con): I am sorry to intervene so early in my hon. Friend’s speech, but she mentioned Ashford, so this is an appropriate time to ask her to join me in welcoming the courageous and correct initiative of Ashford Borough Council, which was so early in saying that it will provide accommodation for 250 Syrian families over the next five years, and its success in beginning to integrate them into British society.

**Helen Whately**: Ashford is one of several councils I have spoken to and the effort, commitment and even enthusiasm it is putting into welcoming refugees are inspiring. It is at the forefront of that effort.

**Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Lab): This is different, but I have a list of asylum seekers in receipt of section 95 support who have been in the country for longer than the Syrian refugees arriving now. As far as I can see, under the previous regime, Ashford provides a home to only one asylum seeker. Other boroughs in the country provide homes for more than 1,000. Why does the hon. Lady think that places such as Ashford and her own local authorities are stepping up to the plate now, but have not been prepared to do so in the past?

**Helen Whately**: I hope we can explore many questions in the debate, such as how well we are doing at resettling not only Syrian refugees now, but asylum seekers who are already in the country, many of whom are in Kent. I will come on to the question of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children already in Kent, and perhaps the hon. Gentleman will address his own point if he makes a speech.

I was speaking of the family who arrived in Ashford. Theirs is only one story. Throughout our history, Britain has offered a safe haven to vulnerable people, from the French Huguenots in the 18th century, to the Kindertransport or the Ugandan Asians in the 1970s and now to the 20,000 Syrians, but recently we have heard about asylum seekers being made to wear wristbands

or their doors being painted red, which is a reminder that, however well-intentioned we may be, we do not always get things right. That is why I asked for the debate.

After all the focus, particularly last year, on the number of refugees whom we should accept—people are still calling for more—it is time to talk about the practicalities of resettling our 20,000 refugees, to ensure that we are doing a good job with them. Have those who have already arrived settled in well? Are the children in school? Are the adults learning English? Are they in decent accommodation? How have they been received by their host communities? Are we on track to take 20,000? Will we manage that, or might we overshoot?

I look forward to hearing answers from the Minister and to hearing from colleagues, especially as I am sure that several of you represent constituencies that are taking refugees. If your constituency is not taking many, you might be able to encourage them to step up and take some more.

**Mr James Gray (in the Chair)**: Order. Whether my constituency does or does not, I am not taking part in the debate.

**Helen Whately**: Thank you for reminding me, Mr Gray. I will do my best to use the right language.

**Mark Field** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I accept that the debate today is about the resettlement of Syrian refugees here in the UK, but does my hon. Friend agree that we should also use our substantial Department for International Development influence and clout to get large multinational corporations establishing free zones to ensure that significant numbers of refugees in Lebanon and Jordan have opportunities to work there, so that they may stay in the region, although that may well be for months and years, and then to return to Syria, rather than coming to Europe?

**Helen Whately**: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I have visited a refugee camp in Turkey and one of the things that struck me was people’s frustration that they could not work, which was one of the reasons why they wanted to leave the camps. Exploring work opportunities for people in the region is important, yes.

Having visited that camp in Turkey, as well as the migrant camp in Calais some time ago, I felt that humanitarian instinct, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could take in more refugees?” However, I feel strongly that there is no point bringing people away from the middle east, across Europe and far from their homes, their extended family and their friends, to a different culture and a very different climate in the UK unless we can offer them something better than the life they were leading in those countries in the region.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The hon. Lady is being generous with her time. On Thursday I, too, visited the jungle camp, with Secours Catholique who said that up to 300 people there in Calais probably have leave to remain in the UK but are trying to get here illegally because they do not know their legal rights. The Government are not providing enough access to lawyers or legal advice to get such people back into a country where they have leave to remain.

**Helen Whately:** I am sympathetic to what the hon. Gentleman says and I have seen the desperation of the people in Calais. It is important that those who might have a right to live in the UK should be helped to explore the possibilities, but on the detail of the right way to do so, which is complicated, I will defer to the Minister.

Those whom we are bringing to this country through the resettlement scheme are among the most vulnerable—for example, they may have specialist medical needs or have suffered from religious or sexual persecution. We have a particular responsibility to get resettlement right for those vulnerable people. Only when we are confident that we are doing that should we have the conversation about whether to increase the number of refugees we are taking.

One thousand refugees were resettled in this country before Christmas, and we are due to take about 4,000 more this year. The Government, in my view rightly, have said that they will not impose refugees on any area, because that would be unlikely to result in a good experience for the refugees and possibly lead to resentment locally. The councils I have spoken to have welcomed the fact that it therefore feels as though it is their choice how many refugees they take. Those that have been quick to offer to house refugees feel proud to be at the forefront of the effort.

In the absence of centralised distribution, however, there is great uncertainty about where the refugees will go and how the 20,000 target will be met. Perhaps the Minister will tell us whether enough local councils have come forward and offered enough places for the coming year. Is the accommodation secured? Is this a commitment or an aspiration to accommodate the refugees? Are there enough places in the pipeline for us to achieve the 20,000 over the five-year period?

My constituency covers two boroughs, Swale and Maidstone. Swale Borough Council has committed to take two families a year. It previously resettled two Afghan interpreters, learning in the process about the pitfalls of placing migrants in a small, rural village in Kent. Maidstone Borough Council plans over the five years to take six single men, because of its shortage of family accommodation.

Councils tell me the settlement of about £8,500 per person is reasonable, if not generous, but some have told me that they are worried about what happens should the refugees move, as they are free to do. The funding follows the refugees, but what if the council has commissioned services or taken out leases, so its incurred costs will continue? Also, the funding for subsequent years decreases. Refugees are likely to cost less as they settle in, get work—I hope—and are more independent, but the worry among some councils is that future funding might not be sufficient. Will the Minister clarify how councils can ensure the necessary funding?

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, and I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. She makes some persuasive points about local councils. In my constituency and in the broader district of Bradford, under the previous gateway settlement programme, we housed many Syrian refugees who have made a positive contribution to the fabric of the district. On the cost to councils and the concerns that they have, many councils, including Bradford, are really suffering as a result of the

Government's cuts and they are rightly concerned because they are often left to pick up the tab. I ask the hon. Lady to reinforce that point, which perhaps the Minister can answer and give some clarification on as well.

**Helen Whately:** The wider question of Government funding for local councils is probably beyond the scope of the debate.

**Mr James Gray (in the Chair):** It most certainly is.

**Helen Whately:** Thank you, Mr Gray. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's reference to the gateway scheme, which is highly spoken of both in this country and around the world as a good example of how to resettle refugees. We can use that experience to ensure that we do a good job with the Syrian refugees and this scheme.

On housing refugees, in the south-east, where my constituency is, the shortage of housing is a particular problem. Even though we are talking about small numbers of refugees—just a few families a year—many of my constituents wait years for social housing, private rents are high and only a limited stock of private rental housing can be paid for with housing benefit. However, the lesson from some councils is not to be deterred by those barriers. Councils should ask themselves and their communities not “Can we accommodate refugees?” but “How can we accommodate them?”

Kingston upon Thames is encouraging people who have empty properties, such as those who have elderly relatives in care, to rent them out to Syrian families, which has led to several homes becoming available. In Ashford and in Tunbridge Wells, some landlords and Churches have offered accommodation specifically for Syrian refugees. Those councils are finding properties that are not in the letting market rather than having Syrians compete for scarce market properties. In Faversham, in my constituency, Sir Bob Geldof has offered to put up three Syrian families in his home.

To secure a future in Britain, refugees need to work. In a refugee camp in Turkey, I saw for myself the frustration and demoralisation of refugees who are unable to work. It is therefore important that Syrian refugees are settled in areas where there are jobs so that they can work and there is no resentment that they are competing with British people for scarce jobs.

**Mark Field:** This is more of an issue for the Minister, but, given my hon. Friend's experience on the ground, no doubt she will have a view. Given the acute crisis in the camps, which, I fear, are now a big recruiting base for extremism, is there any case for accelerating the process and having more migrants, provided that local authorities can cope, or is 20,000 over the next five years on a progressive basis the right way forward?

**Helen Whately:** My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I, too, heard about connections between camps and people going back to Syria to fight to get an income. I would be keen to hear from the Minister about accelerating the scheme and whether we could front-load or bring more people more quickly, but that must be done in the context of making sure that we are doing a good job with those we are bringing here. To ensure that we do the job well, it is important that the scheme where councils volunteer to take people continues and that councils do not have numbers imposed on them.

[*Helen Whately*]

On jobs and qualifications, there are many examples over the years of people who have come here from places such as Afghanistan, where they were skilled professionals such as dentists, engineers, teachers and even doctors, but they find that their qualifications are not recognised in this country. They therefore find themselves doing other jobs and not making full use of those qualifications. I understand that it takes about two years to get a foreign qualification recognised in the UK, so will my hon. Friend the Minister tell us whether it is possible to expedite the process to get international and Syrian qualifications recognised in the UK? Obviously, there must be a requirement for appropriate language skills; it is clearly important that people speak English as well as having professional skills.

Some hon. Members are calling on the Government to take in around 3,000 more child refugees. That sounds like a wonderful thing to do. In Kent, however, already about 1,400 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and care leavers are being looked after by the county council, so services in Kent are under immense strain and foster homes are completely full. We have limited school places.

In November, the Government called on other local authorities to volunteer to take in some of the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children; but unfortunately, few have done so. Offers have materialised for just 35 of the young people. Kent has therefore welcomed an amendment to the Immigration Bill, which is currently going through Parliament, to make it possible to compel local authorities to accept young asylum-seeking children. While it would be a good thing to take in more refugee children and it should be considered seriously, I ask Members who are urging the Government to do that to urge their local councils to ensure, if possible, that they to step up and take their fair share of the young asylum-seeking children and minors we have in the country at the moment. We have got to do a good job by the ones who are here before we start taking in more.

We must not overlook the challenges of integration. There are cultural barriers, but because integration is a two-way process, there is also an opportunity to harness the good will of the British people. We have seen an enormous upsurge in people who want to help, which was triggered particularly by the pictures of what is going on in Europe and the image of the child on the beach last summer.

Communities have seized on the arrival of refugees as an opportunity to do something practical. I heard about a teacher in Tunbridge Wells who has given up their time to teach English to a recently arrived refugee. In Ashford, council staff started their own fund for refugees and donated toys to be given to children. The challenge, however, can be in channelling such offers, and some charities and councils have struggled to co-ordinate enormous numbers of volunteers, so I wonder whether some businesses might be able to help with match-making technology and in other ways or whether the Government could facilitate that, given that this is a problem throughout the country.

Our experiences show that if councils and communities embrace the refugee programme, it could be an incredibly positive experience. People in places such as Ashford and Kingston, and not least their councils, feel a real sense of pride in what they are doing. It is easy to think

of reasons not to take refugees and to think about the barriers, but it is much better to think of ways to overcome those barriers, especially when the numbers are so small. If each of the UK's 391 local authorities took just 51 individuals over the five years—that is about 10 families each—we would achieve the 20,000 target, and some are already planning to take five times that number.

Councils should be bold and take this opportunity to do the right thing. Those who are reluctant and cautious may be surprised by the support that they would receive from voters.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. She is talking with some pride about the many people who want to be of assistance in this unprecedented crisis, but does she agree that while some countries in the middle east are inundated with migrants, some nation states have not done anything to help? If we could see some of those nation states helping, that would certainly help people in the UK feel that everyone was putting their shoulder to the wheel to try to address this unprecedented humanitarian crisis.

**Helen Whately:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We all—the whole of Europe and of the middle east—need to be seen to be doing our part. Some countries have been particularly criticised for not taking more refugees. I have heard, for instance, Saudi Arabia's name come up. I am aware of countries that are taking refugees but not making such a noise about it. Some of this may be a question of communication, with countries taking refugees but not calling them refugees and giving them resident status. Those refugees are being integrated, and they have family members with them. In some areas, the process is just not so visible. There is no question but that the countries in the region around Syria are taking enormous numbers of refugees and putting a lot of resource into supporting them.

The Government should take on the role of facilitating the sharing of expertise on taking in refugees. We have lots of expertise, but some areas may be taking refugees for the first time and will be doing their very best but might not know what the risks are. I would like to see the Government ensuring that we do the best we can across the country and providing more ongoing transparency about how well the resettlement programme is going. Mistakes can and almost inevitably will be made. There is a risk that the generous funding—it is a substantial amount of money—might not be spent in the best possible way. Any mistakes should be quickly identified and addressed, to ensure they are not repeated elsewhere.

My final questions for the Minister are as follows. What is being done to help councils to access people or organisations with the expertise to help them with the resettlement programme? How are the Government enabling the sharing of that expertise and information on what is already known about how to resettle refugees effectively? How are the Government monitoring the resettlement programme to identify how well it is going, to pick up any problems as they emerge and to celebrate the successes?

I want to emphasise that final point: we should celebrate success. We should feel proud that Britain is the second largest donor to refugees in and around Syria, where the British pound goes much further than

it does here in the UK. We should feel proud that we are giving thousands of the most vulnerable refugees a chance of a new life in Britain. Kofi Annan recently told “Newsnight” that Britain’s “effective and smooth” approach is the right one. We should celebrate the councils and communities that are stepping up to take refugees and the charities and the volunteers who are helping, while encouraging all those who are reluctant or sceptical to support this thoughtful strategy. Britain rightly has a reputation as a compassionate country of opportunity that welcomes people from around the world. Some have doubted us recently, but we should make that a reality for 20,000 Syrians.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr James Gray (in the Chair):** Before I call the next speaker, it is perhaps worth pointing out that a number of Members are trying to catch my eye. While I am not keen on formal time limits, I would have thought five minutes is about right for most speeches, out of courtesy to one another.

2.52 pm

**Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, and a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). She made an excellent speech, and I can happily say that I agree with everything she said. She has brought this important and serious topic to the House not only because we should be proud of what Britain has done but also because there are problems ahead that we need to address. The people of Kent and her local council need to be congratulated on what they have done.

I want to do something pretty rare: get up and congratulate a Home Office Minister on his performance. This could be the end of his career, but I want to commend the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), for the work he has done in this area and for overseeing the one immigration target that the Government have actually managed to reach—certainly in the eight years that I have been Chairman of the Select Committee on Home Affairs. That target was the Prime Minister’s pledge, made in a full and open way, to ensure we have 1,000 Syrian refugees resettled in Britain by Christmas. The Minister did it, and he should be commended for doing so. Because of that success, our Committee will be pressing him even harder to ensure he delivers on the rest of the Prime Minister’s pledge.

We need to be conscious that this is not a crisis on its own. It is part of the most difficult crisis the European Union faces: the migration crisis. It is not going to get easier; it is going to get much worse. As we saw at the meeting in Brussels yesterday of EU Home Affairs Ministers, the crisis is dividing Europe and showing the fault lines that exist. There is a challenge to ensure that the overall refugee crisis and the migration crisis affecting the EU are seen in a much wider context than just what is happening in Syria.

All European countries need to be commended for the way in which they have singled out those from Syria in need of a fast-track service, which at the moment is being provided by the United Kingdom but not necessarily by other EU countries. When the Minister responds, I hope he will tell us more about what is happening on the

deal made with Turkey. The European Union has pledged €3 billion to Turkey in order to ask it to provide better and greater assistance to those who have landed within its area.

Of course we need to do what we promised to do and take in the numbers that the Prime Minister mentioned. However, we also need to ensure that good allies such as Turkey and good members of the EU such as Greece are doing their bit to ensure that when Syrian refugees arrive in the EU, they are treated well. Indeed, if Turkey fulfils the promise it made to the leaders of the EU, it will be able to take EU funds and provide the kind of assistance that a number of hon. Members have said it should provide. The Minister will be aware that the way to solve the Syrian crisis is through the political situation in Syria. Unless we deal with that, and unless we have a stable Government in Syria, we will not see an end to a crisis that is clearly engulfing the European Union.

I have just three further points to make within your informal time limit, Mr Gray. The first is about the big and open offer made by a number of residents of the United Kingdom—including, I should say, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the Archbishop of Canterbury—to provide assistance and shelter for Syrian refugees who are coming over. The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent said that Mr Geldof—or Sir Bob, as he is now known—has offered sanctuary to some Syrian refugees. I cannot quite understand why the Government still have not acted on such offers from the British people.

