

**Wednesday
10 February 2016**

**Volume 605
No. 115**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 10 February 2016

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: I hope the House will join me in welcoming to the Serjeant's Chair the new Serjeant at Arms on the occasion of his first Prime Minister's questions, which is an exceptional day—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]—and an exceptional response. Secondly, the House might wish to join me in warmly congratulating Kim Sears and Andy Murray on the birth of their baby daughter.

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

COMMITTEE OF SELECTION

Ordered,

That Heidi Alexander be discharged from the Committee of Selection and Jessica Morden be added.—(*Anne Milton, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

SPOILIATION ADVISORY PANEL

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of the Report from Sir Donnell Deeny, Chairman of the Spoliation Advisory Panel, dated 10 February 2016, in respect of a gothic relief in ivory now in the possession of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.—(*Stephen Barclay.*)

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: We do not take points of order now. Points of order come after questions and statements.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Single Market

1. **Neil Carmichael** (Stroud) (Con): What assessment he has made of the value to the economy in Scotland of UK membership of the single market. [903484]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Mr Speaker, I am sure that everyone, particularly in Scotland, will share your warm wishes to Andy Murray and Kim Sears on the birth of their daughter.

Latest official statistics published last month show that in 2014 around 42% of all Scottish international exports were destined for countries within the European Union. The value of these exports is estimated at around £11.6 billion.

Neil Carmichael: Does the Secretary of State agree that the package that the Prime Minister will discuss in greater detail with his colleagues on the European Council will bring about much needed reform and be a catalyst for further reform in the future, thus making it quite clear that the single market is good for the United Kingdom and, of course, good for Scotland?

David Mundell: In a reformed EU, we could have the best of both worlds—access to the single market while not being a member of the euro or Schengen. I believe that would be good for Scotland and good for the rest of the United Kingdom.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): The single European market and the ability to affect the legislation that governs it is hugely important to the Scottish economy, especially the exporting sectors such as whisky. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, regardless of the ongoing negotiations, he will personally campaign for Scotland and the UK to remain within the European Union?

David Mundell: The right hon. Gentleman will know and will, I am sure, be pleased to have heard that the leader of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party, Ruth Davidson, has expressed exactly that position.

Angus Robertson: The good news is that I get a second bite of the cherry, so perhaps at the end of this question the Secretary of State will answer my question about whether he will support Scotland and the UK remaining within the European Union. Making a positive case for remaining in the EU will be crucial in the weeks and months ahead, so will the Secretary of State give a commitment not to repeat the grinding negativity of project fear and condemn ridiculous scare stories such as those from the Prime Minister on immigration and the refugee camp in Calais?

David Mundell: I will make my position known when the negotiations have been concluded, but I make this offer to the right hon. Gentleman: if the reform package goes ahead and if I am campaigning to keep Scotland in the United Kingdom I would be delighted to join him, the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) and the First Minister on a platform to make that case.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Last night I had the pleasure of meeting the Scotch Whisky Association, which introduced me to some of the finer products from across the border. Simpsons Malt in my constituency produces an enormous amount of the malted barley sold across the border in Scotland to produce this whisky. Does my right hon. Friend agree that expansion into new markets that have nothing to do with the EU is the growth area for the whisky industry?

David Mundell: There are tremendous opportunities for development of the Scotch whisky industry. I think that the Scottish Government, the United Kingdom

Government and all parties in the House are united on that. When the President of China was in the United Kingdom recently, we had the opportunity to present his wife with a bottle of her favourite malt whisky from Scotland, and both he and his good lady were able to make clear how important the product is to developing markets in China.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What discussions has the Secretary of State had with Scottish businesses about the possibility of a UK exit from the European Union, and what concerns have those businesses expressed about the impact it would have on their ability to gain access to, and export to, the single market?

David Mundell: The clearest message that I receive from businesses in Scotland is that they want a short EU referendum campaign so that we can have the minimum amount of uncertainty.

Revised Fiscal Framework

2. **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Ministers of the Scottish Government on negotiation of a revised fiscal framework for Scotland. [903485]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I have regular discussions with the Deputy First Minister to discuss the fiscal framework. The Joint Exchequer Committee met on Monday, and negotiations are ongoing.

Nic Dakin: Yesterday the First Minister wrote to the Prime Minister listing the issues on which agreement still needed to be reached. They were the method for “block grant adjustment...set-up and administration costs, capital and revenue borrowing, fiscal oversight and dispute resolution.” Can the Secretary of State confirm that those are all the outstanding issues on which agreement still needs to be reached?

David Mundell: It was established at the start of the discussions that until everything was agreed, nothing was agreed, but considerable progress has been made on all those issues. I was very pleased to learn from the First Minister’s letter that the Finance Secretary would be presenting revised proposals from the Scottish Government. That is what a negotiation involves: it involves both parties presenting revised proposals as the negotiation progresses, and that is exactly what the UK Government are committed to doing.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): The starting point of the fiscal framework discussions is the Barnett formula, which means that Scotland’s public spending per capita is 15% higher than the United Kingdom average. Does the Secretary of State believe that that differential will be maintained in perpetuity?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend’s views on the Barnett formula are well known. I do not agree with them, and nor do the Government. The Government’s position is that the formula will remain, even in the post-fiscal framework environment.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The negotiations on the fiscal framework are in a very sensitive and fragile state, and we must be very careful about the language that is used. However, the Secretary of State has used language like “ludicrous” and “chancing his arm” when it comes to one party to the negotiations, which is profoundly unhelpful. If the Secretary of State and the Scotland Office have nothing to offer the negotiations, will the Secretary of State vow to stay right out of it, and leave those who want to find a solution to try to get those negotiations fixed?

David Mundell: I find it a little odd to take a lecture from that particular hon. Gentleman on moderate language.

I do not think anyone can doubt my commitment to ensuring that we have a negotiated fiscal framework, and I am delighted that, in her letter to the Prime Minister, the First Minister set out her strong commitment to achieving such an agreement, because that is the Prime Minister’s position. As I said at the weekend, both sides have done the dance; now let us do the deal.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we are to have the successful devolution that we all want, we need a firm and sensible framework for fiscal discipline that will last, and will stand the tests of all the unknown economic vicissitudes that may hit the country? Will he assure us that we will not repeat the mistakes that have been made in Spain, where devolved provinces frequently run up unsustainable debts which they then blame on Madrid, causing great difficulties to Spanish Governments who are seeking recovery?

David Mundell: As my right hon. and learned Friend will recognise, the settlement in Spain is entirely different. I agree with him about the need for a sustainable fiscal framework, but, as the Government have made clear in the negotiations, we are willing to accept a review of the arrangements in a few years to ensure that they stand up to scrutiny, and are seen to be fair to both Scotland and to the rest of the United Kingdom.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I join you in congratulating Andy Murray and Kim Sears on the birth of their baby daughter. However, their baby daughter might be winning Wimbledon by the time we get a deal on the fiscal framework. The UK and Scottish Governments have now been negotiating it for more than six months, which is longer than it took to negotiate the Scotland Bill itself, longer than it took to strike the historic international climate change agreement and longer than it took the G20 leaders to negotiate \$1.1 trillion of support for the global economy. It is clearly the indexation model that is contentious, so will the Secretary of State tell the House why he thinks the per capita index model is not appropriate for the indexation of the block grant?

David Mundell: I have made it clear in previous discussions that we are not going to have detailed negotiations on this matter on the Floor of the House. I have also said that I very much welcome the fact that the First Minister has indicated that the Scottish Government are going to bring forward a revised proposal, just as we have done through the negotiations. I believe that we are within touching distance of striking a deal and I remain optimistic that we will do so.

Ian Murray: The Secretary of State says that he will not provide a running commentary on the fiscal framework, yet both Governments are providing exactly that. The respected economist Anton Muscatelli has said of the fiscal framework:

“I do not understand why it should be such a huge stumbling block.”

The constitutional expert Jim Gallagher has said:

“This fiscal framework is an eminently solvable problem.”

The Prime Minister has spent recent months shuttling around Europe trying to strike a deal on EU reform. Is it not time that he got involved and showed the same enthusiasm for striking a fair deal for Scotland in our own Union as he has shown for the European Union?

David Mundell: The Prime Minister is committed to securing a deal. He has spoken to Nicola Sturgeon about this issue and they have had productive discussions. They are now involved in an exchange of letters, but they are both quite clear that they now want a deal. I am confident, given the position set out in the letter from the First Minister that the Scottish Government are actively engaging in that negotiation process, as are we, that we will be able to get that deal.

North Sea Oil and Gas

3. **Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): What discussions he has had with representatives of the North sea oil and gas industry on Government support for that sector. [903487]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): On 28 January, the Prime Minister and I held discussions with industry representatives in Aberdeen on further support for the North sea. As a member of the joint ministerial group on oil and gas, I also engage with key stakeholders, such as the Oil and Gas Authority, on a regular basis.

Alberto Costa: Calor Gas has its largest operational UK site in my constituency in South Leicestershire. A number of residents in the Scottish highlands and other rural areas rely on Calor Gas, which receives a large part of its Scottish gas supply from the North sea. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as a result of the support that the UK Government are able to provide, we are much better placed to absorb the fall in oil prices than would have been the case had Scotland been an independent country?

David Mundell: I acknowledge the importance of Calor Gas and all those who supply off-the-network energy to people living in rural Scotland. On my hon. Friend's wider question, he makes an important point about the ability of the United Kingdom as a whole to absorb the change in the oil price.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Chancellor about continued funding for seismic surveys on the UK continental shelf?

David Mundell: I am sure that the hon. Lady welcomed the Prime Minister's announcement when he was in Aberdeen of a £20 million contribution to a second round of new seismic surveys.

Sir Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton) (Con): The severity of the collapse in global oil prices carries with it the danger that a number of fields in the North sea will suspend production and perhaps never resume it. Given that this would represent a serious loss of national assets and national infrastructure, may I invite the Secretary of State to have further discussions with the Chancellor in advance of the Budget to try to ensure that these fields are not lost forever and that they remain an important part of our national economy?

David Mundell: It will not surprise my right hon. Friend to know that that issue was part of the discussion with the Prime Minister, Fergus Ewing from the Scottish Government and representatives of the oil and gas industry at the recent meeting in Aberdeen. The Prime Minister made it very clear that he would look at any specific request or proposal in relation to supporting the industry in the forthcoming Budget.

Welfare Programme

4. **Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effects of the Government's welfare programme on social and economic inequalities in Scotland. [903488]

9. **Mike Weir** (Angus) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effects of the Government's welfare programme on social and economic inequalities in Scotland. [903493]

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): On behalf of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, I meet the Secretary of State for Scotland on a regular basis to discuss the devolution of welfare programmes to the Scottish Government; at a meeting just yesterday we discussed the ever-improving labour market in Scotland. I also have regular meetings with my counterparts from the Scottish Government and we have a joint ministerial working group. I will be speaking tomorrow to the Scottish Ministers with responsibility for fair work, and for children and young people.

Anne McLaughlin: The Smith agreement devolved employability funding and services to Scotland, but then the autumn statement cut funding for it by an eye-watering 87%, so that the Scottish Government now have only £7 million with which to deliver those services. Notwithstanding the general acceptance that this was a politically motivated decision, what does the Minister have to say to my constituents, who live in one of the areas of highest deprivation in the whole of the United Kingdom and are, after all, the people this will have the largest impact on?

Priti Patel: I start by hoping that the hon. Lady will welcome the fact that in her constituency the claimant count has decreased by 49% since 2010. We have record levels of employment in Scotland. There will be greater devolution for the Scottish Government in welfare, and we would be particularly happy to have discussions with them on employment programmes. Many of those will look at how we take these programmes further to support those who are out of work in Scotland but desperately want to work.

Mike Weir: As a result of the changes from disability living allowance to the personal independence payment, thousands of Scots are losing their rights to Motability vehicles. That is particularly devastating in rural areas, where accessible public transport may be limited. Will the Minister end this iniquitous policy?

Priti Patel: As I have said, there will be new powers under the devolution deal, which will also include top-up payments; this is still very much based on welfare payments as well. It will be down to the Scottish Government in particular to get on and start making some of these decisions. They have got the powers coming to them so they will have to start deciding how they want to use them.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It was thanks to Labour peers that the Government's initial cack-handed and unfair cuts to tax credits were brought to an abrupt end, but we now know that the Government want to introduce new changes to income disregard which will leave 800,000 people on tax credits across the United Kingdom worse off come April. Can the Minister tell the House how many people in Scotland will be affected?

Priti Patel: I will say, as I have previously said when the House has discussed the issues of welfare reform and welfare changes, that we have the Bill going through the other place right now and the changes we are making are to bring fairness and stability to the welfare bill in this country. We know, and we have made it clear, that despite the figures that the hon. Gentleman and the Labour party leverage constantly, people will not be affected and the right kind of transitional support will be put in place.

Employment

5. **Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con):** What steps the Government plan to take to increase the level of employment in Scotland. [903489]

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): The employment rate in Scotland has never been higher, and it now stands at 74.9%. Our employment support offer will build on that, recognising the changing labour market environment, while delivering value for money to the taxpayer.

Maggie Throup: Erewash has many great examples of businesses whose commercial operations north of the border help to sustain jobs locally, including Rayden Engineering and West Transport. Does the Minister agree that Scotland not only supports jobs for its own population, but creates a great deal of employment across the rest of the United Kingdom?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that record levels of employment in Scotland have clearly benefited her constituency, as there is a crossover in employment opportunities between her constituency and Scotland. With our growing economy, and the strength of our economy, those levels will continue to grow and grow.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Under the SNP Scottish Government, Scotland's youth employment is at its highest level since 2005, and is 7% higher than that

in the rest of the UK. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that he will make representations to the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills to ensure that Scotland receives a fair share of funding from the apprenticeship levy?

Priti Patel: I did not fully hear the hon. Gentleman's question, but I will certainly take it away. I understand that the Department is already looking at that matter.

Mr Speaker: It is a very serious situation if Ministers cannot hear the questions. It is also a considerable discourtesy to the people of Scotland if, when we are discussing these important matters, questions and answers cannot be heard. Let us please try to have a bit of order.

West Coast Main Line

6. **Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab):** What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport and Ministers of the Scottish Government on the effect on communities in Scotland of the partial closure of the west coast main line. [903490]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I have had a number of discussions with the Department for Transport and others to ensure that the closure of the Lamington viaduct, which is in my own constituency, is addressed as quickly as possible. We remain absolutely committed to working together with all parties to reopen the west coast line in the first week of March.

Sue Hayman: I apologise for my lack of voice. The closure of the west coast main line has a huge impact not only on the economy of southern Scotland, but on Cumbria, too, as it is a strategic cross-border crossing on which many businesses in my constituency rely. I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State say that it will be open in the first week of March, as it is so important. Will he confirm that the entirety will be open by 1 March?

David Mundell: I welcome the hon. Lady's comments because, as she will be aware, my own constituents who use Lockerbie station are among those most affected by these changes. We are determined to get the west coast main line fully reopened in that first week in March.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Prime Minister claims that he will get a good deal for Britain in the European Union. Would the Secretary of State like to see the United Kingdom play the same role and have the same powers in the EU that he claims Scotland currently has in the UK?

Mr Speaker: That was quite tangentially related to the west coast main line, but I hope that the dexterity of the Secretary of State will admit of an answer.

David Mundell: Mr Speaker, the west coast main line is one of the most important routes within the United Kingdom to Europe via London. I have set out my position in relation to the EU referendum. If the SNP genuinely wants Scotland to remain in the EU, it is important that, rather than concentrate on process issues, it gets out and campaigns for it.

Devolution and Local Government

7. **Mr Graham Allen** (Nottingham North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Ministers of the Scottish Government on the effect of devolution on the powers and autonomy of Scottish local government; and if he will make a statement. [903491]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has had the opportunity to read my speech of 21 December, in which I set out that I fully support the devolution of power from Holyrood to local communities, as Lord Smith recommended in his commission agreement. This is the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament to implement, and I encourage them to do so.

Mr Allen: Will the Secretary of State condemn those who use devolution to centralise power in Holyrood—whether it is the centralisation of the police, the fire service, health spending, local government spending, courts, colleges and enterprise companies? Will he ensure that he stands together with those who feel that devolution does not stop at Holyrood, but goes down to the Scottish local authorities and to the Scottish people?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I can tell him the best way to achieve it, which is, under Ruth Davidson, to elect more Scottish Conservative MSPs to the Scottish Parliament.

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): In the interests of the record, can the Secretary of State confirm that, under the powers that are being devolved as part of the current Scotland Bill, the Scottish Government will be able to vary rates and bands of the Scottish rate of income tax—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting the hon. Gentleman. The Secretary of State and the Minister could not hear the question because of a rude eruption of noise. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can ask his question again, and perhaps Members will have the common courtesy to allow him to be heard by their own Ministers.

Philip Boswell: Thank you, Mr Speaker. We are getting used to interruptions. In the interests of the record, can the Secretary of State confirm that, under the powers that are being devolved as part of the Scotland Bill, the Scottish Government will be able to vary rates and bands of the Scottish rate of income tax, allowing the Scottish Government to make progressive choices on these additional powers, and that the half-baked Labour plan to raise Scottish income tax for everyone before these additional powers are transferred—

Mr Speaker: Order. Members need to learn the merits of the blue pencil. If they used the blue pencil and questions were shorter, they would benefit.

David Mundell: The Scottish Parliament will indeed take on those very significant tax powers, which it will be able to use as it sees fit. I hope it will use them to make Scotland a more attractive place for business and commerce and to grow the Scottish economy and the Scottish population.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, I call Fiona Bruce.

Economic Trends

8. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What discussions he has had with business organisations on economic trends in Scotland. [903492]

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has had a number of discussions with business organisations, including the Institute of Directors, the Scotch Whisky Association and Oil and Gas UK. It is because of this Government's commitment to our long-term economic plan and economic prosperity that we have seen such growth in the Scottish economy. Thank goodness that the good people of Scotland voted to stay within a United Kingdom and reject independence.

Fiona Bruce: Research by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers shows that Scottish shop workers could lose up to £1,300 annually as stores increasingly abandon their additional Sunday pay rates in the light of the proposed Sunday trading regulations. Will the Minister take up these concerns with the Business Secretary?

Anna Soubry: I did not hear all that my hon. Friend said, but I can tell her that we intend to devolve power down to local authorities, so that they make the decisions on what is in the best interests of people locally. That includes local people who may want to shop on a Sunday and the interests of businesses that may want to open more liberally on a Sunday to take full advantage. I think that is a good idea. I hope that my hon. Friend might consider supporting it.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [903569] **Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 10 February.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): I know the whole House has been deeply saddened by the death of Harry Harpham last week from cancer. After a distinguished career as a miner, an adviser to David Blunkett and a Sheffield councillor, he was returned to this place last May, succeeding David Blunkett himself. Although he was in this place only a short time, he quickly became a popular MP, recognised for his commitment to his constituents and his beliefs. It is a measure of the man that he continued to carry out his work as an MP throughout his treatment. We offer his wife Gill and his five children our profound condolences. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

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.

Mims Davies: First, may I associate myself, alongside colleagues, with the sentiments expressed at the sad loss of the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough? He came to this House with an excellent record in local government and will be greatly missed. I am sure the whole House sends our condolences to his family at this sad time.

Housing is the No. 1 issue in my constituency—a workable local plan that looks after our green spaces while offering that pure Conservative value, the right to buy. Does the Prime Minister agree that our Help to Buy ISAs, one of which is currently being taken out every 30 seconds, is the right way to promote savings and encourage home ownership?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. One of the most difficult things for young people is to get that deposit together for their first flat or their first house. That is where Help to Buy ISAs, where we match some of the money they put in, can make such a difference. Some 250,000 first-time buyers have opened a Help to Buy ISA, so under this Government we have seen 40,000 people exercise the right to buy their council house. Now we are extending that to all housing association tenants, and we have seen 130,000 people with Help to Buy getting their first flat or house. There is more to do—mostly, building houses—but helping people with their deposits is vital for our country.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister and the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) in paying tribute to Harry Harpham, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough, a former miner, who passed away last week. Just a short time ago, Harry used his last question here to ask the Prime Minister about Sheffield Forgemasters and the steel industry. I hope the Prime Minister will reflect on his diligence in representing that industry and his constituency.

Yesterday, I had a chance to have a very nice conversation with Harry's widow, Gill, and his family. I asked them to say how they would like to remember Harry. She gave me this message, which I will read out:

"We have admired the bravery and courage he showed in his life which was formed during the miners' strike, and carried him forward for the rest of his life".

I am sure the whole House and many in the much wider community will remember Harry as a decent, honourable man absolutely dedicated to his community and his constituents. We are very sad at his passing.

Also following the hon. Member for Eastleigh, I have a question on housing. I have an email from Rosie. She is in her 20s—[*Interruption.*] Unfortunately, the Rosie who has written to me does not have the same good housing that the Chief Whip of our party does, but aspiration springs eternal. The Rosie who has written to me is in her 20s, and she says:

"I work incredibly hard at my job, yet I am still living at home with my parents".

The lack of housing options is forcing her to consider moving—even leaving the country. She asks the Prime Minister what action he is going to take to help young people and families suffering from unrealistic house prices and uncapped rents to get somewhere safe and secure to live.

The Prime Minister: First, let me say to the right hon. Gentleman that when you get a letter from the Chief Whip, that normally spells trouble. What I would say to Rosie—the Rosie who wrote to him—is we want to do everything we can to help young people get on the housing ladder. That is why we have got these help-to-save ISAs, and I hope she is looking at that. We are cutting Rosie's taxes, so this year she will be able to earn

£11,000 before she starts paying any taxes. If Rosie is a tenant in a housing association home, she will be able to buy that home, because we are introducing and extending the right to buy. And, of course, she will have the opportunity to register for Help to Buy, which gives people the chance to have a smaller deposit on owning their own home. If Rosie is not earning that much money, but wants to be a homeowner, shared ownership can make a real difference. In some parts of the country, you will only need a deposit of some £1,000 or £2,000 to begin the process of becoming a homeowner. But I recognise, in this Parliament, building more houses, following those schemes, we have got to deliver for Rosie.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am very pleased that the Prime Minister wants to help deliver decent housing for Rosie. She lives and works in London, and as the Prime Minister knows, London is very, very expensive. He talks about people getting on the housing ladder, but the reality is that home ownership has fallen under his Government by 200,000—it actually rose by 1 million under the last Labour Government. His record is one, actually, of some years of failure on housing. He said that council homes sold under the right to buy would be replaced like for like. Can the Prime Minister tell us how that policy is panning out?

The Prime Minister: First, let me start with what happened under Labour with right-to-buy sales. What happened was one council home was built for every 170 council homes they sold. That is the record. We have said that we will make sure that two homes are built for every council home in London that is sold. That is because my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) insisted on that in an amendment to the housing Bill. Now, these take some years to build, but they will be built, or the money comes back to the Treasury.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister ought to be aware that just one home has been built for every eight that have been sold under his Government. People are increasingly finding it very difficult to find anywhere to live. The Chancellor's crude cuts in housing benefits for those in supported housing are putting at risk hundreds of thousands of elderly people, people with mental health conditions, war veterans, and women fleeing domestic violence who need support. Can the Prime Minister tell the House what estimate housing providers have made of the impact of this policy on supported housing?

The Prime Minister: First, we are going to increase housing supply in the social sector through an £8 billion housing budget during this Parliament that is going to build 400,000 affordable homes. When it comes to our reforms of housing benefit, yes, we have cut housing benefit because it was completely out of control when we came into government. There were families in London who were getting £100,000 of housing benefit per family. Think how many people—think how many Rosies—were going to work, working hard every day, just to provide that housing benefit for one family. We support supported housing schemes, and we will look very carefully to make sure they can work well in the future, but I make no apology for the fact that in this Parliament we are cutting social rents, so that the Rosies who are living in social houses and going out to work will have lower rents under this Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am pleased the Prime Minister finally got on to the question of supported housing. Housing providers estimate that nearly half of all supported housing schemes will close. One in four providers is set to close all their provision. This is a very serious crisis. I assume the Prime Minister is not content to see the elderly, people with mental health conditions and others with nowhere to live, so can he assure the House now that the warm words he has just given on supported housing will be matched by action, and that he will stop this cut, which will destroy the supported housing sector?

The Prime Minister: We will continue to support the supported housing sector. The report that the right hon. Gentleman quotes from was an opinion poll with an extremely leading question, if he actually looks at what he was looking at. The changes that we are making are reducing social rents by 1% every year for four years. That is good news for people who go out to work, who work hard and who would like to pay less rent. That goes with the lower taxes that they will be paying and the more childcare they will be getting. The other change that we are making, which does not actually come into force until 2018, is to make sure that we are not paying housing benefit to social tenants way above what we would pay to private sector tenants. The simple point is this, and this is where I think Labour has got to focus: every penny you spend on housing subsidy is money you cannot spend on building houses. So let us take this right back to Rosie, in the beginning. She wants a country where we build homes. She wants a country where you can buy a home. She wants a country with a strong economy, so you can afford to buy a home. All those things we are delivering, and you will not deliver them if you go on spending more and more money on subsidised housing and housing benefit. One day Labour has got to realise that welfare bills have to be brought under control.

Jeremy Corbyn: Shelter estimates that the measures in the housing Bill will lose 180,000 affordable homes over the next four years. The Prime Minister is actually overseeing a very damaging housing crisis. It is pricing out people from buying and it is not providing enough social housing. Therefore, many people are forced to rely on the private rented sector. Those on the Benches behind him recently voted against an amendment put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) for homes to be fit for human habitation. Labour invested £22 billion in government in bringing social homes up to the decent homes standard. There are now 11 million people in this country who are private renters. Does the Prime Minister know how many of those homes do not meet the decent homes standard?

The Prime Minister: In the last five years, we built more council houses than the previous Labour Government built in 13 years. Where was the right hon. Gentleman when that was going on? Thirteen years, and an absolutely hopeless record on housing. What we are doing is this: an £8 billion housing budget that will provide 400,000 new affordable homes, a target to build a million homes during this Parliament, getting housing benefit down so we can spend money on housing, and having a strong economy that can support the housing we need.

Jeremy Corbyn: I was asking the Prime Minister how many of the 11 million renters are living in homes that do not meet the decent homes standard and are, therefore, substandard. I will help him. One third of homes in the private rented sector do not meet the decent homes standard. Shelter has found that six out of 10 renters have to deal with issues such as damp, mould and leaking roofs and windows. It is simply not good enough.

Millions are struggling to get the home that they deserve. More families are slipping into temporary accommodation. The elderly are threatened with eviction. Homelessness is rising. Too few homes are being built. Social housing is under pressure. Families are being forced into low-standard, overpriced private rented accommodation. Young people are unable to move out of the family home and start their own lives. When is the Prime Minister going to realise there is a housing crisis in Britain? His Government need to address it now so that this dreadful situation does not continue.

The Prime Minister: Let me just take one of the figures that the right hon. Gentleman mentions. Homelessness today is less than half what it was at its peak under the last Labour Government. There is a simple point here. You can only invest in new houses, you can only restore existing houses, you can only build new houses and you can only support people into those houses if you have got a strong economy. We inherited mass unemployment, an economy that had completely collapsed and a banking crisis. Now we have got zero inflation, wages growing, unemployment at 5%, an economy growing and people able, for the first time, to look to their future and see that they can buy and own a house in our country.

Q2. [903570] **Robert Jenrick** (Newark) (Con): Nadia Murad, a Yazidi woman, was 19 years old when Daesh came to her village. They killed most of her family, they tortured her, they raped her and they made her their slave. Nadia's story is the same as those of thousands of Yazidi women, except that thousands of Yazidi women are still held in captivity and Nadia managed to escape. In fact, she is in the Public Gallery today. Will the Prime Minister join me in acknowledging Nadia's resilience and her bravery—the essential qualities that have allowed her to triumph over Daesh—and will he do everything in his power to redouble his efforts to support Yazidi women and to eradicate Daesh?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue in such a way. Let me welcome Nadia Murad, who is here with us today. She and the Yazidi community have suffered appallingly at the hands of this murderous, brutal, fascist organisation in Syria and in Iraq. We must do everything we can to defeat Daesh and its violent ideology. We are playing a leading role in this global coalition. In Iraq, where so many Yazidis have suffered, Daesh has lost over 40% of the territory that it once controlled. We are making progress, but, as I said at the time of the debate about Syria, this is going to take a long time. Building up Iraqi security forces, working with Syrian opposition forces, building the capacity of Governments in both countries to drive this evil organisation out of the middle east—however long it takes, we must stick at it.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): We on the SNP Benches join in the condolences expressed by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in relation to Harry Harpham, and we pass on our best wishes to his family at this sad and difficult time.

The Prime Minister made a vow, and his party signed an agreement, that there would be no detriment to Scotland with new devolution arrangements. Why is the UK Treasury proposing plans that may be detrimental to Scotland to the tune of £3 billion?

The Prime Minister: We accept the Smith principles of “no detriment”. There are two principles: first, no detriment to Scotland, quite rightly, at the time when the transfer is made in terms of Scotland having these new tax-raising powers; and then, no detriment to Scottish taxpayers, but also to the rest of the United Kingdom taxpayers, whom we have to bear in mind as we take into account this very important negotiation.

I have had good conversations with the First Minister, and negotiations are under way. I want us successfully to complete this very important piece of devolution in a fair and reasonable way, and these negotiations should continue. But let me remind the right hon. Gentleman that if we had had full fiscal devolution—with oil revenues having collapsed by 94%—the right hon. Gentleman and his party would be just weeks away from a financial calamity for Scotland.

Angus Robertson: In the context of the referendums, whether in Scotland or across the UK on EU membership, do not voters have a right to know that what is promised by the UK Government can be trusted and will be delivered in full? Will the Prime Minister tell the Treasury that time is running out on delivering a fair fiscal framework, and that it must agree a deal that is both fair to the people of Scotland and fair to the rest of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I can tell the right hon. Gentleman everything that has been committed to by this Government will be delivered. We committed to this huge act of devolution to Scotland, and we have delivered it—we committed to the Scotland Bill, and we are well on the way to delivering it—with all the things we said we would, including those vital Smith principles.

There is an ongoing negotiation to reach a fair settlement, and I would say to the Scottish First Minister and the Scottish Finance Minister that they have to recognise there must be fairness across the rest of the United Kingdom too. But with good will, I can tell you that no one is keener on agreement than me. I want the Scottish National party, here and in Holyrood, to have to start making decisions—which taxes are you going to raise, what are you going to do with benefits? I want to get rid of, frankly, this grievance agenda and let you get on with a governing agenda, and then we can see what you are made of.

Q3. [903571] **Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): The skills shortage in engineering in Wiltshire is a particular problem. It is threatening and undermining all the work we have done in job creation and also in supporting businesses. It is, quite simply, a ticking time bomb. May I ask the Prime Minister what more he can do to remove the stigma, misunderstanding and problems associated with STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—subjects and STEM careers?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this. There are special circumstances in Wiltshire, because it has the enormous success of Dyson, which is hiring engineers and skilled mathematicians and scientists from every university in the country, and long may that continue. What we will do is help by training 3 million apprentices in this Parliament, and we are giving special help to teachers of STEM subjects and encouraging them into teaching. I think there is a lot that business and industry can do to help us in this by going into schools and talking about what these modern engineering careers are all about—how much fulfilment people can get from these careers—to encourage people to change the culture when it comes to pursuing these careers.

Q4. [903572] **Mrs Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Young people afraid of losing their homes, women denied the pensions that they were expecting and, increasingly, the needy left exposed without the social care they need to live a decent life: when will the Prime Minister address these scandals?

The Prime Minister: What we are doing for pensioners is putting in place the triple lock so that every pensioner knows there can never be another shameful 75p increase in the pension that we saw under Labour. They know that, every year, it will increase either by wages, prices or 2.5%, and that is why the pension is so much higher than when I became Prime Minister. Of course we need to make sure there is a fair settlement for local government, too—we will be hearing more about that later today—but the ability of local councils to raise special council tax for social care will help an area where there is great pressure.

Q5. [903573] **Nigel Adams** (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): The Spitfire was a crucial element in our winning the battle of Britain 75 years ago and keeping our country free from tyranny. However, there are some who fear that our independent nuclear deterrent could be as obsolete as the Spitfire. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister assure the House and the country that that is not the case?

The Prime Minister: It takes quite a talent for a shadow Defence Secretary to insult Spitfire pilots and our brave submariners all in one go. Another week, another completely ludicrous Labour position on defence. The last word should go to the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon)—thank you Twitter for this one—who, as she came out of the parliamentary Labour party meeting, tweeted:

“Oh dear oh dear omg oh dear oh dear need to go rest in a darkened room”.

I expect that she will find the rest of her party there with her.

Q7. [903575] **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): At the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee today, the Business Secretary confirmed that the Government will not support the European Commission in raising tariffs on dumped steel from countries such as China. Why will the UK Government not stand up for UK steel?

The Prime Minister: We have repeatedly stood up for UK steel, including by supporting anti-dumping measures in the EU, but that is not enough. We need to get behind

public procurement for steel, and that is what we are doing. We need to get behind reducing energy bills for steel, and that is what we are doing. We need to support communities, like the hon. Gentleman's, that have seen job losses, and that is exactly what we are doing. We recognise what a vital part of Britain's industrial base the steel industry is, and that is why we are backing it.

Q6. [903574] **Victoria Atkins** (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Julian Assange is accused of rape and is on the run. Despite that, a United Nations panel that nobody has ever heard of declared last week that he has been "arbitrarily detained" and is somehow deserving of compensation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that was a nonsensical decision, that Mr Assange should hand himself over to the Swedish prosecutors and that if anyone is deserving of compensation, it is the British taxpayer, who has had to pay £12 million to police his Ecuadorian hideout?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It was a ridiculous decision. This is a man with an outstanding allegation of rape against him. He barricaded himself in the Ecuadorian embassy, yet claims that he was arbitrarily detained. The only person who detained him was himself. What he should do is come out of the embassy and face the arrest warrant against him. He is being asked to stand trial in Sweden—a country with a fair reputation for justice. He should bring to an end this whole sorry saga.

Q8. [903576] **Mike Weir** (Angus) (SNP): Women's aid groups, including my own in Angus, have raised the serious concern that changes in housing benefit may force the closure of many refuges. Will the Prime Minister undertake to specifically exclude refuges from the changes and to protect this vital service for vulnerable women and children?

The Prime Minister: As I said in my answers to the Leader of the Opposition, we want to support the supported housing projects that work in many of our constituencies. We have all seen how important they are. The changes to housing benefit that we are talking about will not come into place until 2018, so there is plenty of time to make sure that we support supported housing projects.