In the Minister’s eloquent evidence to my Select Committee, he said that the Archbishop of Canterbury should, in effect, contact Lambeth Council if he had an offer of support. I can just imagine the archbishop on the phone to Lambeth Council, waiting to go through its automated system, finally getting through to some caseworker in the housing department and saying, “This is the Archbishop of Canterbury on the phone. The Minister for Syrian refugees has suggested I should ring and offer some of the rooms I have at Lambeth Palace. Could you tell me what to do?” I imagine the phone would probably be put down or the call transferred to another section of Lambeth Council—maybe the health department. We need something more concrete. Big offers have been made by the British people. Let us take those up.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and I were present at the Home Affairs Committee’s session yesterday when we heard from G4S, one of the Government’s providers of asylum accommodation, which I know is different from what is provided for Syrian refugees. G4S said that the number of asylum seekers in this country for whom it has to find accommodation has gone up from 9,000 to 17,000 in the space of just three years.

The pressure on council housing, and indeed the private rented sector, is now enormous. It will be extremely difficult to find available housing for those who are coming over. We need to be very serious about the issue of housing, because we do not want Syrian refugees to be placed in the same position as some asylum seekers in Middlesbrough were. Our Select Committee looked at that very subject yesterday, because we have enormous concerns about how asylum seekers were being housed there.

[Keith Vaz]

My final point relates to regular information. In the Minister's celebrated appearance before our Committee, I asked him—he keeps reminding me of this—seven times to tell us how many Syrian refugees had arrived. He batted the question away like a great cricketer at the crease, faced by a number of fast-coming balls. He said he was not prepared to give a running commentary on the numbers who had come in and that we had to wait for the statistics that are published on a quarterly basis. He told everyone that except, of course, the Prime Minister, who decided not to wait till the publication of the quarterly statistics, but to tell the House of Commons first, in the last questions session before Christmas, to give us all a warm glow and a feeling of happiness that the Minister had reached his target. We think we should have regular information, and not just about the numbers who come in. We do not need to wait for the quarterly statistics, and we need to include information about inclusion, as the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent said.

When the Ugandan Asians came to Leicester and enriched that city and places such as Watford, where the Minister comes from, and other constituencies represented by Members here, we were able to include them in the mainstream of our country's activities. Some of the Syrian refugees will want to go back to Syria when the country is stable and returns to prosperity, there is no doubt about that. Some will want to stay and be part of our country and live here for the rest of their lives. It is important to include the diaspora—there are many people of Syrian origin who have lived in this country for many years—in a formal or informal resettlement board, because Whitehall does not know best about these issues.

Thirty years on from when the Ugandan Asians arrived in Leicester, they are now an integral part of this country—indeed, some have even been elected to the House of Commons—and they have shown themselves to be model citizens. Let us use that example of what Britain does best, provide asylum to those who need asylum and include those people in the mainstream of our public life.

3.1 pm

**Mr David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): It is a great pleasure to take part in this debate, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on her speech, which was so comprehensive that what she said about the practical elements of resettlement does not need to be repeated. I will therefore take a wider view, although it will permeate through to the practicalities of providing the dignity that we all want to provide for those seeking refuge.

It is right that we are debating this issue on Holocaust Memorial Day, the theme of which is not to stand by when genocide is taking place. We have to say what it is: although we are responding to a humanitarian crisis, which is referred to as a migration crisis, we are also responding to genocide. It is important to say that, because the Yazidis and the Christians have been victims of genocide. It is important to say that—indeed, I call on the Government to say it properly and not to wait for international courts to say it—because there are

implications of doing that, not least for resettlement. When we are resettling victims of genocide, calling it that will have a profound impact and a long-term effect, so we need to do that.

Part of what we are remembering today is those who did not stand by; those who stood up and took notice. The Minister knows about those individuals, families and communities all too well. They are very much part of his legacy and family history, and his motivation for the great work that he is doing is the heroes who did not stand by and who rallied individuals, families and communities. That led to refuge being found from the Nazis for thousands of individuals. That motivation must permeate all the way through what we are doing in our response.

I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister extended the relocation programme in September in response to cross-party calls, which had gone on for some time, to welcome more refugees. This is an issue of numbers—although politicians and the media can get stuck on that side of the issue, we do need to hold the Minister to account on the numbers, because of the pledge that was made. I welcome what the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, on which I am proud to serve, said about holding the Minister and the Government to account.

However, there is also the fundamental issue of human dignity. In many ways, I see the number of 20,000 as a minimum. We need to be ready to have that flexibility, and to respond to people's vulnerability in this tragic situation. We need human dignity both in the assessment stage—the Minister is working hard to get the assessment right to ensure that the most vulnerable refugees can make their way into this country—and all the way down the line to when people are received into our constituencies.

Sadly, that contrasts with the reports that we examined yesterday of the painted doors that identified asylum seekers. We have no truck with that in the way that we do things—it is not the British way or the decent way. On the Home Affairs Committee yesterday, we were concerned that the company involved, G4S, said that it did not know about that because there had been no complaints from asylum seekers. That is not the right response. Such companies should respond properly and responsibly, as a matter of human dignity. They should not wait for some complaints process to be activated. We must ensure that we deal with the people seeking refuge with care and attention, based on human dignity, not on whether they are agitated.

I welcome the Government's primary response of providing international aid of well over £1.1 billion. That is important, because it is tackling the issue as everyone in non-governmental organisations says we need to tackle it—at its root and by ensuring that we support the regions. The World Food Programme has made it clear that the lack of humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees and the barriers to securing legal access to livelihoods—my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) picked up on that point—are directly linked to the increase in flow of those fleeing to Europe. We must focus on that.

I welcome the leadership of the Secretary of State for International Development and her conference, "Supporting Syria and the Region", which will take place shortly. It is important to identify particularly vulnerable groups—

women, children and young people—and ensure that other countries step up to the plate and provide aid. I am concerned that religious minorities are not included in the invitation list and are not recognised, and they are some of the most vulnerable groups. When we are looking at who is the most vulnerable—I understand that the resettlement and relocation programme is based on that—we should ensure that we do not ignore some of the most vulnerable groups.

The Select Committee on International Development, which is chaired by my predecessor in my constituency, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), produced an excellent report. It identified, as NGOs have, that the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex community, religious minorities and children are the most vulnerable and are discriminated against, whether in access to healthcare, in not being able to return to their country of origin, or particularly in not being able to go into camps.

Ninety per cent. of Syrian refugees are not from camps. As the Minister has said in response to questions from me and others, it is not just about having a programme of relocation from camps. Most of the most vulnerable refugees are outside the camps—indeed, the relocation programme includes relocating from outside camps. The problem is registration. Many people, particularly from religious communities—particularly Christians, it has to be said—will not go to the camps, because they fear double persecution there. They do not want to come out into the limelight. They seek refuge through churches and other communities and are dispersed. They are not being registered, and we need to recognise that they, among others, are the most vulnerable groups. We need to ensure that the relocation programme involves Christians as well.

We must also respond to the wider calls relating to unaccompanied minors. The Committee heard horrific statistics from an Italian parliamentarian yesterday—that 4,000 unaccompanied minors were lost in 2014, which has gone up to 6,000 now. They risk exploitation, and it is not just a Syrian issue. It involves young Eritreans who are being trafficked. We must tackle the issue well, given our leadership on modern slavery, and ensure that we do not stand by, whether as a Government, as parliamentarians or individually. I very much welcome us taking practical action through this debate.

3.8 pm

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) for securing a debate that will no doubt be followed closely by the many individuals and organisations around the UK who hold a relevant interest in this subject. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Lady, because I believe the debate today is an important opportunity for all Members to reflect on the process of resettling the Syrian refugees who will now be calling the UK home.

I also welcome the chance to discuss some of the measures being undertaken in my constituency of Inverclyde, and I hope we are able to share examples of best practice from all our local areas. I am aware that in some instances, there is a wide variation in the approach being taken to resettlement and we can improve the process by resolving the problems that have been identified as the first group of Syrian refugees are welcomed into our communities.

I am pleased to put on record that due to the efforts of the Scottish Government and Inverclyde council the resettlement program in my constituency has been an overall success. Inverclyde Council's previous experience in participating in the Afghan resettlement scheme has been invaluable in taking forward the practicalities of the Syrian resettlement. In that programme, Afghans fleeing persecution, including former British Army interpreters, have found a new home in Inverclyde. One Afghan couple was so delighted that their most recent child had been born in Scotland that they insisted on giving it a Scottish name—it may be the first Scots-Afghan baby born in my constituency.

Inverclyde Council has made an initial commitment to support 10 Syrian families over the five-year life of the vulnerable persons relocation scheme. Periodic reviews of the process will help to determine whether the council can make a further commitment to take more.

The first two families arrived in November 2015, and a third family arrived shortly afterwards. On arriving in Scotland, they were met at the airport by council staff and transported to Inverclyde, where they temporarily stayed in a hotel, before moving to permanent accommodation. Housing was provided by locally registered social landlords, and the three families now live within walking distance of each other. In placing the families in accommodation, the local authority felt that it was best to cluster them together, but not to concentrate them too much. That allows them to live within a comfortable distance of each other, but it also ensures that they can integrate more effectively with their neighbours.

Inverclyde Council has assisted the families by helping them to establish bank accounts and by registering them with local GPs and dental practices. I am pleased to report that, throughout the entire settlement process, there have been no major incidents or problems, and the Syrian families continue to settle into their new community.

**Helen Whately:** The hon. Gentleman is doing exactly what I had hoped: he is bringing up examples of how well things are working practically. He mentioned his council clustering people, but not putting them too close together, and that is exactly the kind of good practice I have heard about in other places. I thank him for bringing up that detail.

**Ronnie Cowan:** I thank the hon. Lady.

I am proud of the people of Inverclyde, who have shown such generosity in offering clothing, food, cash and their time to support their new neighbours.

Despite the warm welcome offered by local residents and the range of services available from Inverclyde Council, however, challenges remain for the incoming Syrian families. Most notably, refugees may experience difficulties in seeking work, because of language difficulties or because their professional qualifications are not recognised in the UK. Furthermore, if refugees have been victims of torture, we must ensure that local authorities continue to have the necessary physical and mental health support services to enable them to settle and thrive.

I would like to turn briefly to the issue of asylum seeker dispersal areas. The UK Government have asked local authorities in Scotland whether they would like to become dispersal areas for incoming asylum seekers.

[Ronnie Cowan]

That is pertinent to the debate, because many of those fleeing Syria will have to make a claim for asylum before possibly being granted refugee status in the UK. As one of the few local authorities with a declining population, Inverclyde would usually give serious consideration to becoming a dispersal area, because that would be an opportunity to bring a younger population into our community.

The UK Government are, however, making their request without a commitment to provide funding to cover the cost of the additional support services that would be required. A properly thought-out and fully funded package of funding would likely see a number of Scottish councils willing to become dispersal areas, but authorities will be reluctant to risk the success they have already achieved in resettling Syrian refugees by taking on the many challenges of becoming an asylum seeker dispersal area without the required funding support. I hope the UK Government will consider those concerns as they move ahead with plans to establish more asylum seeker dispersal areas in Scotland.

In closing, I reiterate my thanks to the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent for securing the debate. I hope we will continue this discussion outside the Chamber over the next five years. In doing so, we will ensure that the resettlement program continues to build on the successes we have already achieved.

3.13 pm

**Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on securing the debate.

In April 1939, a 10-year-old Jewish refugee from a small industrial town called Ostrava in what was then Czechoslovakia was put on a train by his mum and teenage sisters. He was the only member of his family allowed to leave, and it was the last time he would see the other members of his family, because they were murdered in the holocaust. He grew up to become the youngest grammar school headmaster in the country, and he was honoured with an MBE for his charitable work and his services to education. He adopted four children, of whom I am the second. I therefore know all about how Britain has welcomed refugees and about the benefits that they have brought to our communities and our country.

In January 1939, Kurt Flossman, a 14-year-old German refugee arrived at Dudley's grammar school. His father had died in 1937, and he travelled all the way across Europe on his own. Students at the school clubbed together to raise the £50 a year in fees and expenses that he needed to go to their school, and local firms sponsored his clothes. Stories such as that show how Dudley has always worked to welcome those in need and to build a tolerant community.

Over the years, Dudley has welcomed refugees from all sorts of conflicts all around the world, including from Vietnam in the 1960s, and, later, from Uganda and Kosovo. No one can say that we are not doing our bit now in Dudley and the black country; in fact there are as many asylum seekers in the black country as there are in the south-west, the south-east and the east of England put together. Although people in Dudley are

proud of Britain's history of providing a safe haven for the victims of fascism and persecution, it cannot be right that Dudley supports nearly half as many asylum seekers as the entire south-east.

Refugees are overwhelmingly concentrated in poor communities in the north and the midlands. Birmingham and Liverpool provide a home for 1,400 asylum seekers each, while Rochdale, Manchester and Bolton have more than 900 apiece.

**Mike Kane:** My hon. Friend makes a powerful case that draws on his own personal testimony. The problem with the resettlement programme thus far has been that it has involved a private sector contract with Serco, under which asylum seekers are flown into Manchester airport in my constituency, put up for a number of nights and then dispersed around the conurbation, going overwhelmingly to Bolton and Rochdale, in Greater Manchester, which has more asylum seekers than the whole of the south put together, and without any redress to any of the councils for the services that are affected. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must do better?

**Ian Austin:** My hon. Friend is completely right. The central point I want to make today is that, when the Government embark on their new programme, they must learn from the mistakes they made in the past when housing people who came to this country to seek asylum.

My hon. Friend mentioned Bolton and Rochdale. There are also 850 asylum seekers in Leicester, 800 in Nottingham and 750 in Middlesbrough. Bradford, Derby, Leeds, Newcastle, Oldham, Stockton, Wigan and Coventry each have 500 or 600.

Meanwhile, much wealthier, much posher communities in the south have turned their backs on the world's poorest and most vulnerable. Local authorities represented by the Prime Minister, the Secretaries of State for Defence and for Communities and Local Government and seven other Cabinet Ministers have not opened their doors to a single asylum seeker. There are just 380 asylum seekers in all the seats covered by all the local authorities represented by all the Cabinet—fewer than in individual local authorities such as Sandwell or Wolverhampton. The local authorities of Swale and Maidstone, which are represented by the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent, who called the debate, have housed just three asylum seekers between them. Watford has housed 15. Camden has housed 21. Islington houses just 34, while Hackney houses only 38, and Oxford houses just 12.

Dudley has pledged to step up and to house Syrian refugees coming to this country, but if the 20,000 Syrian refugees are housed around the country in the same way as those who currently seek asylum are, the north-west will have almost 5,000 and the west midlands will have almost 3,000, while the south-east, the south-west and the east of England will house just 1,200 between them.

I would therefore like the Minister to recognise that the impact of our response to this crisis should be spread much more evenly across the country. The hon. Lady said her local authority had pledged to take six asylum seekers, but if every local authority across the country was prepared to share the work equally, they would each take about 50 or 60 over the next five years.

The way people have been dispersed and then concentrated in localised areas can put pressure on public services such as housing, schools and the NHS, which are already under great strain. That is also unfair on the refugees themselves, who are moved to communities without sufficient Government support and then left waiting for years for their applications to be processed. That is the result of what can only be described as a shambles in the Departments responsible.

In parts of the country such as London, these issues are balanced by the presence of wealthy migrants. It might come as a surprise to hon. Members taking part in the debate, however, to learn that we do not get many millionaire American bankers, German City traders or French hedge fund managers moving to areas such as the black country. Will the Minister therefore examine how the economic benefits that migration brings to some parts of Britain can be used to reduce the pressure elsewhere on schools, housing and other public services, and to improve local infrastructure and public services in places such as the black country? Could he also consider how unspent EU structural funds that the Government are not drawing down could be used in areas such as the black country that face the greatest pressures on public services, to employ the extra primary school teachers or GPs needed so that we can more easily accommodate people in need from around the world?

People in Dudley will rise to the challenge and play a full part in welcoming those fleeing persecution abroad, just as we have in the past; but it is about time people elsewhere did the same.

3.20 pm

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on securing this important debate. It has been four months since I wrote to the Prime Minister, along with many others, to urge him to respond to the escalating refugee crisis affecting mainland Europe. When he and his Government finally woke up, their response was modest and insufficient. By committing themselves to resettling only 20,000 Syrian refugees—a far smaller number than the EU, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, many in Parliament, the Scottish Government and the country demanded—the Government may have damaged our humanitarian reputation overseas.

The Government have rigidly stuck by that decision, but whereas their response was lethargic, our communities responded rather differently. I am immensely proud that my constituents welcomed the refugees with open arms. People in Paisley and Renfrewshire collected donations, opened shops, travelled to Calais and did anything and everything in their power to help those in need. The first refugees arrived in my constituency in November, landing at Glasgow airport. It may have been an all-too-typical cold and wet night, but the response that our new friends received would have shown them the warmth of Scotland—and the UK. Our new Syrian friends are living in local authority areas throughout Scotland and well over 3,000 individuals have signed up to help them resettle, through the “Scotland Welcomes Refugees” website.