Q10. [903578] **Iain Stewart** (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Next month, Milton Keynes will host the first ever national apprenticeship fair. We have a strong record in expanding apprenticeships, but is there not still a need for a cultural shift in careers advice to show that high-level apprenticeships and university places are equally valid?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The careers advice that we need to give young people is that every school leaver has the choice of either a university place, because we have uncapped university places, or an apprenticeship, because we are funding 3 million of them in this Parliament. We need to go on to explain that if someone becomes an apprentice, that does not rule out doing a degree or degree-level qualification later on during their apprenticeship. The option of earning and learning is stronger in Britain today than it has ever been.

Q9. [903577] **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Does the Prime Minister agree that how we protect human rights in the legal systems of the United Kingdom deserves full and careful consideration? Will he give an assurance that his consultation on the repeal of the Human Rights Act will not conflict with the pre-election purdah periods in Scotland and the other devolved Administrations?

The Prime Minister: We will look very carefully at all those issues, but I say to the hon. and learned Lady and Opposition Members that the idea that there were no human rights in Britain before the Human Rights Act is ludicrous. This House has been a great bastion and defender of human rights, but we will look carefully at the timing of any announcement that we make.

Q15. [903583] **Stuart Andrew** (Pudsey) (Con): I have spent most of my working life in children's hospices, which rely heavily on donations from organisations such as Children in Need, which has a long and proud association with the town of Pudsey. Last week, Children in Need's most famous celebrity sadly passed away. Will my right hon. Friend join me and the people of Pudsey in paying tribute to Sir Terry Wogan, who did so much to inspire millions of pounds to be donated to these causes?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to do that. My hon. Friend, who represents a constituency—Pudsey—which has such a connection with Children in Need, is absolutely right to raise this. Terry Wogan was one of this country's great icons. Like many people in the House, I felt almost as if I had grown up with him, listening to him on the radio in the car, watching him present "Blankety Blank" or all the many other things he did. Perhaps many people's favourite was the "Eurovision Song Contest", to which he brought such great humour every year. You did not have to be a "TOG" to be an enormous fan. I think that we were all fans, and he will be hugely missed. His work with Children in Need was particularly special.

Q11. [903579] **John Nicolson** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On Monday, I attended the Work and Pensions tribunal appeal hearing for my constituent, Mrs Jackie Millan, a brave, inspiring woman who has dwarfism. Despite being unable to climb staircases except on all fours, she was awarded zero disability points by her assessor. Has the Prime Minister, as a constituency MP, attended any tribunal hearings? If so, did he find the process fair, dignified and compassionate?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to look into the specific case that the hon. Gentleman raises. As a constituency MP, of course I have people coming to my surgery with inquiries about either employment and support allowance or indeed, disability living allowance. I also have the experience, having had a disabled son, of filling out all the forms myself. I am looking forward to the new system, which I think, with a proper medical check, will work out better. I have listened to the arguments, but we have to have an adjudication system that is independent of politicians.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): When I was growing up, I always knew I was nearly home when I saw the iconic cooling towers of the Rugeley power

stations on the horizon. On Monday, the owners of the remaining power station announced its likely closure this summer. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change to meet me to discuss further the Government support that can be given to the 150 workers, and the provision that can be made to ensure that the site is redeveloped as quickly as possible?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly arrange for that meeting to take place. We should thank everyone who has worked at power stations that come to the end of their lives for the work that they have done to give us electricity to keep the lights on and our economy moving. My hon. Friend is right: as coal-fired power stations come to the end of their lives, we must ensure that proper redevelopment takes place so that we provide jobs for constituents like hers.

Q12. [903580] **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): The Football Supporters Federation is considering calling on fans to hold mass walk-outs to get their voices heard about ticket prices. Will the Prime Minister act to give fans a place at the table in club boardrooms so that their voices can be heard when issues such as ticket prices are discussed?

The Prime Minister: I will look very carefully at the hon. Gentleman's suggestion because there is a problem whereby some clubs put up prices very rapidly every year, even though so much of the money for football comes through sponsorship, equipment and other sources. I will look carefully at what he says.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The vital debate and vote on the Trident successor submarine should have been held in the last Parliament, but was blocked by the Liberal Democrats. Given the fun that the Prime Minister had a few moments ago at the Labour party's expense over Trident's successor, it must be tempting for him to put off the vote until Labour's conference in October. However, may I urge him to do the statesmanlike thing and hold that vote as soon as possible because everyone is ready for it and everyone is expecting it?

The Prime Minister: We should have the vote when we need to have the vote, and that is exactly what we will do. No one should be in any doubt that the Government are going to press ahead with all the decisions that are necessary to replace in full our Trident submarines. I think the Labour party should listen to Lord Hutton, who was Defence Secretary for many years. He says:

"If Labour wants to retain any credibility on defence whatsoever, it had better recognise the abject futility of what it's leadership is currently proposing".

I hope that when that vote comes, we will have support from right across the House of Commons.

Q13. [903581] **Mr Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): In the light of today's damning National Audit Office report on teacher shortages, will the Prime Minister take urgent steps to help excellent schools such as those in my constituency to recruit and—crucially—to retain the best teachers, including by extending the so-called inner-London weighting to all Harrow schools and other suburban schools in London?

The Prime Minister: Obviously we will look carefully at the report. There are 13,100 more teachers in our schools than when I became Prime Minister, and our teachers are better qualified than ever before—*[Interruption.]* People are shouting about increased pupil numbers, but they might be interested to know that we have 47,500 fewer pupils in overcrowded schools than in 2010, because we put the investment in where it was needed. Where I agree with the hon. Gentleman is that we need schemes such as Teach First and our national leadership programme, which are getting some of the best teachers into the schools where they are most needed.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister deserves great credit for the results of the Syria replenishment conference that was held under his co-sponsorship in London. He will be aware, however, that that can only address the symptoms, and not the causes, of the catastrophe that is Syria today. Will he tell the House what more he thinks the British Government can do to try to promote the political track and ensure that it reaches the most speedy possible success?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for what he says about the Syria conference, and that gives me the opportunity to thank my co-hosts, the Norwegians, the Germans, the Kuwaitis, and the United Nations Secretary-General. In one day we raised more money than has ever been raised at one of these conferences—more than \$10 billion—and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development who did a lot of the very hard work. That money helps because it will keep people in the region, feed and clothe them, and make sure that they get the medicine they need. But we do need a political solution and we will go on working with all our partners to deliver that. That requires all countries, including Russia, to recognise the need for a moderate Sunni opposition to be at the table to create a transitional authority in Syria. Without that, I fear that we will end up with a situation with Assad in one corner, and Daesh in the other corner—the worst possible outcome in terms of terrorism, and for refugees and the future of Syria.

Q14. [903582] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am sure that the Prime Minister is looking forward to visiting Hull next year, and as the UK city of culture, we are already backed by many prestigious organisations such as the BBC and the Royal Shakespeare Company. However, we could do much more to make this a real national celebration of culture. Will the Prime Minister join me in urging the many London-based national arts organisations to do their bit and contribute to the success of Hull 2017?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes an important point, which is that our national cultural institutions have an immense amount of work and prestige that they can bring out to regional galleries and centres when there is a city of culture event, or indeed more broadly, and I talk to them about that. I am looking forward to visiting Hull, and as it is the city of Wilberforce, I am sure my hon. Friends will want to join me. Hull

is a city of poets, including Andrew Marvell, and it was home to Philip Larkin for many years, and, of course, Stevie Smith—sometimes one might want to contemplate what it looks like “not waving but drowning.”

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before large numbers of hon. Members file out of the Chamber, I remind them that the election for the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee is now taking place in Committee Room 16. Voting will continue until 1.30 pm. Voting on a deferred Division is taking place in the No Lobby, and that will continue until 2 pm.

Points of Order

12.40 pm

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance on a matter that is of marginal interest at best to the outside world, but which would risk a number of jobs and further undermine the traditions and standards of this House. That is, of course, the matter of the change from vellum to paper for the recording of Acts of Parliament.

You will recall, Mr Speaker, that on 9 October last year you indicated to me, in answer to a point of order, that there would be a substantive vote in this House before any such matter occurred. In answer to a point of order from the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on 9 February 2016, you indicated that you had changed your view on the matter: it would no longer be necessary for a substantive vote in this House, and that, if she wished to register her opposition, an early-day motion would be a way of doing so. That, of course, would have no effect whatever on the other place. However, if I were to call a debate under the aegis of the Backbench Business Committee, with a substantive motion which required that this retrograde decision should be reversed, can you advise me what effect that would have, both on our decision in this place and whether the other place would have any reason to listen to that decision?

Mr Speaker: Let me say the following to the hon. Gentleman, to whom I am grateful for his point of order. First, I have not actually changed my view on the desirability of a vote in this Chamber on the matter. The hon. Gentleman is quite right in saying, as I readily acknowledged yesterday when a point of order was raised, that I had expected a vote would take place on that matter in this House. However, the matter does fall within the aegis—and, it appears, in terms of decision-making competence, the exclusive aegis—of the other place. For that reason, and on account of their desire to proceed, there is no entitlement for this House to supersede the will of the other place.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman quite correctly judges that it would be open to him and to other Members to seek a Backbench Business Committee debate on this matter. I wish the hon. Gentleman all success, presumably in a cross-party effort, to secure such a debate. It is not for me to seek to comment on how the other place judges matters. I would not have sought to do so anyway and I have been reminded by sound professional advice that it is not for me to do so. I therefore do not think I should get into the business of speculating as to what might happen. I have known the hon. Gentleman for well over 20 years and he is, at his best, a formidable and energetic campaigner. If he feels strongly, my advice to him, together with the hon. Lady from the Labour Benches who raised the matter yesterday, is to go ahead and seek a debate, marshal his forces and to plan for victory, rather than to spend time sitting around predicting it. Perhaps we can leave it there.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): You can do it when you get to the other place.

Mr Speaker: I think it would be tactful to ignore the undoubtedly purposeful interjection, from a sedentary position, by the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner), but I heard what he said.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to raise a query about how we select ministerial questions in the post-English votes for English laws situation. Earlier today, we had Scottish questions. Some 45 Scottish Members submitted a question; three were chosen, which makes a success rate of 6%. Some 48 non-Scottish Members submitted a question; 12 were chosen, which makes a success rate of 25%. I appreciate that the randomness of the selection process can create these situations, but it is a matter of concern that Scottish Members had only a one-in-four chance of questioning the Scottish Secretary, as compared with other Members of the House. I ask you ever so gently, as part of the review into EVEL, to consider whether it might be appropriate, for those Departments with a specific territorial responsibility, to put in place some mechanism to allow the Members representing those areas a better chance of holding Ministers to account.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The short answer to the thrust of his question is that the selection is done by electronic ballot. It is done that way for questions to the Secretary of State for Scotland and for every other Question Time. I am happy to consider his request for consideration of an alternative method, but I hope he will bear in mind the likelihood that there will exist opinions other than and different from his own.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your help. Yesterday, in response to a written question, the Immigration Minister had to correct an inaccurate answer previously given to the question of how many young adults who had previously been refugees but unaccompanied minors had been forcibly removed from this country. The original answer was 1,600; the corrected answer was 3,750. Will you open an investigation into how that might have happened and press for information about the cost to the UK Exchequer, in forgone revenue, of deporting 3,750 young people in whom we had invested over many years and who were just at the prime of their lives and about to be able to contribute to our country?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The short answer is that he can seek a debate on the matter, he can table written parliamentary questions pursuant to the information he has already extracted, and he can raise the matter, with all the authority of his leadership office, on the Floor of the House at business questions tomorrow. I keenly expect to see him in his place and leaping to his feet with alacrity tomorrow morning.

BILLS PRESENTED

NORTHERN IRELAND (STORMONT AGREEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Theresa Villiers, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Philip Hammond, the Attorney General, Greg Hands and Mr Ben Wallace, presented a Bill to make provision about the Independent Reporting Commission, extend the period for the appointment of Northern Ireland Ministers, modify the pledge made by Northern Ireland

Ministers on taking office, provide for persons becoming Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly to give an undertaking, and make provision about the draft budget of the Northern Ireland Executive, in pursuance of the agreement made on 17 November 2015 called A Fresh Start: The Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 133) with explanatory notes (Bill 133-EN).

POLICING AND CRIME BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Theresa May, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Michael Gove, Secretary Jeremy Hunt, Secretary Greg Clark, the Attorney General and Mike Penning, presented a Bill to make provision for collaboration between the emergency services; to make provision about the handling of police complaints and other matters relating to police conduct and to make further provision about the Independent Police Complaints Commission; to make provision for super-complaints about policing; to make provision for the investigation of concerns about policing raised by whistle-blowers; to make provision about police discipline; to make provision about police inspection; to make provision about the powers of police civilian staff and police volunteers; to remove the powers of the police to appoint traffic wardens; to enable provision to be made to alter police ranks; to make provision about the Police Federation; to make provision in connection with the replacement of the Association of Chief Police Officers with the National Police Chiefs' Council; to make provision about the system for bail after arrest but before charge; to make provision to enable greater use of modern technology at police stations; to make other amendments to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984; to amend the powers of the police under the Mental Health Act 1983; to extend the powers of the police in relation to maritime enforcement; to make provision about deputy police and crime commissioners; to make provision to enable changes to the names of police areas; to make provision about the regulation of firearms; to make provision about the licensing of alcohol; to make provision about the implementation and enforcement of financial sanctions; to amend the Police Act 1996 to make further provision about police collaboration; to make provision about the powers of the National Crime Agency; to make provision for requiring arrested persons to provide details of nationality; to make provision for requiring defendants in criminal proceedings to provide details of nationality and other information; to make provision to combat the sexual exploitation of children; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 134) with explanatory notes (Bill 134-EN).

Wild Animals in Circuses (Prohibition)

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

12.48 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit the use of wild animals in circuses.

We have heard mention of Andy Murray's new baby. In the last few days, we have had a new delivery ourselves, and it would be remiss of me not to apologise to my wife for taking a pause in our paternity arrangements to present the Bill.

Mr Speaker: Congratulations.

Will Quince: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I am grateful for the opportunity to bring in the Bill, and I would like to pay tribute to those Members, particularly the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), who worked hard on this matter in the last Parliament and pressed for a prohibition on the use of wild animals in circuses.

The Conservative manifesto, on which I was proud to stand at the 2015 general election, clearly stated:

"We will ban wild animals in circuses".

It is a commitment mirrored on all sides of the House. The Labour party manifesto committed to "ban wild animals in circuses".

The Democratic Unionist party's policy is now to support a ban on wild animals in circuses. The SNP's Westminster manifesto promised to consult on the issue of wild animals in travelling circuses, with many SNP MPs and MSPs now calling for a complete ban. This is one of those rare moments where there appears to be a degree of consensus among all parties.

In 2011, the House agreed a Backbench Business motion calling on the then Government to ban all wild animals in circuses. I believe that many Members consider this to be a piece of unfinished business from the last Parliament, and I appreciate the chance to promote this Bill to press for that vital reform.

Ahead of a ban being introduced, the coalition Government introduced, as an interim welfare measure, legislation to license those circuses that use wild animals. I believe it is time to introduce a ban to supersede those regulations.

According to the latest responses to written parliamentary questions, last year there were still 18 wild animals being used by travelling circuses in England. That is a small number of animals, but it is a practice that I, the majority of MPs and the vast majority of the public think should be brought to an end.

Why are wild animals in circuses no longer appropriate? First, there is the practical element. In the past two centuries, wild animals were an essential part of the circus experience. The definition of a wild animal is a member of a species that is not normally domesticated in Great Britain. For many people, particularly those who could not afford foreign holidays, circuses were the only opportunity they had to see wild and exotic animals. That is no longer the case. We are very fortunate in this country to have many world-class zoos, such as Colchester zoo, which has elephants, tigers, penguins, lions, bears and chimpanzees, among other animals. I should probably

[Will Quince]

declare an interest, because I am a gold card member of the zoo and go there with my daughter on many occasions throughout the year. The zoo does fantastic work caring for the animals and providing them with different types of enrichment in order to occupy their time and promote natural behaviours. Crucially, it aims to ensure that the conditions in which wild animals are kept are as close as possible to their natural habitats, thus educating people about a species' natural environment as well as better enabling them to promote important issues such as conservation.

Moreover, thanks to the huge growth in the opportunity for foreign travel, many more people can travel across the world to see these animals in their natural habitats. The extraordinary wildlife documentaries on television now mean that we can see these wild animals in high definition from the comfort of our homes, should we so wish.

The second objection is to do with our basic respect for wild animals. Wild animals that have been used and kept in travelling circuses have the same genetic make-up as their counterparts in zoos or in the wild. Their instinctive behaviours remain. Using such animals to perform tricks and stunts hardly encourages people to respect the animals' innate wild nature and value. Neither is there any educational, conservational nor research benefit from using the animals solely or primarily for such entertainment and spectacle.

I understand that, in many cases, circus keepers do the best they can to care for the wild animals in question, and those circuses licensed under the interim licensing scheme of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs must adhere to welfare standards. However, the very nature of the circus business model means that attempting to recreate the natural habitat of a wild species or to aid in its conservation can never be achieved.

Respected animal health and welfare groups, such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the British Veterinary Association, have long supported and campaigned for a complete ban on the use of wild animals in circuses. Their views are based on the strongly held belief that travelling circuses cannot meet the welfare needs of wild animals. I have some sympathy with those views.

The 2007 Radford report concluded that there appeared to be

“little evidence to demonstrate that the welfare of animals kept in travelling circuses is any better or worse than that of animals kept in other captive environments”.

It is, therefore, clear that there are very strong views on both sides, but when seeking to introduce a ban it is vital to take an evidence-based approach and to recognise the grounds on which it would be sensible to introduce that prohibition.

First and foremost, I want to get this ban through and carry the support of Members on both sides of the House. I am aware that there are some, including in this House, who argue that these animals were born and bred in circuses and that it would be cruel to drag them away from the keepers and environments they know well. I understand that argument, but I am afraid that I respectfully disagree with it. We cannot make the perfect the enemy of the good. Opposing a ban on the basis that wild animals already in circuses might be disrupted

from their regular patterns of life would prevent a ban from being implemented in perpetuity, which is not acceptable.

Of course, it is vital that there is provision to ensure that those wild animals in circuses in England are well cared for in retirement. DEFRA's circus licensing scheme already requires that all licensed animals must have retirement plans in place. It is also important that we give those circuses affected appropriate time to prepare and adapt to any ban. However, like so many throughout the House, I really believe that this is a reform whose time has come and that we should follow countries such as Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands in prohibiting the use of wild animals in circuses.

Wild animals were once an integral part of the circus experience. That is no longer the case. The use of wild animals in travelling circuses can no longer be justified. The majority of MPs want a ban. The public supports a ban. I urge colleagues to support the Bill.

12.56 pm

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I had not intended to speak, but, having heard what my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) has said, I think it is important to put on the record that, if his proposal is indeed supported by the Government, it is they, rather than a private Member through a Bill, who should legislate on it. The reason I say that is that this is a controversial issue—[*Interruption.*] My hon. Friend conceded that it is a controversial issue. It is not surprising that, as a Conservative, I should regard it as controversial that this House should be considering a total prohibition on what is currently a perfectly lawful activity. If we are going to legislate, let the Government introduce a Bill of their own and let us have a proper debate about the detail.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Chope: I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester will listen to this response. He spoke of tricks being done by wild animals in circuses. If we look at a similar Bill promoted in the previous Parliament, we will see that it sought to impose a ban even on displaying wild animals.

The definition of a wild animal is also an issue. For example, does my hon. Friend think that a camel, which in most countries of the world is regarded as a domestic animal, should be banned from being able to participate in a circus?

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just explain that in these circumstances we do not take interventions? That does not happen. Mr Chope's remarks must be heard.

Mr Chope: Thank you, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester did not refer to the outcome of the licensing regime, which has, perfectly rightly, been brought into effect. The regime requires up to seven inspections a year of animals in travelling circuses. My hon. Friend will correct me if I am wrong, but I think that zoos, including Colchester zoo, are inspected only once a year. We are now about to embark on the fourth year of that licensing regime and nobody has criticised the welfare of the animals subject

to it. On the basis that good Conservatives should argue for as little regulation and prohibition as is possible and reasonable, I think we have reached a compromise whereby we have a proper and tight welfare licensing regime without the need for a total ban or prohibition. That is why I say to my hon. Friend that it would be wrong of him to raise people's expectations—I accept that many support the views he has expressed today—by suggesting that this legislation could be passed under the Private Member's Bill procedure. I hope that his response will be that the Government should bring forward legislation, if indeed the Government have the will to implement this particular aspect of our manifesto.

It would be out of order, Mr Speaker, for me to talk about other aspects of the Conservative manifesto that have not yet been implemented and might not even be implemented at all. The onus for putting this matter right, if it needs to be put right, must be on the Government. This will be controversial and technical legislation, which is why I do not think it appropriate to be dealt with under the Private Member's Bill procedure.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23) and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Will Quince, Jim Dowd, Sir Roger Gale, Bob Blackman, Mark Pritchard, Mr Philip Hollobone, Nusrat Ghani, Mr Virendra Sharma, Simon Hoare and Louise Haigh present the Bill.

Will Quince accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 March, and to be printed (Bill 135).

Police Grant Report (England and Wales)

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that this motion is subject to double majority voting. If a Division is called on this motion, all Members of the House are able to vote. Under Standing Order No. 83R, the motion will be agreed only if, of those voting, both a majority of all Members and a majority of Members representing constituencies in England and Wales vote in support of the motion. At the end, the Tellers will report the results—first for all Members and secondly for those representing constituencies in England and Wales.

1.2 pm

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): I beg to move,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) for 2016–17 (HC 753), which was laid before this House on 4 February, be approved.

I crave your indulgence, Mr Speaker, because I noticed that the new Serjeant at Arms was in his place earlier and I was hoping that he would still be there now, although I mean no disrespect to his deputy. I know the new Serjeant at Arms well. He comes from a great regiment, and we will miss him at the Ministry of Justice where he looked after our security. I am sure he will do a fantastic job here.

I was enormously proud when I was appointed the Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice. Early on, I encountered a great deal of lobbying about the grant from colleagues here, as well from police constables and police and crime commissioners around the country. The lobbying was about whether the grant was fair, whether it should be changed and whether police forces would be able to survive further cuts. We inherited a really difficult economic situation and the Treasury quite rightly asked the Home Office to investigate whether further cuts could be made. A very good job was done in the last Parliament of taking really difficult financial decisions to address the funding issues we inherited. What was really good was that in most cases—I say in most cases—discussions were sensible and pragmatic, and we can see from the fact that crime has fallen since 2010 and has continued to fall under this Government, that it is possible to do more with less.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): If the Minister and his ministerial colleagues decide to extend the term of the Metropolitan Police Chief Constable, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, will they make it a condition that Sir Bernard is not allowed to merge Harrow police with any other borough command? If that were to happen, Harrow police would inevitably be diverted to police other parts of London.

Mike Penning: Unlike the previous Labour Administration, we believe in police officers making the decisions they need to make for their communities, and we do not believe in a top-down approach. We have devolved operational policing to make sure that chief constables and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner can make operational decisions and other decisions such as how local community funding is run, whether that is through the Mayor's office or through PCCs. I know that the Labour party opposed PCCs extensively, but it has sensibly changed its mind, not least on account of much lobbying from Labour PCCs. I shall

[Mike Penning]

not in any way instruct the Metropolitan Police Commissioner on how he should police in London and the Mayor will not instruct him on operational issues; those are matters for him.

What I will say is that there will be more money for policing in London than there would have been if a Labour Minister were standing at this Dispatch Box. Labour wanted to cut 10% of its funding budget—and perhaps I will come back to that later.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): As the Minister knows, I have opposed cuts to the policing budget every year but he has always had a good argument to put back to me by saying that crime is going down, thereby justifying the Government's position. My local paper, the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* pointed out last week that crime had gone up by 15% across the Bradford district over the course of the last year. If falling crime was a justification for a falling police grant, now that we face significant rising crime in the Bradford district, including in my constituency, does that mean by the same logic that we will get a substantial increase in the police grant?

Mike Penning: My hon. Friend is nothing less than determined to press his case every time, but crime has fallen, although some types of crime have increased. Reported crime, particularly sexual assaults and domestic violence, can be seen to have gone up. I am very pleased that people have the confidence to come forward now when they might not have done so in the past.

We need to look carefully at where certain types of crime are increasing. Only the other day, I met car manufacturers and asked them why we have seen such an increase in car thefts, particularly of high-value vehicles, when we had previously seen a decrease for some considerable time. We are seeing some increases in crime that were not previously included in the statistics—on fraud, for example. Under the previous Labour Administration, fraud was not reported, but it is now part of the statistics we use because it is, sadly, a crime that we face today.

It is interesting to reflect on what happened after the Chancellor announced from this Dispatch Box that we would not cut the police budget by 25%, or by 10% as the shadow Home Secretary suggested, or even in a way that some forces had said could be managed. We said that we would not cut it at all between now and 2020 in order to give the police the confidence they needed about the funding that would be available. What is particularly interesting is that the Metropolitan Police Commissioner and other chief constables did not suddenly say, "Okay then, we are not going to carry out any more reforms; we are not going ahead with them now that we have the money we need". Rather, they said that very night that they needed to go ahead with many of the reforms that were designed to make our police forces better at detecting and convicting criminals.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister must accept that there are 18,000 fewer police officers than when I stood at that Dispatch Box on the last day of the Labour Government six years ago. He must accept that there have been cuts in real-terms grants and he should explain honestly to us why local authorities and police

and crime commissioners such as mine in north Wales are raising the precept to compensate for the cut in the central Government grant.

Mike Penning: Let me make a couple of points about that. The right hon. Gentleman, with his experience in the Home Office, was absolutely right when he said that there used to be more warranted police officers than there are today. However, actually in percentage terms there are more warranted police officers on the streets of this country today doing the work we need them to do than when he was the Minister.

It worries me that more than 10% of some forces' warranted officers are still not out on the streets doing the job that we would expect them to do. That is one of the reforms with which we must persevere. We must ensure that officers with the skills and the equipment that they need are out on the streets.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Penning: Not for the moment. I will give way to the shadow Home Secretary when I have given way to colleagues who have already tried to intervene.

As for the point raised by the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson), he should have asked those on his own Front Bench why they had said publicly, "Let us cut the police grant by another 10%"—something that we have not done.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. I feel almost as though I have been promoted, given that he has allowed me to intervene ahead of the shadow Home Secretary.

My right hon. Friend has referred to the response of police and crime commissioners to increases in police budgets. In Lancashire, our directly funded police grant is going up. The police and crime commissioner and chief constable had previously presented doomsday scenarios, saying that the Lancashire constabulary was no longer fit for purpose. Given that the Government have listened to not only Members of Parliament but to the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable, is my right hon. Friend as surprised as I am that they have not come out and welcomed the increased budget?

Mike Penning: I met a delegation of Lancashire Members from all parts of the House, and indeed I met everyone who had asked to see me, including the police and crime commissioners and the chief constables. What really shocks me now is that not only has the Lancashire police and crime commissioner failed to welcome the budget, but he has been out there whingeing that he will be short of money again. What I would say to him is that he needs to take a very close look at his reserves. He has been moaning about a sum of £1 million, but if he looks at his reserves, he will find that it is minuscule compared with them.

Andy Burnham: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Penning: Before I give way to the shadow Home Secretary, let me make a point about precepts. All Governments look at precepts. Some PCCs have said that they will not increase theirs, some are increasing theirs by the 2% limit, and others will take the £5 option. That is the arrangement to which we agreed. However, I was lobbied extensively by PCCs throughout the country

who wanted the precept to go up by much, much more than 2%. Now I will give way to the shadow Home Secretary.

Andy Burnham: I am grateful to the Minister, but let us get something straight. When I became shadow Home Secretary, he and his Government colleagues were proposing to cut police funding by between 25% and 40%. It was pressure from Labour Members, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) in a full Opposition day debate, that forced them into a humiliating U-turn. Let us just get our facts right.

Anyway, is this promise what it seems to be? The Minister seems to be suggesting that there will be no cuts, but can he guarantee that there will be no real-terms cut for any police force in the next few years?

Mike Penning: I am so pleased that I gave way to the right hon. Gentleman. I should have given way earlier—I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry).

I find this absolutely fascinating. Any other Opposition would have considered modelling to establish what a force could or could not do, which is exactly what the Government did. We asked the forces whether or not they could absorb—in modelling terms—cuts of 25% or 40%. What we did not do, after that modelling process, was say, completely arbitrarily, “Well, we will make it 10%, then. You will be able to swallow 10% between now and 2020.” Some forces would have really struggled to do that under the present funding formula.

Andy Burnham: Answer the question.

Mike Penning: I am always straight. The right hon. Gentleman can sit there and waffle away from a sedentary position, but actually the 10% was waffle as well. There was no fact behind it, and most of the forces came out against it. Given the precept limits, none of the 43 forces was subjected to a real-terms cash cut.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): The Minister should be commended for being the first Policing Minister in a generation to tackle the issue of police funding by initiating a review of the funding formula, but, as the House knows, that review ended with a long pause. On 1 February, I wrote to the Minister asking when the consultation would begin. The Home Affairs Committee is keen for it to begin as soon as possible. Is he now in a position to answer my question?

Mike Penning: I thank the Chairman of the Committee for his letter, and also for the kind comments that he often makes about me when I am at the Dispatch Box and when I appear before his Committee. I wrote to him yesterday; I am sorry if he has not received my letter. I have not given a definitive date, and I do not think that he would expect me to do so at this stage, given that we are still considering how the settlement should be laid out. We need to ensure that I do not have to stand at the Dispatch Box and eat as much humble pie as I did last time, when we got it wrong. I admitted that we had got it wrong, and we will not make the same mistake again.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): May I question the Minister on a point of fact? I know that he will have the facts in front of him. My police force, South Wales police, has had about 240 fewer officers on the beat

since 2010. We can talk about whether that is a good or a bad thing, but it is a fact. According to my rough calculations, based on the data release, South Wales police will be subject to a real-terms cut of nearly £3.5 million in the next two years. Am I wrong?

Mike Penning: I think that the hon. Gentleman is wrong. Not only have I met South Wales MPs in the last couple of days, but the very vocal PCC—whom I know very well, as, I am sure the hon. Gentleman does—has not raised those figures with me. I suggest that, before South Wales police asks for any more money—which I do not think that it will need to do—they should look very closely at the size of its reserves, which are astronomical.

We need to take account of what the police have already been able to achieve, and the collaboration that has taken place with the help of extra funding from the Department, in order to find ways of providing better day-to-day policing out there. We should not sit in our silos, as we have for many years, allowing money to be spent in a building that is being only half used while another building up the road is just sitting there and could be put to full use.

Hampshire MPs are rightly proud of their emergency services. I am sure that we are all proud of ours as well, but the innovation that has taken place in Hampshire is quite astounding. Money has been saved that can be used in other front-line work, and that has been absolutely brilliant. Winchester has a brand-new fire station. On the first floor are the fire officers and on the next floor are the police, because it is a police station as well as a fire station. More than half the fire stations in England and Wales are within 1 kilometre of an ambulance station or a police station. We are starting to see the same sort of innovation elsewhere in the country, and we should ensure that it continues.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister is right to commend the hard work of the police in very difficult circumstances, but he has asked for comparisons. In Greater Manchester, violent crime is up by 36%, sexual offences are up by 46%, and overall crime is up by 14%. We have had 20% fewer police officers and 4% fewer police community support officers, and we are looking at an £8.5 million cut in real-terms funding in the next financial year. Those figures do not add up, do they?

Mike Penning: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that crime has fallen in Manchester since 2010, as it has in the rest of the country. There is real concern about certain elements of crime, which the hon. Gentleman's chief constable and PCC will be addressing, as we are at the Home Office. However, I ask him to look closely at the figures that he has given. We must be careful not to scare people away. We want people to report sexual assaults, but historically they have not done so. We want them to report domestic violence, but historically they have not done so.

Andrew Gwynne *rose*—

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab) *rose*—

Mike Penning: I will give way to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), but I will give way to the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) again later, if he still wants to intervene.

Neil Coyle: The Minister says that it is important for people to have the confidence to report crime. In London we have seen a 21% increase in sexual offences and a 22% increase in violent crime, including knife crime, but in Southwark last year, worryingly, only 16% of reported crimes resulted in convictions. When will the Minister stop insulting the hard-working officers and constituents in Southwark, and ensure that we have the resources to tackle crime properly, keep people safe, and secure prosecutions?

Mike Penning: I have never insulted an officer, or anyone's constituent, in my entire life, and I never will. I am proud to be Policing Minister, and glad to be in the House representing my constituents and the country as a whole, so I resent the comments that the hon. Gentleman has just made. What would have happened in London if there had been a 10% cut? *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman says, from a sedentary position, that that would not have happened, but it is exactly what was proposed by Labour Front Benchers.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): I agree with the point that the Minister was trying to make about the emergency services working together more closely. In the town of Barnoldswick, we have seen the removal of an ambulance station but now our paramedics work out of the local police station. Such collaboration between the emergency services could deliver real savings across the country and ensure that this very generous financial settlement delivers even greater reductions in crime and even more police officers on the frontline.

Mike Penning: We are seeing that sort of collaborative work across the country and some of it is being paid for by the innovation fund, for which the different forces, emergency services and local authorities are putting in bids. But this goes much further than just working in the same station; it is also about training together. As you might know, Mr Speaker, I used to be a fireman years ago. I may have mentioned that before and I may have to mention it a few more times. There are only two of us in the House, but we are very proud of what we did.

In those days, it was very rare to train or work with the other emergency services unless you were physically on the same job. If hon. Members go round their constituencies and ask people in the emergency services when they last did a forward exercise with the fire service, the ambulance service or, in some parts of the country, the coastguard service, they will find that it happens very rarely. That is often due to logistical pressures, but those pressures do not exist if two or more services are in the same building and can share the same yard and do the same training.

Going back to Winchester, not only is the fire station in the same building as the police station but the yard is jointly used and at the back of the yard is the armed response unit, along with the armoury and the ranges. All this has been built on what was going to be just a fire station. When we talk to those brilliant professionals

who look after us every day and ask them about the training they are doing, we find that firefighters are being trained as paramedics, as is the case in Hampshire. Sadly, in the case of a road traffic collision, the ambulances might not always get their first, even though the incident has been reported and people are trapped. I know how difficult it was when we were at incidents such as those. It is not just a question of how many ambulances there are. When you have a really bad smash on the motorway, it is really difficult to get the emergency services through. You would think that everybody would get out of the way, but I can tell you, Mr Speaker, they do not.

What is happening now is that fire personnel are being trained to keep people alive. I am not just talking about first aid certificates or the use of defibrillators, although that is a really good innovation. By the way, the cashiers at my local Tesco's know how to use defibrillators, and that is a great asset, which also saves people's lives. However, when dealing with a major trauma, it is vital to have the skills that I saw the firemen and women in Hampshire using. I was crying out for those skills when I was in the fire service.

Andrew Gwynne: I want to take the Minister back to the answer he gave me some moments ago. Of course it is not my intention to scare people, but the statistics show that crime numbers are going up in Greater Manchester. Of course this might be due in part to people now reporting crimes that they would previously not have reported, but does the Minister accept that people also need to have confidence that there are adequate numbers of police officers to investigate those crimes? Surely the 20% reduction in the number of police officers in Greater Manchester will not help to create public confidence.

Mike Penning: That really depends on where those officers were in the first place. Were they working in the communities and on the beat, or were they doing desk jobs? The truth of the matter is that, while we have had a decrease in the number of officers around the country, there are more in front-line duties now than there were in 2010. The other thing the hon. Gentleman might want to ask his local police and crime commissioner, if he is really worried about the funding—even though there would have been a 10% cut under a Labour Government—is why his police force is holding £71 million in reserves.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): May I plead with the Minister to look urgently at the rise in gun crime in the west midlands? Will he consider providing resources to try to fill the gap? We have had more than 20 shootings over the past six months, including six over the bank holiday period. There have been 41 arrests and 24 recoveries of weapons and ammunition. Great work has been done by the West Midlands police force, but this work can be continued only if we have additional resources, on a project-by-project basis if need be. This has become a really serious issue over the past 12 years and we have worked hard to bring the crime figures down, but please could the Minister look into the possibility of providing additional support?

Mike Penning: I saw reports of those shootings on the news and I got reports across my desk as well. Our thoughts must be with the families of those affected. We

must praise the fantastic work of the local police in making those arrests, and let us hope that they get prosecutions as well. That is crucial, because public confidence is created when the police get prosecutions and the criminal justice system becomes involved.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) mentioned the shootings in his constituency. There was a terrible drive-by shooting in Wood Green last summer, involving mistaken identity. A baker who was coming out of his bakery to take a break was shot, and the perpetrator drove off. The case is still unsolved. Can the Minister rule out the possibility of that being connected to the cut in police numbers?

Mike Penning: Why anybody would get in a car, drive off, open the window and shoot someone is beyond me, and probably beyond the comprehension of anybody in this House. What we do know, however, is that the police forces around the country are doing a fantastic job. We have just heard of the arrests that have taken place. So, simply to say, "That is happening just because you cut the money" is a really, frankly, silly, silly comment.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) *rose*—

Catherine West: There are orphans who are suffering as a result of that—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think we need to be clear whose intervention is being taken. The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) will have to express herself on another occasion or elsewhere in the debate. I think the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) is intervening.

Debbie Abrahams: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I have another tale of woe. There have been approximately 12 burglaries in the past 10 days in the Saddleworth villages of Greenfield and Uppermill, and I have some very worried constituents. I totally agree with my hon. Friends: we cannot possibly say that there is no link between such events and the front-line cuts to staff in the Greater Manchester police, which were also mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). What can the Minister say to my many constituents who have contacted me to say that they are very concerned about their safety? Surely this must be a priority for him.

Mike Penning: The fact that it is a priority is exactly why the Chancellor stood at this Dispatch Box and said that he would make a very generous settlement. No one dreamed we would get that settlement, but that money will come through. There are no cuts going forward, even though that is exactly what you would have had if a Labour Minister had been standing here.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): The Minister is making a strong case. Is it not important to trust the professionals in the police service? We do not rely on the Labour party's mooted 10% cut; we trust the professionals. He will know that the terrible Joanna Dennehy murders around Peterborough could not have been solved by the Cambridgeshire constabulary alone, and that it had to work with other constabularies such as Norfolk in

order to attain the critical mass in forensics and other back-up services necessary to solve the crimes. We trust our local professional police officers.

Mike Penning: My hon. Friend has just touched on a point that I was going to make about collaboration. None of the 43 police forces around the country—not even London's, with all its size and capabilities—can police alone. They need help across the board. The East Midlands regional organised crime unit is doing fantastic work, for example. And in my own region—the Eastern region—capabilities that were always exercised, with difficulty, in separate local forces are now being spread across the region. [*Interruption.*]

Andy Burnham *rose*—

Mike Penning: I have been called many things since I have been in this House, and before I came here, but "frit" is not one of them. I give way to the shadow Home Secretary.

Andy Burnham: I am glad to hear it, because I never did think that the Minister was in that category. He is saying a few things that are worrying me. He stood there a few moments ago and said that there were to be no real-terms cuts to the police. That is simply untrue and I hope that he will correct the record before this debate ends. The other thing he just said was that there were more officers in front-line positions. A workforce survey that came out last week showed that his Government cut police officers by 18,000 in the last Parliament. Is he seriously standing there today and saying that, despite that cut of 18,000, there are more police officers on our streets?

Mike Penning: I know the Labour party are desperately trying to find a reason to vote against our very generous funding settlement, even though they would have liked to make it a really difficult settlement by cutting it by 10%. What I actually said was that there are more operational police officers on duty now on the frontline than there were in the past. That is what I have said at this Dispatch Box time and time again. Perhaps, when we hear the shadow Minister's arguments as to why there should have been greater cuts—I should say cuts, because we are not going to cut at all—he will tell us what front-line services we would have lost. We need to ask that, because the money would have had to come from somewhere.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): There has been a lot of talk about cuts, and indeed about the horrific issue of gun crime, but the issue of counter-terrorism and national security is also linked here. Will the Minister clarify that this Government, in 2015-16, will be increasing spending on counter-terrorism by more than £650 million, which shows our commitment on national security?

Mike Penning: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. We fund counter-terrorism from a separate budget, and that is enormously important. We have a Minister of State who specifically deals with that task. It is really interesting that even though I have heard Opposition Members say today, "This is terrible! This is going to happen; this has happened," actually the 43 authorities welcomed the Chancellor's Budget, and I have had really interesting discussions with them, in

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some of the areas represented by Members who have complained today about the settlement. That is what this debate is supposed to be about: it is about a very generous settlement, which we would not have had if we had not won the arguments with the Chancellor.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I am slightly baffled by the Minister's comments. Northumbria police force expects to have lost about £150 million between 2010 and 2020, and its workforce has already been cut by a quarter, split equally between police officers and police staff. Will he clarify in what way that is a generous settlement?

Mike Penning: Let me go over the arguments. We inherited a fiscal mess left by the previous Administration. We had to make really difficult financial decisions, including on policing. The police forces did brilliantly well. They were genuinely very worried that we would extend that approach into 2015-16, but we did not do that, which is why they are saying thank you to us for not making 10% cuts to policing, which is what Labour's Front-Bench team would have done.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I have been listening carefully to the Minister. I met my local borough commander last Friday, and although there are of course challenges, he told me that some of the reforms will actually make policing more effective. More importantly, he stressed to me that there are now as many police on the frontline in the Met as there have ever been.

Mike Penning: My hon. Friend has brought me on to an interesting point. The Friday before last, I was at Hendon with the commissioner, taking the salute—he took the salute and I nodded my head, because I was not in uniform—of the 135 new recruits coming through. These are brand-new police officers wanting to join the Met, coming through their training and passing out on parade, and 60% of them live in London. That is because of the reforms that the commissioner has introduced, whereby he has said, “You need to live in London for five years unless you have served in the armed forces.” That figure will be boosted again; I was speaking to the officer in charge of the training there and I was told that in excess of 2,000 officers are expected to be training at Hendon in the new buildings at the Peel centre, which the investment is being put into. We should be really proud of the numbers in London.

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): We all know that one perennial problem of policing has been the amount of time that police officers have not been able to spend on the beat. Does the Minister agree that when good police and crime commissioners use innovative technology to help those police officers spend more time on the beat in places such as Staffordshire, it can mean as many as 100 extra police officers on the beat, at a tenth of the cost?

Mike Penning: There are a myriad different ways we can give the required confidence to our constituents, with our uniformed officers out there and others from the community who are doing this as well. I pay tribute to our specials, who do not get mentioned as much as

they should. They do a fantastic job. We have to look carefully at the situation in certain parts of the country where their numbers have rocketed into their thousands, whereas in other parts of the country we do not have as many as we would like.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mike Penning: I will give way once more and then I will come to my closing remarks.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Will the Minister join me in congratulating the Conservative candidate in the Lincolnshire PCC elections on introducing special constables—parish constables—who will look after the very remote rural areas of Lincolnshire, giving those communities a policing figure they know they can go to for help and advice?

Mike Penning: I have spent quite a bit of time in Lincolnshire over the years, and was lobbied extensively by the chief constable and the commissioner for a change to the funding formula. The sort of innovation we have seen in places such as Lincolnshire, with the parish specials, rural mounted specials and so on, is exactly the sort of thing we would like to see replicated.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): In Lincolnshire, we are very grateful to this Minister, because he has done more than any other Minister to come up and spend days with the police force. We very much appreciate what he has done with this grant and so on. We have, however, had a letter from the chief constable saying that because of historical problems, increases in police salaries and increases in national insurance contributions, he still has a significant funding deficit. Will this wonderful Minister, with all his knowledge of Lincolnshire, just say a word about what more he can do to help us, please?

Mike Penning: I know exactly what my hon. Friend is saying and I know exactly what is in the letter, because I have received a very similar one. Lincolnshire's force was asking me to change the funding formula to make it fairer for Lincolnshire; a lot of constabularies and a lot of people in this House have asked for similar over the years. We are continuing to look at that and I will make sure I get it right, but this settlement is a lot better than Lincolnshire thought it was going to get and a lot better than it would have been, had there been a Labour Minister at this Dispatch Box.

Rehman Chishti: On collaboration, will the Minister pay tribute to the work being done by Essex and Kent police on their joint serious crime directorate, which looks at using intelligence sharing to ensure that serious and organised crime in the port county is dealt with swiftly and effectively?

Mike Penning: That type of collaboration is so important. For too many years forces have sat in silos, as have individual emergency services. They are coming together and one reason for that is that the austerity measures we had to bring in have made them think outside the box.

Mr Jackson *rose*—

Mike Penning: I will give way one last time and then I will sum up.

Mr Jackson: I am anxious to ensure that the Minister does not peak too soon. First, I pay tribute to Cambridgeshire constabulary for the excellent work it has done on issues relating to domestic violence and sexual offences. Does he agree that one reason for the slight spike in the reporting of those crimes is that many more victims feel comfortable about approaching the police now and feel that they will be treated fairly in the pursuit of their complaints?

Mike Penning: My hon. Friend has touched on a really important point. I had the honour the other week of continuing the funding for the victims' groups around the country for the next three years. One really important thing is that our constituents, no matter what has happened to them, have the confidence to come forward, and that they will be listened to with compassion. For too many years that was not the case.

I know that a lot of colleagues want to get in and I have been generous in taking interventions, but may I say that we need to make sure that our constituents are made aware of how generous this settlement is for the next four years to 2020? We are still in very difficult financial times, when we are continuing to pay for the maladministration of this country's finances by the previous Labour Administration and previous Ministers who are now sitting on the Labour Front Bench. I am looking forward to listening to positive comments about our police force. I am enormously proud to be the Minister for Policing, Fire and Criminal Justice and Victims. It is a long title, it is a big job and I am very proud to have it.

1.39 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I bow to no one in my admiration for our police service. Robert Peel uttered these immortal words:

"The police are the people and the people are the police."

There has been a constant in our country for two centuries: the British model of policing by consent, which we built on when we were in government. When Labour left office, there were record numbers of police on the streets—16,500 more than in 1997 and, in addition, nearly 17,000 police community support officers. Neighbourhood policing, which we built, was popular with the public. It worked, and we saw a generation of progress on crime. We had local policing, local roots, local say and local partnership working. We built up neighbourhood policing and the public valued it. It was one of Labour's greatest achievements.

Jake Berry: On the issue of bowing to no one, will the hon. Gentleman support this settlement today, or will he bow to the shadow Home Secretary's suggestion of a 10% cut?

Jack Dromey: We will oppose this settlement today. The Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice said from the Dispatch Box that police funding is being protected. That is simply not true, and I will lay out my case in due course.

We are still learning some painful lessons from the past. There are still wrongs to be righted; the police are not perfect. We need to raise standards, and we should always hold the police to the highest standards in the public interest. The first thing I wish to say to the

Policing Minister and the Home Secretary is that the British model of neighbourhood policing is celebrated across the world. The model was responsible for a generation of progress on crime, but the Home Secretary's remorselessly negative tone about the police, taken with ever fewer police officers doing ever more work, has demoralised the service, and we are now seeing soaring levels of sickness and stress.

Andrew Gwynne: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. He is absolutely right to go back to the Labour success of neighbourhood policing. Is he as dismayed as I am about what is happening now? In my own constituency, neighbourhood policing is withering away, and officers are now being put on response duties. I accept that such duties are necessary, but so too is neighbourhood policing. This is undermining public confidence in the ability of the police to listen to the needs of communities.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Typically, what we see all over the country is a neighbourhood sergeant responsible for perhaps one or two teams and a number of PCSOs. Those who were previously part of the neighbourhood teams are now being put on response duties. Following a Home Office decision in 2012 there was a reclassification whereby some people on response were given local neighbourhood policing duties, even if they spent all their time on response, so the earlier assertions about our having more officers on the frontline are simply not right.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend comment on the fact that Humberside police—I do not think it is the only police force in this position—has been judged inadequate by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary? We have the lowest level of police officers since the 1970s. Will the shadow Minister reflect on what that means for neighbourhood policing?

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Surveys show that, increasingly, the public complain about a lack of visibility of local police officers. Neighbourhood policing is absolutely essential. It is not just about detecting criminals, but about preventing crime, diverting people from crime, building good community relationships, and bringing in people to co-operate in identifying criminals. Losing the benefits of neighbourhood policing will have an effect. At the most serious end of terrorist crime, the former head of counter-terrorism, Peter Clarke, said that neighbourhood policing is "the golden thread" that runs from the local to the global. He said that the patient building of good relationships with communities means that communities co-operate in identifying wrongdoing—in this case, it is wrongdoing of the worst possible kind.

Mr Hanson: Will my hon. Friend confirm that we are not just talking about crime? When we have floods in our communities, public order parades, and football matches, the police are the first port of call. Policing is not just about crime.

Jack Dromey: My right hon. Friend, who served with such distinction as a police Minister, is absolutely right. This is about the wider duties of the police service. The

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College of Policing has done some very interesting work. By the way, the National Audit Office has called on the Home Secretary to have a better understanding of what the police actually do. It is not just about that element that is focused on crime, but about the wider responsibilities.

The police, together with the fire service, the ambulance service, the Environment Agency and others, guarded premises to prevent looting during the floods. That is just one example of what they do. I have another example from last Saturday. I was deeply impressed to see West Midlands police, with other police services from West Mercia and Warwickshire, policing the pernicious Pegida attempt to march through Birmingham, keeping apart counter-demonstrators and those who were there in support of the march. They worked with the community and did a tremendous job. My right hon. Friend was absolutely right in what he said.

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend might have heard me ask the Minister to comment on burglaries in Saddleworth, in which there has been almost a 50% increase. Does he wish to comment on what the Minister said? Greater Manchester police have just confirmed that there has been a reduction of 2,000 front-line posts.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. If we look at the statistics overall, we see that areas of volume crime have gone down—I will come on to explain in more detail why Government claims about crime falling are simply not true. Car crime has gone down, and houses by and large are now more difficult to break into. Having said that, there are spates of burglaries all around the country. What is essential is good neighbourhood policing. Let me give an example from my own constituency. The admirable Sergeant Simon Hensley set up a canoe club on Brookvale lake. I literally launched it in a canoe—[*Interruption.*] It was one of my most terrifying moments as a Member of Parliament. Hundreds of young people joined the club, and very good relationships were formed. One benefit was that when there was an outbreak of burglary in Stockland Green, they came forward and said they knew who the bad lads were. Again, it is that neighbourhood policing that is so important. There is no substitute for it. It is the bedrock of policing in our country.

Mr Jackson: The hon. Gentleman is making a fair point. It would be churlish not to accept that there was progress around community policing, but that is not the whole story. Does he agree that one legacy of the previous Labour Government was an inordinate amount of bureaucracy and paperwork, which kept many front-line police officers in the station, processing data, rather than out catching criminals? This Government have tackled that, which is why we have seen a reduction in numbers and a significant reduction in recorded crime.

Jack Dromey: Let me give a straight answer. I think that we did prescribe too much and too often. It was right therefore that, by consensus across political parties, the previous Government became less prescriptive. Certain things will always need to be prescribed, but I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman's point.

Catherine West: Does my hon. Friend agree that, in relation to the very serious act of gun crime, neighbourhood policing is crucial in piecing together all the small bits of information that might secure a conviction? Will he assist me in highlighting the tragic shooting in Wood Green that I mentioned earlier? There are orphans who wish to know what happened to their father, who, in a case of mistaken identity, was shot in a drive-by shooting as he stepped out of his workplace. They would like to have that crime solved.

Jack Dromey: It is difficult to comment on the detailed circumstances of that crime other than to say that, of course, what we need is capacity to catch those people who are guilty of murder, which is one of the most heinous crimes. I ask my hon. Friend to forgive me if I repeat what I said in a previous answer, but key to that is good neighbourhood policing, as it is vital for intelligence gathering. If we run down neighbourhood policing, the inevitable consequence is that it is more difficult to detect criminals of that kind.

Stephen Hammond: I agree with the shadow Minister that neighbourhood policing is key. Does he agree with the borough commander whom I met again last Friday, who made the point that although the numbers in some of the neighbourhood units are down, they are now dedicated to that unit and that neighbourhood, so although numbers are lower, they are more effective?

Jack Dromey: That depends on what we are talking about. For example, the West Midlands police service has sought to maintain dedicated numbers in high risk, high demand areas, but taken as a whole the numbers have been going down. There will be variations at any one point in time, but the evidence is clear: there has been a remorseless reduction in the number of police officers and a hollowing-out of neighbourhood policing.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Jack Dromey: I have given way about nine times. Let me make a little more progress, then I will gladly give way.

I celebrate the fact that, as the police bravery awards show, we are policed by ordinary men and women doing extraordinary things, often in the most difficult circumstances. They deserve better than what happened in the run-up to the comprehensive spending review. Yesterday I was privileged to speak, together with Conservative Ministers, at the 20th anniversary of the docklands bomb. Afterwards I talked to police officers, brave men and women, with an outstanding sense of duty and a powerful sense of obligation to their community. They talked to me about the mounting pressures they face—the challenges of counter-terrorism and the impact of the past five years—and they were dismayed that their Government had contemplated cutting the police service in half. As I will come on to say, that is precisely what had been contemplated.

In my constituency, Erdington, I saw one PCSO in tears—loyal, long-serving, much loved—describing how awful the uncertainty had been in the build-up to the comprehensive spending review. It should never have happened. After cutting 25% in the last Parliament, right up until the night before the comprehensive spending review the Government were contemplating a further 22% cut in this Parliament. The Home Secretary failed

to stand up for the police service. We were on the brink of catastrophe, as a police officer said to me but yesterday, which would have had very serious consequences, demonstrating a disregard for the first duty of any Government, maintaining the safety and security of its citizens.

Under pressure from the public, the police and the Labour party, the Chancellor U-turned and a promise was made. I shall read it out, as the Policing Minister has clearly forgotten it. The Chancellor said:

“I am today announcing that there will be no cuts in the police budget at all. There will be real-terms protection for police funding. The police protect us, and we are going to protect the police.”—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1373.] In parallel, there were big cuts elsewhere—for example, to Border Force—but let us examine that statement to the House. That promise to the public, to the police and to Parliament has been broken. The Chancellor said he would protect the police, but now we know that police budgets are still being cut.

The force covering my constituency, West Midlands police, is excellent. In the next financial year it will suffer a £10.2 million cut in real terms, contrary to what the Policing Minister said earlier. Yes, the £5 mechanism is being used, but it will raise only £3.3 million, so there will be a £7 million overall cut in real terms.

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): On the precept, is my hon. Friend aware that a force such as Northumbria, which, under our excellent police and crime commissioner, Vera Baird, has made every saving possible, has cut into its reserves and has had the lowest precept hitherto, has had to accept that £5 maximum with great regret, just to try to maintain services?

Jack Dromey: Indeed. I pay tribute to somebody who was a great parliamentarian and who has been a great police and crime commissioner. The work that Vera Baird has done on domestic violence and, more generally, on violence against women and girls is admirable and first class. My hon. Friend is right. As I shall say later, Northumbria, like the West Midlands force, has been hit twice as hard as leafy Tory shire police forces down south.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that some of our police forces are stretched just by the crime that they are currently dealing with? In Salford we have had 19 shootings in a period of 19 or 20 months. On some weekends there have been four shootings on the same day. Protection of the public is important, but should our police force be so stretched in Greater Manchester when they have that to deal with?

Jack Dromey: There has been an £8.5 million cut in real terms, contrary to what was said at the Dispatch Box. After a generation of progress, and despite the heroic efforts of the police and crime commissioner, Tony Lloyd, and the Greater Manchester police service, we are seeing profoundly worrying signs of crime starting to rise once again.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is right to point out the sleight of hand by the Government. The real unfairness to areas such as the west midlands and Greater Manchester is this: we have a relatively low council tax base, so the precept brings in relatively small amounts of funding—nothing like the amounts of funding that are being cut

by the central Government grant. Added to that, those are the areas that tend to have higher crime rates, so need is not matched by resources. It is a double whammy for the urban areas and it penalises places such as Greater Manchester.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend sets out the case powerfully. There is no question but that need does not determine the way this Government allocate funds, whether to the police service or to local government. I will return to that point.

There was another broken promise. The Prime Minister said in 2010 that he would protect the frontline. Not true—12,000 front-line officers have since been lost. It was a broken promise and, to add insult to injury, not only are the Tories continuing to slash police funding, but they are expecting the public to pay more for it. The Tory sums rely upon local people being charged an extra £369 million in council tax. Our citizens and the communities we serve are being asked to pay more for less.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): In a forward-looking county such as Hertfordshire, which has the pressures of supporting London and Luton and policing major roads, it has been possible to use more police on the frontline and more modern methods. In Hertfordshire the police precept is being cut as the funding settlement is perfectly adequate.

Jack Dromey: Every week I see innovation in the police service; of that there is no doubt. In relation to road policing, to which the hon. and learned Gentleman refers, there are profoundly worrying signs that the progress made over many years, particularly under the Labour Government, in reducing road deaths, for example, is starting to reverse as a consequence of the cuts in road policing and other aspects, such as CCTV cameras. I am totally in favour of innovation and greater collaboration—for example, between the police and fire service—but ultimately there is a simple, grim reality: the remorseless downward pressure on our police service. The people who are paying the price are not just our police officers, but the public we serve.

Sir Oliver Heald *rose*—

Jack Dromey: I shall refer later to old Macmillanites. On the basis that I believe the hon. and learned Gentleman to be one, I give way.

Sir Oliver Heald: The hon. Gentleman is very generous, though I shall not comment on that. Does he agree that police force reserves around the country are substantial—Hertfordshire has £48 million, but in one case the figure is as high as £71 million.

Jack Dromey: If I can put it this way, that is a canard, as we used to say in the T and G. Of course it is right that reserves should be used. Looking at the pattern across the country, however, why are they typically built up? The reasons range from investment in bringing three or four buildings into one, as the West Midlands police service has done in Birmingham, through better technological equipping of our police service—we need a technological revolution in policing—to planning ahead to recruit more police officers so that, even if the overall numbers are falling, the service is at least bringing in

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some fresh blood. If we look at the various studies that have been done of police reserves, including by the National Audit Office, we see that the line of argument has never stood up that all will be well if only the police use the hundreds of millions of pounds that are somehow there.

Opposition Members are with the police when they say efficiency savings can be made. Crucially, in the run-up to the last general election, we identified £172 million that could be saved through mandated procurement alone. Other measures included full cost recovery on gun licences, ending the bizarre arrangement whereby the police have to subsidise the granting of gun licences. If the Government had embraced that plan, we would have saved 10,000 police officers in the first three years of this Parliament.

Efficiency savings are one thing, but, ultimately, decisions have to be made. We listened to the police, and in the light of the tragic attacks in Paris, they said, “We think we can make up to 5% efficiency savings”—I stress again that we ourselves identified how one could do that. However, it was clear beyond any doubt that the chilling message from the police, who are so vital in maintaining our security, was that going beyond that would compromise public safety. I will never forget the powerful letter from Mark Rowley, Scotland Yard’s head of counter-terrorism, who said that, post-Paris, we have to look at things afresh. Ultimately, numbers matter.

Rehman Chishti: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jack Dromey: No, forgive me if I finish this important point.

Numbers matter. In the light of attacks such as Paris, we need surge capacity on the one hand, and neighbourhood policing for intelligence gathering on the other hand. We also need more firearms officers; we have 6,000, which is 1,000 down from 2008. We listened to the police.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jack Dromey: I will give way to somebody who has not already spoken.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is all well and good bandying numbers around and saying we must have the capability to make a surge in the number of armed officers. However, if the leader of the Labour party is to be believed, what are those officers going to do? Just wave their guns at these people and say, “Oh, please stop what you’re doing.” Will the hon. Gentleman take this opportunity to dissociate himself from his leader’s remarks about what armed policemen can and cannot do?

Jack Dromey: The Opposition—all of us—have a very simple view. Perhaps I can draw a parallel with the deeply moving statement I heard one of the Parisian officers make about when he and his colleagues went into the Bataclan club. Innocent men and women, including British citizens, were being terrified by jihadis practising the most appalling form of terrorism. That officer said, “I had to make a split-second judgment. I made it, and as a consequence I saved lives.” That is our very, very clear position.

Andrew Stephenson: I am slightly confused, and I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman can help me. He says that savings can be made. Today’s report includes a real-terms increase in anti-terror funding. Why, therefore, is the Labour party opposing this very generous settlement?

Jack Dromey: After Paris, the Government made a series of announcements—there was also one that predated Paris, but that was about the Investigatory Powers Bill. We have to get the balance right, but we said, “Yes, we support the Government’s broad approach”—that we need enhanced means, for example, to combat those who use the dark net. We supported the Government in making £1.9 billion more available for MI5, MI6 and GCHQ. We supported them when they said that additional resources would be made available for the British Army for counter-terrorism. Ultimately, however, it came down to this: Chris Sims, the former chief constable in the west midlands, and Bernard Hogan-Howe here in London say that the majority of the leads that result in the detection of terrorists come through good neighbourhood policing. If we have continuing downward pressure on neighbourhood policing and the hollowing out of neighbourhood policing, that will impact, in Mark Rowley’s words, on the eyes and ears of the counter-terrorism effort. It is not enough, therefore, simply to equip the special services and the special forces with additional powers; neighbourhood policing is key on every front, particularly counter-terrorism.

The simple reality is that neighbourhood policing will continue to be hollowed out. Some 18,000 officers have been lost since the current Prime Minister took office in 2010. Some 1,300 have gone in the last six months alone. Today confirms that the Tories’ back-door cuts to police forces will inevitably lead to further police officer losses. It appears that the Government are oblivious to the consequences of their actions. Hugh Orde, the former head of the Association of Chief Police Officers, as it was called, is right when he says that a generation of progress is being reversed.

Police in the 21st century face the new challenges of terrorism, cybercrime and child sexual exploitation and abuse. Undoubtedly, the threats to British security in the 21st century demand a modernised, more responsive and better equipped police service, not a smaller one. In defence of the Government’s position, the Police Minister said crime is falling, but that is not true: it is changing. In July, when an estimated 6 million cyber and online crimes are included in the official statistics, crime will nigh on double.

Resources are diminishing, just when demand is soaring. We face not just the three challenges that I mentioned; police recorded crime is rising, and some of the most serious crimes have soared to the highest levels in years. There has been a major increase in knife crime, which is up 9%. There has been a 27% rise in violent crime, including a 14% increase in the murder rate, while sexual offences have gone up 36%. Reported rape figures are the highest since 2003. Victims are also being let down, with half of cases closed without a suspect being identified.

Increasingly, the police are left to pick up the pieces, as other public agencies are slashed. Who, for example, goes after looked-after children if council social services departments are badly depleted?

Barbara Keeley: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jack Dromey: I am going to conclude my remarks, because I have been—forgive me if I say so—generous with interventions, and I want hon. Members to have the maximum time to make contributions to this important debate.

The Home Secretary does not seem to understand the challenges to the modern police service or its complexity. Despite massive and growing challenges, not only are police budgets being cut, but the funding formula fiasco in which the Home Office misallocated hundreds of millions of pounds of police funding means that the doomed review of the unfair funding formula has been delayed for another year. We have a stop-gap settlement of only a year, with more uncertainty and more unfairness. My force—West Midlands—and Northumbria face cuts that are double those that Surrey will receive.

As I was saying earlier when the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) intervened, we have had the tradition of Robert Peel, but there has also been the tradition of Harold Macmillan: a tradition of noblesse oblige, of meeting need, and of serving the national interest in one nation. Macmillanites are increasingly an endangered species in the Conservative party, because both in this settlement and in the local government settlement that will be debated later, there has been a grotesque unfairness of approach where need has been ignored in favour of political heartlands being looked after.

I want to ask the Minister three questions. First, on an important detail, where exactly is the funding for the international capital city grant coming from? Why, in the published information, is it not included in the core police settlement figures? Secondly, when will he finally replace the broken funding formula and give forces the long-term certainty they need to modernise and address the challenges of the 21st century? He expects to implement the new formula in the 2017-18 financial year, but we will need a new formula by the end of this year, at the very latest. Will he even begin to make progress on that in the near future? Thirdly, when will he stop this financial rollercoaster and finally be frank with the public and police about the cuts that he and the Home Secretary intend to impose?

Yes, we will vote against this police grant settlement, because for Labour Members the first duty of any Government and of any Parliament is the safety and security of their citizens. Yes, we will vote against it, because that is what is at risk if we continue down this path of remorseless reduction in the numbers of police officers. Quite simply, the time has come to put public safety first and to cut crime, not cut cops.

2.11 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): I would like to say a few words about police funding and, in particular, its significance for policing in Cumbria. There are two key issues: first, the police budget itself, which we are discussing; and secondly, the police funding formula, which is for the future but of equal importance. Before doing so, I would like to make one or two general observations.

It is well documented that Carlisle and Cumbria experienced serious flooding before Christmas. This was a very large local emergency. The Cumbrian

constabulary rose to that challenge brilliantly. Its officers showed leadership, offered practical support and co-ordinated the emergency services. They also showed a lot of empathy. I remember meeting one PC who had himself been flooded, and instead of being at home, he was out there on duty helping everybody else. That demonstrated to me the importance that the police have over and above their normal duties. I pay tribute to the Cumbrian police and crime commissioner, Richard Rhodes. He has led Cumbria extremely well in a mature and professional way, and he has cross-party and widespread support throughout the county. This again demonstrates to me that it was right to create the PCCs. They should continue, and I will certainly support their continuation.

Of the two issues I mentioned, I first turn to police funding in general. The House will recall the debate initiated by the Opposition—it has already been mentioned—calling for a 10% cut in police funding. I welcome the Government's decision not to follow the Opposition's lead but to maintain and, indeed, increase funding for the police, in what we all recognise are still very difficult financial circumstances. This will be welcomed in Cumbria and has certainly been welcomed by the Cumbrian constabulary. It will also be welcomed across the country, in recognition of the fact that the police are an important part of our society. They are the lead emergency service. Given concerns about security and safety, this funding will give confidence to our communities.

On the important issue of the police funding formula, I refer back to my earlier comments. The floods brought home to me how important it is that we have a Cumbrian police force, because it offered leadership, local knowledge and an ability to respond that I am not convinced would have been there had it been part of a larger, more remote force with headquarters elsewhere. The funding formula as consulted on would have had a dramatic and negative impact on Cumbria. Indeed, my local newspaper recognised this and ran a campaign that attracted a huge amount of support. That again demonstrated to me that support for the police and for a Cumbrian police force was deep-rooted.

I was therefore delighted that the Minister was in listening mode when he took on board the potential problems and issues for places such as Cumbria and agreed to postpone, or pull back from, going ahead with his consultation on introducing a new formula. I now wait for the new consultation to come out. I take this opportunity to emphasise the key issues for my county—primarily, rurality and sparsity. There are half a million people in Cumbria, but if one took a map of Cumbria and superimposed it over London and part of the south-east, there would be 20 million. It is a huge area. We have poor infrastructure, with a large mountain range right across the middle of the county, and we are a long way from any urban centre. Manchester is two hours away; Glasgow is an hour and a half away; and even Newcastle is over an hour away. I therefore look forward to the consultation, and I will certainly participate in it.

I give full support to the Government's financing of our police as set out in the current settlement. I am glad to see that we are still the party of the police and the party of law and order.

2.16 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson), who has put forward some important points for discussion. He may claim that his party is the party of the police and law and order, but let us make this an all-party issue, so that we can all praise the work of local police forces and all support the principles of the rule of law, and of law and order. I think that is something that will go across the whole House.

The Minister began by paying tribute to the appointment of the new Serjeant at Arms, who was formerly at the Ministry of Justice but has now taken his place in the House. I join the Minister in welcoming his appointment, not just because of his huge qualities, but because he is the first ethnic minority Serjeant at Arms in the history of Parliament—though of course he was appointed absolutely on merit.

Mike Penning: As the Serjeant at Arms was not in his place when I paid tribute to him earlier, Mr Deputy Speaker, may I repeat my tribute to him? Not only did I have the honour of giving him a reference for this job, but he comes from one of the great regiments of the British Army.

Keith Vaz: Those are two wonderful recommendations.

Jack Dromey *rose*—

Keith Vaz: I see that we will now have another tribute to the Serjeant at Arms from the shadow Policing Minister.

Jack Dromey: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. Now that the Serjeant at Arms is in his place, I would like to say that I was privileged to shake his hand the other day. He is deeply welcome to this House; it is great for us to have him here. It is a long and honourable role within this House. Like my right hon. Friend, I celebrate the fact that we have the first BME Serjeant at Arms—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Mr Dromey, can I just help out? The Front Benchers took well over an hour and there has been plenty of time. Everybody has welcomed the Serjeant at Arms, and so it should be. This is a debate on policing, and I know that the Chair of the Select Committee will not want to wander too far away again, because we do want to get through it, and we only have until three minutes past 4.

Keith Vaz: Absolutely, Mr Deputy Speaker. We now move on, your having encouraged everyone to do so, to the debate on the police grant.

I am very pleased to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) in his place, because when he was Policing Minister, additional funding was provided, and the House therefore voted in support of every one of the motions that he put before it.

May I, like others, pay tribute to my local police force? Tomorrow, the Leicestershire police force will celebrate its 180th anniversary at a ceremony in Leicester cathedral and then at the Guildhall. I pay tribute to my chief constable, Simon Cole, for the excellent work that he does, and to Sir Clive Loader, the police and crime commissioner. I want to say how sorry I am that Sir Clive will be standing down at the next election, because

he has made a great contribution, on an all-party basis, to tackling crime in the local area. They have made a great team.