My local town of Paisley has helped to resettle 50 refugees, and it appears that they have met the traditional warm welcome that I would expect from

Paisley “buddies”. The *Sunday Herald* asked one of the new families whether they were happy in Paisley. They responded:

“It feels like we never left our families back in Syria because of the warm welcome we received in Scotland. We are among our families again.”

It should be noted that a lot of work has been done to ensure the smooth resettlement of our new Syrian neighbours. My office is part of a working group in Renfrewshire, which came together to ensure that the refugees’ arrival, introduction to, and integration with, Renfrewshire was as smooth as possible. That all-party and cross-sector group is attended by religious leaders, council officers, elected members from all levels of government and other important local stakeholders, and we have all worked to make sure that our new Paisley “buddies” settle into the area as smoothly as possible.

Renfrewshire has been opening its doors, but in turn our Syrian neighbours have opened theirs. They have been sharing Syrian food and culture with local people. They have appreciated the beauty of Scotland and we too appreciate their humility and hope. Despite all they have suffered, which is more than any of us can imagine, they look ahead to a new life, making plans—

**Ian Austin:** I was just flicking through the figures. It is fantastic to hear how well the Syrian refugees have been welcomed—absolutely brilliant, and I am delighted to hear it—but why has North Lanarkshire not housed a single section 95 asylum seeker over the past few years? The other local authority that the hon. Gentleman mentioned was Renfrewshire, which housed just two.

**Gavin Newlands:** That is not the subject of the debate today, but the hon. Gentleman is treading a well-worn path.

**Mr Burrowes:** There was a person in my constituency wanting to be accommodated under section 95 in Enfield, but he was unable to do that. He was directed to be housed not in Enfield but in Cardiff, in an area where the Government have a programme of section 95 support. Therefore he is being provided with support in the community, and voluntarily, in Enfield. Perhaps that will throw the figures given by the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) into sharp relief. There is a need to ensure that there is shared responsibility; but, unfortunately, authorities that want to open their doors as has been suggested may not be able to, because of the particular section 95 programme.

**Gavin Newlands:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention.

**Ian Austin** *rose*—

**Gavin Newlands:** I feel I am getting between a relationship, here.

**Ian Austin:** I am very grateful. I just want to point out that a number of people currently housed and seeking asylum in Dudley, from local authorities in north London, were sent there by those local authorities, which are paying for their care but prefer housing them in cheaper accommodation in the midlands to looking after them in north London. Perhaps the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) should discuss that with the local authorities.

**Gavin Newlands:** I think the hon. Gentleman has made his point. Obviously, that is not really the issue that is being debated today.

Overwhelmingly, the families who have come to Renfrewshire have met a warm response; however, there is still a small vocal section of the population who are not so welcoming. My local paper, the *Paisley Daily Express*, ran a story with the headline “Shame on You”, which highlighted, exposed and shamed locals who posted nasty and bigoted messages on social media. I salute my local paper for shooting down those bigots and racists, but the story is a reminder that there still exists a section of the population that we have not won over.

The Government have committed to resettling only 20,000 refugees, compared with Germany’s 800,000. That rather larger “bunch of migrants” is 4,000% more than the UK’s. The question we should now all be asking ourselves is “What’s next?” What do we do next to help those still caught up and affected by the crisis? First, we need to reassess whether accepting 20,000 Syrian refugees is the limit of our compassion, capability and capacity. I argued at the time that we should be doing more to help play our part in this crisis, and I support Citizens UK in its call for a target of 50,000 rather than 20,000. The families and children fleeing conflict never asked for war, and it is important that we do all that we can to help them. That is why I would echo the calls made by Melanie Ward of the International Rescue Committee, who said:

“It cannot be argued that accepting 4,000 Syrian refugees per year—or around six per parliamentary constituency—is our fair share of the millions who have fled Syria—this is more the case now than ever before”.

**Mike Kane:** To house 50,000 refugees requires massive local government resources; yet the Scottish National party Government in Edinburgh is cutting Glasgow’s budget—it is the mainstay of asylum seeker reception in Scotland—by £130 million a year. How can the hon. Gentleman justify calling for 50,000 refugees while the council’s budget is being cut by that much?

**Gavin Newlands:** The Syrian refugees are obviously funded from central Government. The Scottish Government is funded by Westminster Government, so unfortunately—

**Mike Kane:** So it is everybody else’s fault.

**Gavin Newlands:** It is everybody else’s fault. The powers that are going to flow through the Scotland Bill are not yet there.

**Mr James Gray (in the Chair):** Order. I think the debate has lost some of its direction, format and balance. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman might like to address himself to the topic we are debating.

**Gavin Newlands:** I will gladly go back to the topic in hand—thanks very much.

As well as reassessing the 20,000 target, the UK Government have to look at the funding of local authorities that are housing refugee families. I have spoken with the leader of Renfrewshire Council, who has confirmed that, although there is an indication that there may be funding allocated for years 2 to 5, that, and the level of

any future funding, are still to be confirmed. Will the Minister give Renfrewshire Council that guarantee and, if so, let it know to what level the funding will be allocated?

Let us debate this issue but let us also follow up our debate with meaningful action. We have a proud humanitarian tradition in this country. However, with the UK now taking more formal and direct military intervention in Syria, we have an onus and responsibility to take more Syrian families, who are now fleeing not only Daesh and Assad but bombs dropped from American, Saudi, French, Australian, Turkish, Jordanian and British bombers. As we are now very much one of the push factors involved in the mass migration, we owe it to those in flight to offer refuge for a lot more than 20,000.

3.27 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on bringing this matter forward for debate. It is an important issue that cannot be ignored. Everyone has an opinion on it and it is nearly impossible to avoid it. The migrant crisis was one of the defining issues of 2015, because it affected everyone. Whether it is the negative consequences in Cologne or the success stories of relocated refugees settling into their new society, it is a major issue that will take some time to resolve. At the extremes in the UK are those who say we can take no more, and those who say, “Open the door wide.” Somewhere in between we must get a balance, and I think, in fairness, the Government have grasped that to an extent.

More than 13.5 million Syrians need help, of whom 6.5 million are internally displaced, and 4.2 million Syrians have fled abroad, mostly to neighbouring countries in the region. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) spoke of the plight of persecuted Christians, and 600,000 Christians have been displaced in Syria. They went all over the place. Many were given the ultimatum: convert or die. To continue to practise their religious beliefs, they had to leave. We cannot ignore those issues.

Many of those who fled were traumatised, as well, so it is about not just finding a new home but living with the horrors that they have experienced. The Minister has done extremely well, and the Prime Minister has given his commitment. The Government clearly have an objective of addressing the issues, and British DFID funding is very effective.

Syrian nationals were only the fourth largest group of asylum applicants in the year ending September 2015. We need to be careful about the migrant crisis, because it is clear that some illegal immigrants set on purely economic migration are capitalising on the plight of Syrian refugees. Figures from the UNHCR show that about 60% of migrants arriving in the bloc countries are now economic migrants. Slightly more than 10% of Syrians who have fled the conflict have sought protection in Europe, and some 681,700 asylum applications were made between April 2011 and October 2015. I am not a pro-European—you will know that, Mr Gray, as will other hon. Members—but the European Commission has given each resettled Syrian refugee some €6,000, and money can be drawn down. In reality, the numbers that we have are only the tip of the iceberg, and thousands more people are making their way through Europe undocumented.

Regardless of the approach we take, we need to ensure that refugees are processed correctly to give genuine refugees the dignity they deserve and to root out potential criminal elements or security threats, which have clearly happened. Northern Ireland has offered free English lessons, a move that is sure to help vulnerable people to settle and to integrate into their host society. Some 1,000 refugees crossed to Northern Ireland just last year. Those lessons will make life easier for everyone by helping refugees to integrate and offsetting any social or cultural tensions that may arise. They will cost some £20,000 a year and will be a long-term investment, ensuring translation services and covering other expenses associated with providing services to those who cannot speak English, to help integration into Ulster and Northern Irish society. Those who want to learn Ulster Scots can do so, but it is most important that they learn English. Some may want to learn Irish also. The lessons will apply only to refugees and not to economic migrants, a move that will ensure that only those in real need will benefit from lessons at a cost to the public purse. Illegal economic migrants cannot take advantage of the generosity being offered to refugees.

Many churches and charities have been involved, as hon. Members have said. Whenever there is a crisis, people come together and those who can help do help. Churches in Northern Ireland have risen to the challenge, as have charities.

Sweden and other countries have provided social instruction classes, particularly on how to treat women, because it is important to address such issues. Those classes have been successful in helping to educate refugees about how to behave appropriately in western society. We could learn from that innovative approach, which would go some way to improving integration and ensuring we do not have another Cologne.

We have all seen the distressing images of people drowning while desperately trying to cross the Mediterranean. One would have a heart of stone not to have been moved by some of things we have seen. However, the European Commission's chief spokesman has admitted that the majority of people moving across Europe are in fact economic migrants. We need to ensure that only those in genuine need can avail themselves of services such as the English lessons in Northern Ireland, and that we discourage those who are not in such desperate need from making the perilous and often fatal journey to Europe.

We must address the migration issue in Syria—we cannot address it only here. We are reactive, but we need to be proactive in Syria. The issue will not go away, and as we start to welcome more and more refugees into the United Kingdom the innovative approaches in Northern Ireland that I have mentioned should be shared and discussed in Scotland and across the United Kingdom's political institutions, to ensure that the resettling and integration of refugees is as efficient and smooth as possible.

**Ian Austin:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Jim Shannon:** I think you will want me to finish, Mr Gray, as many Members want to speak, but I give way to the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin).

**Ian Austin:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that British military action in Syria is confined to bombing oil fields, disrupting ISIS and helping to bring the

conflict to a conclusion? It is unlikely to result in a wave of more refugees arriving on our shores, as the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) suggested a moment ago.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Obviously he has a particular point of view, and an important one, but when we need a global strategy, we must sometimes do deals with people we do not want to do deals with. We have to look at how best we can come together as a world—NATO, Europe as a whole and the countries bordering Syria—to ensure that some sort of stability is returned to it. If that happens, people can go home again, and I think that is where they really want to be.

3.34 pm

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) for bringing this extremely important and timeous debate to the House. It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak in it as a member of the Select Committee on International Development, having been involved in the recent inquiry into the Syrian refugee crisis.

Feedback from Scotland, including from local authorities, is positive—400 refugees of the initial 1,000 have been settled in Scotland. There is still a long way to go, but we are certainly making excellent progress in that regard. I understand that Ministers are visiting refugees around Scotland as we speak. More work is needed to ensure that refugees do not feel isolated and that we have English classes that are appropriate and sufficient for their needs.

It is important that refugees' needs are matched to local areas and that over the longer term, they can utilise any skills, qualifications and experience they may have. As the hon. Lady said, that process should be expedited and any healthcare and psychological support that may be required to help their adaptation should be provided.

Following on from the International Development Committee's report, I echo the comment of the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) that it is extremely important to ensure that the most vulnerable individuals are assessed and registered by UNHCR. They are not all able to reach camps, particularly those with disabilities or learning difficulties, those in rural areas, Christians and minority groups. Will the Minister ensure that data are disaggregated so that we can ensure that vulnerable groups across the board are fully included in the resettlement process?

I commend DFID and the Minister for their work on resettlement and in the camps. It is important to ensure, as DFID has tried to do, that children have access to education, safety and child protection, and that refugees have the opportunity to work. That is a task in progress.

However, humanitarian crisis funding is not sufficient for long-term planning, particularly when crises are protracted over many years. We must look at funding issues and ensure that needs are met in the long term. Will the Minister ensure in discussions with Turkey and other partners that stipulations on the provision of assistance are met, so that refugees have access to

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

education, healthcare and employment, and that a scrutiny process is enacted and long-term outcome data are collected?

Reports by Save the Children estimate that 26,000 child refugees arrived in Europe without any family in 2015. Children on their own are extremely vulnerable, and figures reported by Italy indicate that of the 13,000 unaccompanied children who arrived through its borders in 2014, almost 4,000 have subsequently disappeared, with concerns that they may have fallen victim to people trafficking. A study from Belgium in 2008 revealed that unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents are five times more likely than accompanied refugee minors to demonstrate severe or very severe symptoms of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. That obviously has implications for their vulnerability and resettlement.

Save the Children has led calls for 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees in Europe to be resettled in the UK, in addition to the 20,000 already accepted. That amounts to five children per parliamentary constituency. In September 2015, the Prime Minister indicated that the Government will continue to discuss the proposal, but no decision has yet been made. I reiterate that unaccompanied child refugees are a particularly vulnerable group and need urgent help.

The recommendation of the International Development Committee was resettlement in the UK of 3,000 unaccompanied children, and that proposal is supported by the Scottish Government. However, that is the tip of the iceberg in Europe. I request that the Minister collaborate and speak with European partners to ensure that unaccompanied children are registered, that child protection issues are engaged with extremely quickly, that childcare workers and staff are employed and that children do not continue to go missing within Europe.

I thank the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent again. She spoke extensively and eloquently about the efforts that her local authority has made and about the emotional and practical requirements of refugees when they are resettled and local arrangements are made. She described her own profound experience of visiting refugee camps and the impact that has had on her understanding.

The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) discussed the importance of delivering on the pledge, raised important issues in relation to the EU and the wider context, and said that it is vital to address the political situation in Syria. Of course, we would all agree about that.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate discussed the issues of human dignity and vulnerability and reiterated points about minority groups, which I emphasise. My hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) spoke about local best practice initiatives and shared learning on resettlement in his area. The hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) spoke eloquently about his own historical family situation and about the need for councils across the UK to engage equally in the process. That should also be addressed.

**James Berry** (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): On that point, will the hon. Lady give way?

**Dr Cameron:** Yes, indeed.

**Mr James Gray (in the Chair):** Order. The hon. Lady should be concluding her remarks. I call Dr Cameron.

**Dr Cameron:** Thank you, Mr Gray.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) discussed what we gain from having refugees in the country. We should be proud of what we are doing, but we should continually ask what more we can do.

3.41 pm

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I know that a number of—

**Mr James Gray (in the Chair):** Order. I say to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that it is a normal courtesy for those who have taken part in the debate to remain present throughout the winding-up speeches. It is not considered courteous to leave the debate during the winding-up speeches, but if any hon. Member does so, he will find that he is not called in subsequent debates. [Interruption.] Order. The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat. [Interruption.] Order.

**Keir Starmer:** A number of hon. Members have asked specific questions of the Minister. Therefore, I will be brief so that he gets the chance to give answers to the questions that people want answered.

I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), not only on securing the debate but on the tone and content of her contribution at the start. I, too, have been to the camp in Calais. I went just three weeks ago. I went to Calais and to Dunkirk, and the conditions there are truly appalling. That is the case particularly at Dunkirk, which—for those hon. Members who have not been—is basically a forest in which there is a swamp. On the ground is mud, water, urine and everything else that one would expect to find mixed in when there are no toilets or running water. In the middle of that, on any piece of semi-firm soil, are pitched flimsy tents. I do not think that anybody could go in any capacity to those camps and not come back a changed person.

Of course, the camps include Syrians among other nationalities. That is not surprising. The figures have already been given. More than half of the pre-war population of Syria are in need of help—13.5 million of 22 million—6.6 million people are internally displaced and 4.3 million have fled abroad, so there are Syrians in Dunkirk, Calais and many other places across Europe. I saw there—in Dunkirk in particular—in the flimsy tents, settling down for the night, at 4.30 because there is no electricity and no lights and it was getting dark, children the same age as my own. I met individuals such as the Iraqi Kurd who showed me around. He explained that he had fled with his family because he was given an ultimatum by ISIS as it was coming into his town to join it or die. He ran for his life with such of his family as he could and is now in Dunkirk.

I acknowledge everything that the Minister has done in his brief so far. He will know just how important language is. I ask him, for that Iraqi Kurd and the others in the camps, whether he will distance himself from what I thought were disappointing comments from

the Prime Minister this morning when he described people in those camps as “a bunch of migrants”. Some of the people in the camps will have been deeply disappointed and hurt to have been described in that way, because they hold our politicians—our leaders—in very high esteem.

May I touch on a couple of issues of process? In those camps and others across Europe, among the Syrians who have fled are individuals who are undoubtedly entitled, under the Dublin III arrangements, to be reunited with their families already in the UK, yet on the ground it is clear that that process is not working; it is not working in Calais or Dunkirk. I ask the Minister whether it is possible to have an urgent review of the Dublin III arrangements—the practical operation on the ground.

The voluntary resettlement programme was started, I think, in January 2014 and extended in September 2015 to the 20,000 Syrian refugees. That is welcome. On all sides, we should always say that it is welcome that that initiative has been taken by the Government; and the Government are right to ensure and insist that there are proper arrangements for those arriving, so that they can be housed, they have proper welfare, they have proper support and they have education. Given the various contributions made today, it may be time to review quite how and where people are located, but it is a very welcome initiative.

It was perhaps wrong to fix a cap in 2015 when we do not know what will happen during the next five years. I hope that the number can be revisited, because all the predictions are for a greater number of refugees next year even though we have already had a record year. We may need to come back to the 20,000 figure to see whether it needs to be revised.

I do ask the Minister and the Government—I have done so on a number of occasions—to give serious consideration to the question of unaccompanied children. There are 26,000 across Europe; 3,000 have been specifically identified by Save the Children and others. These are children on their own in Europe. Some may well have the right to be reunited with people in this country. It is probably unlikely to be their mother and father, but could be more distant family. This is Holocaust Memorial Day—a very important day when we consider children on their own in Europe. I ask the Government to look very seriously at the now very powerful case for taking some among that number of unaccompanied children.

I will turn now to two issues raised by other Members. When asylum seekers arrive in this country, whether from Syria or elsewhere, it is important that they are treated with dignity and respect. We have had, for the second week running, examples of treatment that has not been thought through and is deeply offensive to anybody with any experience of working with and for refugees. The red doors policy in Middlesbrough was raised in the House last week, and it was the wristbands in Cardiff this week. We need to appreciate several important points in those cases. Both examples have come to the attention of the House and been debated only because of the work of journalists. As I understand it, a Home Office inspection regime looks at the arrangements for asylum seekers to ensure the quality and so on of the accommodation and support that they are given. I called last week, and I call again now, for an urgent review of the arrangements to ensure that those sorts of crass arrangements are weeded out as fast as

possible and to ensure that they were confined to Middlesbrough and Cardiff—in other words, to check that similar practices in other parts of the country will not come to the attention of the House in future weeks. Such a review is much needed.

I return to where I started. The steps that have been taken so far are welcome and should be supported on all sides, but it is time for the Government to look at whether we can go further in a number of material respects.

3.49 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Refugees (Richard Harrington):** As always, it is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) for securing the debate and for her contribution. The Opposition, in all their forms—Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition, the Scottish National party and everyone else—have been very helpful in everything that the Government have done on the Syrian resettlement programme. That does not mean that the Opposition have not been critical, but I think we all realise that we all have exactly the same intention.

However, ladies and gentlemen of the jury—if this were a jury, as in the former profession of the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer)—I am a little bit off my normal form, owing to the shock of being complimented by the Chair of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). That stopped me concentrating for a moment.

**Helen Whately:** I want to reiterate something that the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) said, which I may have overlooked in my comments. During my research for the debate, I heard so many positive things about the Home Office and the Minister’s work. He certainly deserves the praise that he has received.

**Richard Harrington:** I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. If I could receive such comments during the rest of my political career, I would be fortunate. We have very little time. With permission, I will attempt to answer most of the questions that have been asked, but if by chance I miss anything, I would be happy to discuss it privately with any Member of this House. Quite a few of the questions were grouped together, so I will try to summarise them.

There has been a bit of a misunderstanding about local authorities and the criteria for deciding where refugees should be settled. I have a lot of respect for the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin)—we are both very interested in holocaust affairs and are involved in the Holocaust Educational Trust, of which I am a trustee—and we agree on most things. However, the list of people settled under the asylum programme is fundamentally different from the system that is used in the resettlement programme, and that is the reason for the confusion between him and my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent. Local authorities have come forward to help in many areas, such as Ashford in Kent. I pay tribute to the leader of Ashford Borough Council, who passed around a video to other local authorities saying how welcome refugees are in Ashford. The council has resettled quite a lot of families.

**Ian Austin:** Will the Minister give way?

**Richard Harrington:** I am sorry, but I really do not have time, because we have only got five minutes and I have got loads of things to say. Participation in the resettlement scheme is voluntary for local authorities. I would like to cover the finance point, because one of the very good contributions from the Scottish Members had a slight mistake in it. It is not just year 1 funding that has been arranged; there is a full programme for years 2 to 5. I am happy to go into detail in writing or to talk to hon. Members about it. Suffice it to say, within the time available, that most local authority leaders are quite satisfied with the funding, because years 2 to 5 are provided for.

As far as local authorities are concerned, the Government are conscious of the fact that settlement requires more than housing. That housing is provided predominantly by private landlords and paid for through local authorities, but with Government funds, deliberately so as not to interfere with the housing stock in those areas. In addition, each area is responsible for programmes to welcome people, introduce them to the local community and ensure that they register with doctors, schools and so on. I mention that because one of the faults of previous such programmes was that people were housed but forgotten about, and we are determined that that will not happen. Those are valid points to raise.

The Chair of the Home Affairs Committee made many erudite points, one of which was to ask what the Government were going to do about all the offers of spare rooms and shelter. He mentioned the Archbishop of Canterbury, whom I was with this morning—

**Keith Vaz:** Oh.

**Richard Harrington:** Indeed, and your name was mentioned—not your name, Mr Gray, but the right hon. Gentleman's. I apologise for not mentioning your name to the Archbishop, Mr Gray; I know that you know him very well.

On a serious point, we cannot take up the kind offers of spare rooms in people's houses because we are not interested in providing temporary accommodation to refugees. Our programme is intended to settle people where they will live, if not permanently, for the foreseeable future. However, that does not mean that we are not using all those offers of help. I discussed the matter this morning with the Archbishop. He is, by the way, in touch with Lambeth Council, and I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Leicester East has such a low opinion of Labour councils and their housing departments that he thinks that he would not be treated properly.

Putting that to one side for the moment, we are considering lots of other things through community sponsorship so that those kind offers can be used. One example is mentoring people into jobs, which is being trialled in a scheme in Bradford at the moment. Another is twinning families with other families, who can help by taking them to job interviews and English language lessons, which we are encouraging. We are doing lots of community sponsorship things—I would be happy to go into them on another occasion, but I am conscious of the time—so the good will of those people is absolutely not being turned away.

I will leave the right hon. Gentleman's running commentary points for the moment, because there may be another occasion to discuss that. He said that it was very important that we include the diaspora of Syrians who already live here. I met all the groups during my first few weeks in office and I asked them to form one umbrella organisation, which they have done. I met some of them yesterday, and I will meet more of them tomorrow, to make sure that they are used in all the areas where they have people. A slight problem is that they are concentrated in certain areas and not present in many areas where refugees are going, but they are being very co-operative.

The point about religious minorities is particularly important, because there has been a general belief that our system of taking people from the UNHCR, using the vulnerability criteria, is all well and good, but that some people—particularly Christians, but also other minorities—have been left out. I am determined that that will not happen. There is one rule on which I think the Government have every right to be inflexible, and that is that people have to register with the UNHCR, because it is the only way in which we can work out the vulnerability points, such as health and all the other things that we deal with. However, I have asked the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Catholic Bishop Patrick Lynch, whom I met last week, and every other body that we work with to give us evidence of places where there are pockets of people who are not registered. The Department for International Development is funding the UNHCR to provide outreach staff to register those people. I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) that on meeting a Catholic bishop who came back from Jordan last week, I was told for the first time that there are green shoots, with more evidence of Christians registering. I want to make it clear that the Government have no policy of discriminating against Christians or anybody else, because what we are interested in is vulnerability.

As far as the contributions from Scottish Members are concerned—I am sorry to group them together, but there is not time to go through their individual contributions—I pay tribute to the way in which the Scottish Government, the Scottish local authorities and the Home Office have worked together. It is a very good model for democracy, because no one cares about who is in which party or about trying to score points off each other, and the end product has been extremely good. I cannot stress that enough, and I can say that because I have experienced it myself.

This is a very complex issue. A lot of people have mentioned the 3,000 children, and have said that 20,000 refugees is not enough. It is certainly true that hundreds of thousands could be picked out. I would like to stress two points in my remaining time. First, hon. and right hon. Members must remember that the 20,000 is a small part of our overall humanitarian policy. Most of our work is in the countries adjoining Syria, such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, and I think that this country can be proud of that work. One Member mentioned Germany. Germany has a lot of migrants, but compared with Germany, we do a lot of work on the ground on matters such as accommodation and health. It works both ways. There has been a lot of talk about the children, and all I can say in the few seconds I have left is that the Prime Minister is considering the situation, and I believe we

can expect an announcement shortly. I am sorry that I cannot give any more information than that, but the points have been very well made.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the resettlement of Syrian refugees.

## Small Businesses: Late Payments

[ALBERT OWEN *in the Chair*]

4 pm

**Alok Sharma** (Reading West) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered late payments to small businesses. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, for the first time in this Parliament.

One of the biggest drags on small and medium-sized businesses—

*Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.*

4.10 pm

*On resuming—*

**Alok Sharma:** As I was saying, one of the biggest drags on small and medium-sized businesses is the scourge of late payments. Timely cash inflow is the lifeblood of a small business. It is the difference between growth and stagnation, between profit and loss and, in some cases, between success and failure. There are some 5.4 million private sector businesses operating in this country, and more than 99% of them are small businesses, with 4.1 million consisting of just one person. The last thing someone in that position needs is the late payment of invoices by customers.

A recent survey by the Federation of Small Businesses concluded that central Government Departments and Government agencies tend to pay reasonably promptly, with more than 70% of invoices being paid early or on time. By contrast, more than 50% of invoices from SMEs to larger businesses are paid late. Research from Bacs Payment Schemes Ltd, published in February 2015, revealed that more than three quarters of UK businesses are being forced to wait at least a month beyond their agreed contract terms before getting paid. The Bacs research also found that SMEs bear the brunt of late payments. At the time, £41.5 billion was owed in late payments across the British economy. Some £9 billion was owed to larger corporates but a staggering £32 billion was owed to small and medium-sized businesses.

The late payment difficulties for SMEs are further compounded by the additional costs that have to be borne by businesses as a result of late payments, which average around £700 a month per SME, including staff costs for chasing late invoices. That equates to a total cost to small businesses across the year of more than £8 billion. The Minister is working incredibly hard on this, and the Government are committed to cutting £10 billion of red tape over the course of this Parliament. Can colleagues imagine what would happen if we also managed to eradicate £8 billion of late payment costs from SMEs? It would provide exactly the sort of boost to jobs, productivity and economic growth that the Government want to encourage.

Smaller companies have told the FSB about the very real costs of late payments: reduced profitability; lateness in paying their own suppliers; difficulties in paying staff; lateness in paying Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, and all the negative consequences of that action; and, ultimately, lost contracts. There is also the very real risk of insolvency.

**Andrew Bingham** (High Peak) (Con): Turnover and sales are the predominant drivers for a small businessman, but does my hon. Friend agree that cash flow is a big

[Andrew Bingham]

problem and that the smaller the business, the bigger the problem it is? Consequently, when large companies withhold payment, a small business often cannot implement any early payment schemes because the large company can just go to somebody else and another small business will take the hit for them.

**Alok Sharma:** The adage that cash is king matters most to the smallest businesses, so my hon. Friend is right that cash flow is vital for a small business, as it is for larger businesses. The sum total of all this is that the very real risk of insolvency sometimes results from late payments. A poll of 1,000 business owners carried out in August 2015 by the electronic invoicing network Tungsten showed that more than 20% of businesses faced with unpaid invoices were having a brush with insolvency, and some of them, sadly, were having more than a brush.

The complaints that have come in to me from the Thames valley area as a result of my work with the FSB are wide-ranging and come from a range of industry sectors. I hear that large companies apply pressure in all sorts of different ways. Pressure is being applied to accept 90 to 180-day payment plans, fees are being charged to remain an approved supplier, and all sorts of complicated processes for submitting invoices have to be followed. Sometimes, payment is simply delayed with no reasonable excuse whatsoever.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Many SMEs in my constituency have expressed exactly the same concerns and fears. Does he agree that SMEs are effectively at the mercy of larger companies and that their survival depends on these cash payments being paid, and being paid quickly?

**Alok Sharma:** The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and I will address the culture of late payments within big businesses, which is sadly prevalent in the UK but is perhaps not always the case in other jurisdictions.

I will quote some of the businesses with which I have been in contact. A machined plastic parts supplier that has been doing business for 50 years without any problems suddenly found that a large company it had been dealing with demanded payment of a non-negotiable fee to a third party to remain on an approved supplier list. The supplier said that it had reported the situation to the large company's

"own ethics team who seem to think it is normal business practice and I have had it confirmed that we will be de-listed if we do not pay."

An SME with 10 people and a turnover of less than £2 million that supplies goods and services to large telecommunications companies in the UK and Ireland contacted me:

"I could write a book on the various hoops we have to jump through".

The examples provided by the SME include self-imposed cash arrangements by large companies and pressure to accept long payment terms.

A direct supplier to a local authority contacted me. It has had that contract for a long time, but it was suddenly told that it had to procure work through a particular procurement portal. The supplier told me:

"It was free to register (ignoring the not-insignificant effort in doing so), but the portal company then informed us that 'a 5% fee...will be deducted from your agreed rate for each work opportunity you secure via the portal'".

That is a 5% mandatory fee being put on a small business, which is completely unacceptable. The owner of the business went on to tell me in conversation:

"In our opinion as a small business unable to fight the process, this amounts to supplier bullying."

I have had businesses in the construction sector contact me. One said:

"Our industry (construction) is full of poor payment practices despite the Construction Act."

Finally, a service provider that supports pharma and medical device companies across Europe wrote:

"We have experienced very late payments with UK based companies only, either by paying after 90 days...or after starting legal proceedings. In contrast working for a German based company we do get our invoices settled usually within 2 weeks."

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) made a point about corporate culture. As we have heard, these problems are cross-sector and do not relate to just one part of British industry. Having run a business in Germany myself, I can tell the House from personal experience that German corporates are generally pretty good at paying on time. In Britain, some large businesses have developed a culture of late payment over the years. Squeezing small suppliers has been considered normal business practice, and hang the negative consequences for the supplier. The risk of late payment in Britain is considered to be higher than in many other European nations, according to the latest European payment index, and it is clearly not an acceptable way of carrying on.

In the past few days, colleagues will have seen the outcome of the Tesco discussions. To be fair, Tesco contacted me before this debate and told me:

"Smaller suppliers with spend from us under £100,000 a year, will move to 14 day payment terms."

That is a win for the adjudicator, for small businesses and, ultimately, for Tesco and British business in addressing the culture of large companies in doing business with small suppliers.

What are the Government doing? I am sure the Minister will talk about the measures to address late payments that have been implemented, or are planned to be implemented, but I will highlight a few areas on which I would be interested in getting feedback either now or in writing, if the answers are not readily available.

The first is the strengthening of the prompt payment code, which clearly has happened because of Government encouragement. It is a real success and a badge of honour for businesses. Also, thanks to the input from the Government, not only has the number of companies signing up to the code increased but the code has been strengthened so that 30-day payment terms are now considered standard and 60-day payment terms a maximum.

One of the suggestions made to me by the FSB is that the Government should commit to making sure that any supplier that supplies to Government should sign up to the code; being a signatory should be an absolute requirement before a company starts to supply any Government body or agency. I would be very interested in hearing the Minister's views on that suggestion.

The second point is with regard to the EU directive relating to late payments. Of course, that directive was originally based on pre-existing UK law and it requires that businesses pay their suppliers within 60 days or

face interest payments on money owed. However, the UK implementation of the directive allows businesses to agree longer terms

“provided it is not unfair to the creditor.”

For a small business, even 90 days is a very long time to wait to get paid. Given that the prompt payment code suggests that 60 days be considered a maximum period for payment, will the Minister consider amending the legislation to ensure that 60 days is considered the mandatory maximum period for paying suppliers?

Thirdly, I welcome the requirement from April this year for large and listed companies to publish their payment practices twice a year. Can the Minister confirm whether this piece of secondary legislation is on track and what the definition of a “large company” is? Is it one that has more than 250 employees? That is certainly the European definition of a large company.

My fourth and final point relates to the Government’s plans to establish a small business commissioner, who will help to solve complaints from small businesses about late payments. I hope that the Minister will agree that the commissioner needs to be an individual who commands respect across the business community. Perhaps it could be a former chief executive officer of a large business. I would not go so far as to say that we should get a poacher turned into a gamekeeper, but I think she will know what I mean. I know that we will have the Second Reading debate of the Enterprise Bill in the coming days, but hopefully she can provide a bit of commentary on the role of the commissioner. I welcome the creation of the commissioner; they will help SMEs, but only if they are seen to have some real teeth. If they come to be seen simply as a postbox for complaints, I am afraid they will lose the confidence of SMEs and will not command the respect of large businesses.