We need to acknowledge, as others have done, what happens at a local level. Here we are in Parliament talking about global figures, but policing is about what happens to local people and what happens on the front line. We in the Home Affairs Committee are conscious of that fact when we discuss some of the big issues. As I have said to the Minister, the police funding formula means that my area is £5.6 million a year less well off than equivalent authorities, such as Derbyshire. The police and crime commissioner has recommended an uplift of 1.99%, which is the maximum amount permissible without a local referendum. On behalf of my local area, I welcome the fact that we see no further cuts in the figures that have been provided. However, as has been said, there are 17,000 fewer police officers than there were when the Government took office, and that is a matter of concern.

As I have said to the Minister, I welcome the fact that he has decided to tackle police funding and to look at the problems with the formula. He came before the House and, in his own words—he was modest, as always—ate “humble pie”. He recognised that the whole funding formula procedure was a bit of a “shambles”, as the Select Committee stated in its report. I know that the shadow Minister would like to claim credit, on behalf of the Labour party, for stopping the Government in their tracks, but he should remember that the Home Affairs Committee conducted a thorough inquiry into the matter. One of our members, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), is here following her astonishing assault on Assange during Prime Minister’s questions. I am not saying that the shadow Minister should not take a little bit of the credit, but he is not a Liberal Democrat; he does not have to take all the credit. The Select Committee had hearings, we considered evidence and we concluded that the process was, in the words of the report, a “shambles,” that needed to be looked at again. The Minister came before the House and agreed. It took Andrew White, the chief executive to the office of the Devon and Cornwall police and crime commissioner, to tell the country that the formula was wrong; senior, learned and intelligent people in the Minister’s Department were unable to do so.

I wrote to the Minister on 1 February to ask him for an update on the consultation on the police funding formula. He began an important process by agreeing to consult, and the Committee set out in our report the procedure that we thought he should follow. In our 10th recommendation, we even suggested a number of organisations that could be part of the process. I know that he respects the work of the Committee, because he has said so on a number of occasions.

The Minister has told me that he wrote to me yesterday, but that letter has not arrived. When we discuss changes in policing, we talk about investment in IT, and I wonder whether the Minister’s private office might invest in email, because emailing me the letter would have been a quick way to ensure that I received it before the debate. We are all watching our emails and waiting for this letter, which was supposed to have been sent yesterday. I know that several of the Minister’s officials are here today, and perhaps nobody is in the office sending out emails. I would like to receive that letter, so that I can

share it with other members of the Committee. I do not know what it will tell us, but I hope that it will say that the consultation process is about to begin. We do not want to run out of time.

I believe the Minister when he says that he wants the widest possible consultation. He is right to say that he met me and every other Member who came to see him, and that is the right thing to do. However, unless we start the process and consult the chiefs, the police and crime commissioners, the National Police Chiefs Council and other interested parties, including Members of the House, we will not reach a final conclusion. Perhaps the letter will arrive before I finish speaking. We do not know, but we would like it to come as soon as possible.

Barbara Keeley: My right hon. Friend is making a thoughtful and effective speech. As part of the consultation, will he and the Home Affairs Committee take on board the fact, which I raised earlier with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), that some police forces are peculiarly stretched by a local crime surge? In Salford, we have suffered from 21 shootings over 18 months. The hollowing out of neighbourhood policing, which we have talked about in the debate, is serious when the police have so much more to do because of crime surges such as the one we have seen in Salford. That really ought to be addressed.

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have visited her constituency, and I know that the issues she talks about are important. At the end of the day, we need to give the police the resources that they need, but decisions about such things have to be handled locally. She is right to say that the problem needs to be addressed and monitored.

I hope that the Minister might cover, in his closing remarks, the extension of the contract of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner. It is important that we do not get into a position similar to that with water cannon, where the Mayor of London waited a whole year for a decision to be made on whether they should be used. The commissioner is due to appear before the Select Committee on 23 February to discuss that and other matters, and I hope that, by the time he appears, the Home Secretary will have written back to the Mayor to give some indication on the subject. Such stability and security at the top of the Met, which represents a fifth of our country's policing budget and numbers, is extremely important. I remind the Minister that such decisions need to be made, in the interests of the policing service, the commissioner and Parliament.

I want to raise some final points. The first is the wider issue of what exactly we want the police to do. One of the recommendations in our report was that the Government consider the question: what are the drivers of crime and police demand? Of course, we live in tough times, and the Government will blame the Opposition for what they did in government, but the issue remains that Parliament and the Government will always look carefully at resources. The police service needs to know exactly what the Government are prepared to fund. Are they prepared to fund more work on immigration? Police officers nowadays act as though they are immigration officers, because they have to deal with many issues that

they did not deal with previously. The Minister and the House know how many cases that reach the custody suite involve people who are suffering from mental illness and should not be there in the first place, which means that police officers are being used as social workers. We know that meetings with local authorities and others, and big inquiries, take up a huge amount of time.

When we begin the consultation on police funding and the new formula, the Minister needs to tell police forces exactly what the Government are prepared to fund. I know that the Government have turned their face against the idea of a royal commission, which the Committee favoured in the last Parliament. We need to look at what we want our police officers to do. They cannot do everything, but that is what they are being asked to do at the moment.

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we have come to over-rely on our police for a lot of things? For example, there was some controversy in my constituency this year because the police were not able to police the Armistice Day march. When it came to it, however, plenty of local councillors and other volunteers were more than able to do that without using police time and resources, and it was a great success.

Keith Vaz: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. There are other people who can step in. As those of us who support football clubs—including Leicester City, who are currently leading the premier league—know, there are a lot of police officers on duty at football matches, but it is possible that part of their work could be done by stewards who are not warranted officers. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we do not need warranted officers to do everything.

The Minister has a real opportunity this year to set his mark on the history of policing. He was prepared to tackle the issue of the police funding formula, and received the brickbats that people get, because there are winners and losers, when they try to deal with vested interests. This is a big opportunity: let us decide on a set of principles as a model that can be used for a generation. To do that, he must consult and he must begin such a consultation immediately.

2.29 pm

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): I am very grateful for the opportunity to add my comments to this important debate. Policing and local policing is a subject about which I feel very strongly and in which I take a great interest.

Policing and crime rates are a huge concern to my constituents, as they are to all our constituents. My postbag, as regularly, I am sure, as those of other hon. Members, contains letters from constituents asking what the Government are doing to bring down crime rates. I welcome the reduction in crime during recent years, but I recognise the need to make savings. I commend the Home Office on the very tough decisions it took during the last Parliament. I express huge welcome for the announcement in the autumn statement that we will certainly keep police funding on a stable basis. I particularly welcome the flexibility over the precept, especially for forces with the lowest precepts in the country, such as Essex.

[Rebecca Harris]

Given my constituents' natural concerns about current crime rates, I took it upon myself to enrol in the police service parliamentary scheme. I strongly recommend it to all hon. Members. It is quite a time commitment—at least 20 days are spent in different parts of the police force—but it has given me a very strong and valuable insight into the true pressures on our police, the challenges for modern policing, and the changes and innovations that the police need to bring in and are bringing in. I want to put on the record my enormous gratitude to Chief Constable Stephen Kavanagh of Essex police and all those I have been out with. They have made me feel extremely welcome and have been very supportive.

I have had some extraordinary opportunities on the scheme. I have been out with the Juno teams, which are tackling domestic violence, and seen for myself the enormous efforts made by the police in their approach to domestic violence. For example, I have seen how quickly they have adopted our new stalking legislation and how closely focused they are on it. That is part of their approach to hidden harms.

Victoria Atkins: Is my hon. Friend aware of the welcome police officers have given to the introduction of on-body cameras? One of the great hopes for the cameras is that they will greatly assist in prosecuting domestic violence cases.

Rebecca Harris: Absolutely. I have seen officers in action with their cameras, which they can use, for example, when entering the scene of a domestic dispute to which they have been called. As they arrive, they can record evidence of their own that they can use in court. When the victim of domestic violence is, for whatever reason, nervous, reluctant or intimidated about coming forward, they can prosecute on her behalf. That is an enormous innovation. It relies on the police remembering to turn the cameras on, however, so they are doing good training on that. It is a great innovation, and the police are very pleased to have it.

I have visited a custody suite. Hon. Members will understand my reluctance to be photographed anywhere near the cells. I can well imagine the comments on webpages about the picture of any Member of Parliament in the cells. I have seen the pressures that the police face there, and the teething processes involved in trying, not without difficulty, to modernise and to move to new technology. I have been out with CID, and I have seen the forensic labs. I also went to a drugs factory, which was very interesting. A Member of Parliament does not often get the opportunity to go into a cannabis factory. I have also seen how the police are dealing with the problem of modern-day slavery, which they were not geared up to deal with in previous decades. I have seen the sensitivity with which they approach finding out about what they call the “gardener”, who is sometimes left in such factories without any real means of escape.

There are big changes in the way that our police are policing and big differences in the kind of crimes they have to police. They are spectacular in standing up to the challenge of doing all that in difficult funding circumstances. I must say that I have been overwhelmed struck by the sheer commitment and dedication of our police officers. I definitely expected to find professionalism, but I must admit that I did not anticipate just how

passionate they are about their work and the extent to which they really care about the communities they serve. Again, I put on the record my thanks to them and to Chief Constable Stephen Kavanagh for helping with the scheme, and I say to hon. Members, “Do it.” All hon. Members should take that opportunity, because it makes a huge difference.

Essex police, whose motto is “Sworn to Serve”, has long been an efficient force. I could wax lyrical about Essex police for a long time, because when I was in publishing, we produced a book about the history of the constabulary. It is a very long, honourable and proud constabulary. Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary has repeatedly found that Essex police force provides better value for money than other police forces. It already has a very close programme of collaboration with Kent police, as was mentioned earlier, including significant sharing of back-office functions, and it is collaborating increasingly closely with other forces in the east of England. It also has one of the lowest reserves in the country, so it has not had the option of absorbing extra costs and pressures by reducing its reserves. That makes the fact that it has managed to be so successful in what it does all the more remarkable. It is right, however, that it should continually look for efficiencies to ensure that public money is spent on keeping the public safe.

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend is making a very effective point about her local force. If I am called to speak, I intend to say very similar things about efficiencies in Lancashire police. Will she join me in welcoming the £55 million from the police innovation fund, which will help forces to continue to modernise and to create efficiencies in the way they operate?

Rebecca Harris: I absolutely welcome the announcement of those funds. A lot of things are already going on in the police, but it does cost money just to modernise and make improvements. I wish we did not have such an enormous debt in this country, but ultimately, in a strange way, the drive to create efficiencies means that, when our economy is back on an even keel and the money is again flowing in, our police service will be enormously efficient. Old practices, which have been stuck in place for many years, will have been ironed out.

John Stevenson: On that point, does my hon. Friend agree that such innovations and making our police forces far more efficient have been due to the introduction of police and crime commissioners?

Rebecca Harris: Absolutely. I will come on to that point later, but the innovation of police and crime commissioners was an enormous achievement of the last Parliament. My police and crime commissioner has been highly visible, and much more so than the old police board that he replaced. To this day, people do not realise that such police boards even existed, but they know the name of their police and crime commissioner and are able to approach him.

Essex police force remains very keen to see a review of the funding formula that determines individual police force allocations across the country. The changes to the formula proposed by the Home Office last year would have meant an increase of more than £10 million in the funding for Essex police. We hope that a review later this year will increase the amount of central funding for Essex.

As I have said, Essex is an area with an historically low policing precept. I believe it is about £140 on average, compared with a national average of more than £180 for a band D householder. Essex police force is very proud to say that it has been a lean and efficient force for a long time. I recently surveyed my residents to ask whether they would be prepared to pay extra if that meant additional officers and greater police visibility. Unsurprisingly, the response was of course overwhelmingly positive.

Because of the difficulties of the existing rules about how PCCs can put across their case in a referendum and about how such a referendum is triggered by a rise of 2% or higher, there has been real concern in Essex, with such a low precept, that we would only ever be able to have an increase of 1.99%. That would embed, in perpetuity, a disadvantage for such a lower-cost force compared with more expensive ones. I am very grateful to the Chancellor and Home Office Ministers for listening to that point. The Government are now allowing police and crime commissioners in areas with the lowest precepts to have flexibility in raising their precept. In Essex, that has made it possible to raise the base budget for Essex police by £3.8 million to £266.3 million this year. Frankly, it is right for forces with the lowest precepts to raise their precepts on local council tax payers, rather than call on central Government and national resources to get other members of the public, who may already be paying a higher price for the police in their local area, to provide funding through a higher grant allocation. This is the right and fair way forward, and it is understood by local residents.

The current budget includes increased investment in specialist police officers and police staff to tackle child sexual exploitation, child abuse, serious sexual offences and domestic abuse. There will also be an increased investigative capacity to tackle those horrible crimes and greater support and safeguarding for victims. We now hear so much more about those hidden harms, which we did not used to talk about and recognise in the same way. As we have heard in this debate, the figures for domestic abuse, child abuse and other hidden harms have been rising, which has contributed to the appearance that violent crime is rising. I would contend, as I am sure would most police officers in my area, that these crimes are not rising. What is rising is the confidence of people to come forward and report them, knowing that they will be dealt with sympathetically. The police are taking a very different approach to such crimes and have had training in how to deal with them. They also wear cameras now, as my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) said, and other changes in legislation have been made.

Within the budget, there will be greater investment in the training that is needed to equip officers to investigate internet-enabled crime and cybercrime, which are affecting individuals and businesses across the country. That subject is very topical this week.

I welcome the autumn statement and the funding review, which will enable Essex police to keep many more PCSOs than it had planned and to make many positive innovations. Essex is lucky to have been served by such a fantastic police and crime commissioner in Nick Alston. I say unashamedly that he is the best police and crime commissioner in the country. He was recognised by his peers in an election on that basis. He

has served as the inaugural police and crime commissioner at a time of real change and financial difficulty. We would not be in such good shape in Essex were it not for his sterling support for, and challenge to, the police. Far from being a faceless police board of the great and the good that no one knows about, his name is incredibly well known. I have only been able to accept his resignation because the highly able Roger Hirst is standing as the Conservative candidate in the police and crime commissioner elections.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I have allowed the hon. Lady to cover a broad scope, but I do not want to get into campaigning and electioneering. This must not become an election campaign, rather than a debate on the police funding grant.

Rebecca Harris: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker. Thank you for your indulgence.

Despite the huge debt burden this country faces, I am proud that the Conservative Government have managed to protect police spending as much as they have. I very much welcome today's motion.

2.42 pm

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. May I join in the welcome to the Serjeant at Arms? We served at the Ministry of Justice together many years ago. I very much welcome his presence today.

This debate is about the police grant—an issue that the Policing Minister skirted around. He talked about a range of issues, including rationalisation and making the police service more efficient, but he avoided the central question of the level of police funding that the Government are committed to for the next few years.

However, I do not want to start on a negative note. On a positive note, I share with the Minister and the hon. Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) an admiration for the work of the police and the professionalism of the police service. They do a marvellous job. We must never forget that the police put their lives on the line every day. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), as a Merseyside MP, will note that, because we recently lost an officer in Merseyside. Anyone who has been to the National Police Memorial Day, as the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and I have, will know that the police do a great job and put their lives on the line every day.

This debate is about the level of financial support for the police service across England and Wales. It is clear from what my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington said that the level of support is not sufficient to meet the needs of the police service over the next few years. Nobody will deny that crime has fallen in certain key areas, and that the police are trying their best to reduce crime in key areas. However, a key point has been missed in this debate: policing is not just about crime and whether crime is falling or otherwise.

The hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) put his finger on it when he spoke about the difficult circumstances that Cumbria has faced with the recent flooding. In such circumstances, the police are the first port of call. When there are public order events, such as

[Mr David Hanson]

football matches and parades—my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington spoke about the recent events in Birmingham—the police are the first port of call. When there are road accidents or deaths in our communities, whether in houses or on the streets, the police are the first port of call. Because social services and health services are not always operational at weekends, on mental health issues the police are the first port of call 24 hours a day.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington spoke about the golden thread of neighbourhood policing that runs through the service. The police are about reassurance, visibility and evidence collecting, not just about solving crime. My worry is that today's settlement will put the level of service at risk. No one can deny that the service is under pressure.

I happen to live in a relatively low-crime area in north Wales. The police force there does a great job under Mark Polin. I met Inspector Dave Jolley in my local area last week. The police are doing a great job and the level of crime is relatively low. However, the budget is putting great pressure on the level of service. It is important to examine that, rather than to duck around the issues, as the Minister did today.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): This Government clearly have a small-state Conservative view of the world, as we have seen in local government, which will be changed radically by this week's settlement. Does my right hon. Friend agree that what the average member of the public wants is the reassurance of having police in their communities, and that what is being proposed in the small-state Conservative world that is being put forward is not what our voters want?

Mr Hanson: The constituents of north Wales and, I am sure, of Durham want a visible police force that engages with them locally, works with them locally and provides reassurance, as well as solving and preventing crime. The Minister has missed something extremely important. He has focused on crime falling in certain areas, which I accept it has—I will come on to the areas where crime has not fallen—but policing is about much more than solving crime.

Barbara Keeley: My right hon. Friend is making some very effective points. I have already raised the issue of gun crime, particularly in Greater Manchester. That will not be solved in any way other than through neighbourhood policing and working with the community. Our outgoing chief constable, Sir Peter Fahy, said before leaving his post that relationship building was needed with the community, so that people were confident to come forward and give the police information, without which the police cannot solve the gun crime that we have. In Moss Side, it took a long period of building such relationships to get that information out. That is the key point.

Mr Hanson: My hon. Friend makes her point very well. As she says, we need not just high-level policing but community intelligence and reassurance, and people who know their communities and who work at a local level.

The Minister made great play of efficiency. Nobody will deny that we can make the service more efficient. He is absolutely right about the sharing of buildings and about procurement. He knows about the air contract and the vehicle contract. Those are reforms that we should be making to save money. However, the bottom line is that those efficiencies are not compensating local police forces for the long-term reduction in central Government grant. My police force in north Wales has made efficiency savings of £19.65 million over the past four years, but that has not compensated it for the loss of grant.

The central point I want to put to the Minister, as I said in an intervention on him, is that the reductions in central Government grant are being compensated for by rises in the local precept. My local force area in north Wales has had a grant reduction of 18% over the four years. At the same time, there has been a 14.5% rise in the precept. My constituents are paying more in local taxes at a time when they are losing money in central Government grant.

The point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) understands, is that the poorest areas do not have the council tax base that richer areas have to raise that amount of resource. A 1% or 2% rise in—dare I say it?—the constituency or council area where we are now, Westminster, will raise a hell of a lot more than a 1% or 2% rise in a community such as mine in north-east Wales. When the grant is cut to forces such as North Wales police, and we are expected to raise the local precept, it means that my constituents pay more locally for something that should be provided as part of a national service, whereby richer areas contribute to crime reduction in poorer areas or, indeed, in higher-crime areas. It is important that the Minister recognises that it is not simply a case of reducing the grant and hoping that we can raise that local precept, which he did not mention in any detail today, but of having a fair settlement that meets the needs of poorer communities or areas where crime is higher.

It is important to place it on the record that, under the previous Labour Government, there were 18,000 more police officers than we have now. Crime consistently fell under that Labour Government. If we could look again, in the next three to four years while the Minister holds office, at how we respond to not only the efficiency agenda but the central Government grant agenda, he could do a great deal to help reduce crime and build reassurance.

The Minister mentioned crime falling but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington said, violent crime has increased by 27% in the past year. On victim outcomes, for half the offences recorded in 2014-15, the case was closed without a single suspect being identified. Hate crime, disability crime, sexual offences and violence against women are starting to increase. There has been a 36% increase in sexual offences. For historical reasons, the reporting of sexual offences is also rising. I accept that car crime, shoplifting and other forms of crime are falling. Good—I am pleased about that, and we want crime to continue to be driven down. However, the Minister cannot avoid the fact that the funding settlement will mean at least a standstill for some authorities, and at worst, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington mentioned, a massive cut, particularly for

those authorities that have the highest crime, the greatest challenge and the lowest council tax base from which to draw the resources.

It is a little complacent of the Minister to say that all will be well because crime has fallen and forces are managing. My plea to him is to drive efficiency forward still further and perhaps even consider mergers, looking at some of the voluntary mergers that we have encouraged in the past, but not to pass on central Government grant cuts to areas that cannot meet the need, and need to raise money locally. The police service demands more. It is trying to do its best in a professional manner, but the settlement, given the new problems of increased terrorism, cybercrime, fraud and a range of other crimes, will not meet the challenge in the next four to five years. It will certainly not do so in the next year and I therefore support my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington in asking the Minister to review it. I will cast my vote this afternoon to try to make him review it and I hope that others will join me at one minute past four.

Mr Speaker: I will now announce the result of the ballot held today for the election of a new Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee. Four hundred and sixty votes were cast, with one spoilt ballot paper. The counting went to three stages, and 417 active votes were cast in that round, excluding those ballot papers whose preferences had been exhausted. The quota to be reached was therefore 209 votes. Mary Creagh was elected Chair with 258 votes. The other candidate in that round was Geraint Davies, who received 159 votes. Mary Creagh will take up her post immediately. I congratulate the hon. Lady on her election. The results of the count under the alternative vote system will be made available as soon as possible in the Vote Office and published on the internet for public viewing.

Notwithstanding some of the courtesies that have developed around these matters in recent times, given that we are in the middle of a debate and people are waiting to speak, I should be most grateful if hon. Members expressed their congratulations and commiserations outside the Chamber.

Again, I warmly congratulate the hon. Lady and I thank the other candidates for taking part in that important election.

2.55 pm

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): May I briefly congratulate the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on her election as Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee? None of us will miss the tsunami of paper to which we have all been subjected over the past few days, but I am sure we will all miss the poetry of the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner). It may not have been from Palgrave's "Golden Treasury", but it was certainly entertaining.

I am grateful to be called to speak in this important debate on the police grant and pleased to follow the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson), a former Policing Minister, who is very experienced in these matters, although I do not agree with everything that he says. I am certainly not always right.

Simon Hoare: No!

Christopher Pincher: You may be surprised to learn that, Mr Deputy Speaker. However, when police and crime commissioners were first mooted, I have to admit that I was sceptical. I am a Conservative and, like all Conservatives, wary of change, so I was not sure whether we should employ this radical procedure of appointing police and crime commissioners. I always remind myself of the words of the former Prime Minister, the great Marquess of Salisbury, who, when officials and Ministers visited him at Hatfield House to encourage him to do this, say that or think about the other, would press his fingers to his chin and say after a moment's thought, "Twere better not." Governments of all stripes would do well when considering officials' ideas to say, "Twere better not." We might all be better off.

However, the Home Secretary was right, on police and crime commissioners, to say "Twere better to do this" because they have transformed our police forces around the country and the way in which they spend their money, not least in my county of Staffordshire, where Matthew Ellis has done a tremendous job in introducing new technology. Hand-held tablets have reduced the amount of time that police officers have to work in their stations and has put them out on the beat. At a fraction of the cost, that has effectively created 100 new police officers in Staffordshire. As a result of Matthew Ellis's reforms, there has not been an increase in the precept in the past four years, and he can balance the budget for the next four years without an increase in the precept.

Other hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), have mentioned body cameras. We call them "bobby cameras" in Staffordshire, which led the way with that innovation. They not only make it easier for the police to prosecute crime, but make it far more challenging for people to bring malicious and false accusations against the police. If the police are wearing cameras and can film their own behaviour, angry, often young people are far less likely to make untrue claims about the police.

In Staffordshire, we have also led the way in introducing a cadet force. There are now 240 cadet officers between the ages of 14 and 17 working in and with the police to build their skills and work out whether they want a career in the police service. If money is spent effectively and considerately, we can have better policing, a community that feels safer, and a police force that has the tools it needs to do the job.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am interested in what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but will he address the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson)? The central grant to counties such as Durham is far more important than the precept, given that even a large increase in our precept will not generate much cash because of the number of band A properties in County Durham. Does that not mean that there is no level playing field across the UK, given that the precept is not a way of generating any extra cash in places that contain large numbers of band A properties?

Christopher Pincher: I hear the hon. Gentleman's point, but I feel that he may be thinking that Staffordshire is some sort of green and leafy county. Staffordshire has Stoke in it, and areas of deprivation in Tamworth, Stafford and Burton. That county, which is led by Matthew Ellis, has managed to make a saving of

[*Christopher Pincher*]

£126 million, which is invested in technology and makes policing better in Staffordshire and—dare I say this?—better than in County Durham?

Mr Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Christopher Pincher: I will not give way because the House does not have much longer to debate this matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The House has lots of time. If you wish to give way, Mr Pincher, you must do so, but do not use the Chair as a debating point to say that we have cut the time down. That is not the case, no matter what the Whips might tell you.

Christopher Pincher: I am grateful, as ever, for your guidance Mr Deputy Speaker, but I would not wish to impose on the time of my colleagues on both sides of the House, and I am sure that the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) can make his own speech in his own good time. If he cannot, I am sure he will tweet about it later on.

In conclusion, Staffordshire has an innovative police force that works collaboratively with the community and its police and crime commissioner. We have cut costs and put more police on the streets, we have introduced innovation, and our public are happy. I commend our police force and police and crime commissioner to other police forces around the country. I was wrong to say no to police and crime commissioners, and the Labour party is wrong to pour cold water on this grant settlement, which will deliver more money to the police. When it does, Staffordshire will lead the way.

3.2 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) for his remarks about PC David Phillips whom we lost on Wirral last year. He died in the line of duty, doing the job that he did so well to protect the people of Wirral. He was a highly valued and dedicated officer, and I know that his loss is keenly felt.

The Chancellor's eleventh hour U-turn on police funding in November's comprehensive spending review was welcome. The police and crime commissioner on Merseyside had been anticipating cuts of between £62 million to £100 million by 2019-20, which would have stretched to near breaking point the capacity of the Merseyside police force to do its job of keeping us safe. Cuts on that scale would have meant the loss of all police and community support officers and the mounted police section, as well as reduced resources for tackling serious and organised crime, sexual offences and hate crime. People on Merseyside were extremely concerned about the impact that that would have had on the safety of our communities.

The relief with which the Chancellor's announcement was greeted on Merseyside was qualified by the knowledge of the spending reductions that our police force was already being forced to make. Between 2010-11 and 2015-16, the force made savings of £77 million, resulting in an overall budget reduction of 20%. Over that period, the number of police officers fell by 20%, police staff by 24%, and PCSOs by 25%. PCSOs are the eyes and ears

of community policing on whom we rely. On Merseyside, and particularly the Wirral, PCSOs now end their shifts at 10 pm, which is before the pubs have closed, as a result of the reduction in shift allowance in May 2013. There simply is not enough money to pay them to be on duty at one of the times when they are most needed.

The relief felt on Merseyside at the news of the Chancellor's U-turn was therefore tempered by what followed. Since November, it has become clear that the Chancellor's pledge to safeguard police funding was not the full 180° U-turn that we hoped for, but only partial, and the devil is very much in the detail. The Chancellor's pledge to protect the police depends on an increase in the precept to compensate for a reduction in Government grants. Merseyside's general grant was reduced by £1.3 million.

The Home Secretary has made it clear that she expects the grant reduction to be offset by increasing the precept to the maximum available, and the police and crime commissioner has consulted the general public and the police and crime panel on increasing the precept by 1.95%. That proposal has won strong support in both cases. However, for 2016-17, Merseyside police faces a budget deficit of £5.4 million. To address that deficit and balance the budget, the PCC is proposing to utilise £2.1 million of reserves, and request the force to make further savings of £3.3 million in 2016-17. Assuming that the PCC's overall level of funding remains broadly at the 2016-17 level, it is anticipated that further savings of £22 million will be required by 2017-18 and 2020-21.

Although the final settlement announced in the spending review will mean that the force will have to make smaller savings than expected, it still represents a challenge. Those savings will have to be made against a background of increasing demands on the Merseyside police. The increase in some kinds of crime—including serious offences—on Merseyside has been significantly higher than the national average, and I urge the Minister to look at the detail.

The overall increase in crime on Merseyside between September 2014 and September 2015 was 6.4%—that is just in one year—which was in line with the national averages for England and Wales. However, when we look at other offences, we find that the picture is not so favourable. Vehicle theft offences on Merseyside increased by 8.9%, compared with 0.1% in England and Wales. Domestic burglary increased by 1.2% on Merseyside, but decreased by 5.1% in England and Wales. There was a 48.7% increase in offences involving violence against the person in Merseyside, compared with nearly half that—26.8%—in England and Wales. Those are worrying figures. Violent offences involving injury increased by 38.6% on Merseyside, compared with 16% in England and Wales, and the number of violent offences without injury leapt by 60.7%, compared with 37.5% for England and Wales.

Those figures for Merseyside are a matter of concern and reflect the serious need for properly funded policing. The number of sexual offences increased by 34.5% in Merseyside. It is thought that that increase may reflect a greater willingness of victims to come forward, as well as improvements in recording crime. While that willingness must be welcomed, the resources must be available to pursue cases and deal with victims in a sensitive way. If that does not happen, victims will not continue to come forward in greater numbers. People on Merseyside must

have redress in law when they are subjected to violence, and the state must act as their protector and defender. The first duty of the state is to protect the public, and the Chancellor must ensure that the police have the resources to do so.

Wirral West is a lovely part of the world with some areas of real prosperity, but it also has areas of deprivation. In some areas of my constituency people are frightened to go to the shops in the middle of the day because of antisocial behaviour. That is wholly unacceptable.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a strong case by articulating the impact that these cuts are having on communities. Despite being at opposite ends of the region, she and I are both covered by the Merseyside police force, and every day we see the impact of the cuts on the people she has spoken about. Does she agree that the people we ask to do this difficult job are the men and women who are police officers on Merseyside, and that they are also suffering as a result of these cuts? A Police Federation survey towards the end of last year showed that more than three-quarters of police officers did not feel valued in the service and were suffering from low morale, and that is a real cause for concern.

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it is important that we value police officers and all police staff who do such a difficult job.

All my constituents deserve to be able to go about their daily lives without fear or anxiety. All of them deserve a police service that is funded at a level that enables it to do its job safely and efficiently. I pay tribute to the work done by all Merseyside police staff, including PCSOs, police officers and so-called back-office staff. They have been rather maligned, I feel, by certain Government Members. Front-line personnel, often in perilous situations, rely on them. Without them, the force could not operate. I also pay tribute to the police and crime commissioner, who does such a good job.

The Chancellor made his U-turn on extreme cuts the night before the spending review. That suggests an extraordinary lack of planning and calls into question the quality of decision making in the Treasury. The police force on Merseyside must be funded at a level that enables it to prevent crime wherever possible and pursue effectively those who commit it. The force has to be able to meet the rising demands on it from increased levels of crime and the expectations we have of it. That is fundamental if we are to live in a civilised, stable and safe society. I urge the Minister to look carefully at policing need on Merseyside and to fight for a fair police funding settlement.

3.10 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate and a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood). I will use the short time available to address some of the issues that affect London in particular, but let me start by making it very clear that I have not heard any Government Member maligning anybody in the police force—far from it. I put on record my tribute to the Metropolitan police, particularly in my borough where they have had to deal with some interesting issues over the past month. I will refer to those later on.

Last September, a number of London Members had dinner with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, who went through the modelling to which my right hon. Friend the Police Minister referred earlier. So that we understood the potential of the modelling, I think that it was dinner without wine, but it was dinner none the less. After that, my hon. Friends the Members for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) and for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) led delegations to meet the Home Secretary. From a London point of view, I am delighted that the Minister, the Chancellor and the Home Secretary listened. It will make a huge difference. The £900 million in cash terms over the next four years, with the reforms the Minister talked about, will allow for the policing of our national city, including our local constituencies.

The key point is that there have been reforms, a number of which have rendered the police force more effective. I made an intervention on the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), who was rightly talking about the effectiveness of neighbourhood policing. One problem with the previous model, however, was that people got taken off neighbourhood policing, particularly in London. There have been some real issues with that at various times. I have no doubt that it was a great innovation and he was right to say it. It works and it has worked. Even though there is a reduced number, having dedicated people there the whole time has a similar effect. We saw that recently in my constituency, with the help the police received in relation to information brought forward to solve a very unfortunate murder.

The money for London, of course, is not just there for the local; it has to be there for the national. I thank the Home Secretary and the Chancellor for listening to the issues relating to the National Crime Agency. The investment has the potential to transform it into a world-leading law enforcement agency. If we look at any number of the debates we have had in the Chamber in the past two years about cybercrime and the impact it has on our national city, we see that on one level it affects us all. The risk that criminals will be able to break into the internet of things and create problems for people on a personal level is high. London is the financial centre of Europe; nay, it is the global financial centre of the world. Alertness to cybercrime, and giving the police the resources to be able to fight cybercrime, is therefore absolutely key. Investment in the NCA will have a big impact not only in London, and on the reputation of London, but nationally.

The same applies to counter-terrorism. The money that has been invested will have a huge impact both locally and nationally. The Police Minister will be aware that there were a number of incredibly callous bomb hoaxes at four of my local schools two weeks ago. The money secured for the NCA and counter-terrorism can not only be invested in the capability to ensure there are extra police on the streets but to deal with and to build up the intelligence on callous bomb hoaxers and defeat them. The local commander kindly shared with me a lot of information that I would not want to bring out today on the work it has done, but that work can happen only if we put the money into some of those agencies as well. The police grant will protect those agencies and protect people on the streets day after day, minute after minute. All that is absolutely crucial in the great city of London.

[Stephen Hammond]

Many cities in this country and around the world face the threat of terrorism. London, however, faces a unique and very severe threat from terrorism, so there are additional pressures on London police. It is therefore particularly welcome that the Met and the City of London police will, through the Greater London Authority, receive national and international city funding worth £174 million.

We in London are pleased that the Minister has listened. The money was necessary and it was right that the adjustment was made. It is right that we are protecting the police. What we do in London has an impact not only across London constituencies, but nationally and internationally. Like the former shadow Police Minister, the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson), I will be casting my vote on the basis of what I think the police need. I recognise and pay tribute to what the Government have done. I hope my colleagues and others will join us in realising what a good settlement this is for the police and will support the Government in the Lobby tonight.

3.16 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I would like to speak briefly about Bedfordshire, which has been very seriously underfunded for a prolonged period. It still has serious problems. I was very pleased to visit the Policing Minister with the other five Members of Parliament for Bedfordshire—Conservative and Labour—a little time ago. He will have seen the paper prepared by the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable illustrating the desperate state of funding for policing in Bedfordshire. I made the point, in Business questions last week, suggesting that the funding formula was fundamentally flawed—broken was the term I used. I hope the funding formula will be amended rapidly, so that it can provide fair funding for Bedfordshire and other authorities across the country.

We have a particular problem with knife crime that is comparable with that in Merseyside, Greater Manchester and other areas, yet we are substantially less well funded. We also have a problem with gun crime that is comparable with that in large urban areas. Again, we cannot cope because we have serious underfunding. Our police force does a wonderful job with the resources it has, but those resources are simply not good enough. Rural Wales has, per head of population, resources and police numbers that are a multiple of those available in Bedfordshire, yet it has very little crime. There is something fundamentally wrong with a formula that can give such relatively generous police funding to rural areas with very little crime, when Bedfordshire has some fairly serious problems with crime, which we do our best to deal with but really are struggling with.