The FSB wants the scope and remit of the commissioner to be broadened to consider complaints about poor payment practices in the public sector as well, which I understand is not currently the role that has been prescribed for it. The FSB is also rather keen that the commissioner should have the power to make referrals to the Competition and Markets Authority. Both these suggestions are worthy of serious consideration. I would be interested to know the Minister and the Government’s view of them, if not today then perhaps in the Second Reading debate.

As I have said, there are more than 5 million small businesses in the UK. I do not think anyone expects that the commissioner will set up a huge administrative bureaucracy, mechanically processing complaints, so there needs to be a holistic approach for dealing with complaints. What I would like to see is the commissioner establishing a public register or website, loosely based on those that review holiday destinations, on which SMEs could enter verified complaints about late payments or poor supplier policies practiced by their customers.

Once SMEs start coming forward with issues, many of which will be recurring in terms of their scope and the identity of offending large companies, that will enable the commissioner to spot patterns of poor behaviour within different sectors. The commissioner should certainly have the power to bring CEOs from big companies around a table to ensure that they act collectively to end poor practices. I think we would find that if we were able to tackle 20% of the problems that are identified, that would solve 80% of the problems related to late payments.

Eradicating late payments will provide a boost to jobs, growth and productivity, and I am absolutely convinced that greater transparency will help to eliminate what I regard as a corporate disease.

**Albert Owen (in the Chair):** Before I call the Minister to respond, I remind Members that the debate was suspended for 10 minutes, so it will now finish at 4.40 pm.

4.24 pm

**The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) on securing this debate on an important topic. We know that late payment is one of the biggest complaints that small businesses have. They rightly complain about what are effectively two types of late payment. One is when they supply services or goods to people, and as part of the terms and conditions of the contract they find themselves almost over a barrel. They do not want to turn away business or fall out with an important customer, so they sign up to terms and conditions that in a modern age are, frankly, unacceptable.

Of course, someone can take action against anybody who breaks the terms of a contract. They can go to court, but for obvious reasons there is a reluctance to go to court. It costs money, and it could also sour the relationship between the two parties, which would not be good for the smaller business. It is important to put on the record that, for our purposes, when we refer to a small business we are referring to any business that employs fewer than 250 people. That ranges from a very small business, or even a microbusiness that employs between one and five people, to companies with much bigger turnovers that employ up to 250 people. The small business sector is huge and, as we know, it is absolutely the engine of our economy.

The second type of complaint comes from businesses that have signed up to being paid within a certain period, only to find that term or condition of the contract is broken. As I have explained, they feel reluctant to go to law, but there is a remedy available to them.

As I say, there are two types of complainants: those who find themselves signing up to onerous terms and conditions in the first place, and those who, having signed up to a contract that may on paper include good terms regarding when payment will be made, nevertheless find that the company’s practice is to breach those terms. They do not really want to go to law. I accept, and the Government absolutely recognise, the case that my hon. Friend makes that the situation we find ourselves in is unacceptable. Things have been getting better, but we know there is more to be done.

It is important that I put on the record my thanks to the Groceries Code Adjudicator for what happened yesterday, which in many ways was astonishing. What Tesco was doing was a scandal, but it was a great day for smaller businesses, which found themselves having a champion who did not pull her punches in criticising and exposing Tesco. After a year-long investigation, she made it very clear what Tesco had done, which was a flagrant breach of the groceries code.

[Anna Soubry]

As we know, since last April the Groceries Code Adjudicator, which was set up by the last Conservative-led Government, has had the power to impose fines of up to 1% of turnover. That is serious money for any business, but especially for big businesses. So credit where credit is due; yesterday was a good day for smaller businesses, and full credit to the adjudicator and to the last Government for doing all of that.

I will deal with a few important points, then I will come to my hon. Friend's asks in a minute. The small business commissioner, which will be set up by the Enterprise Bill, will have a specific role of considering the problem of late payment. The commissioner might want to look at other things as well, but primarily he or she will look specifically at that problem.

We know that people can go to law if there is a breach of contract. The small business commissioner will look at the practices that lead to unfair terms and conditions and at those that mean people breach terms and conditions and make late payments. What I am looking for in the commissioner is somebody who will take up the complaints of much smaller businesses, which invariably reflect trends in what bigger companies are doing.

The real aim is to change the culture. My hon. Friend said that the problem stems from a culture that is unacceptable in this day and age, and I want the small business commissioner to change that culture. He was right to ask for the commissioner to have some teeth, but then they would turn into a very different creature and we would have to go down the route of having someone whose role was quasi-judicial. In any event, people can take to court a claim for breach of contract, and we will be wildly encouraging mediation. That will be another role of the small business commissioner. We do not want to create a quasi-judicial role, because we would be beginning to get into quango land. I want someone who has respect and authority, so that when a phone call is made the bigger companies do not flinch but pick up the phone. It is about banging heads together and changing the culture.

**Alok Sharma:** I agree with the Minister, of course; we certainly do not want another quango. That would not help anyone, particularly small businesses. Does she agree that whoever is appointed to the role has to be a serious and hugely respected business figure? They have to be respected by small and large businesses, because it is the office and their individual personality that will help to drive things and get large businesses around a table when heads need to be banged together.

**Anna Soubry:** I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right. The person we appoint will be critical in achieving what we want. We want someone with gravitas, so that when a telephone call goes to a chief executive, that chief executive does not hesitate to say, "This is a call I have to take. This is someone I have to listen to." When I spoke to the Australian equivalent, what struck me was that when he has that conversation with a chief executive and tells them, "Did you know what your finance team are now saying has to be in the terms and conditions for small businesses?", invariably the chief executive says, "I had no idea what was going on. That is absolutely unacceptable,

and that is not how we do business." It is fair to say that the new chief executive of Tesco, for example, was clear yesterday that it will no longer treat smaller businesses in that dreadful way. I welcome the change in policy so that very small suppliers will be paid within 14 days, but we must be clear that they supply only about £150,000 of goods to Tesco. They are very small contracts, and I look forward to Tesco extending its new-found policies to all its suppliers across the piece.

The small business commissioner will be expected to have a website. I want it to be a series of portals that will show small businesses where they can go for advice, especially on mediation. I am not sure about the idea of turning it into a sort of TripAdvisor. I always get a little nervous about people being able to post things, which would require a lot of regulation to ensure that no one was saying anything defamatory. I want to make it absolutely clear that the small business commissioner will produce an annual report, in which they will be expected to name and shame all those who are not doing the right thing by small businesses, especially in relation to prompt payment. What happened with Tesco yesterday was so important because it was all across the media, and damage to a business's reputation is hugely important and hugely powerful.

**Alok Sharma:** The Minister is being generous with her time. I hear what she is saying about the potential risks of a TripAdvisor-type website, although such websites of course operate already, so I am sure that it is possible to construct something that might work. Whatever mechanism is used, we need to ensure that there is a way of getting complaints in and processed in a timely and fast way. I reiterate that the last thing we want is a quango, and I know she does not want that either.

**Anna Soubry:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Speed is of the essence. We have reduced the maximum size of company that can make a complaint. The limit will be around the 50-employee mark, because we anticipate that there will be a lot of complaints. Those companies will be symptomatic of a way of doing things in particularly large businesses and of culture. We think that we are aiming in the right direction to get the sort of results that we want.

We introduced new reporting requirements in 2015 for the UK's largest companies to report on their payment practices and performance, including invoices paid beyond agreed terms. I want to make it clear that those reports will be published in a central digital location, which sounds pretty ghastly, but most importantly it will do the trick. It will bring in the oxygen of publicity, which invariably cleanses things and makes them better. I am going to say something slightly controversial and be very blunt.

**Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con):** Surely not.

**Anna Soubry:** I know. It is not like me, and my officials are now having huge palpitations, but it says on my brief:

"Government is leading by example by paying its suppliers fairly and promptly."

I wonder whether we really are. Shall we be truly honest about this? My hon. Friend gave an example of a local authority that is not doing that, and I have examples of

local authorities that are not doing that. I have an example that was brought to me—I will not go into the detail of it now, but I will be taking it up in a serious way.

We all know that we have to be careful. We can make great headline statements, but when we drill down into the reality—most of us, certainly on the Government Benches, live in the real world—what sounds like a good headline is not borne out in practice. I have seen evidence that by the time something that looks like a Government contract has come through the first subcontractor, the next subcontractor and the next one, the payment terms are something in the region of 120 days, and I am concerned about that. That is not a fault of Government, because we have been clear about what we expect, but the danger with over-regulation is that there is always a way around it. The most important thing is changing the culture and policing it. People will be very clever in looking for the loopholes and different ways of doing things, but we have to ensure that we find them, track them down, expose them and ensure that those sorts of practices cease. I will be keen to take that up so that we practice what we preach.

**Alok Sharma:** The Minister is always at her best when she is being controversial. She raises the issue of how the public sector deals with small businesses, so can I come back to one point? Will she at least have another look at whether the small business commissioner should cover Government quasi-public bodies as well as private sector companies?

**Anna Soubry:** I absolutely do not have a problem with looking at that. I place on record, however, that I am looking at that now. I will not bore Members with all the details, but someone who is not a constituent came to see me. He runs an excellent small business called Caunton Engineering. By bad fortune for some of the contractors, he happens to chair the relevant committee

for his sector. I am taking the issue seriously, and we will look into it to ensure that we are doing the right thing.

The last Government made huge strides forward with the prompt payment code and the publications that bigger companies have to make. The directive that my hon. Friend mentioned is wishy-washy. Am I going to say that we should change it? Actually, I do not want to over-regulate. I would much rather that we changed the culture rather than put strictures on small business, but he makes a good point. I will look at all the points he has raised, and I congratulate him on bringing the matter to our attention.

I feel proud: the Conservative party is undoubtedly the party of small business. We get it. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) is here, and he runs a small business, no doubt extremely well. We know the area and we understand it. What we now have to do is this: I ask all Members to bring me their examples, and I will not hesitate to take them up with bigger companies and be the champion of small businesses, to ensure that we deliver in the way that we want and encourage small businesses.

**Alok Sharma:** Will the Minister give way?

**Anna Soubry:** Yes—my hon. Friend can have the last word.

**Albert Owen (in the Chair):** There are 10 seconds left.

**Alok Sharma:** I am really pleased that the Minister has thrown out that challenge to Members. Will she commit to sit down with me over the coming weeks—

**Anna Soubry:** Yes—

**Albert Owen (in the Chair):** Order. There is plenty of time to sit down with the hon. Gentleman.

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

## Iraq Historic Allegations Team

4.40 pm

**Richard Benyon** (Newbury) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Iraq Historic Allegations Team.

**Albert Owen (in the Chair):** Because of time factors, if the Member who secured the debate takes 10 minutes, all the seven Back Benchers, including Mr Stewart, who have indicated that they want to speak will have four minutes before I bring in the Scottish National party and Labour party spokespersons for five minutes each, and the Minister will have 10 minutes to respond.

**Richard Benyon:** Thank you, Mr Owen, for overseeing our proceedings today. I am grateful to the Minister for being in her place and to so many colleagues for showing so much interest in this important matter.

I have a view of our armed forces that is similar to my view of other public services. Just as with the NHS and the police, I revere the people who work for those services for being the best at what they do and for showing exceptional courage and professionalism. I also accept that the armed forces, like other public servants, sometimes fail. In wanting them to remain the best armed forces in the world, I want there to be a proper sanctioned system, clearly understood by all ranks, to act as a deterrent against those who might break the rules of law. Here I admit a prejudice. As somebody who has served on operations and saw men under my command have their self-control tested to the extreme, I constantly wonder how young men, often with little education, can show such intelligent restraint at times of great provocation. I am only talking about Northern Ireland.

This year sees the 25th anniversary of the first Gulf war. Hundreds of thousands of young men and women have seen more combat in the quarter century since than in any period since the Korean war. To mark it, Help for Heroes, in conjunction with King's College London, has produced an in-depth report that shows that roughly between 60,000 and 70,000 regular veterans and around 20,000 reservists will need our support in the coming years as they face the effects of combat. Those are the people I will talk about today and they should be our absolute priority.

I secured this debate because something has happened to some of our veterans in recent years that I think needs the urgent attention of Government. Some call it "lawfare". It is having a profound effect on the morale of our armed forces and on how we will be able to fight wars in the future.

**Mark Spencer** (Sherwood) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in the security of this Chamber, it is difficult to second-guess the decision-making processes in the theatre of war, where the environment is entirely different?

**Richard Benyon:** My hon. Friend is right, and I would add that when decisions are taken through judicial process, with the benefit of hindsight, sometimes more than a decade later, it is very hard to try and put oneself in the position of those who are taking the difficult action.

**Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree with one of my constituents who explained in an email that the present wars are not the same as wars in the past, where it was obvious who the enemy was and certain standards were adhered to on both sides? We are working in very difficult times at the moment.

**Richard Benyon:** Most of the asymmetric conflicts that we have fought in recent years are extremely difficult. We are fighting an enemy who does not sign up to the Geneva convention and the basic rules of war. I will make suggestions for the Minister that I think might address those concerns. My hon. Friend is, as always, absolutely right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) co-wrote a landmark report last year called, "Clearing the Fog of Law". I recommend it to hon. Members. In it he makes some recommendations that are intellectually researched and will go a long way to address the problem that we discuss today. I am also grateful for any contribution to the debate from my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) whose understanding of these issues within the machinery of Government is second to none.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), who has asked me to say he is sorry he cannot be here as he is in hospital, wrote a powerful article last week in which he described an action in which a sniper shot and killed an insurgent who was about to fire an RPG-7 round towards troops. The shot was made from 1,200 metres—an act of skill that is hard to imagine. However, in absolutist terms, it could be that this fatality was illegal as the sniper did not issue a verbal warning. To give such a warning in a language that an assailant can understand over that distance is clearly a ridiculous concept, even before you try to second-guess the thoughts racing through the sniper's mind as he balanced the rules of engagement with the safety of his mates. I think he did the right thing. Now we are led to believe that he is being investigated because a firm of lawyers—sitting, no doubt, in the comfort of offices in London or Birmingham—have realised that there is money to be made here. The lawyers have tracked down the deceased's family, who have no doubt been told of the riches available on a no win, no fee basis or possibly from legal aid. This has to stop.

The Iraq Historic Allegations Team was being set up in the last days of the previous Labour Government. It was put into operation by the coalition Government for a perfectly respectable reason, and no doubt also to offset some of the threats from international judicial processes, to tackle alleged crimes in that conflict.

**Sir Gerald Howarth** (Aldershot) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. I was an opponent of the International Criminal Court Bill that was proposed by the Labour Government and would have subjected our soldiers to the International Criminal Court. I said at the time that

"we must foresee the possibility of the court saying that this country has been unwilling to take action although we believe that it would be inappropriate for our national courts to do so. In such circumstances we must provide maximum protection to our troops."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee D*, 1 May 2001; c. 247-48.]

Is it not the case that the Government introduced this because it feared that otherwise our troops would have been taken to the International Criminal Court?

**Richard Benyon:** I find it depressing that we are talking about this so long after my right hon. Friend made those remarks. It will be interesting to hear from the Minister what advice she has received about the need for the Iraq Historic Allegations Team. Perhaps the debate will be able to draw out some of the reasoning for it.

As we know, IHAT was set up in 2010 by the then Minister, Sir Nick Harvey, who in a written statement said that he expected it to complete its work within two years. In July 2014, the Secretary of State recognised that IHAT's work was not going to be completed by the end of 2016. He approved additional funding of £24 million to cover the period from the end of 2016 to the end of 2019, which increased the level of funding of IHAT to £57.2 million. I want us to think of 2019 in relation to when some of the instances it is investigating actually took place.

IHAT employs 145 people and is still recruiting. The job specs actually say that contracts are initially short term, but are likely to be extended for significantly longer. The IHAT website gives 2019 as the likely date when it will complete its work. If it was exposing systematic and institutionalised war crimes, I would at least understand why such persistence was a good idea, and feel that the cost to the British taxpayer was justified. Estimates in the press say it costs £5 million a year, but other estimates vary. A look at IHAT's website shows that 18 investigations have been completed, one of which has resulted in measures being taken against somebody, and a £3,000 fine being awarded. Of the others, 15 cases have been dropped and two cases have been passed to other authorities, but no action has been forthcoming.

By June last year, following a huge increase in IHAT's caseload, the diagnosis was even worse. It is not necessary to be a mathematician to appreciate that, at this rate, the task of investigating allegations arising from the activities of British armed forces in Iraq will never be fully completed. The Ministry of Defence guide describes what has happened to the 59 allegations of unlawful killing that IHAT has reviewed up to this month: 34 cases have been closed, or are in the process of being closed, with no further disciplinary action; seven are currently subject to further limited, focused lines of inquiry; and 17 are under investigation. Only one of those cases was referred to the Director of Prosecutions, who directed that there should be no prosecution. So, on the face of it, that is not a great record.

At this stage, I want to make it clear that I do not blame the Iraq Historic Allegations Team. It no doubt has worthy detectives sifting the evidence, but after 10 years it is finding two things: evidential trails have run cold; and it is being inundated with claims, many spurious and many the result of the malign actions of lawyers, who see this is a Klondike-style fee-fest or, perhaps, as a way to get at the system that conducted what they believe to be an unjust war. If anyone doubts my last remark, I suggest looking at the interview on YouTube given by Mr Phil Shiner of Public Interest Lawyers to that great beacon of impartiality, *Russia Today*.

IHAT's caseload now involves just over 1,500 alleged victims, 1,235 of whom are victims of ill treatment and 280 of unlawful killing. Given that backlog, the burden will hang over the heads of many of our veterans for many more months and probably years. That is utterly intolerable.

All that falls into the concept of what "Clearing the Fog of Law" calls "legal imperialism". The worst case of such a culture are the allegations that culminated in the al-Sweady inquiry. The allegations surround actions taken during what became known as the battle for Danny Boy, a brutal attack on a checkpoint of that name resulting in a fierce firefight. British troops showed exceptional courage and resolve, and a number were decorated for bravery. The inquiry that followed cost £31 million; the fees were about £5 million. Some mistreatment was discovered, but the allegations of torture, mutilation and murder were baseless and the product, according to the judge, of "deliberate and calculated lies".

The Government and many others have accused the two firms promoting the cases, Public Interest Lawyers and Leigh Day, of attempting "to traduce" the reputations of the Army units concerned. We have heard that the alleged actions of one of the law firms, Leigh Day, have resulted in referral to the Solicitors Regulation Authority. I hear that Public Interest Lawyers might also be referred to that body.

We could all take up lots of time venting our collective spleen at the behaviour of firms that trawl places such as Basra trying to convince people of the great riches in proving that they were victims of bad behaviour. We could take up much more time asking the shadow Defence Secretary, the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), why she and the Labour party thought it right to accept donations or donations in kind from those firms.

**Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con):** I congratulate my hon. Friend on his speech. Does it not speak legions that virtually no Labour Member is attending the debate today? What does that show about Labour's position on the military?

**Richard Benyon:** I share my hon. Friend's feelings. Rather than spend the time talking about our views of those lawyers, however, which would be self-indulgent, I want to get to the bottom of this concept of legal imperialism.

I am glad that since I requested the debate the Prime Minister has announced that he has asked the National Security Council to produce a comprehensive plan to stamp out the industry. He is looking at banning no win, no fee schemes; he is speeding up the planned legal aid residency test; and he is strengthening penalties against firms that abuse the system, possibly even including suing those who have been found deliberately to withhold facts that could prove the innocence of the servicemen or women concerned.

That is all good stuff, but I want to press the Minister for more information on the timescale for the reforms. I suggest that they can only be seen as work in progress. May I respectfully suggest that the Minister add to the Prime Minister's wish list the suggestions made in the report by my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling?

[Richard Benyon]

In order to draw a line under the situation, for recent and future conflicts the Prime Minister should consider these powerful recommendations. The Government should derogate from the European convention on human rights in respect of future overseas armed conflicts, using the mechanism of article 15 of the convention. The Government should revive the armed forces' Crown immunity from actions in tort during all future "warlike operations" overseas by ministerial Order under the Crown Proceedings (Armed Forces) Act 1987. The Government should take the lead—this is important—in supporting efforts by the International Committee of the Red Cross to strengthen the Geneva conventions on the conditions of modern warfare, which addresses the point made in an early intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani). The Government should make an authoritative pronouncement of state policy, declaring the primacy of the Geneva conventions in governing the conduct of British forces on the battlefield.

**Danny Kinahan** (South Antrim) (UUP): I am grateful that we are having this debate. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that alongside the conflicts of the past we need to concentrate on the past in Northern Ireland as well? We should also look at a proactive media presence so that we are in front when defending our servicemen, rather than waiting for every case to get to the papers.

**Richard Benyon:** The hon. Gentleman is right. I support the plea by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) that incidents such as that of the arrest of Lance Corporal J of the Paras under caution should cease. Society wants a line drawn under such things. We seem to have moved too far towards favouring the actions of our enemies and we do not seem mindful enough of those to whom we owe a great debt.

The recommendations I have just outlined are clearly set out in the report of my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling. It makes it clear that we are not only talking about alleged victims of war crimes, excessive violence in combat or the mistreatment of prisoners. The definition of "lawfare" extends to the ability of the courts to judge the actions of commanders—decisions often taken in the heat of battle and then judged years later by people for whom such circumstances are alien and with the mantle of hindsight.

I go back to my own experience. I got to know well a 19-year-old soldier who, in a tense situation, shot and killed someone contrary to the so-called "yellow card" rules for opening fire. He was convicted for murder. The case has haunted me for 34 years. My worry is that the legal imperialism we have seen in recent years and the existence of organisations such as IHAT will put a dangerous caution in the minds of the sniper of the future. Rather than taking a life to save many, caution prompted by a fear of legal implications might, to quote my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex, "put a splint around his trigger finger".

The analogy extends into every area of war, involving everyone from the most junior soldier just out of training to the most gnarled veteran of a quarter century of expeditionary warfare. The Apache pilot, the mortar platoon commander and the frontline rifleman all need to be governed by the rule of law—but which law? That

is the matter that the Minister and the Government must tackle with haste. However despicable we might think the actions of certain lawyers are, they are only responding to circumstances created by Governments past and present. My argument is that the rules we have created put our servicemen and women in greater danger in future. That cannot be right.

**Albert Owen (in the Chair):** Given the length of the last speech, the remaining speakers have three minutes each.

4.57 pm

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): I pay huge tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) for such an excellent speech and for bringing the subject to the Westminster Hall Chamber. I will now gabble through my speech in two minutes and 51 seconds.

As a former soldier, I welcome the opportunity to put on the record how deeply disturbing I find the relentless pursuit of our servicemen and women by unscrupulous and opportunistic lawyers. I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to clamp down on the abuse, but I wish he would go further. I understand, however, that shutting investigations down would create an even more legalistic nightmare.

We all acknowledge that if and when atrocities are committed, or are alleged to have been committed, they need to be investigated. The Iraq Historic Allegations Team was established for that purpose in a genuine attempt to right historic wrongs and to deliver effective criminal investigation of allegations of murder, abuse and torture. In the case of Baha Mousa, for example, it worked.

One of the problems of the investigations now is the time that they are taking. Over the past five years, only a small number of the 1,500 cases have been looked at, and then only after nearly £60 million was given to IHAT to look into the allegations. Will the Minister comment on that when she sums up?

Another problem is that hundreds of the cases were fed to IHAT by only two legal firms, Public Interest Lawyers and Leigh Day.

**Nusrat Ghani:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Richard Drax:** I really do not have time, so I will fire on, if I may.

The perception is that left-leaning lawyers are intent on undermining one of the pillars of the establishment—namely, the armed forces. Given the opportunity, they are jumping to the task with relish. Unbelievably, it is alleged that middlemen touting for clients in Iraq received referral fees, which are prohibited, thus inviting fabrication and fantasy, which was never the intention. Those self-serving and unscrupulous firms have wrapped themselves in the banner of human rights, creating a compensation industry funded by the taxpayer.

Although I am delighted to learn that the gravy train is now coming off the rails, with both firms facing the Solicitors Regulation Authority and Leigh Day now referred to the solicitors disciplinary tribunal, the damage has been done and remains in the huge backlog of cases. For example, one British soldier could now in turn face investigations by the Iraq Historic Allegations Team and the International Criminal Court at the Hague;

civil claims for compensation in the High Court; and finally an inquest by the Iraq fatality investigations—you couldn't make it up!

Our soldiers are left feeling persecuted and betrayed. Those still serving are demoralised and people thinking of serving may think again. How on earth will we prosecute a war in the future if at every turn our servicemen and women fear being investigated for doing their duty, which, let us not forget, is to kill the enemy?

5 pm

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, especially in this debate, which has aroused so much interest around the country and goes to the heart of so much in UK politics at the moment. I thank the hon. and gallant Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) for bringing the debate to the House.

There is no doubt that the personnel of our armed forces do their job with a minimum of fuss, operating in conditions that most civilians would find intolerable, usually to a remarkable standard, because of which they are worthy of our praise and we must take time to understand specific circumstances. However, just as those men and women are the pride of their communities, we can be proud of our record on human rights, rooted in historic documents such as Magna Carta and, in Scotland, the Declaration of Arbroath.

In this debate, we should remark on the fact that IHAT is something of a classic British fudge. The idea that we should allow the UK to uphold its commitment to human rights, while protecting those who have given so much from unnecessary legal intrusion, has instead become an underfunded, sub-prime body that has lost the confidence of many it purports to help. It is also unfortunate that this necessary debate has been somewhat hijacked by those who seem to be obsessed by promoting an anti-European agenda.

In my work in the Select Committee on Defence, on which I serve with the hon. Member for Newbury and others here today, it has been made clear to me that we have the most professional, dedicated and capable armed forces in the world. They are men and women who hold themselves to the highest standards both at home and abroad. I am sure we agree that they are experienced personnel and professionals who can account for and justify their decisions on the battlefield. That does not mean, however, that there is not room for improvement in their practices.

The three services are a result of steady evolution, adaptation and best practice. It must be noted that a strong commitment to human rights has played a vital part in that evolution. We must agree, however, that the allegations brought forward are serious. The very reputation of our armed forces—indeed, the reputation of the UK and its commitment to human rights—relies on proper adherence to procedures and the rule of law.

On the other side is the ridiculous list of cases brought forward that contain false or exaggerated allegations that exploit the fundamental character of the justice system. Soldiers who have served with distinction and valour in the Iraqi conflict should not be unnecessarily hounded. Many in my party are clear that those who abuse the system must be dealt with severely.

**Albert Owen (in the Chair):** Order.

5.3 pm

**Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) for his kind words and for calling for the debate. I will try to reduce my speech in so far as I can, but these matters did concern me in my working life for many years. I was in charge of the MOD's litigation team in the Treasury Solicitor's Department when the claims started flooding in in 2010. We faced a tsunami of litigation. I am not going to talk about individual cases, but I will give some recommendations from my experience.

First, IHAT was the least bad option available. The civil courts are not the place for criminal investigations to take place. Some of the claims made were very serious and needed to be investigated. IHAT is independent but secure. It is staffed by excellent officers who can investigate criminal allegations. Unlike the Baha Mousa inquiry, for example, they can refer cases to the Service Prosecuting Authority. Given where we are at the moment, IHAT should be encouraged to press on, but we should find new ways to deal with such issues in any future conflict.

Secondly, lawyers should not act without real clients with whom they are in touch and from whom they can take instructions. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] If, for example, offers of settlement are made, it is essential that a lawyer can get in touch with their client immediately; anything less makes litigation impossible.

Thirdly, access by IHAT officers to the Iraqi complainant should have been provided with speed, but it was not. I can see no explanation for that at all. There is no need, nor is it usual in police investigations, for those who complain of a crime to be represented by a lawyer from the other side of the world.

Fourthly, our disclosure rules should not be used to pervert the course of litigation and push the Ministry of Defence into a position where it feels it cannot defend itself or its soldiers. Fifthly, I support scrutiny of whether legal aid should be available to non-UK nationals bringing action against the Government. That money, in my view, would be much better spent on rebuilding Iraq than on lawyers based in the UK.

Sixthly, I think the UK should derogate from the European convention on human rights—I am certainly no anti-European—whenever we deploy soldiers abroad. The authors of the convention, who were writing at a time when the horror of the holocaust and the battlefield was still fresh, intended international humanitarian law to apply to soldiers. International humanitarian law and the law of armed conflict is robust law, designed for that very purpose; the ECHR is not.

In conclusion, we are not dealing in the main with the fog of the battlefield, but rather with the confusion of detention and interrogation. In Iraq, soldiers were detaining men who minutes before might have been shooting at them or killing their friends or who were believed to have had information that might have helped us to prevent further attacks on our troops. They were usually not in custody suites, offices or cells, and time for gathering information was perilously short. It was hot—

**Albert Owen (in the Chair):** Order.

5.6 pm

**Johnny Mercer** (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I do not want to repeat much of what has been said already, but as everyone knows the situation has got completely out of hand. It is beyond parody, because what we find ourselves in is not the product of any of the individuals now charged with sorting this out. Throughout the rest of the world, there is not another country whose legislators or political representatives are putting its servicemen and women through anything remotely similar. Every day, those same legislators use the freedom of speech and freedom of will that so many have fought so hard to defend. Indeed, we are the only first-world country that seems to take such a passive and reactive approach to anything to do with veterans' affairs.

That we find ourselves in this situation is astonishing, baffling, embarrassing and wrong. That we can take a battlefield and all that goes into it—train hard, work hard and be the best we can possibly be to ensure success—and then have our homework marked by those whose love of this country does not wander far beyond their own bank balance is simply beyond me. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] We cannot withdraw from IHAT now—I accept that. That we are here is ridiculous, but here we are and we must, as ever, fight our way out.

What is really going on in this investigation? Our soldiers have retired police officers who have answered the noble call of exciting new opportunities and above market rates of pay turning up at their door with a letter summoning them to court, with no warning. Yes, they have access to a lawyer afterwards from the MOD, but they got no warning from the Government they represented that this—a Government inquiry—is turning up. That is not good enough.

No one has a problem with scrutiny. Our professionalism is what separates us from the rest. We work so hard to imbue moral courage in our men and women, along with mental strength and resilience, precisely to get decisions right in warfare. The truth is that, by and large, we do that and, when they do not, someone speaks up and it is dealt with, without fear or favour, for we are the British Army and we are embarked on a relentless pursuit of excellence.

I do not know how many times I must say this in this place, but I will keep going until my time here is done. We have a duty to look after these people and this is not how to do it. I urge the Government to follow the Prime Minister's lead and do everything they can to protect our men and women: be proactive; warn them of what is coming; calm them; and support their families. The time for letting veterans fend for themselves and seek out a charitable shoulder for support is over. It ends in this Parliament. These people are the best of us—the true patriots; the warrior generation. We owe these men and women. Let us not let them down.

5.9 pm

**Mr Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) on securing the debate. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer).

We ask our armed forces to serve us abroad, so that we can be safe at home. I represent a constituency with a proud military tradition, particularly in the naval

sphere. I hear and see at first hand the service and sacrifice of our armed forces, and therefore my constituents and I share what the Prime Minister described as the "deep concern" that Iraq war veterans could face the threat of prosecution due to fabricated or unjustified claims.

Although we expect our armed forces to adhere to the rule of law and the rules of engagement, we should commit to ensuring that we protect them from those who irresponsibly abuse the process of law. I therefore very much welcome the commitment from the Secretary of State for Defence to clamp down on bad practices. I also support the Prime Minister's action. Asking the National Security Council to produce a clear, detailed plan of how we can stop our troops facing this torment is positive news.

I hope the Minister will confirm that the National Security Council's work is proceeding well. Several of the proposed steps are especially welcome. My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury referred to the imposition of strict time limits for the lodging of claims, to residency requirements, to the prevention of no win, no fee deals and to the reviewing of legal aid provision to certain firms that have been implicated in the al-Sweady deal. Those are all very welcome.

The unjustified claims against British troops are harmful for at least three reasons. Operationally, such claims harm morale. They affect recruitment and damage the operational effectiveness of our troops at a time when we are relying on them more than ever. From a financial perspective, every false claim that IHAT and the Government respond to, investigate and defend diverts spending from the frontline at an important time in our country's activities. Politically, such claims threaten to unjustifiably undermine the outstanding work of our armed forces in the eyes of the public, even when those claims are later found to be unfounded. The al-Sweady inquiry, which reported last year, is a case in point.

Time is short. In closing, I hope that all hon. Members will join me in paying tribute to not only our armed forces but the many charities that champion and care for our veterans when they come home, from Combat Stress and SSAFA to the Royal British Legion. Their approach stands in stark contrast with those who pursue our veterans, rather than protecting and caring for them.