We have an excellent chief constable and an excellent police and crime commissioner in Jon Boutcher and Olly Martins. They are doing their best and have provided me with detailed arguments and statistics, which the Policing Minister will have. They make the point over and over again that we need a fairer funding formula to bring Bedfordshire into line with other areas.

Our area needs extra resources for policing. As I mentioned, we have crime, but we also have political extremism on both sides of the divide, and that requires extra policing too. The police do the best job they can,

with the resources available, but we do not have enough resource to do the necessary job. I urge the Policing Minister to look seriously at the funding formula. It should not just be an extra bit of cash to help out in the short term. We need to consider fundamentally how it can be revised, so that it treats Bedfordshire and every other area more equitably. Overall, we still need more funding for the police in general, but the lower funding we have across the country ought to be allocated fairly, and Bedfordshire should get its fair amount.

I will leave it there. I apologise to hon. Members and to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I have to go to the European Scrutiny Committee, where we are interviewing the Foreign Secretary. It is pressing business, so I hope that hon. Members will forgive me if I leave fairly quickly after my speech.

3.20 pm

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Despite some of the scaremongering in the press, the police grant report is good news for police forces across the country and for the force that covers my constituency. I strongly welcome the significant increase in financial resources available across England and Wales and the fact that no police and crime commissioner will face a reduction in cash funding in the next financial year. Credit for that must go to the Home Secretary and the Policing Minister, whom I thank for investing in protecting my constituents from crime and disorder.

The police have had to bear a heavy burden, as the country has had to deal with the mess left behind by the Labour party. The report confirms that we are through the worst and that under a responsible Government we can once again afford to offer our police the support they need and deserve. The fact is that crime has fallen by more than a quarter under this Government. Crime has fallen across Lancashire, including in Pendle.

Barbara Keeley: I counsel the hon. Gentleman against talking about crime falling across the country. He is saying things that are not true for Greater Manchester, which has seen a 14% increase in recorded crime and a 36% increase in violent crime, but which is facing an £8.5 million cut. Will he please not talk about crime falling across the country, as he is not referring to Greater Manchester?

Andrew Stephenson: The hon. Lady is talking about reported crime. According to the British crime survey, crime has fallen across the country, and that survey has always been accepted on a cross-party basis as a more accurate reflection of crime rates across the country.

Barbara Keeley *rose*—

Andrew Stephenson: I want to talk about rates of crime that have increased, so if the hon. Lady will allow me, I will make some progress.

Jack Dromey: My intervention will be quick, because I am keen that everyone has the chance to speak, but it is important to put the record right. In July, cybercrime and online fraud will be included in the crime survey of England and Wales. The early estimate is that it will add 6 million crimes and result in crime possibly doubling. Will the hon. Gentleman reflect on what he has just said and recognise that at last the truth will be told on crime? It is not falling; it is changing.

Andrew Stephenson: If the shadow Minister will hold his horses, I will talk about cybercrime and other types of crime not currently reflected in the crime figures and why the police grant is a sensible investment in our ability to deal with new forms of crime.

Drug gangs are a real problem in Pendle, but Operation Regenerate has seen significant resources and a significant number of officers dedicated to tackling organised crime there. The Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 will help further by stopping people profiting from selling dangerous drugs to our young people. So-called legal highs have caused serious harm to young people across my area, and I am proud to have served on the Bill Committee, alongside other right. hon. and hon. Members in the Chamber today.

Although most types of crime recorded in the statistics have fallen, we have seen upwards trends in certain types of crime. Rates of violence and sexual offences have increased in recent years. Some of that is down to historical under-reporting, but there are other factors. As a country, we still face an epidemic of domestic violence—it is mostly against women, but men are affected too. Just last week, a woman was the victim of a very serious sexual assault on the streets of Colne, the town in which I live. This is a rare thing to happen in the town, and I am sure the whole House will join me in hoping for the swift arrest of those guilty of this appalling attack and in expressing our every sympathy for the victim. I hope the Minister will set out how the Home Office will support police forces such as Lancashire to work with other agencies to ensure that domestic violence and sexual offences are reported and victims protected.

Lancashire police are at the forefront of fighting the rise of modern slavery. One of the first—if not the first ever—modern slavery orders was given to a man in my constituency, using new powers given to the police by the coalition Government's Modern Slavery Act 2015. This shows that we face new types of crime. The Government must continue to help the police to reform so that they can tackle new forms of crime and protect vulnerable people at risk of exploitation.

The commitment to transforming funding towards developing specialist capabilities to tackle cybercrime will be hugely important, if we are to protect individuals and businesses from the growing threat of online fraud, which all the statistics indicate is of real concern. A new cyber-skills institute will soon open in Nelson, in my constituency, which I hope Ministers will help to support so that we can train the next generation of cyber experts that our police forces desperately need.

There is also the challenge of identifying how the police can best help to integrate communities in east Lancashire and across the country, as we join together to fight extremism and discrimination against certain groups based on their ethnicity or religion. I recently met Andy Pratt, who served Lancashire for 28 years as a police officer. During his career, he set up the first ever community cohesion team in the county, and since his retirement, he has worked tirelessly on interfaith work, trying to build bridges, particularly between our Muslim and Christian communities. I am delighted that he has been selected as the Conservative party's candidate—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I said I did not want us campaigning for people standing

for election. The debate is about police funding, not candidates, no matter how good or bad they are; that is not the idea of the debate.

Andrew Stephenson: I thank you for that guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It was not guidance.

Andrew Stephenson: In conclusion, I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for how he has worked with me and other Lancashire MPs on a cross-party basis, particularly over the proposed changes to the police funding formula, which would have disadvantaged Lancashire police. I welcome the generous settlement before the House. We now have to work with our local police forces to continue to reform policing across the UK and to drive down all types of crime.

3.28 pm

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I rise to make four brief points. First, on the level of funding, before the autumn statement, the Home Office, like many other Departments, was asked to model reductions in spending, and the police were preparing for cuts of 20% to 25%. Labour said that the police could withstand cuts of 10%, but the Chancellor protected police funding, and I welcome that protection, as do many police leaders. The most impressive responses from the policing community came from people such as Chief Constable Sara Thornton, who recognised the need not only for sufficient funding, but for the police to reform and to adapt to the changing demands on their services.

My second point is about flexibility. It is important that the police are flexible to meet the demands on their services. A National Audit Office study reveals that the police do not have a sufficient understanding of those demands, so it is important that they both understand and adapt to meet them.

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

James Berry: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, who was wronged earlier, because Durham is, in fact, the most efficient police force in the country. I think he wanted to make that point earlier.

Mr Jones: I wanted to put the record straight for the hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher). As the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) rightly says, Durham is the only constabulary in the country that has received an “outstanding” rating for efficiency five times from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs inspectors. In spite of that, however, it is going to have to save about £3 million over the next year. The hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) has said that the cash settlement has not been reduced, but other demands mean that the number of officers in County Durham will have to be reduced, even though it has already been cut by some 400 over the past 10 years.

James Berry: I am sure the Minister will deal with that in his response. I do not recognise those statistics, but I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's chief constable for running such a fantastically efficient force.

Jack Dromey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Berry: No.

[James Berry]

The point about flexibility is clearly lost on the Labour party. I recently attended a Westminster Hall debate in which a London Labour MP insisted on a top-down, inflexible model of ward policing in London, without recognising the fact that some wards needed more policing than others, as is the case in Kingston. That is why I endorse the decision taken by the Home Secretary and the Chancellor to be flexible themselves, including increasing funding both for counter-terrorism policing and firearms officers, which is what the police asked for, at a time when we face an unprecedented terrorism threat, and for a new drive to co-ordinate the fight against fraud, which, as the hon. Gentleman has said, has increased, particularly on the internet.

Thirdly, police funding has to go hand in hand with reform. Thanks to the coalition Government—particularly their Conservative policies—there has been an increase in the democratic control of policing through police and crime commissioners. Important reforms have also been made to the police misconduct regime, including, most recently, opening up misconduct hearings to the public, to increase transparency and public confidence. The College of Policing has been created to set standards and guidance for police. I declare that I am an associate of that college and occasionally give lectures there.

The Home Secretary's police reform agenda continues, including funding to encourage collaboration between forces, which is not a top-down model like that pursued under the last Government, but a bottom-up model. There are excellent examples of collaboration, such as that between West Mercia and Warwickshire police. There is also funding to encourage blue light collaboration, which not only saves money, but increases the efficiency and effectiveness of our blue light services.

My fourth and final point is about policing in London and in Kingston, which has the second lowest crime rate in London. We have an excellent borough commander in Glenn Tunstall, who leads a fantastic local police force, which is part of the fabric of the local community and does us in Kingston proud. Tomorrow I will host a public meeting with officers in Surbiton, to talk about the excellent work that they, led by Sergeant Trudy Hutchinson, do to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour. I pay tribute to them.

In Kingston town centre, the Conservative council has made good on our campaign to increase the number of police officers by using the Police Act 1996 to buy extra police officers and making use of the Mayor of London's "buy one, get one free" offer. That has had a fantastic impact on the rate of arrests and on safety in the town centre.

My constituents do not spend all their time in Kingston with its low crime rate; many of them also come into central London, where, of course, crime rates are higher, as is the threat of terrorism. That is why I got together with other London MPs, including my constituency neighbour—my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith)—and my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) to talk to the Policing Minister, the Home Secretary and the Chancellor, in order to ensure that police funding in London was protected. The right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) has claimed that it was Labour that forced a change in

police funding, but I am afraid that that is simply not correct. Clear calls were made by Conservative Members, and the Chancellor, the Home Secretary and the Policing Minister listened to them and protected our budget. As a result, the number of police community support officers in London is not going to be cut, and the number of authorised firearms officers will be increased considerably. There will also be increased funding for counter-terrorism, and our capital city grant has been protected.

To return to the issue of flexibility, certain areas of crime have increased, despite the overall downward trend in the UK and in London, but I am sure that the Metropolitan police and the police in Kingston and the rest of the country will be flexible to meet the increased demand on their services and that they will meet those challenges.

I welcome the report. I am delighted that funding has been protected in London and that the Government are putting the protection of people at home and abroad first. I thank the Minister for what he has done for policing in London.

3.34 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): It is fitting that we are having this debate in the same week that the Prime Minister made a speech on his groundbreaking reforms in our prison system. One startling fact in his speech was that 70% of prisoners have at least seven previous convictions. If we can improve recidivism rates, it will inevitably have an impact on the resources available to police officers. These reforms to the prison system and to the police funding formula are compassionate and they are to be welcomed because they will also help to prevent crime.

My right hon. Friend the Policing Minister is to be congratulated on acting on the promise to review the police funding formula—something promised by others over the years but never actually done; it has now been done by the Minister and the Home Secretary. He is also to be congratulated on protecting the policing budget in the autumn statement and on making real blue light reform possible, enabling the police, the ambulance and the fire services to work together. I shall deal quickly with each in turn.

On the police funding formula, Lincolnshire is the police constabulary in my constituency, which is a very rural part of the world that has been particularly badly affected by the old police funding formula, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). The Lincolnshire chief constable—and, indeed, some of his colleagues and other chief constables—has been very brave in challenging the funding formula. Not every chief constable has made the same progress as him on efficiency savings. He has written an excellent book, "The Structure of Police Finance—Informing the Debate", which helped me when I needed to put various questions to chief constables in my work on the Home Affairs Select Committee. The Select Committee has found that some forces have extraordinarily generous reserves of savings. The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), the Committee Chairman, invited chief constables and police and crime commissioners to give evidence and we heard from some that they had reserves of up to £60 million. Since then, I have learned that the West Midlands force has a

reserve of £153 million. Rather than have that money sitting in a bank account, we should surely spend it wisely to protect the public.

Jack Dromey: The hon. Lady mentions the money of the West Midlands police service, but it is overwhelmingly earmarked for the rationalisation of buildings in order to save money in the medium and longer term and for the recruitment of new police officers. I know Neil Rhodes well, and he is a fine chief constable. He was right to call for a review of the police funding formula, so does the hon. Lady share his dismay and my dismay that, as a consequence of the omnishambles within the Home Office before Christmas, we are stuck with the existing arrangements?

Victoria Atkins: It is certainly true that the chief constable was excited at the prospect of the new funding formula and how it might help his constabulary. It is as it is, but I received a letter from the chief constable last month saying that the constabulary has made further bold bids for transformational funding, which it is excited about in connection with blue light funding. I shall come on to that later.

As we have heard, the overall police budget is going to be protected—up to £900 million by 2019-20—and there is going to be a real-terms increase to £670 million for policing and counter-terrorism next year. There is also to be an increase in transformation funding to help with issues such as cybercrime.

I see in their places three members of the Joint Committee that has scrutinised the draft Investigatory Powers Bill, which is going to report tomorrow. During our work on that Committee we have heard about the changing nature of the threats facing our country and local policing, whether it be in respect of counter-terrorism or the challenges faced by police officers investigating missing persons. That, however, is for another debate and another time.

My final point is about making blue light collaboration possible. In a village in my constituency, Woodhall Spa, fire officers are trained to step in as ambulance workers, because they will be on the scene before the ambulances arrive. That is a great improvement, and the more we see of it the better. When I had the pleasure of visiting police stations in both Louth and Horncastle before Christmas to thank the officers for their work, I was interested to see that Louth police station was next door to the fire station. There must be room for the services to work together in helping to protect the public.

There have been suggestions from the Opposition that Members do not appreciate the work of police officers. That is simply wrong. I had the pleasure and privilege of working with excellent police and law enforcement officers in my previous career, and I am delighted that Lincolnshire constabulary will be hosting its annual awards in March to celebrate the bravery and commitment of officers in our county. I have been invited to the ceremony. Sadly, I shall probably not be able to go because I shall be here, but I wish them well. I am sure that the whole House wishes each and every police officer in our country well for the future, and is grateful for the work that they have done already.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): If the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) stands up, he will be called.

3.41 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. That is very kind.

As the Chancellor of the Exchequer said, the police protect us, and the Government have indeed protected the police. I believe that the settlement strikes the right balance between ensuring that police forces are properly funded and can plan for the future, and maintaining the impetus and the tempo of reforms.

When I was listening to the speech of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), it struck me that it would be helpful to put the settlement in context. Back in 2010, this country was truly staring into the abyss. Youth unemployment had doubled, and Britain was the basket case of Europe. *[Interruption.]* I hear the scoffing of Opposition Members, but the important point is this: the impact on public services would have been felt if the Government had not introduced some degree of order. Let us remember what the position was like back then. People were talking not just about trimming the police force, but about the wholesale meltdown of some of our key public services, and that is precisely what has not happened.

On 25 November the Chancellor announced that police spending would be protected in real terms over the spending review period, when the precept was taken into account. No police and crime commissioner will face a reduction in cash funding next year, and funding will have increased by up to £900 million in cash terms by 2019-20. As has already been pointed out, counter-terrorism funding will increase in real terms to £670 million in 2016-17. We have moved from a time when the country and policing faced disaster to a time when we have a strong funding settlement that will give proper funding to our most important services.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Chalk: Very briefly.

Mr Jones: I think that the hon. Gentleman has to sit down when I stand up.

Alex Chalk: Sorry.

Mr Jones: I know that the present Government find it difficult to distinguish between revenue and capital, among other concepts, but the hon. Gentleman has said that no one will lose cash. Durham, for instance, has an “outstanding” force—the only one in the country—but that force must take £3 million out of its budget this year because of wage increases and other pressures. “Flat cash” does not constitute an increase.

Alex Chalk: As I have said, it is important to put the settlement in context. Back in 2010—*[Interruption.]* May I deal with the point? In 2010, the country was bringing in about £600 million in tax revenue and spending £750 million. If that had not been addressed, the country and policing would be facing meltdown, but policing is now on a sound footing to protect the people of our country.

Speeches are sometimes as interesting for what is not said as for what is said. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington did not mention, even as one of his own apocalyptic scenarios, the kind of cut that he would himself have countenanced. At the Labour party conference

[Alex Chalk]

in Brighton, the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) declared that savings of up to 10% could be found. He said that that would be doable. That is not what is happening under this Government. Funding is now on a sustainable footing and capability is being enhanced.

Jack Dromey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Chalk: I will not take any more interventions.

Let us look at how that capability is being enhanced. Specialist capabilities in cybercrime are being improved, as is firearms capability. Modernisation and reform are also taking place because, as Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary has set out, there are further efficiencies to be made. Whether in respect of decent funding or improving our capability, this settlement will enable us, even in difficult times, to protect our police, build capacity, drive reform and deliver for the people of this country.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 310, Noes 212.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England and Wales: Ayes 305, Noes 208.

Division No. 191]

[3.45 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel	Carmichael, Neil
Afriyie, Adam	Cartledge, James
Aldous, Peter	Cash, Sir William
Allan, Lucy	Caulfield, Maria
Allen, Heidi	Chalk, Alex
Amess, Sir David	Chishti, Rehman
Andrew, Stuart	Chope, Mr Christopher
Ansell, Caroline	Churchill, Jo
Argar, Edward	Clark, rh Greg
Atkins, Victoria	Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Bacon, Mr Richard	Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Baker, Mr Steve	Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Baldwin, Harriett	Collins, Damian
Barclay, Stephen	Colville, Oliver
Baron, Mr John	Costa, Alberto
Barwell, Gavin	Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Bebb, Guto	Crabb, rh Stephen
Bellingham, Sir Henry	Davies, Byron
Benyon, Richard	Davies, Chris
Beresford, Sir Paul	Davies, David T. C.
Berry, Jake	Davies, Glyn
Berry, James	Davies, Dr James
Bingham, Andrew	Davies, Mims
Blackman, Bob	Davis, rh Mr David
Blackwood, Nicola	Dinenage, Caroline
Boles, Nick	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Bone, Mr Peter	Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Borwick, Victoria	Donelan, Michelle
Bradley, Karen	Dorries, Nadine
Brady, Mr Graham	Double, Steve
Brazier, Mr Julian	Dowden, Oliver
Bridgen, Andrew	Drax, Richard
Brine, Steve	Drummond, Mrs Flick
Brokenshire, rh James	Duddridge, James
Bruce, Fiona	Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Buckland, Robert	Dunne, Mr Philip
Burns, Conor	Ellis, Michael
Burns, rh Sir Simon	Ellison, Jane
Burrowes, Mr David	Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Burt, rh Alistair	Elphicke, Charlie
Cairns, Alun	Eustice, George

Evans, Graham	Johnson, Joseph
Evans, Mr Nigel	Jones, Andrew
Evennett, rh Mr David	Jones, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael	Jones, Mr Marcus
Fernandes, Suella	Kawczynski, Daniel
Field, rh Mark	Kennedy, Seema
Foster, Kevin	Kirby, Simon
Fox, rh Dr Liam	Knight, rh Sir Greg
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Knight, Julian
Frazer, Lucy	Kwarteng, Kwasi
Freeman, George	Lancaster, Mark
Freer, Mike	Latham, Pauline
Fuller, Richard	Leadsom, Andrea
Fysh, Marcus	Lee, Dr Phillip
Gale, Sir Roger	Lefroy, Jeremy
Garnier, rh Sir Edward	Leigh, Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark	Leslie, Charlotte
Gauke, Mr David	Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Ghani, Nusrat	Lewis, Brandon
Gibb, Mr Nick	Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Glen, John	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Goodwill, Mr Robert	Lidington, rh Mr David
Gove, rh Michael	Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Graham, Richard	Lopresti, Jack
Grant, Mrs Helen	Lord, Jonathan
Gray, Mr James	Loughton, Tim
Grayling, rh Chris	Lumley, Karen
Green, Chris	Mackinlay, Craig
Green, rh Damian	Mackintosh, David
Greening, rh Justine	Main, Mrs Anne
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic	Mak, Mr Alan
Griffiths, Andrew	Mann, Scott
Gummer, Ben	Mathias, Dr Tania
Gyimah, Mr Sam	Maynard, Paul
Halfon, rh Robert	McCartney, Jason
Hall, Luke	McCartney, Karl
Hammond, rh Mr Philip	McPartland, Stephen
Hammond, Stephen	Menzies, Mark
Hancock, rh Matthew	Mercer, Johnny
Hands, rh Greg	Merriman, Huw
Harper, rh Mr Mark	Metcalfe, Stephen
Harrington, Richard	Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Harris, Rebecca	Milling, Amanda
Hart, Simon	Milton, rh Anne
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Hayes, rh Mr John	Mordaunt, Penny
Heald, Sir Oliver	Morris, Anne Marie
Heapey, James	Morris, David
Heaton-Harris, Chris	Morris, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter	Morton, Wendy
Henderson, Gordon	Mowat, David
Herbert, rh Nick	Mundell, rh David
Hinds, Damian	Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Hoare, Simon	Murrison, Dr Andrew
Hollingbery, George	Neill, Robert
Hollinrake, Kevin	Newton, Sarah
Hollobone, Mr Philip	Nokes, Caroline
Holloway, Mr Adam	Norman, Jesse
Hopkins, Kris	Nuttall, Mr David
Howell, John	Offord, Dr Matthew
Howlett, Ben	Parish, Neil
Huddleston, Nigel	Patel, rh Priti
Hurd, Mr Nick	Pawsey, Mark
Jackson, Mr Stewart	Penning, rh Mike
James, Margot	Penrose, John
Javid, rh Sajid	Percy, Andrew
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil	Perry, Claire
Jenkin, Mr Bernard	Phillips, Stephen
Jenkyns, Andrea	Philp, Chris
Jenrick, Robert	Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Johnson, Boris	Pincher, Christopher
Johnson, Gareth	Poulter, Dr Daniel

Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 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
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 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
 Walker, Mr Robin
 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
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Guy Opperman and
Jackie Doyle-Price

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Alexander, Heidi
 Ali, Rushanara
 Allen, Mr Graham
 Anderson, Mr David
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Barron, rh Kevin
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berger, Luciana
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blenkinsop, Tom
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Burnham, rh Andy
 Butler, Dawn

Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Jenny
 Coker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cox, Jo
 Coyle, Neil
 Crausby, Mr David
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Dakin, Nic
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 De Piero, Gloria

Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Jim
 Dowd, Peter
 Dromey, Jack
 Dugher, Michael
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elliott, Tom
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Gardiner, Barry
 Glass, Pat
 Glendon, Mary
 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
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hermon, Lady
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hunt, Tristram
 Hussain, Imran
 Irranca-Davies, Huw
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, rh Sadiq
 Kinahan, Danny
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona

Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 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
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 Meale, Sir Alan
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame M.
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Pugh, John
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Jamie
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Marie
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Starmer, Keir
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark

Thomas, Mr Gareth	Whitehead, Dr Alan
Thomas-Symonds, Nick	Williams, Mr Mark
Thornberry, Emily	Wilson, Phil
Timms, Mr Stephen	Winnick, Mr David
Trickett, Jon	Winterton, Mrs Dame Rosie
Turley, Anna	Woodcock, John
Twigg, Derek	Wright, Mr Iain
Twigg, Stephen	
Umunna, Mr Chuka	Tellers for the Noes:
Vaz, Valerie	Vicky Foxcroft and
Watson, Mr Tom	Sue Hayman

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) for 2016–17 (HC 753), which was laid before this House on 4 February, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I have now to announce the result of the deferred Division on the Question relating to the draft Immigration and Nationality (Fees) Order 2016. The Ayes were 313 and the Noes were 67, so the Question was agreed to.

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

Local Government Finance (England)

[Relevant Documents: Oral evidence taken before the Communities and Local Government Committee on 13 January 2016, on the Financial Settlement 2015, HC 530, and written evidence to the Committee on Adult social care, reported to the House on 8 February 2016.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): We come now to the three motions on local government finance in England, which will be debated together. I remind the House that these motions will be subject to double majority voting. If Divisions are called on these motions, all Members of the House are able to vote in the Divisions. The motions will be agreed only if, of those voting, a majority of all Members and a majority of Members representing constituencies in England vote in support of the motions. At the end, the Tellers will report the results, first, for all Members and, secondly, for those representing constituencies in England.

4.5 pm

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Greg Clark): I beg to move,

That the Report on Local Government Finance (England) 2016–17 (HC 789), which was laid before this House on 8 February, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this we shall discuss the following motions:

That the Report on the Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) 2016–17 (HC 790), which was laid before this House on 8 February, be approved.

That the Report on Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Alternative Notional Amounts) (England) 2016–17 (HC 791), which was laid before this House on 8 February, be approved.

Greg Clark: I am pleased to open the debate on this year's report on local government finance in England. I would like to start by thanking all colleagues in the House, and council leaders and officials, who contributed to the consultation after I made a provisional statement shortly before Christmas. Nearly 280 groups or individuals contributed to the consultation. All responses have been carefully considered, and sensible suggestions have been incorporated into the final settlement that is before the House today.

I have always been frank with local councils that they will need to continue to make savings. Local government accounts for nearly one quarter of public spending, so it is inevitable and appropriate that councils should play their part in helping to reduce the national deficit. Council tax payers are also national tax payers; they are the same people—our constituents—and everyone suffers if we run a permanent, untamed deficit.

Councils have accepted their part in this responsibility. During the last Parliament, all parts of local government delivered the savings that have helped to reduce the deficit by half. At the same time, satisfaction with the services provided by local councils has been maintained—a remarkable reflection on the professionalism and the resourcefulness of local government.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State understand the frustration of my constituents at the settlement for Harrow Council? We

have one of the lowest per capita settlements in London. The council is having to make £80 million of cuts over four years, leading among other things to the closure of the popular Bridge mental health day centre.

Greg Clark: What I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that London Councils welcomed many of the changes we have made in this settlement, including the provision of a four-year settlement. One of the concerns councils have had for many years is that, with annual funding, they were not able to plan ahead and reap some of the economies.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Greg Clark: The hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) will also know that, in terms of the response to the provisional settlement, I have made extra resources available to Harrow, which I think has gone down well in his borough.

Paul Maynard: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Greg Clark: I will give way to my vigorous hon. Friend.

Paul Maynard: I thank my right hon. Friend not only for finding extra money for Lancashire, but for listening to me and not taking that money out of Blackpool's budget. Blackpool is another urban area facing high levels of need. He has performed a balancing trick very adroitly.

Greg Clark: I am grateful for what my hon. Friend has said. Blackpool has important pressures that need to be met, and he has made representations, as indeed have his local authorities. It is true that some advised that some transitional relief should come at the expense of places such as Blackpool. However, I have been able to find a way for us to provide some relief for the years in which the reductions in grant are sharpest, without making the situation worse for places such as Blackpool, which have benefited from the settlement.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): This is actually a very progressive and good settlement for the long-term future of local government, because it is genuinely devolutionist. In that context, does my right hon. Friend recognise and accept that it is important not only that he has given transitional relief, which helps outer London boroughs such as Bromley, but that London boroughs and other authorities help themselves by reducing their unit costs in the same way as, for example, Bromley, which has the lowest unit costs in outer London?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I had the pleasure of spending some time with the cabinet of Bromley Council, which is one of the most efficient in London and shows the way for all London boroughs to deliver services that are very much valued by their residents, very cost-effectively.

Mr Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): On 26 January, the leader of Blackpool Council wrote to the Secretary of State to remind him that we face cuts

for 2016-17 of 4.9% compared with an England average of 2.8%. Despite that—and despite the Secretary of State's welcome comments yesterday about looking at the way in which demographics in certain areas, particularly those with large numbers of older people, might be dealt with—under this formula Blackpool gets absolutely no transitional relief at all. Is there any logic or justice in that?

Greg Clark: Of course there is, because the transitional relief is for the authorities that had a sharper reduction in the grant than others. Blackpool benefited to the tune of £3 million from the improvement of the grant. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) was wise enough to recognise that, and to recognise the difference it will make to the people of Blackpool, and the hon. Gentleman should do likewise.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): One of the most progressive things that the Secretary of State has done is to give local councils a four-year settlement, so that they can now view what their settlements will be into the future and not live from day to day not knowing what their budget settlement would be in the next year.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right. This is one of the key requests that local government has made of central Government for many years, and it has constantly fallen on deaf ears. Councils right across the country, with all different kinds of party political control, have welcomed the fact that they will have the chance to look ahead and plan for the future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Greg Clark: Let me make a bit of progress, and then I will of course give way to more colleagues.

As the Institute for Fiscal Studies pointed out, over the course of this Parliament the required savings that, as I made clear, councils will need to continue to make will be less than those required in the previous Parliament. The Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that the required savings of

“around 7% in real terms over the next four years...is a substantially slower pace of cuts than councils had to deliver between 2009-10 and 2015-16, when councils' spending power was cut on average by 25% in real terms.”

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that within this process councils are still required to do things in a fundamentally different way, such as setting up trading joint ventures, as one county council told me it had done on Monday, or looking at Uber-type services for buses?

Greg Clark: Yes, councils should take the opportunities to be innovative. My hon. Friend and I served on the Committee on the Bill that became the Localism Act 2011, which introduced a general power of competence for local councils precisely so that they could take decisions in the interests of their residents and contribute effectively.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Greg Clark: I will give way to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), and then to—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the Secretary of State gives way—he has been perfectly polite and courteous in giving way a great many times—let me point out that this is a short debate. Twenty-four people have indicated to me that they would like to make speeches, and they intend to sit here all afternoon awaiting their turn to do so. Many people are making interventions, which the Secretary of State is dealing with most courteously. They are taking part in the debate, and they must be aware that they are taking up the time of other people who will be waiting to speak later on. If you make an intervention in this debate, you must remain for most of the debate and certainly be here for the wind-ups.

Greg Clark: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. Given those numbers, I will be brief in taking interventions, but I will take the point from the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State. Does he recognise the problems of Liverpool, which faces a 9% cut in funding next year, coming on top of a 58% cut since 2010?

Greg Clark: I have been very clear that all councils need to continue to make savings. As I think the hon. Lady will know, the way in which we have conducted the settlements has been fair across the country, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies pointed out. In fact, a council that she knows very well that is close to her area, Sefton Council, said in its response to the consultation:

“The announcement that core spending power will be reduced by only 0.5% between 2015/16 and 2019/20 in cash terms and 6.7% in real terms, is better than we had expected last summer.”

That is from her neighbouring council.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con) *rose*—

Greg Clark: I will give way to my hon. Friend and then make some progress.

Neil Parish: I welcome a review of the fair share for rural areas. The rural fair share campaign, which has been running for many years, is about making sure that funds keep coming across to help us deal with not only our elderly populations, but the things such as small schools and rubbish collections that cost so much more to provide in rural areas. We need a fair deal. I look forward to the Secretary of State's keeping up his good work, but we want to see delivery.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we could add to those services school transport, which is particularly costly in rural areas. That is why the underlying formula should catch up with what has happened in many communities. That is overdue.

I will highlight four features of this year's settlement. First, for decades councils have had to set annual budgets without knowing what resources they can expect 12 months hence. That prevents them from planning long term, and it promotes inefficiency. Because plans and contracts have to be short term, councils miss out on the economies that would be possible if they could take a longer view. For the first time in the history of local government, the settlement gives

indicative figures for the next four years to any council that shows that it can translate such certainty into efficiency savings.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): There is a deep hole in the arrangements for the island. Can the Secretary of State work with locals, of all parties and of none, to find solutions to the problems that we face?

Greg Clark: Indeed, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that he does as MP for the Isle of Wight in bringing together all its leaders and councillors, regardless of party political affiliation, to promote its best interests. I look forward to visiting the island in his company to meet the councillors and officers.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): My county of Staffordshire makes the transitional grant list at No. 18, with just £5.6 million. Next door to me, deprived Stoke-on-Trent gets nothing, against £24.1 million for Surrey. Why, in this battle of the S's, does the south, as ever, win out?

Greg Clark: It is very straightforward. The amount of transitional relief is in proportion to the reduction in revenue support grant, and so Staffordshire had less than Surrey. That is purely mathematical. I should have thought that the addition of nearly £3 million to the council's budget would have been welcomed by council tax payers. In fact, I know that it has been.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, I welcome the statement wholeheartedly. May I take him back to what he has said about certainty? That is welcome, from a district and county council perspective. Will he give further consideration over the coming weeks to providing certainty to town councils that they will be exempt from having their precept capped? They are trying to work in greater concert with district councils, and that parallel certainty will help them to forge such deals.

Greg Clark: There is a lively debate as to whether the bigger town and parish councils should be part of the capping regime. I have resisted drawing them into that, but I look to parish and town councils to exercise economy, recognising that the services that they provide are much valued but that they are paid for by council tax payers. If those councils continue to operate in an economical way, they may not give rise to the question on which my hon. Friend seeks certainty.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Greg Clark: I am going to make some progress, as you have urged me to do, Madam Deputy Speaker. If I have time towards the end, I will take an intervention from the right hon. Gentleman.

The second feature of the settlement is that we have prioritised spending on adult social care—the care that we provide to our elderly and vulnerable citizens. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members groan and complain, but they should recognise that in response to the requests of local government, the Government have done something that the previous Government did not and established funding arrangements to ensure that we can protect our elderly and vulnerable citizens.

In September, the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services and the Local Government Association made a submission to the spending review—“Adult social care, health and wellbeing: A Shared Commitment. 2015 Spending Review Submission”—in which the two organisations jointly requested that an extra £2.9 billion be made available by 2020. With the introduction of the 2% social care precept and £1.5 billion made available to councils through an improved better care fund, up to £3.5 billion of extra funding will be available for adult social care by 2019-20.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Greg Clark: I will not give way.

More elderly people living in our communities is a good thing—they are our parents and grandparents, and it is an advance that they are living longer than anyone thought possible—but we need to pay for their care needs. It is no reflection on the efficiency of a council if care costs increase because the number of older people is increasing in their communities.

Helen Jones: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Andrew Gwynne: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Barbara Keeley: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Greg Clark: I will not give way.

A 2% precept is the equivalent of an annual £23 increase in the average bill for a band D property. That money can be used only for social care, and council tax bills are required to be transparent about the purpose for which the money is raised.

By the end of this Parliament, local government will retain all the business rates it raises. It is a huge transformation from a world in which, just three years ago, every penny that councils collected from local businesses had to be handed over straight to the Treasury. That meant that councils were dependent on the central Government grant. At the start of the last Parliament, nearly 80% of council expenditure was in the form of a grant from central Government. By 2020, all local government spending will be raised by local government. Councils and local people will reap the benefits of reviving economic growth, just as central Government and the country will benefit from the rising prosperity that the Government's policies are fostering. With services financed locally, councils are even more accountable to their electorates, rather than to Ministers in Whitehall. Even as a Minister in Whitehall, I say that this is how it should be.

Helen Jones: I am sorry, but the Secretary of State is being disingenuous. He knows that the whole local government finance system, set up under the previous Government's Local Finance Act 2012, takes no account of need. His social care precept will raise the most

money in areas that have the highest council tax base, not in areas where there is greatest need, which tend to have the lowest council tax base.