Finally, I congratulate again my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury on securing this timely debate on an important issue. I welcome the Government's commitment to positive action and look forward to hearing from the Minister. I am confident that when she gets to her feet, she will reassure us that this Government are very much on the side of our brave armed forces personnel, who serve us abroad and protect us at home.

5.12 pm

**Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): It is very difficult for any civilian to sit in judgment of a soldier. I have no experience of the unique and extraordinary pressures under which they operate, nor the snap life and death decisions they are forced to make. Too many people in the legal profession lack the wisdom or the humility to take that view and hound our veterans with self-righteous enthusiasm.

Just this week, the BBC announced that the Iraq Historic Allegations Team has dropped nearly 60 cases of alleged unlawful killing—cases that have cast a shadow over the lives of innocent veterans. As we know, in 2014 the al-Sweady inquiry found that previous allegations against British troops in Iraq were “deliberate and calculated lies” intended to smear our military at a cost of £31 million, as my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) said. As a result, Leigh Day, one of the law firms involved, faces a full disciplinary tribunal from the Solicitors Regulation Authority. The Prime Minister has threatened to sue that company to recover the millions of pounds it has claimed in costs, and I hope he will find support from across the House for that measure. He has also outlined a broader crackdown on so-called tank chasers, including reforms to legal aid, to no win, no fee arrangements and to the civil courts regime.

Clear-cut, conventional wars against uniformed enemies are increasingly a thing of the past. Today’s foes increasingly know no rules of war, yet just as the old conventions of conflict are breaking down, we are handing our opponents unprecedented opportunities to attack our troops in the courts. Even though it is right we hold our armed forces to high standards, such self-flagellation is completely ridiculous.

Such challenges are not confined to the middle east. Veterans of the campaign against IRA terrorism in Northern Ireland face their very own historical inquisition. Meanwhile, the terrorists they were fighting—men and women who deliberately targeted civilians and murdered several Members of this House—are shielded by an amnesty. I understand that it is important to hold our armed forces to account, but this country has one of the most disciplined, effective and professional armies in the world, and we should be proud of it.

Unless we trust our troops and give them the leeway they need to make hard decisions in extraordinary circumstances, we will find it increasingly difficult to wage war at all. Troops on the battlefield will hesitate to act, for fear of years of harassment and potential prosecution. Potential recruits will see the reward for serving and seek careers elsewhere.

War is, and will always be, a messy and brutal business. Rules designed for civilian life are inadequate for its challenges, and we shall only end up crippling the armed forces if we make perfection the enemy of good in upholding the conduct of conflict. Cases against our forces should be considered and advanced by an uninterested party, not by lawyers looking to maximise profit.

5.15 pm

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I congratulate my good friend, the hon. and gallant Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), on securing the debate.

Just over 400 soldiers have contacted me. Most of them I have never met; some I knew from my service. I want to represent them in the short time I have, and I want two thoughts to be brought to the attention of the House. The first is that those soldiers feel they are being chased down by unscrupulous lawyers who do not give a damn about their wellbeing, some of whom seem to imply the soldiers are guilty before that is proven.

The soldiers feel extremely irritated that the Ministry of Defence seems to have set up an organisation to join with those lawyers to chase the soldiers down. I use the

word “seem” because the soldiers do not understand why that is happening. We can spend all the time we like explaining and saying, “It’s because we’ve got to investigate things. We’ve got to do it properly, otherwise you’ll go to the International Criminal Court,” but our men and women in uniform do not accept that, so this is a communication problem.

My second thought is this. I have given evidence with my soldiers in Northern Ireland on murder charges and in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Our soldiers, our men, our women, our sailors, our airmen and our airwomen loathe doing that. They are frightened by having to appear in court in front of slippery-tongued lawyers who have a much better gift of the gab than they do. They feel they will slip up, and that terrifies them. Often, their thought is, “I’d much prefer to be on the frontline, under fire, than in this poxy court where no one seems to be on my side.”

The problem we have is trying to tell our servicemen and servicewomen that this is actually for their own benefit. I had to tell two soldiers, after they had been in a firefight, that they were being charged with murder in Ireland. They did not believe it was possible. I explained that the reason was to take them to court to prove they had acted under the law, so that they could never be prosecuted again.

I speak, I admit, with some emotion on behalf of our men and women, and I tell you this: we should listen to them and communicate better.

5.18 pm

**Sir Gerald Howarth** (Aldershot) (Con): I congratulate my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) on bringing forward this important debate, and I also congratulate my hon. Friends who have taken part in it. The debate demonstrates the strength of feeling in the House that our armed forces are not being well served by the campaign of what is known as lawfare, rather than warfare.

Our armed forces go and fight and do their best in the most difficult of circumstances. A number of my hon. and gallant Friends have been out in theatre. I have been to Afghanistan six times, so I know what it is like. I fear that by putting our armed forces into harm’s way in this fashion, we are undermining their morale and thereby threatening the war-fighting capability of the next generation of those who will be called upon to serve their country. I believe we are doing them a disservice.

The Prime Minister is absolutely right to express his concern about this matter. The Government need to do more; we owe it to the 120,000 troops who have served in Iraq in Her Majesty’s armed forces. We cannot have a situation where men and women go out to fight in the most appalling of circumstances, dealing with an enemy that they sometimes cannot distinguish from the civilian population. They do their level best and then come back—many of them suffering injuries and some of them traumatised—and may have to wait years before finding out that they might face prosecution from their own fellow civilians. That cannot be right.

I have constituents in Aldershot, the home of the British Army, who served with distinction in Northern Ireland. They still, 43 years on from Londonderry in 1972, face the possibility of prosecution. That is not right. It is not in the interests of natural justice that our men and women who serve our country should be treated in that fashion.

5.20 pm

**Steven Paterson** (Stirling) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) securing today's debate. It is crucial that we not only support our service personnel but uphold human rights and have the UK show leadership in promoting international human rights.

Our armed forces carry out a vital role on our behalf, often in harsh and dangerous conditions. Their courage and professionalism are to their immense credit. As part of that professionalism, our armed forces should and must be able to justify their decisions and actions against clearly defined standards of conduct. When allegations are made that conduct has not met the high standards expected by both society and the armed forces, they must be taken seriously. When there is a case to answer, the case must be investigated fully and fairly.

Since the inception of the Iraq Historic Allegations Team, a number of issues have arisen that require consideration, as many speakers have touched on today. They include the scope of the investigations, the considerable volume of the case load, the amount of time that has passed in some of the incidents involved and concerns about the credibility and veracity of the allegations. Each of those issues presents challenges to IHAT and to us, who oversee it, in the dispensing of justice.

The latest figures that I have seen indicate that 1,514 allegations have been reported to IHAT, making up 1,329 cases. Of those, 43 have been closed and 57 dropped, with 280 UK veterans under investigation. It is only fitting and fair that we are concerned about the number of allegations and the speed of the investigations, and it is no surprise that many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), have raised that issue.

I understand that IHAT has about 150 staff, so in my view, it is reasonable to question the speed at which cases are being dealt with. Indeed, if I were a member of a committee scrutinising the issue, I would have serious questions for witnesses and would be pressing them on the apparently slow rate of progress and for a comparison with other legal jurisdictions.

I fully understand that we are talking about a unique situation in many respects, given the challenges in investigating allegations. However, the rate of progress is an issue. The hon. Member for Newbury raised the issue of trails going cold on some of the investigations. We need to address that and face the reality that in some—indeed, many—cases, it might not be possible to get the evidence we need to establish whether an allegation is true. That might simply mean that the case cannot proceed, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about that.

Turning to the credibility and motives of those bringing complaints, which many Members have raised, I have concerns that there may well be instances in which the current system is being abused, and that spurious allegations are being brought against military personnel and service veterans. The answer lies in ensuring that we have a system in place that allows the prompt dismissal of cases that are brought on flimsy evidence or are not evidence-based. In cases where evidence is found to have been falsified or deliberately distorted, I would want to see penalties imposed for what I consider to be

akin to the criminal charges of perverting the course of justice or, at the very least, wasting police time, or its equivalent in Scottish law.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) said, our legal system in this area must uphold the values of the European convention on human rights, as well as other international human rights treaties. We have to work with other nations to set an example of our values on human rights. Some Members have expressed the desire to derogate from the convention, but that is not the right way forward. The European convention on human rights was born out of the horrific events of world war two, which rightly made the international community think very carefully.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good point, but the problem with regard to derogation is that it was specifically intended by the authors to allow for operations outside the territory. The danger of the argument he is making is that the Scottish National party is turning soldiers from cannon fodder into courtroom fodder.

**Steven Paterson:** I will resist getting into party politics. This is a serious case and I do not think that the hon. Gentleman made his point very well there—[*Interruption.*]

**Albert Owen (in the Chair):** Order.

**Steven Paterson:** Time is now against me, but to address the hon. Gentleman's point, I hope that we all accept the need to uphold standards of human rights. That should be the case across the world, wherever we send our armed forces. Our armed forces have our support and gratitude for the difficult work that they do on our behalf in defending not only us but our values. That means that our armed forces must always live by and espouse the same values that they defend with such distinction.

5.25 pm

**Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) not only on securing the debate, but on his excellent contribution and the valuable perspective that he brought to the debate—I think it informed all of us.

This important issue raises emotions and concerns among all hon. Members. It is a matter of tremendous national pride that Britain's world-class armed forces are renowned across the globe for upholding the very highest military standards, so often while performing in the most dangerous of theatres, and are rightly acknowledged as being expected to conform to, and indeed as achieving, the very highest standards of ethical behaviour. None of us should forget for a moment the debt of gratitude that we owe to our servicemen and women, nor should we lack humility about what we in this House have expected of them under the most trying circumstances imaginable.

I turn to the purpose of establishing the Iraq Historic Allegations Team. Rather than begin a long drawn-out public inquiry, it was considered to be better for all parties concerned to deal with allegations on a case by case basis, managed by a dedicated team, to identify whether there were causes for concern and to manage the process in as timely a manner as possible. In November 2010,

IHAT was given full investigatory powers by the coalition Government to ensure that the resulting investigations would be in keeping with the UK's legal obligations under the European convention on human rights, and I share many of the concerns that hon. Members have raised today.

It is important to re-emphasise that although we all have tremendous respect for our armed forces and the work they do, and although we are all conscious of the danger of malicious inquiries and the effect that they would have on the morale and stress of those serving, nobody in this debate has been arguing that our soldiers are above the law. We have to ensure that when serious allegations are made, they are properly investigated. The UK is among the countries with the highest human rights standards in the world, and we should be proud of being held to those standards.

The work of IHAT, however, was initially due to be concluded in 2012. We are now in 2016, with the conclusion deferred at least until 2019. There is a genuine fear that IHAT is becoming exactly what it was designed to prevent: a drawn-out investigation that becomes a burden on valued members of the armed forces and the taxpayer alike. There is also a sense that the transparency and generosity of spirit evident in the setting up of the team is being abused by irresponsible law firms or malicious complainants.

Although it is right to ensure that allegations are properly investigated, we also have to prevent abuse of the public purse and ensure that our justice system is not being systematically abused. We are all aware of the recent allegations of ambulance chasing by certain law firms, and the Prime Minister rightly said today that certain firms clearly have questions to answer.

As we have heard, only this week 57 allegations of unlawful killing were dropped due to lack of evidence. That is 57 innocent soldiers who have had that hanging over their heads and have faced the prospect of prosecution for crimes of which they knew they were innocent. It is imperative that we do all we can to prevent that from happening again. However, using the alleged cases of ambulance chasing as an excuse to withdraw from the European convention on human rights seems to be the wrong approach. I am happy to look at the details of the Government's proposals and to support evidence-based measures that discourage claims without merit and make sure they are not funded through legal aid.

**Victoria Prentis:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Toby Perkins:** I do not have time.

I believe that measures such as re-examining the current eligibility criteria for legal aid, or the development of a residency test for civil legal aid, would be very welcome. I know that I, like other Members, would have trouble explaining to my constituents in Chesterfield why an individual who has never set foot on British soil should be able to claim legal aid to bring civil legal action against a member of our armed forces at the UK taxpayer's expense. Not only is the prospect of prosecution for an alleged historic crime traumatic for the serving soldier, but I am worried, as are other Members, that such a practice could act as a barrier to recruitment in future generations. For that reason, I am also interested to read the Government's proposals on a time limit for individuals or firms to submit cases to IHAT.

I ask the Minister the following questions. How can the Government guarantee that only individuals with a strong connection with the UK will have access to UK-funded legal aid? Will the Government consider applying a specific time limit or cut-off date relating to allegations of human rights abuse in Iraq? What more can the Minister tell us about the success the Government have had in prosecuting firms who make malicious complaints, as the Prime Minister referred to today? Can she tell us what steps will be taken to enforce that approach and what criteria will be used to decide that a complaint is without merit? What impact do the Government believe the process is having on morale, on the stress levels of people who served in Iraq and on recruitment and retention within the Army, both among those who served in Iraq and more generally? Do the Government think that a timetable of 2019 for concluding the work of IHAT is acceptable, and what steps are they taking to support and reassure servicemen and women who suddenly find themselves within the process?

I want to reiterate our admiration for those who served in Iraq and assure the Government of our intention to support any practical steps that they can take to rebuild confidence in this process.

5.30 pm

**The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt):**

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) for securing this debate. He is a doughty champion of our armed forces and a former member of their number. I also thank, in particular, my hon. Friends the Members for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) who have spoken today and have been a great help to me in the work I have undertaken since May last year.

I also thank all hon. Members who have spoken in support of our armed forces today. We send them into harm's way, dressed in body armour, to defend our freedom and national interest. It is not just their courage and capability that makes them the best; it is their values and the high standards we hold them to—values of self-discipline and self-sacrifice. Much of what they do in both war and peace is to uphold the rule of law, including international humanitarian law such as the well-known and well-understood Geneva conventions.

As a nation, we have chosen to invest in preserving and promoting those vital rules in armed conflict, ensuring they are reflected in all we do, and using our considerable reach to instil them in armed forces around the world. It is right that we meet the obligations on us to investigate credible allegations of human rights breaches, serious criminality and war crimes. How ironic then that those brave men and women, who do so much to protect and promote human rights and the laws that enshrine them, stand accused of wishing to exempt themselves from such obligations.

I will set out some of the shocking practices of those accusers, mainly two law firms, that concern us and what we are doing to meet our manifesto commitment. I will contrast that with the work of the Iraq Historic Allegations Team and provide an insight into its remit, its methods and some of the cases it has been dealing with which, if I do them justice, will reassure Members of the House and the armed forces.

I want to explain why protecting our armed forces from litigation motivated by malice and money is compatible

[Penny Mordaunt]

with upholding human rights and the pursuit of justice, and that human rights and justice depend upon it. It is not about holding our armed forces above the law, as Leigh Day has suggested, but rather that we wish to uphold the primacy of international humanitarian law that helps to keep our armed forces safe, gives them the freedom to act in accordance with those laws, and protects human rights.

The ability to take prisoners, for example, is a well-understood good, and not being able to do so would have very grave consequences for both sides of a conflict. Any action that undermines or deviates from such rules is detrimental to our operational ability and to the safety of our own armed forces. We should make no apology for investigating and holding our armed forces to account for such actions. It is in our national interest to do so, as well as in that of the people who serve in our armed forces.

The steady creep of extending the reach of European human rights legislation, which was not written for conflict situations, is eroding international humanitarian law. The behaviour of parasitic law firms churning out spurious claims against our armed forces on an industrial scale is the enemy of justice and humanity, not our armed forces or the Ministry of Defence.

**Tom Tugendhat:** When I was interviewing various witnesses for the “Clearing the Fog of Law” report, the former Member, Jack Straw, was very specific about the reason for not derogating in advance of the Iraq conflict, which was that it was never thought that the European convention had extraterritorial jurisdiction. What other Members have called for—I particularly highlight my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis)—is very reasonable in the light of that experience.

**Penny Mordaunt:** My hon. Friend is right, and he knows what he is talking about.

When the courts entertain claims against our armed forces of the likes of an insurgent bomb-maker suing us for not shooting him in a fire fight, but instead taking him prisoner and holding him until we could guarantee he would not face mistreatment in the local justice system, it is not just our armed forces who suffer the strain on them and the corrupting effect on their behaviour in the field; the cause of human rights suffers too. Today, when faced with the likes of Leigh Day and PIL, we need to wrap our service personnel in more than just body armour when we send them out to defend freedom.

Shortly the National Security Council will meet to decide on a number of options to address all the concerns that hon. Members have expressed this afternoon. Over the last eight months, extensive work has been going on in the MOD and the MOJ on these issues. Hon. Members have mentioned some of the options that may be brought forward, and there are others.

Specifically with regard to spurious litigation being brought against our service personnel and the conduct of legal firms, the Prime Minister has announced that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab), and I will chair a working group to tackle every aspect of that, including conditional fee arrangements, legal aid

rules and disciplinary sanctions against lawyers who are abusing the system or attempting to pervert the course of justice.

Against that backdrop, I understand that the work of IHAT has been tarred with the same brush. Hon. Members have spoken about why it was set up. It was to ensure that we have a domestic process as opposed to an international one. I want to give an insight into some of the cases, because they are illuminating.

In case No. 377, it was alleged that a passenger in a car was shot by an

“hysterical British soldier in a tank.”

That IHAT investigation ascertained that PIL had submitted the allegation in October 2014, despite Danish armed forces accepting liability for the incident and paying compensation in 2003.

In case No. 123, it was alleged that a 13-year-old girl had been killed when she picked up part of a UK cluster bomb that had failed to detonate. The IHAT investigation established that a 13-year-old boy had been killed, but was unable to ascertain whether Iraqi or UK munitions were responsible. PIL challenged the MOD’s decision not to refer it to the IFI—Iraq fatality investigations. The MOD defended the challenge on the basis of that information. Shortly before the hearing, PIL disclosed a witness statement by the boy’s father, made before the IHAT investigation, in which he said that the boy had been killed while in the vicinity of an Iraqi mobile missile launcher preparing to fire missiles into Kuwait that was destroyed by a coalition helicopter. There are many other cases that I could mention. It was concluded, after thorough investigation, that UK service personnel had acted in self-defence, in the defence of others, and lawfully.

IHAT enables us to meet our obligations to investigate serious wrongdoing, and its work is exonerating those wrongly accused and rejecting bogus allegations. I would add that the sniper case that my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury mentioned is not an IHAT case. Its investigators—a mix of service personnel, police officers and legal experts—are doing a public service, and I pay tribute to them. They feel their responsibilities keenly. Those investigators did not set up IHAT; we did. That was done not by anyone in this Chamber today, but by a previous Government, and for sound legal and policy reasons—there should be a domestic system of accountability, because without that there would be an international one. I hope that I have set the record straight on that. However, some questions remain for us, the politicians.

Does the existence of IHAT invite such claims? Were we not funding it, would fewer cases be brought? Why are so many cases brought and why are they so poorly researched, lengthening the investigation process? How can we speed that up? What support is given to our armed forces during the process? The work of IHAT is independent of the MOD, and we would not interfere with its investigations or work, but those are genuine questions to look at. It is right that we look at further ways of speeding up the process without compromising the quality of its output or its independence.

I can reassure hon. Members that we do all we can to support our armed forces through such investigations, and that support is also embedded in the practices of IHAT. It does give notice of investigations, and hon.

Members must flag it up if they have heard of instances in which that has not been the case. Support that the MOD routinely provides to service personnel includes the funding of legal costs and, where appropriate, the funding of judicial reviews, as well as pastoral support. We fund medical assessments and applications to excuse from giving evidence veterans and serving personnel who are not medically fit to do so. Indeed, some in the judiciary have criticised the MOD for providing the level of support that we do provide. Those obligations remain, whatever the theatre in which the actions took place, whether it is Iraq, Afghanistan, Northern Ireland or elsewhere, but we recognise the cost of all this to our servicemen and women and to the public purse.

The al-Sweady case, in which our armed forces were exonerated and which resulted in Leigh Day being referred to the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal, cost the MOD and the British taxpayer £31 million to stage—£31 million, I would argue, that would be better spent on equipment and support for our armed forces. The status quo is financially unsustainable and morally unjustifiable. To put this right falls to us in this place, and we must all be resolved to do so. This issue and the solutions that we will bring forward are complex, but the objective is simple: we must protect human rights and we must protect those who defend them—our armed forces.

**Albert Owen (in the Chair):** We have run out of time, but I will give the hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) one minute. I apologise for the time restraints.

5.40 pm

**Richard Benyon:** You are very generous, Mr Owen. I thank hon. Members for taking part in the debate and particularly the Minister, who has proved, as she always does, that she is a very good Minister indeed and has understood the feeling in this place and beyond it—that is what is really important. Can she pick up a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and really communicate to the cohort in our armed forces today that they will get our support throughout the process and ensure that they understand why this has been set up and that we are moving away from allowing this culture to continue?

I will finish by saying to the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) that this has nothing to do with Europe. I have similar views on Europe to my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis). I understand the history of the European Court, its place in our society and the convention on human rights. This is about trying to ensure that we have the best legal vehicle for dealing with these matters.

5.41 pm

*Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).*



# Written Statements

Wednesday 27 January 2016

## BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

### Register of People with Significant Control

**The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson):** My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Baroness Neville-Rolfe) has today made the following statement.

I laid before Parliament on Monday 25 January draft regulations that implement the public register of information about people with significant control (PSCs) over UK incorporated companies and limited liability partnerships (LLPs). These regulations are derived from powers under Part 21A of the Companies Act 2006.

These regulations form the detailed requirements of the register of people with significant control, which will come into force on the 6 April 2016 subject to consideration. The register is the cornerstone of the UK's response to the problem of corporate opacity. It ensures the UK meets international standards which tackle the misuse of companies. The reforms provide greater transparency over company ownership and control for enforcement agencies, business, and citizens. By making this information public, without charge, we are setting a standard for open government that we aim to persuade international partners to follow.

On Monday 25 January I also laid, in draft, statutory guidance on the meaning of significant influence or control in the context of companies, for the register of people with significant influence or control. This is required by paragraph 24 to Schedule 1A of the Companies Act 2006, and is subject to the approval of the House. The term "significant influence or control" is included in the fourth and fifth specified conditions for being a person with significant control. The statutory guidance is required to explain how that term should be interpreted.

I have also published, in draft, the statutory guidance on the meaning of significant influence or control in the context of limited liability partnerships. I intend to lay this document in draft before the House, once The Limited Liability Partnerships (Register of People with Significant Control) Regulations 2016 have been commenced, following the approval of the House.

This month I will also publish the general guidance for companies and limited liability partnerships on how to comply with the register of people with significant control requirements. This has been developed with the help of business, civil society and legal experts, and will enable companies, limited liability partnerships and individuals to familiarise themselves with the framework before it comes into force.

[HCWS494]

## TREASURY

### Securitisation Framework: Justice and Home Affairs

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin):** The Government have decided not to opt in to the justice and home affairs (JHA) provisions within the European Commission's proposal for laying down common rules on securitisation and creating a European framework for simple, and transparent and standardised securitisation.

Article 19(2) of the proposal requires that where member states have chosen to pursue a criminal sanctions regime for breaches of elements of the proposals, those member states must ensure that information can be shared between competent authorities across the EU. As the provision requires co-operation involving law enforcement bodies, the Government believe these are JHA obligations and therefore our JHA opt-in is triggered and we have informed Council of that fact.

The Government have decided not to opt in to these provisions as there are no significant benefits to be gained from doing so. The obligation to share information will fall on member states who have a relevant criminal sanctions regime, and UK competent authorities will be in a position to access this data irrespective of the decision to opt in. The Government have no intention to introduce a criminal sanctions regime in a way that would lead to this regulation imposing an obligation on the UK or on our competent authorities.

[HCWS496]

## FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

### Foreign Affairs Council and General Affairs Council

**The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington):** My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council and I attended the General Affairs Council on 18 January. The Foreign Affairs Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, and the General Affairs Council was chaired by the Dutch presidency. The meetings were held in Brussels.

#### *Foreign Affairs Council*

A provisional report of the meeting and conclusions adopted can be found at:

<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2016/01/18/>.

In her introductory remarks Ms Mogherini welcomed the progress that had been made on implementation of the Iranian nuclear deal and updated Ministers on the political situation in Venezuela. During the morning sessions, Ministers discussed Syria—including the London conference—and Iraq. The Jordanian Foreign Minister joined Ministers for lunch. The afternoon concluded with discussions on Ukraine and the middle east peace process.

#### *Syria and recent developments in the region*

Ms Mogherini updated Ministers on the political process in Syria, highlighting recent tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Foreign Secretary welcomed the Riyadh conference of the Syrian opposition, and underlined the need for confidence-building measures in parallel with the UN-led talks. All member states welcomed the political progress made in the final months of 2015 but cautioned that the process was fragile. Ministers also discussed preparations for the Syria conference taking place in London on 4 February.

The conference has three main objectives: to increase available funding to the most affected countries, to address the long-term economic needs of refugees in the region, and increase the protection of civilians. The Foreign Secretary underlined the need to do more for the vulnerable and displaced inside Syria and the millions of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries.

#### *Iraq*

Ministers exchanged views on Iraq following the adoption of conclusions at the December 2015 Foreign Affairs Council. Ms Mogherini focused on how the EU could support the domestic reform agenda and national reconciliation. The Foreign Secretary noted the recent military successes against Daesh in Sinjar and Ramadi, which had relieved some of the pressure on the Iraqi Government.

#### *Lunch with Jordanian Foreign Minister*

Over lunch, Ministers exchanged views with the Jordanian Foreign Minister, Mr Nasser Judeh, on foreign policy challenges in the region. They looked ahead to the London Syria conference. Ms Mogherini expressed support to Jordan in the fight against Daesh and counter radicalisation.

#### *Ukraine*

Ms. Mogherini opened the discussion by underlining progress made by the Government of Ukraine on their reform programme under very difficult circumstances. She stressed the need for the EU and member states to continue to support Ukraine. Ministers exchanged views on how this could best be achieved.

#### *Middle east peace process Council conclusions*

Following discussion, the Council approved conclusions on the middle east peace process. Ministers agreed without discussion a number of measures:

The Council adopted conclusions on Libya.

The Council adopted a regulation concerning restrictive measures in view of the situation in Libya.

The Council adopted the EU priorities for co-operation with the Council of Europe in 2016-2017.

The Council set a financial reference amount of EUR 14 850 000 to cover the expenditure related to the EU's CSDP mission in Mali (EUCAP) Sahel Mali between 15 January 2016 and 14 January 2017.

The Council adopted a decision supporting the biological and toxin weapons convention (BTWC).

The Council concluded that all the conditions have been met for EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia to implement on the High Seas UN Security Council Resolution 2240.

#### *General Affairs Council*

The General Affairs Council (GAC) on 18 January 2016 focused on the presidency work programme and preparation of the European Council on 18 and 19 February 2016.

A provisional report of the meeting and conclusions adopted can be found at:

<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2016/01/18/>.

#### *Presidency Work programme*

The Dutch presidency commenced on 1 January. The Dutch Foreign Minister, Bert Koenders, set out the presidency's programme and priorities for the current semester, and referred to his letter on improving the role of the GAC highlighting three priorities: open and inclusive dialogue at the multiannual financial framework high-level conference on 28 January; continued work on rule of law; and implementation of the inter-institutional agreement, transparency and better governance.

The Dutch programme is based on the presidency Trio programme, developed jointly with Slovakia and Malta, but focuses on four main themes: jobs and growth; labour mobility; the eurozone; and a union of freedom, justice and security.

I welcomed the presidency's priorities, particularly those based on supporting job creation and economic growth. I also highlighted the importance of continuity of Trio programmes and looked forward to working with Estonia and Bulgaria—the UK's Trio partners—and the current Trio to deliver real results on competitiveness, the internal market, investment, and entrenching the EU's position at the heart of global trade.

#### *Preparation of the February European Council*

The GAC prepared the agenda for the 18 and 19 February European Council, which the Prime Minister will attend. The draft February European Council agenda covers: the UK's EU renegotiation; migration, and economic issues.

On the UK's EU renegotiation, I reiterated the Prime Minister's message that what mattered more than the timing of a deal was getting the substance right.

On migration, I highlighted the UK's role in efforts to tackle the migration crisis through chairing the upcoming Syria conference in London; chairing the Khartoum process; supporting the action plans from the Valletta and Turkey summits; supporting the Turkey Refugee Fund; and providing technical assistance to EU agencies.

[HCWS495]

# Petitions

Wednesday 27 January 2016

## OBSERVATIONS

### HOME DEPARTMENT

#### Funding formula for Leicestershire Constabulary

*The petition of residents of Leicester East,*

Declares that current proposals to change Leicestershire's policing budget through the revision of the funding formula as well as other cuts could jeopardise the safety of thousands of residents; further that this will result in an unacceptable loss of £700,000 from the force's budget; and further that the proposals will lead to fewer officers keeping Leicester safe and give a green light to criminals.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to immediately review the proposed funding formula for Leicestershire Constabulary.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Keith Vaz, *Official Report*, 10 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 350.]

[P001553]

*Observations from the Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning):*

As I set out to the House of Commons on 9 November, the Government have listened to the views of policing partners and are delaying implementation of the new funding formula.

The Government have secured a good settlement for the police. Police spending will be protected in real terms over the Spending Review period, when the locally funded police precept element of council tax is taken into account. This is an increase of up to £900 million in cash terms by 2019-20.

Proposed allocations of central Government funding for individual police force areas are set out in the Provisional Police Grant Report, published on 17 December.

Overall, the public should be in no doubt that the police will have the resources they need to respond to new threats rapidly and effectively to help keep people safe.

#### Police Cuts in Merseyside

*The petition of Residents of Merseyside,*

Declares that Merseyside Police has already lost 1600 people since 2010; further that if cuts don't stop now, Merseyside Police will lose all PCSOs, the entire mounted section and 1000 more police officers and staff; further that additional cuts will affect the teams which fight serious and organised crime, investigate rape and sexual

violence and tackle hate crime; further that the cuts will also affect the Force's ability to provide neighbourhood policing, as it is depleted from a strength of more than 7300 officers in 2010 to fewer than 4500 officers in 2019; further that this situation could get even worse if the Chancellor decides to cut the police budget even further on November 25th; further that more cuts may put the safety of Merseyside residents at risk; and further that with crime already starting to rise, the petitioners believe that these damaging cuts should be stopped before they seriously weaken the Force's ability to keep residents safe.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to end the cuts to Merseyside Police.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 23 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 7p.]

[P001562]

*Observations from the Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning):*

The Government are committed to protecting the public. That has been true over the last five years and remains the case for the current Parliament.

The Government have secured a good settlement for the police in the Spending Review. Overall police spending will be protected in real terms over the Spending Review period, when local income is taken into account. This is an increase of up to £900 million in cash terms by 2019-20.

As set out in the written ministerial statement that accompanied the 2016-17 Provisional Police Grant Report, in 2016-17 no Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) will face a reduction in cash funding if precept income is maximised. On top of this, transformation funding will be available to develop specialist capabilities to tackle emerging crimes and to enable a major uplift in firearms capability and capacity.

This does not change our view, which is shared by police leaders, that further efficiencies can be delivered by forces. As HM Inspectorate of Constabulary has reinforced, there remain further efficiencies to be made from improved and better use of IT, from greater collaboration between forces and with other public services, and from improving workforce productivity.

Decisions on the size and composition of a police force's workforce are for individual Chief Constables and PCCs. What matters is how officers are deployed, not how many of them there are. All forces need to look at the way frontline services are delivered to ensure that the quality of service provided is maintained or improved.

We trust that PCCs and Chief Constables will do everything in their power to continue to drive efficiencies, safeguard the quality of policing and continue to reduce crime. Overall, the public should be in no doubt that the police will have the resources they need to respond to new threats rapidly and effectively to keep people safe.



# Ministerial Correction

*Wednesday 27 January 2016*

## **BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS**

### **Trade, Exports, Innovation and Productivity**

*The following is an extract from the closing speech by the Minister for Universities and Sciences in the Opposition day debate on Trade, Exports, Innovation and Productivity on 13 January.*

**Joseph Johnson:** The number of United Kingdom companies that are exporting is growing strongly—it has increased by 18% since 2010—and Scottish companies

are also exporting more. In 2011 there were 9,300 Scottish exporters; now there are 11,100. Our trade deficit is responding, and narrowed in the three months to November.

*[Official Report, 13 January 2016, Vol. 604, c. 959.]*

*Letter of correction from the Minister for Universities and Science.*

An error has been identified in the closing speech to the debate. The correct statistics should have been:

**Joseph Johnson:** The number of **companies in Great Britain** that are exporting is growing strongly—it has increased by 18% since 2010—and Scottish companies are also exporting more. In 2011 there were 9,300 Scottish exporters; now there are 11,100. Our trade deficit is responding, and narrowed in the three months to November.



# ORAL ANSWERS

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Wednesday 27 January 2016

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# MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Wednesday 27 January 2016

	<i>Col. No.</i>
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