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady makes two interesting points. On the first point, about the formula, I agree with her. It is too long since the underlying assessment of needs was updated—it is more than 10 years—and that is why I have proposed to go back to the drawing board and look at the needs and the resources available to each county. She is quite right on that point. On the second point, of course she is right: I recognise that the effect of a 2% precept is different in different parts of the country. The better care fund has been allocated differently precisely to take account of that. I would therefore have thought she welcomed that.

Mark Spencer: Does the Secretary of State recognise that councils that are progressive in supporting business and providing housing for their constituents will actually get a more generous income in future than those that do not support businesses coming into their area?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is of course better for councils to face in the direction of bringing successful businesses into their area and benefiting from that, rather than passing all such benefits up to the Exchequer.

A few moments ago, I mentioned the increasing elderly population, but, as I said to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), we have had a decade of significant demographic change without the needs-based formula—it determines how much a well-run council requires to deliver its services efficiently—being revised to reflect that change.

Andrew Gwynne: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Barbara Keeley: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Lady should be patient. I have given way to their hon. Friend, and I am going to make some progress.

That point was made repeatedly during the consultation by councils from all across the country and under the leadership of all political parties. That is why I will conduct a fundamental review of the needs-based formula to govern the change to 100% business rates retention, which I have described. It is not only the changing needs of different areas that need to be recognised, but the differing costs of providing services to residents depending on the area a council serves. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) was saying, the rural services delivery grant, which recognises the extra costs encountered by rural authorities in delivering services, is bringing £15.5 million into such councils this year. This settlement increases the grant more than fivefold to £80.5 million, which will ensure that there is no deterioration in Government funding for rural areas, when compared with urban areas, for the year of this statutory settlement.

Liam Byrne: The Secretary of State is being characteristically generous. However elegant the strategy, he must surely take a moment to look at the results. What Buckinghamshire gets from the Government will

[Liam Byrne]

have been boosted by 11.4% by 2016-17, while Birmingham has been battered and is losing 10%. I welcome the shift to a needs-based formula, but surely he must see that massive discrepancies are emerging, when great cities such as Birmingham are being battered to bits.

Greg Clark: The right hon. Gentleman is an intelligent man, so he should go away and study the changes in the formula. When I met the former leader of his city, Sir Albert Bore, he recognised, as has the Institute for Fiscal Studies, that it is fair to proceed with an approach that looks at all the resources that are available to local councils. On that basis, his city of Birmingham, for which I have enormous ambition and regard, has benefited significantly. Of course, the transitional grant is for places that did not benefit from the changes in the formula.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): My right hon. Friend maintains a soft and genuine manner, which I admire, but I am made furious by the interventions by Labour Members, because when in power they skewed the whole system. They could not find a way to put the money into Labour areas without coming up with a falsehood. They put density into the formula at four times the weighting of sparsity, when there was no evidence whatsoever of any link between density and need. It was they who skewed the system, and it needs to be put right.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is a passionate advocate and he makes his case very well. I think that all Members across the House would recognise that after 10 years it is appropriate to look again at the cost of providing services in different areas—rural as well as urban—and at the changes in demographic pressures in that time. That sensible approach has been welcomed widely.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Is it not true that the long-standing unfairness has been the penalty against rural areas? Areas such as Devon have a low-wage economy, but the highest council taxes. This settlement addresses that imbalance without penalising areas such as Torbay. I therefore congratulate my right hon. Friend on a very sensible settlement.

Greg Clark: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. Every local government finance settlement has to strike a balance between the very different needs of different areas of the country. Most people who have reflected on the settlement that I have proposed, including the Local Government Association and the Institute for Fiscal Studies, have recognised that I have been fair to places, such as those she mentions, that have higher costs—Torbay has benefited from the change in the formula—and that I have committed to making sure that the new system for 100% business rate retention is founded on an accepted analysis of the costs and pressures that different authorities face.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Greg Clark: I am going to make some progress, but I will give way to the Chairman of the Communities and Local Government Committee in a few moments.

Another important provision of the settlement is the continuation of the new homes bonus. It had not been guaranteed that the existing scheme would continue through the spending review period. I believe that the bonus has been a valuable source of funding for councils and a spur to much-needed house building, so I am very happy that the scheme will continue, subject to the changes on which I am consulting.

The settlement provides flexibility for councils with a record of keeping costs low by permitting a de minimis £5 a year council tax increase without requiring the cost of a referendum. We will consult on plans to permit well-run planning departments to increase their fees by, at most, the rate of inflation, as long as such income is used to decrease the existing cross-subsidy of the planning function by other council tax payers. Importantly, the settlement makes it clear that as revenue support grant declines, no council will have to make a contribution to other councils in either 2017-18 or 2018-19—something that was considered to be unfair in the provisional settlement by certain respondents.

Let me say a few words about the reductions in revenue support grant over the spending review period. As I have said, we are moving from one world to another; from a world in which the Government grant accounted for nearly 80% of local government expenditure in 2010 to one in which, by 2020, only 5% of local government spending power will come from the revenue support grant. In the same period, with the implementation of 100% business rates retention, the proportion of council spending power from local sources—council tax and business rates—will grow.

The reason for the change is not just financial. A council that is almost entirely dependent on central Government will, consciously or unconsciously, end up looking to central Government to be told what to do. Of course, since time immemorial, Governments have attached strings to the money they give out. My excellent predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles), abolished 4,700 targets, measures and indicators to which every council in the country had to subjugate itself to obtain revenue to provide services for its residents.

That is no way for the proud towns, cities, counties and districts of this country to be governed. Places, many with a history as long and distinctive as our country itself, should not be reduced to complying meekly with Whitehall's presumptuous demands. That is why a shift to funding from the people and businesses that councils exist to represent and serve, rather than all eyes being fixed on London, is so vital.

Our councils have been the strongest campaigners for this long overdue change, but in the consultation period that followed the statement on the provisional settlement, councils and colleagues made the compelling case that the transition to this new world needs to be sensibly managed and that the first two years of the settlement would pose particular challenges.

Barbara Keeley *rose*—

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) *rose*—

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con) *rose*—

Greg Clark: I will give way in a second.

I agreed with those views, which is why I have ensured that the final settlement will include a transition fund worth £150 million a year to cover 2016-17 and 2017-18.

Rebecca Harris: My right hon. Friend spoke about Government attaching strings to their funding. It was a version of he who pays the piper calls the tune. Does he believe that we might be moving to a world that is much more democratically responsive not only to the local electorate, but to businesses? They have often felt neglected by their local council areas and they will now feel that they are rather more important and have a starring role.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right. It was a ludicrous situation, whereby local councils levied business rates, collected them and sent them to the Treasury. Local businesses felt that they did not have the same direct connection as council tax payers with their local councils. The best run councils have always had a high regard for promoting business in their areas, and it is high time that they were rewarded and backed for that. The reforms do that.

Mr Betts: As the Secretary of State knows, I agree with the proposition that it is important that councils can raise more of their finance locally. It is not a question of whether, but how it should be done. A crucial element is the needs assessment review, which will set the basis for the new system of 100% business rates retention for the future. How does the Secretary of State intend to go about that? Will he fully involve the Local Government Association? Will he consider any independent element to the review to ensure that it is not seen as some sort of stitch-up by Government Members to look after their areas and ignore areas represented by Opposition Members?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman has known me long enough to realise that, when I approach something, I do it seriously and rigorously. I take representations from everyone who has a sensible view to contribute, and I will certainly do that from local governments of all types. I hope that the hon. Gentleman and members of his Select Committee will contribute, as well as hon. Members of all parties who have a great deal of experience and knowledge of their constituents' needs.

Under the proposed settlement, no council will receive less than was stated in the provisional settlement figures. However, the transition fund will ease the change from a system based on central Government grant to one in which local sources determine a council's revenue. The fund will be applied in direct proportion to the difference in the revenue support grant that would have been experienced. It is as straightforward as that, whatever the Labour party's conspiracy theories suggest. Indeed, some Labour-led authorities, including Lancashire, made the proposal. The transition fund will ease the pace of reductions in the first two years of the spending review period, after which income from other sources will grow.

The local government financial settlement is always important. It is the statutory act that allows councils to set their legal budget for the year ahead—the budget to deliver the services that we and our constituents rely on. This year the settlement contains some particularly important changes: indicative budgets for the entire spending review period to make longer-term planning a reality; a big increase in funding for adult social care,

which is one of our councils' most important responsibilities; action to help rural areas and a commitment to all councils that the move to 100% business rate retention will be accompanied by a fundamental review of the needs-based formula; and transition funding to smooth the long-overdue journey from our over-centralised state to a future where all money that is spent locally is generated locally.

Multi-year budgets have been delivered, social care prioritised, rural needs acknowledged, a fair funding review launched, and the devolution of funding advanced, and I commend the motion to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the Opposition Front-Bench speaker, it will be obvious to the House that a great many people wish to speak and we have a limited amount of time. I therefore impose a five-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches, although not for Mr Steve Reed.

4.35 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab): I will do my best to keep my remarks brief.

It is always a pleasure to listen to the Secretary of State's engaging manner, but it is not so pleasant listening to what he has to say. He repeated his claims to have protected funding for councils over the next four years, but there can be no one left who believes that anymore—judging from what we have heard over recent weeks, not even his own MPs believe it. That is no wonder, because the settlement funding assessment takes away £1 in every £3 given to councils for funding core services, and that is on top of cuts in excess of 40%—indeed, in many councils, in excess of 50%—that have already been imposed.

Barbara Keeley: I tried to intervene on the Secretary of State and he would not take my intervention, but I cannot leave what he said about social care because it is just wrong. There is no injection of cash into social care; there is only a maximum of £400 million this year. That funding is uncertain, risky and back-loaded, and the LGA has asked him if he will inject £700 million over the next two years because it is so concerned. There was not even funding for its own policy of national living wage increases, so let us not hear such things about social care.

Mr Reed: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will pick up on those points later in my contribution. Returning to the settlement funding assessment, because increases elsewhere do not plug the gap that those cuts create, it will result in cuts to front-line services, including cuts to youth services, fixing potholes, cleaning the streets, emptying the bins, looking after parks, keeping the street lights on at night, Sure Start centres, libraries, museums and rural bus services. The Secretary of State has not protected any of those; he has sharpened the knife.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Councils such as Coventry will lose 60% of their income from grants over a 10-year period—that is £80 million—which will inflict unnecessary hardship. The Secretary of State

[*Mr Jim Cunningham*]

talks about business rates, but it was a previous Conservative Government who changed those in the first place. He is now passing the buck of paying for the police and social care on to local authorities, and three or four years down the line, he will do what Ministers always do and come in and cap it.

Mr Reed: My hon. Friend is right, and devolving the blame for their cuts is part of what the Government are up to with this settlement.

Some funding for social care has been handed over to councils, which certainly sounds welcome. According to the Tory-led Local Government Association, however, the Government have handed over a £1 billion funding black hole. They have told councils to impose a 2% council tax rise every year for four years to plug that gap, but even that does not raise anywhere near enough to pay for the care that older people need. That increase raises the least money in the poorest areas that most need the funding. The Government have cut the funding then handed it over to councils to take the blame.

Andrew Gwynne: That is exactly the problem Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council finds itself with. This year, it has a £16 million social care deficit. Raising 2% on council tax—based on 100% collection, which is not going to happen—will bring in £1.4 million. The sums do not add up.

Mr Reed: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making a very graphic illustration of the point I was making.

What this all means is denying vulnerable older and disabled people the home care they need. It means turning away frail, older people who cannot clean their own homes or cook their own food. It means closing down day care centres. It means cutting back on home care visits. It means leaving people stuck in hospital beds because they have no support to go to at home, with the knock-on effect of lengthening hospital waiting times for other patients.

Mr Marsden: Does my hon. Friend not think it bizarre that the Secretary of State should be trumpeting his reviews for the future for elderly people in places such as Blackpool, where we have a larger than average number of elderly and disabled people, but he is not prepared to identify the really savage cuts to adult social care in Blackpool, which is leading exactly to the sort of situation my hon. Friend describes?

Mr Reed: What is really worrying is that the Secretary of State does not seem to understand what is really going on in councils and in public services across the country.

Even Tory MPs were terrified of what voters would make of all this, and they threatened to vote it down. On Monday this week, the Secretary of State came to the Chamber with a fix to head off the rebellion. He announced he had found £300 million down the back of a sofa—he would not tell us where it had come from—and then handed nearly all of it to the wealthiest Tory councils as a sweetener just weeks before the council elections. Some 85% of the money will go to Tory-run areas and barely 5% to Labour-run areas, despite the fact that those Labour areas have suffered far bigger

cuts since 2010. Whatever happened to the one nation Tories? What about the northern powerhouse? If the word gerrymander did not already exist, we would have to invent it to describe a fix like this.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech, but I think that it is factually incorrect. As he will know, rural areas tend to have the oldest populations, yet when this Prime Minister came to power, there was a 50% premium going to urban councils with much younger populations. Whatever the future might have held for them, they were not old then and they did not have the need. Rural areas did and his party did absolutely nothing.

Mr Reed: We need a funding formula that is based on need. The Tories have had six years to give us that and they clearly have not done it.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Birmingham has been hit by the biggest cuts in local government history, with cuts of £90 million next year. The city put a powerful case for a fair deal and transitional funding. How can it be right that Birmingham got not one penny in transitional funding, but Surrey got £12 million and Cheshire East, in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's constituency, got £3 million? It is simply not fair.

Mr Reed: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Actually, Surrey got more than £12 million. Surrey, which of course is where the Secretary of State just happens to be an MP, gets the most of any council. [*Interruption.*] The council next door to where the right hon. Gentleman happens to be an MP gets the most, with £24 million. Hampshire gets £19 million, Hertfordshire gets £14 million and the Prime Minister's campaigning mum—admirable woman that she is—will be very pleased to see that Oxfordshire gets £9 million.

I am not criticising what those councils are getting. They did not deserve the scale of the cuts the Government had lined up for them, but then neither do Middlesbrough, Knowsley, Hull, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Darlington and all the other more deprived areas that have suffered far deeper cuts in the past six years but have been offered absolutely no help whatever.

Greg Clark: I suggest gently to the hon. Gentleman that if he aspires to be a Local Government Minister, a little geography might help. He is welcome to come to Tunbridge Wells. I would be happy to show him that delightful place. Since we are talking about geography, I am sure he is familiar with Durham County Council. In its submission to the consultation, it said:

“In our view, no authority can now claim that this approach is ‘unfair’”.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Mr Reed: I spoke to at least 20 or 30 council leaders over the weekend, at the Labour party's local government conference, and not a single one thought the right hon. Gentleman's approach was fair, and I am afraid that leaders of Tory councils agree with me, not him.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I have absolutely no idea what the Secretary of State was saying or where he got it from. According to

headlines in our local paper, the funding settlement for Durham has been slammed as unfair by the leader of the council.

Greg Clark *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) has to answer, and then he can give way to the Secretary of State.

Mr Reed: My hon. Friend makes my point for me. The distribution of the money is desperately unfair.

Greg Clark: The hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) asked a very reasonable question. The quote came from a document headed: “Durham County Council response to the 2016/17 Local Government Finance Settlement Consultation.” It states:

“The new approach is fairer and should never be reversed.”

Mr Reed: That is a misinterpretation of what Labour council leaders are saying. However much the Conservatives think this pre-council elections sweetener will work, the Rural Services Network is clear that this political bung will not change the dire financial crisis facing even rural councils over the next four years.

Mr Betts: Has my hon. Friend had any indication from the leaders of metropolitan councils whether they think the new arrangements are fair? As I understand it, only three metropolitan councils will get any of the transitional funding, and two of them happen to be Trafford and Solihull—the only two Conservative metropolitan districts.

Mr Reed: Over the weekend, I spoke to the leaders of Manchester and Newcastle upon Tyne, the deputy mayor of Liverpool and the leader of Leeds City Council. All of them believe that the Government’s actions are devastating local services.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Reed: I want to make some progress, because we are short of time.

Greg Clark *rose*—

Mr Reed: No, I will not give way again. I will continue.

Some areas represented by Tory MPs, such as Stockton on Tees and Nuneaton, get nothing from the additional money. Those MPs need to ask themselves what their voters will think of MPs who vote for deep cuts and council tax rises for their own areas but throw millions at wealthier areas such as Tunbridge Wells.

Greg Clark *rose*—

Mr Reed: I will make some progress.

Greg Clark *rose*—

Mr Reed: I have given way to the Secretary of State twice, and now I am going to continue.

I turn now to council tax. On Monday, the Secretary of State denied he had written to councils, telling them to put up council tax. Indeed, it was not the Secretary of

State who wrote that; it was the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones). [*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The House is making far too much noise. Both the hon. Gentleman and the Secretary of State have important things to say. Let them fight it out. Do not make so much noise.

Mr Reed: Barracking will not stop me saying what needs to be said.

I have a copy of the letter the Minister sent to councils with the provisional settlement. The spreadsheets it links to, which were sent to every town hall, include figures setting out the Government’s expectation that councils will put up council tax by 1.75% every year for four years and, on top of that, impose a further 2% rise to help plug the gap arising from the Government’s failure to fund social care properly. That is 3.75% a year more every year for four years. By 2020, it adds up to a council tax hike of well over 20%. That will cost the average band E council tax payer about £300 more a year. It is very hard indeed to square that massive Tory tax hike with the Tory manifesto pledge to keep council tax as low as possible. The Tories are breaking their promises—they are hiking council tax up.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is making a very important point about council tax. During his statement earlier this week, the Secretary of State failed to understand that different councils have different council tax bases, and he told me to go away and speak to Trafford Council about how it is managing its affairs. There is a 27.4% difference between the council tax bases of Tameside and Trafford. Does my hon. Friend agree that such a difference is inherent in the unfairness under discussion?

Mr Reed: That is one of the many ways in which this settlement is deeply unfair to communities up and down the country.

Paul Farrelly: The situation regarding transitional help is even worse than my hon. Friend has described. The west midlands, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Stoke-on-Trent and Birmingham will all get nothing, but already well-rewarded Conservative counties and districts in the south, including St Albans, Sevenoaks and Surrey Heath—those are names to conjure with—are going to benefit. Does my hon. Friend think that that is right or fair?

Mr Reed: The figures speak for themselves: 85% to Tory councils and 5% to Labour councils. Everyone listening to this debate knows precisely what the Government are up to.

Turning back to the council tax rises that will be imposed over the next five years, what will people get for all the extra money the Tories will take off them? Will their streets will be swept more often? Will their bins be emptied more regularly? Will their library be saved, or will older people be looked after properly? No, because the Government have cut council funding so hard that the extra money they will take off people will not make up for what the Chancellor has cut.

Taxpayers will pay more, but they will get less in return. That is Tory value for money—tax hikes and service cuts, picking people’s pockets, while damaging

[Mr Steve Reed]

the quality of life of every community up and down this country. That is the story of this funding settlement, which is why every Member should vote against it this evening: a 20% council tax hike designed in Downing Street; services cut to the bone; and £300 million hurled at a handful of wealthier areas in a desperate bid to buy off a Tory Back-Bench rebellion. People pay more but get less from these tax-hiking, pledge-breaking, self-serving Tories.

4.52 pm

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): It costs more to deliver public services on an island with no link to the mainland. For instance, in the event of a major emergency, we cannot get help from the mainland fire services in less than an hour, so capability must be maintained to a higher level, to secure the safety of islanders and their visitors. That is just one example of the extra costs. There are many others, which have never been properly recognised in successive local government funding formulae.

Back in 2002, the Isle of Wight was set to lose the additional costs allowance. The island was counted in with much more affluent Hampshire. The then Labour Government decided to change the rules, resulting in the island being too small to qualify for the ACA on its own. The former leader of the Liberal council, Shirley Smart, and I had to explain why the council could not manage without it.

The Elliott review—a major study of local government finance—was published in 1996. Professor Elliott recommended that further research was needed on disparities in non-labour costs for only two councils, namely those of the Isle of Wight and the Isles of Scilly. That research has not been carried out. Nick Raynsford, the then Minister for Local and Regional Government, eventually agreed that we would continue to receive the ACA. The extra cost of delivering services on an island was not specifically recognised, but we none the less continued to receive the £3 million or so a year.

Over the years, the method of funding local government has changed, but the benefits of the island getting the ACA remained somewhat buried in the unfathomable formulae that made up the annual settlements, although I am told that the value decreases over the years. When the move away from the Government grant to local funding was announced, it became clear that this would make the difficulties of the Isle of Wight Council even more difficult and even more severe. Indeed, the council could not find a way to carry on beyond this year. For the first time in many years, the Isle of Wight Council asked me to assist it to achieve a number of specific sensible proposals that would help it to change.

The announcements made on Monday did not help the island quite simply because our issues are unique—something that the Secretary of State and even the Prime Minister have recognised. We do not qualify for transitional help because the settlement based on the existing formulae did not disadvantage us. It was the formula itself that disadvantaged us. We do not qualify for the rural sparsity grant because people cannot live very far from a town on an island only 23 miles by 13 miles.

With the announcement that there was to be a fair funding review, I realised that my Front-Bench team recognised that some problems were unresolved even by the revised settlement. If we can get the real costs of delivering services on an island recognised, we will find a long-term solution to a very long-term problem—but we still have the problem of getting to the review. The future of the Isle of Wight Council beyond this year was not secure. Money is in short supply, but when there is not so much of it to go around, resources must be shared most fully.

I am grateful for the discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State about this problem, and I thank him for his offer to visit the island to find the necessary flexibilities for the council to find a way through the challenges until a fair funding settlement can be put in place.

I will be honest: I had initially decided to vote against the settlement this afternoon. Based on our discussions, however, I will support the Government this year—I say again, this year. I trust my right hon. Friends to deliver on these proposals over the coming months. I am very proud that this Conservative Government are doing what was not done over the past 10 years. I look forward to working with the Government, and on a cross-party basis on the island, for the benefit of the Isle of Wight and all its islanders.

4.58 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I want to try to be fair and even-handed in these matters, and I shall focus on the positive elements first. We ought to welcome the four-year settlement on offer, as it is something that local government has for some time been asking for. It is a helpful step forward, providing greater certainty for the future. We are not quite sure yet what efficiency plans local councils will need to draw up to achieve it, but it seems a good starting point.

I welcome the money for social care, too. It is reasonable, but I have some questions about how it is going to work. I have had an exchange of correspondence with the Secretary of State and with the Local Government Association. The LGA clearly says that it asked for more money than it has got on transformational spending and it states that this was not recognised.

I do not object to the fact—indeed, I welcome it—that local councils will be able to raise more money through council tax. It is right in principle for more local services to be paid for by local taxes. As a localist, I firmly believe in that.

Let me clarify the questions that still need addressing. First, the better care fund that is part of the package is very much back-end loaded in the spending settlement, but there are pressures at the front end, too. The Secretary of State claimed in his statement that the issue of the 2% council tax increase raising more money in richer areas would be addressed through the distribution of the better care fund. Will he put some clear information in the Library to explain how that is going to be done?

Barbara Keeley: My hon. Friend has raised a key issue. For two years, there will be hardly anything from the better care fund. There will be a maximum of only £400 million this year from the 2% precept, nothing from the better care fund, and only £105 million from the fund next year. The funding gap is increasing by

£700 million, and the Local Government Association's Councillor Izzi Seccombe has asked for that sum to be released.

Mr Betts: That was the next point that I was going to make. The Government should consider how the better care fund money could be distributed in a way that would help more poor authorities, but it would also be helpful—I know that the LGA has mentioned this—if more of that money could be provided until at least 2017-18, if not into the next financial year. I hope that the Secretary of State will consider that, because current back-end loading is a real problem.

The LGA has drawn my attention to the fact that the council tax base—which relates to the number of properties from which council tax will be raised—is assumed to rise by 7.8%. Will the Government explain precisely how they have made that calculation? It seems a very big increase indeed.

What account have the Government taken of the ability of clinical commissioning groups to help local authorities with their social care spending? In my own authority of Sheffield, the CCG has said that it faces a substantial reduction in its funding against the anticipated level for next year, but this year it is providing the council with £9 million of transfer funding to help it with its added social care provision. If that money is removed, any element from the better care fund or increased council tax will not be a substitute. I think that that is an issue for cross-departmental work.

The settlement will clearly result in cuts. The Secretary of State will argue that they will be less severe than those made in the last Parliament, but, of course, they are in addition to those that have already been made. In the last Parliament, when most of the larger percentage cuts were made in the metropolitan areas, which had the greatest needs and the greatest problems, we never once heard mention of a transitional arrangement to provide extra help for those councils. It has only come about now because the Government have developed a core spending power which includes council tax, and the richer councils happen to be more able to raise council tax. As they have suffered a bigger reduction in revenue support grant as a result of the initial spending announcement, a transitional funding arrangement has suddenly and magically been put in place for them.

Greg Clark: I think that, uncharacteristically, the hon. Gentleman's memory is letting him down. He should recall that, in the last Parliament, there was a series of tariffs and top-ups to stop the bigger cuts being made. That money was top-sliced from the settlement. What I have now been able to do—and this was recommended by many authorities, including Labour authorities—is bring in new money from outside the settlement, and the hon. Gentleman should welcome that.

Mr Betts: I think that in the last Parliament there was a series of ceilings and safety nets, which is traditional in the operation of local government finance. I do not remember any occasion on which it was reported to the House, after the initial settlement, that extra money had been found to help metropolitan Labour councils that were suffering major cuts.

What will happen when the transitional funding comes to an end after the first two years of the settlement? Will

the money be found from somewhere else, or will it be absorbed into the new review of needs? The Secretary of State announced that towards the end of the settlement he would effectively end the arrangement for negative revenue support grant, which affected some authorities. Which councils will pay for that, or will the money be found, again, from outside?

The way in which the needs assessment review is carried out is absolutely crucial. The Secretary of State has promised to involve the Select Committee and the LGA. Will he consider introducing an independent element at the outset? Perhaps initial assessments could be carried out by a body such as the Office for Budget Responsibility or the Institute for Fiscal Studies, on a politically neutral basis.

How can we begin to assess this process when we do not know the details of many of the other grants? When, for example, will the public health grant be announced, so that authorities know what they have to spend in that regard?

Let me return to the subject of my own authority in Sheffield. Its spending power is to be cut by 4.3%, which is more than the national average of 2.8%. There is also to be a £25 million cut in its revenue support grant. The reality for Sheffield is another £50 million of cuts in services: cuts in rate support grant plus extra spending needs coming on stream will mean a £50 million cut in services.

This is a very challenging settlement, even for an efficient council such as Sheffield, of which we can be proud. Indeed, we can be proud of the whole of local government for the way in which it has dealt with very challenging spending settlements over a number of years. It has dealt with them in a very efficient way—better than central Government, by and large. However, the cuts that local government is now facing are on top of the cuts it has already had, and they are eventually going to mean more library closures, more run-down parks and a whole number of worsening services.

As Chair of the Select Committee, I want to end on a positive note. The Committee as a whole has said that we want to work closely with the Secretary of State when the new funding arrangements for the 100% retention of business rates are implemented at the end of this Parliament, to ensure that those arrangements are put in place in the best possible way.

5.5 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Like many other hon. Members, I cut my teeth in politics in local government: I was elected to Cornwall Council in 2009. It is partly because of that that I simply do not recognise the rhetoric that we continually hear from Labour Members that this Government are somehow seeking to undermine, dismantle or even destroy local government. That rhetoric just does not stand up to scrutiny, because this Government are delivering the changes that local government has been asking for over many years.

At the heart of this matter is devolution. We are devolving real powers to cities and regions up and down the country. We are seeing this in Cornwall, where we are delivering an historic devolution deal. Cornwall is the first rural area to get a devolution deal. The people of Cornwall have been asking for such a deal for many

[*Steve Double*]

years, and it is this Government who are delivering it. So Labour's suggestion that we do not believe in local government just does not stand up to scrutiny. Why would we give more powers to local government if we did not believe in it and trust it to deliver its services?

Barbara Keeley: I do not think that anybody on the Opposition Benches is saying that. It is surprising, however, to find that in devolved Greater Manchester, only one council, Trafford, is benefiting from the transitional funds—

Andrew Gwynne: Tory Trafford.

Barbara Keeley: Indeed; Tory Trafford. I was a councillor in Trafford, by the way, and I have to tell the Secretary of State that the council leader is not called Stephen Anstee; he is called Sean Anstee. The right hon. Gentleman has referred to him twice this week as Stephen—

Greg Clark *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: You can't intervene on an intervention.

Barbara Keeley: My point is that picking out one local authority among the 10 and giving it such largesse hardly helps the devolution plans.

Steve Double *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman responds to that intervention, I have to tell the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) that it was far too long. We have hardly any time, and if hon. Members make long interventions they are preventing their colleagues from speaking.

Steve Double: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention.

Greg Clark: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I do not know why the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) is confused. I know Sean Anstee very well, and I have never been in any doubt as to his name.

Steve Double: I want to address the point about the transitional grant. I am happy to place on record that, as of Monday morning, I was one of the Conservative Members who would have been prepared to walk through the No Lobby this evening and vote against the Government. That was because the proposed settlement was unfair to rural areas. It would have widened the gap in Government funding between rural and urban areas. I campaigned passionately during the election to stand up for Cornwall as a rural area and to seek a fairer funding deal for it, and I was not prepared to support the proposed settlement.

It is a well-established fact that rural areas have had the raw end of the deal from central Government for decades, despite having some of the highest levels of deprivation in the country and a growing ageing population, with all the increased pressure that that places on the delivery of services and the increased demand that it creates, not to mention the additional challenges and costs of delivering those services in a rural setting. Yet places such as Cornwall have had to accept lower levels

of funding for many years, not just for our local government, but for things such as our schools and police. I am proud that this Government, under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, have started to address that issue—it has been going on too long. We have started to see extra money put into our schools and, through the rural services delivery grant, we have begun to close the gap in local authority funding.

When I looked at what was being proposed in the settlement, I was therefore disappointed to find that it would have widened that gap and started to undo much of the good work the Government have already begun. I could not have supported a financial settlement that was going to make an unfair system even more unfair to rural areas. If I had gone through the No Lobby tonight, it would have been my first rebellion against the Government. As someone who has a slightly inherent rebellious streak in their nature, I am slightly disappointed that my rebellion will have to wait for another occasion.

I am delighted to say that the Secretary of State has listened to the many voices from across the House from rural areas who highlighted that what was being proposed was simply unacceptable to rural areas. I want to place on the record my thanks to him for the way he has conducted this consultation. He met me, as well as my Cornish colleagues and MPs from many areas, and he listened to our concerns. I am not sure I am going to go as far as my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who is no longer in his place, and offer a wet kiss, but I want to place on the record my great gratitude for the way in which the Secretary of State has listened to our concerns and come forward with proposals that address them.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I am sure the hon. Gentleman will have detected that the vast majority of north-east councils, save for Northumberland, will get nothing from the transitional fund. The argument he appears to be confirming in his speech is that the decisions taken by the Secretary of State to grant transitional funding are based on staving off a Conservative rebellion, rather than on actually giving the funding to local authorities that need it the most.

Steve Double: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but this is simply about the case that was made about rural constituencies, where the funding was going to widen the gap we had begun to close. That was the issue at stake. I am delighted that not only have funds been made available through this transitional grant to make sure that that gap does not get any wider, but, probably more importantly, we have the promise of a comprehensive review of the cost of delivering services. That gives us the opportunity to establish that it costs more to deliver services in rural areas than in urban areas.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is right about the fundamental needs reassessment and he is right to congratulate the Secretary of State, but does he share my disappointment that, repeatedly in January, the Opposition spokesman refused to sign up to closing the gap?

Steve Double: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. We need to address this issue, and this review gives us the opportunity we have asked for, time and again, to establish the true cost. Tonight, I will therefore be happy to support the Government on this motion.

5.13 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Liverpool is one of the most deprived local authority areas. It is also entrepreneurial and outward-looking, always ready to adapt to new circumstances and welcoming innovation. Despite the valiant efforts of Mayor Joe Anderson and his hard-working councillors, it is not possible to protect the people of Liverpool against the cuts from this Government—cuts of 58% up to now, with an additional 9% cut in funding for next year. Indeed, that cut might be even bigger, because the council still does not know how much money will be available for two crucial services—I am referring to the public health grant and the independent living fund. Both those vital funds are important for the wellbeing of the people of Liverpool, and we still have no final figure on how much money will be available there.

In my short contribution tonight, I want to focus on the growing crisis in adult social care. Adult social care in Liverpool has already suffered a £90 million cut as a result of Government actions. We have been told that the new precept, the new tax to be levied on the people of Liverpool, and the Better Care Fund will resolve that situation. When we look at the facts, we can see that those two measures together will deliver £2.9 million next year, but there is already a need for an additional £15.2 million to cover the implementation of the national living wage and the demographic changes resulting from the rise in the number of elderly people in Liverpool. That means that the measures that we have been told will solve the problem will do very little indeed next year.

The council is not standing still and simply wringing its hands. It has been trying to develop innovative ways of working. It is talking to the local health authority—the clinical commissioning group—to see how it can work better with them to produce support services, but there is no way that the funding gap can be plugged next year. There will be more disastrous cuts for very vulnerable people in Liverpool. I am already hearing, day after day, from individuals—they are often people suffering severe disabilities who are trying very hard to live a normal life—who have been told that their care packages will be cut because, despite the council's best efforts, the funding for those packages is being significantly reduced.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must look at bringing forward to this year the additional funding that they promised from the better care fund, so that there is not a gap, and so that the council at least gets some extra money to support vulnerable, elderly and disabled people?

Mrs Ellman: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. In the case of Liverpool, it is possible that there could be some help in future years, but the figure that has been put forward at the moment is purely an indicative one. The council does not know what will be available in the future.

It is also important to recognise the very low tax base of a place such as Liverpool. Some 78% of its properties are in bands A and B, making the potential of the council to raise funds locally very difficult indeed.

I am acutely aware that there have been problems across all public services in Liverpool, because of consecutive years of Government cuts, including what is to come next year. I know that the council has done its best to protect people from those cuts. I have focused on adult social care, because that affects the people who are most in need. I go back to the comments that I made earlier about the council not knowing how much money will be available in the independent living fund. That is also about supporting people who need help the most.

My concern is that, unless the Government act now, more and more people will face crises and more and more people will suffer great hardships. Those people who are striving hard to live a normal life will find that the rug is cut away from underneath their feet. That is intolerable, and I ask the Government and the Secretary of State to revisit this area now, to look again at the provision of adult social care in Liverpool and in other areas of need and to take action so that more and more people do not suffer in this unacceptable way.

5.18 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): This is a particularly important local government finance settlement debate. In the past, we have tended to have debates where we are essentially rolling forward, year on year, much of the same. The difference this year—and it is very much to the credit of the Secretary of State—is that the settlement is genuinely transformational, as it moves away from what was essentially a flawed system. That is why this is so important.

There were two flaws in the system. First, it did nothing to take account of efficiency. The efficient authority gained nothing; everything was predicated on demonstrating—in certain parameters in the formula—need. It almost entrenched dependency, which drove out innovation and initiative. Now the Government have put in place a raft of measures that enable local authorities to say not “How much do we need?”, but “How do we change our own circumstances? How do we grow our rate base?”

The work that has been done through the Localism Act 2011, the power of general competence and the ability of local authorities such as Bromley to enter into commercial partnerships as landowners and investors with their business community has all changed the landscape. The ability to go for genuine growth, but in sensible terms, changes things. It is sad that we have seen such an old-fashioned and almost demeaning approach to local government from Labour. That is the first and most important point I wish to make.

The second important point is that the new approach moves away from an idea that central Government must sort out local government's problems all the time. We are putting powers back into the hands of local authorities and doing so with a measure of fairness. The important thing is that there has been a transition. Because it was transformational, it was necessary to ease that move from a dependency culture to a self-sufficiency culture. That is utterly to the good. Now we need to make sure that as we go forward, we get the proper baselines right.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Robert Neill: I will give way once.

Anna Turley: In Redcar and Cleveland we have lost 3,000 jobs at the steelworks, which is the equivalent of £10 million per year in business rates. In London that would be the equivalent of 176,000 jobs going overnight. Does the hon. Gentleman not recognise that there are differences that mean that councils have to respond in different ways to their economic circumstances?

Robert Neill: Yes, of course. That is precisely why the Government set up the local enterprise partnerships, and why under the previous regime we set up the arrangements for top-ups and tariffs, which I hope we can simplify in future.

The simplistic idea that we cannot be, to some degree, masters of our own destiny is wrong. In particular, what seems to me utterly wrong is that a local authority such as Bromley, which has historically had the lowest unit costs per head in London, was treated on a formulaic basis in exactly the same way as local authorities that had never bothered to keep their unit costs down and which were never, therefore, driven by efficiency in the same way as we were. Once, when I commented that there was no reward for efficiency in the formula, I was told by a civil servant, “Well, Minister, surely efficiency is its own reward.” He did not grasp the concept. I am glad to say now that Ministers and officials in the Department for Communities and Local Government do grasp the concept, which should be fundamental to the way we go forward.

I welcome what has been done for Bromley, but more importantly, I ask the Secretary of State to ensure that we take forward those basic principles to the next degree so that when we get to the calculation of the needs element, I hope we will remember that there are more than simply the old-fashioned demographic trends in what constitutes needs. As has been observed, the way that needs were calculated in the past, for example, took a simplistic weighting of density as equating with deprivation. That was not the case at all. The way that both inner London and outer London have changed demonstrates that clearly.

Graham Stuart: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Robert Neill: I had better not because I need to save time.

Very often, the greatest driver of adult social care is not purely deprivation; it is age profile, as much as anything else. We need to build that sort of thing into the equation. We also need to make sure that where local authorities—

Liz Kendall: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Robert Neill: I am sorry. I have been generous and time is short.

We need to make sure, going forward, that where local authorities can demonstrate long-term efficiency and a record of reinvesting in improved services, that is given as much weighting in the calculation of a formula as a purely formulaic needs ratio matrix that has been established in the past. That will drive behavioural change. Those of us who call ourselves localists want to give local authorities the tools, the means and the incentive to change behaviour and to be more efficient and more self-reliant. We are part-way down the track on that.

The return of business rates to the localities is a huge step forward. It was an error that my party made in government, but we have rectified it and that is a good thing. The next step that I hope the Secretary of State will take in the succeeding years of this settlement is to entrench efficiency as something that should be rewarded, just as much as ticking boxes on the needs indices are. Then we will get genuine fairness in local government, something that is genuinely responsive to local needs, and gives local representatives the ability to shape their policies and financing to the needs, concerns and aspirations of their communities. If we achieve that, this settlement will be worth a very great deal indeed. I commend it to the House.

5.25 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am a serving councillor on Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council.

I pay tribute to councillors up and down the land for the fantastic work they do in delivering excellent public services right across the communities we are here to serve. Time after time, residents say that they trust local government far more than central Government. Review after review has concluded that local government is the most efficient arm of government—far more efficient than any central Government Department.

However, the term “lions led by donkeys” could not be more apt than when we look at the relationship between central Government and local councillors, who are the frontline in delivering services and often the last line of defence for the communities they are there to serve. For far too long, local government has been subjected to the whims and follies of Ministers who use critical public services as a plaything—as a toy.

In central Government’s armoury, cash is the weapon of choice. As a councillor for 12 years, and as a former council leader representing a community of 250,000 people, I have witnessed and, indeed, implemented settlements passed down by this Government. As demand for support increased, money was taken away, as the link between need and the available cash was being broken.

The Government were warned time and time again that removing money from prevention would only shunt costs on to other parts of government. That is why, for almost every pound taken from local councils in Greater Manchester, the same amount has been shunted across to welfare and health, because the pressures just get moved around the system. That makes things worse for the people we represent, and it saves the Government no money whatever.

Liz Kendall: Is my hon. Friend aware that the cost of delayed discharges from hospital is almost £1 billion a year? That could buy more than 40,000 elderly people a full year of home care. How does that make moral or economic sense?

Jim McMahon: I absolutely agree. The better care fund had a mechanism for putting money at the frontline to make savings further down the line, but it was completely inadequate for the needs that were there.

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy has placed on record its view that some councils could well fall over. The challenge, of course, will not come from one lone council failing to set a budget; it will come in the courts. As entitlement to basic services such as children's services, education and social care are taken away, somebody will test that entitlement in court. When the judgment is that their entitlement has unlawfully been taken away, that will send a shockwave through the system that central Government are not fully ready for. At that point, the system may well fall over.

The truth is that the Government do not want to be honest about the true cost of cuts. Most people will accept that adult social care is one of the biggest challenges facing local government and society more generally. Our older population grew by 11.4% between 2010 and 2014, while core funding was being taken away. Age UK estimates that more than 1 million people have unmet care demands. What is the Government's response? It is lacklustre, weak and pathetic; it simply does not address the social care crisis in this country today.

Barbara Keeley: My hon. Friend is perfectly right to quote those figures from Age UK for unmet care demands, but the need to meet those demands falls on unpaid family carers. The Government passed the Health and Social Care Act 2012, which gave carers rights, but there is no funding for that. That is what legislation will have to address.

Jim McMahon: I thank my hon. Friend. We can talk about figures, and this is a debate about the settlement, so we are likely to do that, but we need to think about the human cost too. Down the line, what will these things mean for individuals, families and our communities? Oldham's £200 million of cuts leaves a gross budget of £188 million. More than half the town's money has been taken away by the Government.

If the answer to providing adult social care is a 2% levy on council tax, let us follow that through to see what it means. For Oldham Council, a 2% increase in council tax, as directed by Government, would generate £1.5 million, because of course the town has a low council tax base to begin with. However, the increase—just—in the living wage impacts on social care contracts, and so, not even taking into account an older population or increased demand, there is a £2.7 million increase in wage bills. With £1.5 million generated in council tax and £2.7 million in increased wage bills through the Government's living wage, the numbers do not add up. This does not even allow us to stand still; we are going backwards.

I am sure that the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) is very pleased with a cash bonanza to buy his vote today, but some of us were not so fortunate. We had a raw settlement and a raw deal from this Government, because on top of the £200 million in cuts, we cannot ignore the rural relief grant. So it is cash after cash after cash for rural areas, not taking into account a single bit of need. It has already been pointed out that 85% of this funding is being given to Tory shires, but let me go closer to home and look at Greater Manchester.

Trafford has some rural areas, but let us look at them: Bowdon, Alderley Edge and Hale—"Footballers' Wives" territory. This is the most affluent borough in Greater Manchester. It has the highest council tax, the highest business rate base, and the healthiest budget as a result of this Government's policies—but that is not all. Because of the way that you have protected your side, you have something in common with Trafford—Baroness Williams of Trafford, the Local Government Minister and former Trafford Council leader, who lives in Trafford. Is a "friends and family" discount being offered? What do we need to do, Greg? Do you want to come and live in Oldham? If that helps our financial situation, then we will—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I know that the hon. Gentleman is new, but he speaks through the Chair, so when he is saying "you" he is addressing me. Members are referred to as hon. Members or named by their constituency.

Jim McMahon: I am very sorry for that slip, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The truth is that the five most deprived areas get absolutely zero—nothing—from this Government. At the same time, the five least deprived areas, together, share £5.3 million between them.

Greg Clark: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is new to this House, but first he should know that of course Trafford does not get any rural grant because it is not a rural authority. Secondly, he might want to reflect on the remarks that he made about my noble Friend Baroness Williams of Trafford, who is, and has been throughout her career, an excellent public servant. She has done great work, not only in Trafford, for Greater Manchester, and is a woman of the utmost integrity. I think he will want to reflect on that.

Jim McMahon: I am quite happy with my comment. There is a direct link between Government Members who had to be bought for their vote today and the fact that the only council in Greater Manchester to receive the transitional grant happens to be the place where the Local Government Minister lives. I am sorry about that, but I did not choose where the Baroness chose to be a council leader and chooses to live.

The crux of the issue is that the Government steered through the cuts in a very politically tactical way but have not at all understood their true impact, which has been found in review after review, and by the Public Accounts Committee in this House. If the responsibility of Government is to look after the welfare of their citizens, then on that test I am afraid they have failed.

5.33 pm

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I stood here a month ago and said that now was the time for the rural voice to be heard. A month on, I am pleased to say that the rural voice has spoken and has been heeded, at least to some extent. I pay tribute to the way in which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has conducted the consultation, making time for colleagues in all parts of the House and councils from all parts of the country. He has turned a consultation

[Graham Stuart]

exercise, which can sometimes seem like a rubber-stamping exercise, into a genuine engagement with people across the country.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I believe that my hon. Friend and I are on the same side on this matter. Does he agree that the test of a good Minister is that they are prepared to change when they are faced with a valid argument for doing so? That is what the Secretary of State has done following the representations that my hon. Friend, I and others have made. The deal may not be perfect, but does my hon. Friend agree that it is better than it was?

Graham Stuart: I expect that my right hon. Friend and I will always be on the same side on such matters. He is right in what he says.

One of the most important aspects of the settlement—the promise to look again fully at the needs of local government—is not actually in the settlement, and it is long overdue. As my right hon. Friend has just said, when the facts change, sometimes my opinions do, too. The fact is that this country has a fast-ageing population, as Labour Members have said, and the distribution figures show that older people are disproportionately to be found in rural, rather than urban, areas—[*Interruption.*] Some people are saying “Nonsense!” and “Rubbish!” I do not know what dataset they have, but just as there is a massive discrepancy between the amounts per head for rural and urban areas—it was 50% when Labour left power, and it is 45% now—

Liz Kendall: Nobody from the Opposition is denying that elderly people live in rural areas, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that we have to consider those people’s ability to pay? The most deprived areas have the greatest need for publicly funded care. Does he not agree that that must be part of the equation?

Graham Stuart: Some of the hon. Lady’s colleagues deny that the people in rural areas are older, on average, than those in urban areas. They shouted “Rubbish!” just moments ago when I asserted that, even though the shadow Minister acknowledged it in his speech in January. People are, on average, older in rural areas, and the hon. Lady is clearly unaware of—or, like too many of her colleagues, closes her ears to—the fact that people in rural areas are, on average, poorer than those in urban areas. Average earnings based on residence are lower in rural areas than in urban areas. Average earnings based on place of employment are lower in rural areas than in urban areas. That is not to say that centres of real deprivation do not need special and specific support, but to generalise that the poor burghers of Sheffield are all on the breadline, whereas everyone in Withernsea in my constituency is living it up in some rich, prosperous rural idyll, is nonsense. I know that the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) would not do that, but too much of the Labour party’s argument has suggested otherwise, as has much of today’s debate.

If we are to move to a fair system, we must recognise how iniquitous it was of the Labour Government to use density to drive funding to wealthier, younger, less needy urban areas. The Labour party is now screaming

about an adjustment that recognises an ageing population, predominantly based in rural areas, who are also poorer. Those are the facts; if they are not, I will happily take another intervention from the hon. Ladies who shouted “Rubbish!” at me. The Labour party was shameful in skewing the funding formulae. It is equally shameless now in pretending that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is being unfair in dealing with the mess that the previous Labour Government left behind and making the tough decisions that he has to make.

In a less partisan spirit, I say to Members from all parts of the House that we must work together on the needs assessment to embed efficiency, not dependency and incompetence, and to recognise hard need such as an ageing population. Someone who is relatively healthy but old has—guess what?—higher health needs and higher social care needs. They are entwined, as colleagues from all parts of the House have said. They are predominantly less well funded in rural areas than in urban areas, so there is greater need. The Labour party should hang its head in shame at the fact that it turned its face utterly against that clear and present need. If the party apologised, as it should, for doing so, it would have much more traction in the debate to appeal for a fair and proper settlement.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very good point. Does he agree that the review needs to take place sooner rather than later—there must not be any delay—and that it must cover all needs, including the demographics, which is very important in rural areas?

Graham Stuart: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has been a champion of the rural interest, along with so many other colleagues, in arguing for a fair settlement. In the rural fair share campaign, which has always been a cross-party campaign, we have been clear that we want something that is fair to all.

The reason I have been so confrontational with Labour colleagues is that I am starting to hear the old untruths coming out, such as the suggestion that there is a difference, as the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) described it, between some phenomenally wealthy Trafford and some downtrodden Oldham, and that the allocation of money is utterly unfair. Of course the people taking the biggest percentage reductions in the Government grant were predominantly, in the original settlement, rural areas. Mets were getting an average reduction of 19% and rural areas were seeing cuts of 30%-plus in their Government-supported spending. That is the truth: those are the facts in the data table. Yet, to listen to the hon. Gentleman, one would think the opposite was true. He puts forward the entirely false argument that the cuts are somehow unfair. Transitional arrangements are put in place to soften the blow.

We now have the opportunity—I must say that I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—for all of us, on both sides of the House, to move to a settlement that is fair to rural and urban areas alike and to Labour and Conservative areas alike. Never ever again must we have a Government who, for partisan purposes, put in place a skewed and unfair formula in the outrageous, shameless and shameful way that the Labour Government did during their 13 years.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I must lower the speech limit to four minutes.

5.41 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I was hoping I was not going to be the next speaker because I am speechless after that peroration by the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart). It is extraordinary what this Government have managed to do in pitting town against village, the north against the south, and the metropolitan areas against the shires. It is disgraceful. They have created division by the decision they made on the original settlements and then by finding this magic, back-of-sofa money. I have never known anything so deliberately partisan. I did not believe I would ever see anything like it.

I admire the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who is no longer in his place, for at least having the honesty to come to the Chamber and tell colleagues he was thinking of voting against the Government today, but that he had changed his mind. He changed his mind—he was very open about why—because his council will get some extra money. He therefore felt that he could vote with the Government. Well, give me some extra money and I might think about doing so!

I do not resent Conservative Members for being good champions of their areas and winning some extra funding for their councils—that is one of the things we are in Parliament to do—but I hope that they enjoy the extra money they get and that they win the shire council seats for which it was clearly designed to ensure victory. I hope that they enjoy that, but that they realise it will happen on the back of services in my area and those of my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods). These are the services for deprived children, the children centres that are closing in my constituency, and the libraries that are closing—

Greg Clark *rose*—

Jenny Chapman: My constituency has two libraries, both of which are to close. The market at the heart of my town is set to close. I hope Conservative Members enjoy the extra funding that they will receive, because my town and the people in my town are angry. I have never seen them this angry before. They are angry about what is going to happen, but also about the unfairness.

Greg Clark *rose*—

Jenny Chapman: I will not give way. Why should I give way? Why should I give way to the Secretary of State who is ripping the heart out of my constituency? Why should I give way to him? He had half an hour at the Dispatch Box; he made a statement on Monday; he had Communities and Local Government questions on Monday. He has dismissed all attempts by Labour Members to lobby him. He has provided nothing for my constituency. My constituency is a town the same size as Wokingham. My constituency gets nothing from transitional funding—not a penny. In fact, we will lose £2,000 a year. Wokingham is getting £2.1 million of

additional funding. The two towns are the same size and have completely different needs. My town is losing out.

Greg Clark *rose*—

Jenny Chapman: I am not going to give way. I am going to allow other Members to make the case for their constituencies. I hope the Secretary of State listens to what we are saying and takes it on board. I know that he is familiar with my part of the country. He needs to think about the needs up there, because the people of the north-east will never, ever forgive this Government for what they are doing to our region.

5.45 pm

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): The need to reduce the deficit has inevitably put pressure on councils right across the country. Even those that have made substantial and successful savings are understandably concerned about the transitional period during the move from centralised funding to an accountable system of self-funding.

At the start of this year, the leader of Essex County Council wrote to me and my fellow Essex MPs, setting out his concerns regarding the provisional local government finance settlement, which he thought would see the council lose over £50 million a year more than it was anticipating, despite having budgeted carefully. We took our case to the Secretary of State and I welcome the fact that he listened. As we know, he has made available up to £3.5 billion for social care.

Essex, like many council areas, has a serious and pressing challenge in its ageing population. It has the longest coastline in Britain and attractive coastal towns, so it is an attractive place to retire to. Over the next decade, our older population is expected to grow by 9%. As has been said, it should not be assumed that just because someone lives in beautiful rural Essex, they are not stretched for cash. People who live on a park homes site on a fixed income may not be the richest members of society. The demographic pressures are huge and we welcome enormously the fact that the Government have listened to our case.

Essex County Council is very much looking forward to the challenge of being more go-getting when it is dependent on the retention of business rates. We recently hired a new chief executive who is an ex-businessman, and he is taking an incredibly positive approach. We believe that the devolution agenda will transform local government from being about service delivery and dealing with needs to being organisations that set out to change their areas, encourage business development, and create jobs and growth. It is businesses that create jobs, wealth and growth, not politicians like us and local councillors.

Councils such as Essex County Council, which have shown that they can make efficiency savings, will benefit from the security of this four-year settlement. During this difficult time for all public finances, councils need to be able to plan for the medium term. Owing to the foresight of this four-year settlement, they can do so. This settlement brings greater transparency and parity in local government finances than we have ever had before.

[*Rebecca Harris*]

The retention of the new homes bonus, which the Secretary of State mentioned, is incredibly valuable. Councils will have to be active in bringing forward new development and new houses, rather than sitting back passively, as they used to in the days of top-down national targets, when large green-belt sites were allocated to big unit developers, which may or may not have built on them because it was not in their business model to get on and build houses and so reduce house prices. Councils know that they can now invest officer resources not just in bringing forward new businesses and making life easier for businesses in their area, but in bringing through new developments, perhaps on smaller sites with local businesses, that will be sold to local people through local estate agents.

The entire package is an enormous step forward in local government finance. It will be very healthy for democracy and business creation around the country.

5.48 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I want to make just three points to the Secretary of State. Let me start by saying that, as he knows, he has enjoyed a good reputation among many Labour Members. I am afraid that that reputation has taken a bit of a battering from the settlement he presented this afternoon. It is with some sorrow that I say that.

I simply cannot square with any sense of fairness an outcome that means that budgets in Buckinghamshire will rise by 11.5% by 2016-17, while budgets in Birmingham will fall by 10% over the same period. Quite frankly, the battering of Birmingham has gone on for far too long. We had looked to this settlement for some sense of salvation.

I will be grateful for small mercies, and I am grateful that the Secretary of State recognises Birmingham's case that there is a fairer funding formula to be had. The challenge is that the Secretary of State does not plan to introduce that new settlement until 2016-17. There is nothing to accommodate the shortfalls in 2014-15 or 2015-16. Yet if we were on the funding formula that the Secretary of State acknowledges would be good, an extra £98 million would be flowing into our city right now.

The Secretary of State has said that that is not realistic because there is a fixed budget: what comes from one authority is what goes to another. We listened to those arguments, yet in the past couple of days, lo and behold, from down the back of the sofa in the Secretary of State's office comes £150 million of transitional funding, plus £90 million in rural delivery grant, none of which is available for the city of Birmingham. There is no attempt to address the unfairness of past settlements or to tackle our weaker ability to raise a social care precept, no confirmation of flexibility about capital receipts, no clarity on our four-year settlement, and no way of bringing forward any funding in the better care programme for social care. The reduction in our spending power is twice the national average, despite the extra needs in our city.

In the weeks to come, I hope that the Secretary of State will reflect on not only the knock-on effects on local government, but the danger of knocking over the

health service in east Birmingham. As he knows, my constituency is home to Heartlands hospital, which has been put into special measures, has a £54 million deficit and has now been taken over by Queen Elizabeth hospital. There is unprecedented pressure at the front door and A&E, which is exacerbated because the crisis in the social care system means that it is so much harder to get older residents out and into their homes. The delayed discharge rate at Heartlands hospital has increased over the past year by four times the national average. According to the House of Commons Library, public funding shortages are driving that whopping increase. Delays due to public funding shortages have increased by 1,000% in the past year.

I put it as gently as I can to the Secretary of State: we have a funding crisis in social care that threatens to knock over our national health service. I know that he will say that funding solutions for social care are coming down the track, but the crisis in our health and social care services is not in the years to come, but now. On top of that, Birmingham City Council anticipates that it will have to take another £92 million from social care in the next couple of years. That is not credible or realistic, but intensely dangerous. Birmingham demands new solutions from the Secretary of State, and not for the years to come. Birmingham needs them now.

5.52 pm

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), who has great experience of working in the Treasury. I gently say to him that I would be more than happy to offer him a deal—not that I have the power to do so at the moment—of swapping per capita funding for his constituents in Birmingham with that for constituents in Nottinghamshire, East Yorkshire, Cornwall, or any such rural area. Today, per capita funding—[*Interruption.*] If the right hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, he can do so, but shouting from a sedentary position is not the thing to do.

Liam Byrne: Let me offer the hon. Gentleman a deal: will he join me in arguing for a special and strong weighting for poverty in the needs-based formula that the Secretary of State plans to review?

Mark Spencer: I am more than happy to argue with the right hon. Gentleman, and stand side by side with him if we are talking about older people and those who are less wealthy, who tend to be found in rural areas. That is the challenge that we face today. In those rural areas, the population is not only older, but less wealthy and people have further to travel to the resources and services that they desperately need. For someone who lives in a rural area, needs a hospital appointment and has to use public transport, the public transport links are not as good as they are in urban areas. The doctor is further away than a doctor in an urban area. There are much greater challenges for those who live in rural areas.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): My hon. Friend should also remember that pupils in Birmingham get funded £1,000 a year more than my pupils in Leicestershire, yet one of the most deprived towns in the county is in my constituency.

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Thank goodness that at last the Government are starting to address the challenges faced by rural areas. The Secretary of State has given us a four-year settlement, which means that local authorities will not be living hand to mouth but can plan for the next four years. They know what they have got coming, which means that they can plan to use some of the resources and reserves that some of them are sitting on, to ensure that they protect our constituents and look after their needs. They will not have to sit on those reserves thinking that they may need them within the next 12 months.

That builds in a buffer so that authorities that are keen to promote business and housing developments, and to ensure that the local economy expands, have time to increase the amount of revenue that they generate. That is a positive step forward, and I am working alongside Nottinghamshire County Council and the local enterprise partnership to try to create jobs in my part of Nottinghamshire, so that in future we can live by our own means, and generate and boost the local economy. Authorities that give a boost to their high streets and protect local shops will reap the benefits of that when those successful businesses are able to pay rates back to the authority and contribute to the local economy by creating jobs.

It is sometimes enormously frustrating in Nottinghamshire when I hear councils complain that they are short of cash and will have to shut services, when at the same time one of my district councils is working with the county council to spend £1.4 million on swapping people's dustbins. My constituents do not understand why we need to spend £1.4 million on that, at a time when the council says it is short of cash to deliver the services my constituents desperately want. Hopefully, with the help of the Secretary of State we can get to a more balanced settlement, have a vision for the future, and mitigate that change with the support that he is providing.

5.57 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Let me begin by providing clarification to the Secretary of State about comments on fairness from Durham County Council—this is via the wonders of modern technology—that related to certain aspects of the provisional settlement and not to the total or final settlement. The council said that the settlement would put the county at a huge disadvantage, and that none of the extra cash has been targeted at areas with the greatest need. It added that the settlement was “unfair” and “far too late”, and I hope that the Secretary of State will accept that clarification.

Greg Clark: It is clear that that is a response to the statutory consultation, and to reassure the hon. Lady that I am not taking anything out of context, the section that I quoted from is entitled, in bold, “Fairness of Settlement” and states:

“In our view, no authority can now claim that this approach is ‘unfair’.”

It is as clear as day.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I think that is the fourth time we have heard that from the Secretary of State this

afternoon, but that does not make it right. Durham County Council has clarified that, and it thinks that the settlement is totally unfair.

Jim McMahon: Simon Henig, the leader of Durham County Council, has just sent me a message to say that that aspect was part of the original consultation, and that it does not consider the latest round, which includes the transition fund, to be fair.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for confirming what I have just said. Those of us in Durham think that the settlement is absolutely shocking because, once again, it hits hardest those councils with the greatest problems and highest levels of disadvantage, such as Durham. I had hoped that the Secretary of State's comments on Monday would go some way to addressing the balance in favour of areas with the highest need, but I am afraid there was not a glimmer of that. Given the Government's record of unfairness and widening inequalities, it is perhaps not surprising that the settlement massively favours Conservative councils. In fact, 87% of the funding announced on Monday is going to Tory councils.

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Blackman-Woods: I am not going to give way to the hon. Gentleman, because he would not take an intervention from me.

The only north-east council to benefit from the £150 million additional funding announced on Monday is Northumberland. That is staggering, especially as Durham is also a substantially rural area. It is odd, then, that Northumberland is the only council to benefit from the rural fund. Indeed, if we look across the country, the areas to benefit most are Surrey, with £11.9 million; Hampshire, with £9.4 million; North Yorkshire, with £9.2 million; and Devon, with £8.3 million. Examples of the reduction in core spending tell a similar story: Durham had a reduction of minus 4.1%; Newcastle minus 4.4%; and Sunderland minus 4.3%. Compare that with Surrey, which has a decrease of only minus 1.1% and North Yorkshire minus 0.3%.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Blackman-Woods: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman, just because we are very short of time.

It is very clear from those figures that shire county areas and southern authorities have received below-average reductions in core spending power, while deprived areas have received above-average decreases, continuing the unfair trend set by the coalition Government. As we have heard from other Labour Members, the very councils suffering the highest cuts have a higher demand for children's services, evidenced by severe cuts to our children's centres, with most closed under this Government, and greater demand for adult social care and higher levels of need for good public health. That is not, however, reflected in core spending power per dwelling. The average across the country is £1,838, but for Durham, an area of high disadvantage, it is only £1,608. By comparison, the whole of Surrey gets more than £2,000 per dwelling, while Richmond upon Thames receives £1,866.

[*Dr Blackman-Woods*]

Based on current forecasts, Durham's total savings target for the next four years is £105 million, so there will have been £260 million of cuts since austerity began—figures so large that they are difficult to comprehend.

Figures are important to understanding the gross unfairness in Government funding, but we need to take a moment to consider what this means for people who need council services. Even by dipping into council reserves, Durham faces severe challenges with regard to social care charges, the provision of essential youth services and support for vital bus services. I say to the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) that Durham is a rural area, too. It needs to support its bus services, but the Government are not allowing for that in the current formula, not to mention any access to leisure facilities.

The council will do its best to ensure that the most vulnerable people are protected and that, where it can, capital will be used to promote economic growth and tourism, but the Government should take no comfort from that. The statement on Monday was a disgrace in that it failed to address the needs of some of the most disadvantaged people in the country. The settlement leads to the extraordinary position whereby residents in more affluent areas are receiving services of higher standards and greater volume than in areas where a lot of the people are low waged or where historically they have high levels of poor health. That cannot be fair and no amount of loquaciousness and tongue twisting from Government Members will make it so. It is time for a fair local government finance settlement based on need, not the political colour of the local authority.

6.3 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I will start in the way I concluded the debate on this issue in the House on Monday, by saying, "Thank you" to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for listening carefully to the representations made to him and for making significant improvements from the draft settlement. As there has been quite a bit of to-ing and fro-ing here about what local authorities might think, let me add to that list. I have in my hand a piece of paper.

North Devon District Council was dissatisfied with the draft settlement, as I made clear in the House after its introduction. I spoke to the council at great length. It was not happy about being unfairly treated. It believed, as did many, that the settlement did not tackle the unfairness between rural and urban authorities, and it asked me to do something about it.

After much intense lobbying, the Secretary of State has come forward with a new and improved final settlement, and this afternoon, at about half-past 2, the council issued a media release—not from the Conservative group, but from the neutral officers of the council. The headline reads, "Council welcomes Rural Services Delivery Grant increase", and it continues:

"North Devon Council has welcomed news that a government grant is to be increased, which will help benefit rural areas like North Devon... It means, instead of £77,000 identified in the draft settlement for North Devon...the district is now likely to receive £308,000. Meanwhile, for 2017/18, the council is now likely to see its Rural Services Delivery Grant come in at £249,000,

instead of the previously predicted £134,000... Executive Member responsible...says: 'This is really good news for North Devon and other rural districts.'

That goes to the heart of the problem that I and many other Members had with the draft settlement: it was unfair. There followed, however, a great deal of lobbying from us and a great deal of listening from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. It is disappointing, therefore, to hear the Opposition describe this as a fix to head off a rebellion—talk about glass half empty. My right hon. Friend listened to colleagues, responded positively and significantly improved the final settlement. We should all welcome that.

The funding of adult social care is a serious issue. In north Devon, and Devon as a whole, with its older demographic, of course it presents a challenge, but, again, the Government and the Secretary of State have sought, in the final settlement, to do something positive. During Labour's 13 years in government, when it could clearly see this challenge looming—the demographics were there for all to see—it did absolutely nothing to address the problem. It left it to this Government to do something about it, and as always happens, the electorate recognised that only a Conservative Government would do that.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): We have heard a lot about party politics. Given that the extra money for Devon covers Exeter, has Labour objected to additional money for social care in Exeter?

Peter Heaton-Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) does not seem to be in his place. Neither are any Liberal Democrats here for this important debate, despite their trying to sell themselves as the party of local government that wants to build from the ground up. There are not many of them, but not one of them has come to speak in this important debate.

I thank my right hon. Friend again for listening and making this significant improvement, but we need to go further to address the long-term unfairness between rural and urban settlement grants. My hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) said that £130 million was needed for the rural grant. I hope the Government can look at that aspiration, but in the short term, I welcome the settlement, as do Devon County Council and North Devon District Council. It shows what can be achieved when Conservative MPs and local authorities and a Conservative Government work together, listen and get a settlement that I hope we can all support in the Lobbies this evening.

6.9 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I well remember the Prime Minister in 2010 speaking to the country and declaring that we were all in this together. That had a ring of fairness that resonated with the British people. He went on to say that those with the broadest shoulders would bear the greatest burden. Sadly, those were just words and were never backed up with action. My constituency is one of the least affluent areas of the country, and despite that, since 2010, Burnley Council has seen its funding cut by a staggering 54%. Cuts of that magnitude have also been the order of the day at Lancashire County Council. As if all that is not bad enough, during the same period other, more prosperous

authorities have had their funding increased, which demonstrates an outrageous absence of fairness. The people of Burnley have known since 2010 that we are certainly not all in this together.

As the former leader of Burnley Borough Council, I am no stranger to belt-tightening exercises, and I can tell the House that it was exceptionally difficult at times. The Minister for Housing and Planning may well remember meeting me on more than one occasion when I pleaded with him to grant transition funding for Burnley. He will, no doubt, also remember the long and tedious process involved for Burnley and other authorities to secure that most essential funding. Having negotiated numerous hurdles, Burnley Borough Council demonstrated efficient transitional activity. It was, and is, an efficient council.

When this year's provisional settlements were announced, councils across the country were, unsurprisingly, angry about the cuts to their budget, but it seemed like the Secretary of State was listening when he announced an additional £300 million over the next two years. We welcomed that, until we saw where the funding is going to go. Will it be distributed to those areas most in need? Of course not. Given this Government's record, we ought not to be surprised that more than 80% of that additional funding will go to the most prosperous authorities.

Since 2010, the five least deprived authorities have, overall, had their budget cut by £7 per person, while, shockingly, the five most deprived authorities have had their budgets cut by more than £336 per head. Will the Minister explain what funding formula he has used to arrive at this latest settlement? I note that Burnley is to endure a further budget spending cut of 4.8%, while the more affluent areas of South Ribble and Uttlesford are to enjoy budget increases. So, while Burnley will have its budget cut by 4.8%, Uttlesford will have its budget increased by 6.4%. I have no problem with the people of Uttlesford, but I do with the lack of fairness.

Did those councils have to go through a lengthy process of targets and assessments to access that increase? Of course not. A word in the Prime Minister's ear, it seems, and the budgets are increased. What message does that send to the people in Burnley? Has the Minister stopped for one minute to think what the impact of the cuts will be in Burnley? Does he even care?

The cuts will result in reduced social care services for the elderly and disabled; the closure of community centres and libraries; the loss of bus services; the loss of support for those fleeing domestic violence; and the withdrawal of services for those struggling to cope with autism. I could go on, but it is clear that the most vulnerable will carry the heaviest burden, while those with the broadest shoulders are given a bonus.

Burnley has been cheated, and I believe that these further unfair cuts will confirm to the people of Burnley and Padiham that this Conservative Government will always prioritise the needs of the richest at the expense of the poorest and most vulnerable. If the Minister were to change his mind and reconsider—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order.

6.13 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper). Perhaps this debate has given us a chance to look forward to the

future, given that the Lib Dems have left the building, but it has also given us an opportunity to look back to the past. Just over a year ago, Labour had been complaining for nearly five years about various local government settlements. An election was coming and Labour Members were challenged: "What extra would you do?" Their answer was, "Nothing." It is interesting to compare their rhetoric today with the reality.

A four-year local government funding settlement is welcome. I used to work in local government and it made no sense to find out in December what we would have to spend from April and to then base it on a budget that was set at the back end of February. Whatever anyone's view of the overall settlement, it makes eminent sense for councils to be able to plan in a similar way to Governments.

I represent one of the few totally urban constituencies to the west of Bristol, but do I object to the recognition given to the challenges that our neighbouring county faces in delivering services? For all the fury and rhetoric we have heard about Conservative areas being favoured, it is worth noting that Exeter, the one Labour constituency west of Bristol, falls under Devon County Council, which is going to benefit. [*Interruption.*] Judging from what we have just heard, it seems as if Labour is working to ensure that it has no MPs west of Bristol after the next general election.

Issues affecting coastal communities are well worth looking at. In my area, we are a mixture—in some ways urban and in some ways rural—but we certainly have big social challenges and problems surrounding an ageing population. In one ward in my constituency, 9% of the population is aged over 85, and it will soon be 10%. Whatever anyone says, that makes for a real challenge.

When it comes specifically to Torbay, some lessons can be learned by other councils from its approach to the challenges presented by asking the LGA to come and work on a peer review. This confirmed the council's viability and suggested that it needed to develop its own vision for the future. I could suggest some areas on which it might want to review its spending—subsidising the local conference centre, for example—but at the end of the day, a positive picture has been presented of how a council that wants to grapple with the issues and wants to put forward a vision can build towards the future, while facing some of the biggest demographic challenges with childcare at one end and elderly social care at the other.

I welcome aspects of the settlement. I think it is fair settlement overall—one that does not denude my area when it comes to assisting other areas. With greater devolution and more areas working together—and particularly with Devon, Somerset, Plymouth and Torbay looking to work together—it is wrong to present this false idea of little islands all working on their own that we have heard from Labour Members. That is absolute nonsense.

There are positive aspects, but yes, there are still challenges. We have heard some false anger from Opposition Members, when Labour did not pledge any extra funding in this area and argued during the election campaign that it did not even want to match our pledges on the NHS.

Dr Blackman-Woods *rose*—

Kevin Foster: I happily give way, as I would like to have another minute.

Dr Blackman-Woods: There is nothing false about the issues we are raising this afternoon. We are simply asking for a fairer settlement for local government that takes account of levels of disadvantage and levels of need, and for the needs of rural areas such as Durham, as well as rural areas elsewhere, to be acknowledged.

Kevin Foster: There may be nothing false about the issues, but it is somewhat false to come into this Chamber and complain about reductions in local government funding, when Labour Members had an opportunity to change the situation in their manifesto but failed to do so.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend may want to reflect on the fact that the reductions in Government grant and Government spending power over this Parliament to the original settlement in Durham amounted to 19.6%, yet rural areas were seeing reductions of 30%-plus. That is why Durham did not receive transitional relief—because it was not among the councils that were suffering the most. It is a simple concept, but Labour Members have misrepresented it—and yet again they should be ashamed of themselves.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing his usual laser-like precision to the debate. It is interesting to reflect on some things, and I expect some council leaders will be reflecting on the old floors and ceilings that used to exist in local government funding as a means of altering the assessments.

I therefore find some of the fury we have heard this afternoon to be somewhat unconvincing and fairly fake, given the absence of proposals for any extra funding. When the Government are being attacked and the Secretary of State offers to intervene, the refusal to accept it just about says it all.

I am pleased about aspects such as the coastal community fund and some of the other funding and support that is coming in. I am most pleased to see a Government who are prepared to let councils get on with their work and reward those that deliver economic regeneration, as well as a Government who are delivering an economy that will provide benefits to local people. Ultimately, this is a Government with the vision to take the country forward rather than a vision for attacks and a lot of hot air. When it comes down to it, the Chancellor put up a manifesto, put up a commitment and said where it was going to be paid from—yet nothing came forward from Labour.

6.19 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Let me tell the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) that this is an issue about distribution and the unfairness of the distribution of these cuts. Some parts of the country that have the greatest social and economic need, such as Liverpool, are facing the biggest cuts yet again. That is what Labour Members are genuinely very angry about, reflecting the anger in the communities we represent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) has already spoken about the challenges

that we face in Liverpool. I join her in paying tribute to the mayor of Liverpool, Joe Anderson, who has done a fantastic job in leading Liverpool over the last six years. Where did he start? He started with efficiencies. Efficiencies could be made, and he made them. Then he turned to innovation. He made a city deal with the Government that enabled him to rebuild or refurbish 12 schools that had lost out when the Government cancelled Building Schools for the Future. He took the lead, working with other council leaders in Merseyside, in securing city region devolution.

It is not a question of a choice between efficiency and innovation on the one hand and cuts on the other. Liverpool is facing up to the challenges, but even with efficiencies and innovation, its funding from central Government has been cut by 58%. That is simply not tenable. It is simply not possible to balance the books without harming front-line services.

That brings me to the £300 million of Government transitional support. Conservative Members have made legitimate points about rural payments. Rural poverty is undoubtedly a real issue, as is an ageing population, but if that is what the transitional money is about, why on earth is Surrey the biggest beneficiary of the additional money? It is not going to the poorest rural areas. Despite that 58% cut in central Government funding, Liverpool will not receive a penny, while Surrey will receive a substantial amount.

Let us have a fair system of funding. I do not want to talk about “urban versus rural”, because this should be about need and deprivation. Yes, there is deprivation in rural areas, but there is also considerable deprivation in constituencies like mine. I want to ensure that there is fairness and justice in the treatment of different types of authority, but hitting a council like Liverpool with a 58% cut and then providing no transitional support does not strike me as reasonable.

Graham Stuart: According to the figures that I have seen, the average cuts in Government-funded spending power in this Parliament will be 19% in metropolitan areas and 30% in rural areas, and the figure for Liverpool is just over 15%. Where did the hon. Gentleman find his figure of 58%?

Stephen Twigg: I am talking about the actual reductions in Liverpool’s actual funding from central Government. However, the hon. Gentleman has helped me by bringing me to my next point, which other Members have already made today.

In areas with greater social and economic needs and higher levels of poverty, such as my constituency, the council tax base is such that allowing local authorities to increase council tax simply does not have the impact that it has in Surrey and some of the wealthier London boroughs. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside spoke about social care. The increase in council tax that Liverpool has been allowed will enable us to raise £2.7 million. That is better than nothing, but the city’s social care budget has been reduced by £90 million since 2010. We can raise £2.7 million, but the gap is still £90 million.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) made the important point that, while we must take account of demographics and the number of older people in each area, we must also take account of

ability to pay. One Member mentioned the number of people aged over 85 in one of his constituency wards. Clearly that brings pressures, but life expectancy in poorer parts of the country is such that not many people live until they are 85. Those are the kind of pressures caused by an ageing population that are faced in areas of high poverty, and they are different from those that are faced in other parts of the country.

I urge the Minister and the Secretary of State to think again, and, in particular, to take up the excellent suggestion made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West and make the better care fund money available immediately. That could at least help us with what is an emerging social care crisis. As a number of my hon. Friends have said, it is a human crisis not just in terms of the provision of social care, but in terms of the additional pressure that is placed on our health service.

I am hopeful that devolution for the Liverpool city region will bring many benefits, but those benefits are more than cancelled out by the scale of the cuts, which are simply unfair because they hit the poorest parts of the country—constituencies like mine—much harder than the rest.

6.24 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I warmly welcome this statement today from the Secretary of State. My local authority, North Yorkshire County Council, will receive £15 million in transitional funding over the next two years, and my district authorities will receive £1.4 million. We hear cries of “Tory plot” from the Opposition, but my local authority was facing a 37% reduction in its funding, compared with an average of 20% for metropolitan authorities. What kind of Tory plot is that? This is about fairness.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Does my hon. Friend also welcome the news that Labour-run Carlisle and Labour-run Cumbria are also receiving some transitional relief?

Kevin Hollinrake: I do welcome that news.

This funding is targeted at the locations with the biggest falls. Opposition Members need to understand the profound feeling of unfairness that exists in my community, not just about funding for rural services but about the way in which our schools and healthcare are funded. How would they explain to an elderly constituent of mine in need of adult social care why she should get less funding than somebody in an urban area when she pays more in council tax? Why is that right? The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) mentioned disadvantage, but a band D council taxpayer in my area pays £1,472 a year, which is £200 more than someone in his constituency.

These are deep cuts for the people we need to protect in our communities, whether they affect our libraries, our bus services, our post offices or those in our voluntary sector who do such fine work but who rely on central moneys to pay for the car schemes, the home visits, the day care and the relief care. I therefore welcome the fair funding review that the Secretary of State has announced. We just want fairness. We do not want a better deal than urban areas; we just want a fair deal, and whatever deal is arrived at needs to be baked into the system.

Historically, underfunding by successive Governments has led to our paying more in council tax and to our homes being more expensive to buy or to rent and more expensive to heat. Among the elderly population in my constituency, the numbers are rising three times faster than those in metropolitan areas, and the cost of providing services to those people is much more expensive. The Government recognised that in 2013-14, but we only got 25% of the funding that we were due, owing to damping.

What we need is a simple, transparent system that recognises need. Whatever that system might be, if it is fair Conservative Members will sign up to it without question. None of us is complaining about the size of the cake; we just want a fair distribution. We realise that we need to make cuts. Every time we have one of these debates, Opposition Members refuse to say where they would make such cuts. They are deficit deniers. We need to make cuts in our area. Our local authorities need to become more efficient.

In my area, we have eight separate local authorities. That cannot be right at a time when we are having to make deep cuts, and we need to look for efficiencies. That cannot be an efficient way to run local government. Local authorities have a part to play in this, and we have a chance to reorganise as part of the devolution revolution. We have a complex system with five clinical commissioning groups, five health trusts, eight local authorities and a huge number of voluntary organisations. If we are to make the best of the money available and balance the books, local government will of course have to play its part if we are to become more efficient. We need to bring together all our services, such as health, social care, housing and education, to ensure that they are interconnected and that they work more effectively without duplication, complexity or bureaucracy. This settlement gives us the breathing space to develop a new fairer funding formula—a simple, fair, future-proof and rural-proof formula—and I am very happy to support the motion.

6.29 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is pleasure to contribute to this debate. First, I wish to pay tribute to all local councillors, of all political parties and none, for the work that they do in the world of local government, making sure that local services are provided to the people we represent in Parliament. They do an incredible job in difficult circumstances. I say that having been a councillor on Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council for 12 years. My wife has been a Tameside councillor for 16 years, and I know the very difficult decisions she and her colleagues are having to make at the moment.

My constituency is served by two borough councils. They are very different in their socioeconomic and demographic, and political make-ups, but both are having to deal with tough—although different—spending decisions. Stockport contains the two Reddish wards in my constituency. Tameside would love to have Stockport's settlement and its council tax base. Nevertheless, the cuts are biting hard in Stockport and I wish to make a few comments on behalf of the borough council. It says it is:

“Surprised at extent to which council tax growth is assumed in the government's figures which...fail to acknowledge the spending pressures arising from government induced changes (e.g national living wage, NI increases and apprenticeship levy).”

[*Andrew Gwynne*]

It would be good if the Minister could respond to some of those points. Although Stockport Council welcomes

“certain aspects of the settlement, insofar as it is not as bad as it might have been”

it is

“under no illusions as to the scale of the financial challenges that face the Council”.

It says that it will have to

“take full advantage of the newly granted flexibility to increase council tax.”

I wish to make the point again that Tameside’s council has a £16 million social care deficit this year. It is now restricted to providing just critical and substantial care, which is statutory. That means the council still has to find the money to close that £16 million gap. Given that social care amounts to 60% of the council’s overall budget yet it serves only 4% of the residents of the borough, that money has to be found from the services everybody else takes for granted. I do not wish to repeat many of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), but Tameside’s council is in a pretty similar position, in that its grounds maintenance, parks, road repairs and street cleaning are what is being literally—

Barbara Keeley: Today, I have been downstairs to meet people from the Malnutrition Task Force, which is doing some brilliant work in Salford. We have more than 2,000 cases of malnutrition—we are talking about people over 65 here. This sort of thing is developing now. Cynical comments are made by Conservative Members about the real concern Labour Members have. We used not to need a malnutrition taskforce, and 193 out of 2,000 cases of malnourished older people were found in Salford. I know that Tameside has now launched a food bank to deal with this issue.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. Of course these cuts to local government budgets must also be set alongside the £200 million in-year reduction to the public health budget, which of course local government controls—it is a point she makes very well.

In areas such as Darlington and Tameside, local residents are not going to receive the basic services they expect to receive because the social care gap has to be filled by the general fund. I am glad the Secretary of State is back in his place, because he keeps telling Tameside Members to speak to the leader of Trafford Council. I tell him that Tameside would love to have Trafford Council’s council tax base. Band D properties in Trafford bring in £84.9 million of income to Trafford, whereas the same band in Tameside brings in £74.3 million. That is because Trafford has many more band D properties, and it also has many more in bands E, F and G. That is the real unfairness.

In my closing few seconds, I will touch briefly on the better care fund, which is of course backloaded. We need that money today, because the crisis in social care is here, it is now and it is literally killing the council financially. I say to the Secretary of State that it is all very well giving money through the better care fund, but the council is losing a similar amount from the new homes bonus. We need a fairer

settlement for the metropolitan areas, and a needs-based assessment, because Tameside and Stockport are being clobbered.

6.35 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). I concur with him and share his thanks to councillors and council officers, of all politics and none, for the work that they do, day in, day out, on behalf of their communities across the country.

To listen to Opposition Members, one would have thought that the settlements for their areas had been stripped away in order to adjust ours. Had that been the case, I would have shared their anger, but it is not the case. No draft settlement that was announced in December has been driven downwards. The Department and the Treasury, to whom thanks must be due, have found additional money. I find myself asking this question, because I am not convinced by the synthetic froth of anger that we are hearing from Opposition Members. Where were they—with the honourable exception of the shadow Minister and the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman)—for the debate on the local government settlement just a few weeks ago? They were not here. They thought that they had got away scot-free, and that our areas were getting the clobbering. They have suddenly woken up and taken an interest in this situation.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is right that it is a synthetic froth. Let us take Tameside and Trafford. In the original settlement, Trafford was facing a 28% reduction in Government-funded spending power, against 19% in Tameside. Surrey was facing a 54% cut—I would never normally speak up for Surrey—so it is no wonder that it got some transitional relief.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is right. Frankly, the Opposition party has been rumbled on this. Let us not kid ourselves, this remains, even after the welcome announcement made by the Minister on Monday, a tough settlement. It leaves an unfair and unsustainable gap between funding for rural and urban areas. That continues. It has just been made a little less tough. There is no golden goose being given to Tory local government.

Liam Byrne: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take back the point about synthetic rage. If other hon. Members had a hospital such as the one in my constituency, which is £54 million in deficit, and where delayed discharges are up 1,000% in a year because of public funding cuts, they would have a responsibility to stand up and say, “Think carefully about how you distribute money.” If they are representing a city such as Birmingham where there is another £92 million to come out of social care on top of the crisis that is already there, then, collectively as a country, we have a problem. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take back his comment and recognise that there are genuine questions about the distribution mechanisms being put forward by the Secretary of State.

Simon Hoare: If Birmingham City Council is funding its local hospital, it might explain some of its problems. That is not a responsibility of the city council. I do not know how the right hon. Gentleman has the brass neck to stand and ask Government Members to retract

comments when the note he left in the Treasury continues to hang like an albatross around his and his party's neck.

Liam Byrne On that point—

Simon Hoare: I will not give way to him.

Liam Byrne: It is because he is frit.

Simon Hoare: No. Of the right hon. Gentleman, I am never frit. Of course I will give way.

Liam Byrne: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is being courteous and collegiate in giving way. He will also remember that I left a Budget that was going to halve the deficit over the course of the Parliament, which his Chancellor has still failed to achieve.

Simon Hoare: The right hon. Gentleman has obviously been to Specsavers—he has the rose-tinted glasses and he is looking through a completely different Labour history.

Mr Speaker: Order. There is an unseemly tenor now to the debate. I urge the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) to return to the path of virtue, which he ordinarily occupies, in terms of the conduct of debate. I remind the House that we are discussing not budgets, but Local Government Finance (England).

Simon Hoare: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I take that Lenten reprimand in the way that it was intended.

The Labour Opposition are judging this Government by their standards. The formula that they put in place when they were in government was patently skewed. It was gerrymandering on a massive scale. That is why, in my closing remarks, I turn to the future. The announcement that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made on Monday makes a tough settlement for local government across the piece just a little less tough. It provides an opportunity and a breathing space, particularly for counties such as Dorset, which was going to have revenue support grant for only two years—Dorset County Council, that is—rather than for four. That is where the transitional relief has had to kick in, and the rural services delivery grant has also come in to help. But that help is temporary, so I will be pressing, as I am sure will some of my hon. Friends—no doubt Opposition Members will do so too—for an efficient and speedy review and formulation of the new methodologies to be deployed in calculating what our local authorities need. I think the Ministers get that point.

In broad terms, the motions that we are debating are to be supported. There is additional help for my rural areas, which I welcome. The Secretary of State listened to my call for the £5 de minimis and has put that in. Something similar applies to the localisation of planning fees. In closing, I repeat my call in an earlier intervention for town councils to work fully in concert with district councils. They should be exempt from having their precepts capped. That will allow them to forge a deeper relationship with senior tiers of local government, instead of the year-on-year question of whether they would be capped or not. I welcome the settlement and I will join the Government in the Lobby tonight to support it. Rural communities throughout the country, which have suffered for too long under a faulty Labour manifesto, are now getting—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: There are three Labour Members still seeking to catch my eye, but realistically we ought to begin the winding-up speeches no later than 6.50. Whether Members wish to share, I leave to them. There is a time limit of four minutes, but it is up to them to cope with it.

6.43 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Respecting that discipline, I shall be brief. Birmingham is a great city—the city of Chamberlain, the birthplace of municipal governance, the birthplace of municipal enterprise, a city with great potential, and a dynamic city—but it is a city of high need. My constituency may be rich in talent, but it is one of the poorest in the country. If someone gets on the train at the new Grand Central station and gets off at Erdington or Gravelly Hill, they are likely to live seven years less than if they continue on the train to Sutton Coldfield.

The city is now suffering the biggest cuts in local government history—£500 million already, another £250 million at the next stages, £90 million this year—and the city is the victim of grotesque unfairness. MPs of all political parties met the Secretary of State and we put a powerful case for fair funding and for transitional funding. We welcomed the fact that ultimately the Government want to move to a new fair funding formula, but what happens in the next three to four years is crucial.

We put a strong case, the Government listened, the Government moved, then they gave Birmingham not one penny, yet they were able to shell out for Wokingham, Surrey, Cheshire East, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Kent and Worcestershire. It is fundamentally wrong. It cannot be right that areas of high need are treated in that way at a time when the Government say they want to move to a new needs-based formula. It cannot be right.

Let me conclude, so that my hon. Friends the Members for Redcar (Anna Turley) and for St Helens South and Whiston (Marie Rimmer) may speak. The Government should recognise the consequences of their actions. School crossing patrols, which are vital to the safety of kids going to and from school, are at risk. Home-Start in my constituency, which has given outstanding support to parents who are struggling in their lives and struggling to bring up their kids, is at risk. In a city where 100,000 people are in need of social care, many of those people—the elderly, the disabled and the vulnerable—will not now get the care they should be entitled to in a civilised society. What the Government have done is fundamentally wrong: they have ignored need and looked after their own, and that is something that no Government should ever do.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman's middle name is clearly Share.

6.45 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): As everyone in the House will be aware, the liquidation of Sahaviriya Steel Industries and the closure of Redcar steelworks last September led to more than 3,000 immediate job losses. The local authority, Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council, serves a population of 135,000 people. Those

[Anna Turley]

job losses would be the equivalent in Greater London of the overnight loss of 176,000 jobs—imagine the headline on the front of the *Evening Standard*. That is what my local area is dealing with.

Imagine now, on top of that, the loss to the council of £10 million in business rates from SSI, plus the loss to council tax income as a result of people being out of work, as well as the knock-on demand for services from those out of work and the money lost more broadly to the local economy.

Add to that the fact that less than £5 per head is spent on transport in our region, compared with £2,600 per head in London. Add to that the fact that unemployment was already more than double the national average, and that was before the steelworks closed. Add to that the fact that our demographics show we have a higher than average proportion of elderly people and we have desperately deprived rural areas in Cleveland, which many Government Members have not taken into account in the debate. Add to that the fact that a third of men and half of women are on less than a living wage. Add to that the fact that the Tees valley has the second highest number of wards anywhere in the country in the index of multiple deprivation. That is what we are dealing with.

Our local authority of Redcar and Cleveland has lost £56.4 million in funding since the Prime Minister came to office—more than the funding package we got to retrain SSI workers. That is what we have lost, and now the Government intend to take a further £7.5 million from us—a total loss of £89 million over 10 years. That is not sustainable.

We are trying to get back on our feet. We are trying to recover. Why are the Government holding us back? This is a heinous settlement from a shameless, arrogant and downright cruel Government, and I urge them to think again.

6.47 pm

Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I speak on behalf of the residents of St Helens South and Whiston. My constituency extends over two small metropolitan boroughs—Knowsley and St Helens. I have three wards in Knowsley, which is one of the top three most deprived boroughs in the country, and the seventh-highest in terms of income deprivation. Knowsley has already suffered £98 million of cuts. Last year, it put £7 million into the social care budget for elderly people—£7 million in reserves that is not there this year, so Knowsley will have to find the funds to fill the gap or cut those services.

I declare an interest: I am still a St Helens councillor. St Helens suffered £68 million of cuts. I can say more on that, because I know more of the detail. A 2% precept on council tax will raise £1.2 million, but there is £1.8 million in demand for care services, with £1 million in demand for older people's services and £800,000 in demand from other people receiving social care. The living wage will increase the spend by £1.8 million. With only £1.2 million being raised, we already have a gap of £2.4 million, and that is without the cut coming in this year's budget. We have received nothing for the transition.

I was amazed at the lack of understanding of how health and social care work together. I am proud that public health, primary care, secondary care, the clinical commissioning group and the hospitals all work together in St Helens. This weekend, I spent time in the hospital with some friends. A lady's partner was going to have to leave the hospital, but sadly could not go home, so people were trying to persuade her that her partner would need to go into a home, and I took her to a home. The hospital serves five or six boroughs, all of which are suffering from cuts in social care. That means that people are unable to get the care that they need and would have had previously. They are wondering who is going to look after them, particularly those living alone. Who will go in to help them in between the social care? Looking at children's services, we are putting children out for adoption much more quickly than we were, but the cost of providing foster care is enormous.

I urge the Minister at least to look to bringing forward the better care fund. I ask him to look at the ability to raise funds, how little council tax raises, and needs and deprivation. The elderly population—65-year-olds, over-75s and over-85s—is growing by 14% each year. I ask him please to take everything into account.

6.50 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I will be very brief because I want to hear from the Minister, as we do need answers to the questions that have been asked in this extremely lively and robust debate. The House is clearly extremely split over this settlement, with discontent, concern and dissatisfaction among Labour Members that needs to be listened to. That does not need, and does not deserve, to be met with denial, derision and dismissal, as in the case of so many Conservative Members, I am afraid.

The Secretary of State says that he will conduct a needs-based formula review, and that cannot come soon enough. I welcome the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) about the inequality created by the 2% precept, which raises money for those areas with the highest council tax base. That inequality has to be addressed. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden) said that his area is suffering from 4.9% cuts as against the England average of 2.8%. Blackpool, an area of extreme deprivation, gets no transitional relief at all. He highlighted the failure of the 2% council tax precept to adequately fund adult social care—a theme that has run through the debate. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), pointed to the predicted council tax hike of 20% by 2020. This Government have broken their promise to the people of England to reduce council tax over the course of the Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) welcomed the four-year settlement to enable our councils to plan. Indeed, I think all Labour Members welcome that. [Interruption.] As my hon. Friend the shadow Minister reminds me, Conservative Members actually voted against it. My hon. Friends also welcome the money for social care, but have pointed out that it does not meet the vast discrepancy in the funding that is needed to provide social care for our elderly and vulnerable, given the paltry amount that the 2% precept will raise. It is disappointing that Conservative Members

do not understand the link between delayed discharges from hospitals and the inadequacy of social care. This is a huge social problem, and the Government need to face up to it. They need to come out of denial and do something about the funding of social care.

Too many of my hon. Friends spoke for me to be able to credit them all, but I want to thank my hon. Friends the Members for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for their eloquent explanations of the chronic underfunding of adult social care and the distress that it is already causing to the disabled, the elderly and the vulnerable.

I will close with the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), who pointed out that Birmingham gets “not one penny” in transitional funding, yet Surrey—not an area of high deprivation—gets £24 million. Areas of high need cannot be treated in this way. The Government need to recognise the consequences of their actions.

6.54 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I thank hon. Members for this passionate debate, which it is my pleasure to close. These are important times for local government. The devolution of power and resources from Whitehall is gathering momentum. Public services need to find innovative ways to save money and support services for local people.

I take the opportunity to thank local government for its hard work and dedication across the country over the past five years. More savings need to be made as we finish the job of eliminating the largest deficit in our post-war history. The finance settlement that we have discussed today will help councils to continue their excellent work. We have consulted carefully, and I am grateful to hon. Members—particularly Government Members—for bringing their constituents’ views to us during the consultation.

I want to cover some of the points that hon. Members have raised. The opening salvo from the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) was nothing more than scaremongering and the politics of fear. There was certainly a lot of heat, but there was not much light. He showed no contrition whatsoever for the deficit that the previous Labour Government left behind, which we have had to deal with. He made no mention of the fact that, only months ago, the Labour party went into a general election saying that it would cut funding to local government. He might not know his Kent from his Surrey, but he is the former leader of Lambeth Council, so I think we should give him some credit for his knowledge of local government. I am sure he will be keen to know that Lambeth Council has supported the idea of transitional measures:

“Transitional measures are usually employed where a new distribution methodology is introduced to ensure significant shifts are not experienced one way or the other. The Council believes this is sensible on the basis that the control totals are adjusted such that those benefitting are not adversely affected.”

No council has been adversely affected as a consequence of our response to the provisional settlement, but the hon. Gentleman seemed to deny that. He gave Government Members a considerable lecture about council tax, which I found absolutely astounding. During the last five

years, council tax has been reduced by 11%, on average. He did not mention the fact that while the Labour party was in government, council tax doubled.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) made strong representations during the process on behalf of his constituents. I hope that he was reassured by the comments of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who is certainly listening to the challenges faced by the island that my hon. Friend represents.

The Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), made a sensible contribution. He welcomed the move to localism and local funding for local services. He asked when details of the distribution of the better care fund would be made available. I reassure him that there will be a response to the consultation on the better care fund very soon, and we will be able to give further details.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) welcomed devolution, the transitional arrangements and the increase in the rural services delivery grant. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) used his considerable experience of local government and as a Minister to support the proposal. He made a sensible and excellent point about entrenching efficiency. That is absolutely achievable now that we are offering councils the ability to take a four-year budget if they so wish.

I want to mention the speech by the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahan), who is no longer in his place. He made some appalling comments about my noble Friend Baroness Williams. I can assure hon. Members that the transitional grant is based purely on supporting areas that have encountered the largest reduction in the revenue support grant. The approach he took towards my noble Friend Baroness Williams was very sad and not becoming of him.

Barbara Keeley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: I will not give way, because I do not have the time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) has been an effective advocate for rural areas, as he was again today. I am glad that he has welcomed the Government’s response to the consultation.

The hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) made a very strong speech, but I was surprised because if she feels so strongly why did she not respond to the consultation? If she had done so or if she had looked at the figures closely, she would have seen that Darlington has actually benefited from the way in which the settlement has been prepared.

Jenny Chapman: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: No, I will not give way. The hon. Lady will see that that is the case if she looks properly at the figures.

The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) absolutely knocked the nail on the head in 2010, when he said, “There is no money.” From his speech today, he seems to have absolutely forgotten that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) made another sensible contribution to this debate. He talked about the opportunity for councils to

[*Mr Marcus Jones*]

raise new council tax and business rates for their local community. Such councils are sensible and are doing the right thing on behalf of their local residents.

It was good to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), who talked about his council officers welcoming the improved rural services delivery grant. I agree with him that it is a shame no Liberal Democrats were in the Chamber for this debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) reminded me of Elvis when he said that the Lib Dems had left the building. It does not seem that the handful of them now left are representing their constituents very well.

Lancashire is a great county. It is a shame that the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) talked at length about the negatives but did not mention that Lancashire is actually benefiting from the transitional arrangements that this Government have put in place. It will be very interesting to see whether she votes down a proposal to give more money to her county and to the services provided to her constituents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay made an excellent contribution. He was an excellent deputy council leader in Coventry. He knows his onions and he knows what he is talking about. He explained the importance, particularly in his area, of councils working together to continue to deliver high-quality services for his constituents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) made a strong contribution. He pointed out the challenges of providing services in rural areas and the importance of the rural services delivery grant in his area.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) made his usual colourful contribution. I am glad that he did not follow up on the offer he made to the Secretary of State on Monday, but it was much appreciated. His comments were noted. He is a doughty campaigner for his constituents, and it was good that he welcomed the council tax flexibility of £5 for district councils.

This settlement meets the needs of the users of council services. It charts the path to the future accountability of local government. This is a time of big opportunity and expectation for reform in local government. The settlement delivers transition funding to smooth the path from central control to fully localised income: a fivefold increase in support for rural communities next year; a fundamental review of the needs-based formula to chart the path to full business rates retention; and support for social care amounting to £3.5 billion by 2020. I commend it to the House.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 315, Noes 209.

Division No. 192]

[7.4 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel	Amess, Sir David
Afryjie, Adam	Andrew, Stuart
Aldous, Peter	Ansell, Caroline
Allan, Lucy	Argar, Edward
Allen, Heidi	Atkins, Victoria

Bacon, Mr Richard	Evans, Graham
Baker, Mr Steve	Evans, Mr Nigel
Baldwin, Harriett	Evennett, rh Mr David
Barclay, Stephen	Fabricant, Michael
Baron, Mr John	Fernandes, Suella
Barwell, Gavin	Field, rh Mark
Bebb, Guto	Foster, Kevin
Bellingham, Sir Henry	Fox, rh Dr Liam
Beresford, Sir Paul	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Berry, Jake	Frazer, Lucy
Berry, James	Freeman, George
Bingham, Andrew	Freer, Mike
Blackman, Bob	Fuller, Richard
Blunt, Crispin	Fysh, Marcus
Boles, Nick	Gale, Sir Roger
Bone, Mr Peter	Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Borwick, Victoria	Garnier, Mark
Bradley, Karen	Gauke, Mr David
Brady, Mr Graham	Ghani, Nusrat
Brazier, Mr Julian	Gibb, Mr Nick
Bridgen, Andrew	Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Brine, Steve	Glen, John
Brokenshire, rh James	Goldsmith, Zac
Bruce, Fiona	Goodwill, Mr Robert
Buckland, Robert	Gove, rh Michael
Burns, Conor	Graham, Richard
Burns, rh Sir Simon	Grant, Mrs Helen
Burrowes, Mr David	Gray, Mr James
Burt, rh Alistair	Grayling, rh Chris
Cairns, Alun	Green, Chris
Cameron, rh Mr David	Green, rh Damian
Carmichael, Neil	Greening, rh Justine
Cartlidge, James	Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Caulfield, Maria	Griffiths, Andrew
Chalk, Alex	Gummer, Ben
Chishti, Rehman	Gyimah, Mr Sam
Chope, Mr Christopher	Halfon, rh Robert
Churchill, Jo	Hall, Luke
Clark, rh Greg	Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth	Hammond, Stephen
Cleverly, James	Hancock, rh Matthew
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey	Hands, rh Greg
Coffey, Dr Thérèse	Harper, rh Mr Mark
Collins, Damian	Harrington, Richard
Colville, Oliver	Harris, Rebecca
Costa, Alberto	Hart, Simon
Cox, Mr Geoffrey	Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Crabb, rh Stephen	Hayes, rh Mr John
Davies, Byron	Heald, Sir Oliver
Davies, Chris	Heapey, James
Davies, David T. C.	Heaton-Harris, Chris
Davies, Glyn	Heaton-Jones, Peter
Davies, Dr James	Henderson, Gordon
Davies, Mims	Herbert, rh Nick
Davis, rh Mr David	Hinds, Damian
Dinenage, Caroline	Hoare, Simon
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Hollingbery, George
Donelan, Michelle	Hollinrake, Kevin
Dorries, Nadine	Hollobone, Mr Philip
Double, Steve	Holloway, Mr Adam
Dowden, Oliver	Hopkins, Kris
Drax, Richard	Howarth, Sir Gerald
Drummond, Mrs Flick	Howell, John
Duddridge, James	Howlett, Ben
Duncan, rh Sir Alan	Huddleston, Nigel
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain	Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Dunne, Mr Philip	Hurd, Mr Nick
Ellis, Michael	Jackson, Mr Stewart
Ellison, Jane	James, Margot
Ellwood, Mr Tobias	Javid, rh Sajid
Elphicke, Charlie	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Eustice, George	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
 Kinahan, Danny
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lancaster, Mark
 Latham, Pauline
 Leadson, Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Lewis, Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 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
 McCartney, Karl
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 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
 Osborne, rh Mr George
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew

Perry, Claire
 Phillips, Stephen
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 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
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 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
 Walker, Mr Robin
 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
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jackie Doyle-Price and
Simon Kirby

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Alexander, Heidi
 Ali, Rushanara
 Allen, Mr Graham
 Anderson, Mr David
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Barron, rh Kevin
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berger, Luciana
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blenkinsop, Tom
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Burnham, rh Andy
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Jenny
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, Rosie
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cox, Jo
 Coyle, Neil
 Crausby, Mr David
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Dakin, Nic
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 De Piero, Gloria
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Jim
 Dromey, Jack
 Dugher, Michael
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Farron, Tim
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Gardiner, Barry
 Glass, Pat
 Glindon, Mary
 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
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hunt, Tristram
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Irranca-Davies, Huw
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Alan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kinahan, Danny
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid

Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Mr Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCartney, Jason
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 Meale, Sir Alan
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame M.
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Pugh, John
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Jamie
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Marie
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Ryan, rh Joan

Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Starmer, Keir
 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
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 Watson, Mr Tom
 West, Catherine
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Wilson, Phil
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Sue Hayman and
Vicky Foxcroft

Mr Speaker: The Ayes have it in respect of the UK-wide Division. On account of a technical hitch that has just been reported to the Chair, I shall cause the

result of the Division among English constituency Members to be disclosed to the House when those facts are relayed to me. On the assumption that there is no contradiction between the results, the Ayes have it. Members will be kept informed.

7.22 pm

Mr Speaker: I can now announce the results of the Division among English Members in respect of the matter of which we have just treated. The Ayes to the right were 301; the Noes to the left were 181, so the Ayes have it. I have now confirmed what I suggested to the House a few moments ago.

Resolved,

That the Report on Local Government Finance (England) 2016-17 (HC 789), which was laid before this House on 8 February, be approved.

More than three hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings, the proceedings were interrupted (Order, 8 February).

The Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Order, 8 February).

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE (ENGLAND)

Resolved,

That the Report on the Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) 2016-17 (HC 790), which was laid before this House on 8 February, be approved.

That the Report on Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Alternative Notional Amounts) (England) 2016-17 (HC 791), which was laid before this House on 8 February, be approved.—(*Mr Marcus Jones.*)

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 15),

That, at this day's sitting, the motion in the name of Chris Grayling relating to the notification of arrest of members, may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour and Standing Order No 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Julian Smith.*)

Question agreed to.

Notification of Arrest of Members

7.25 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I beg to move,

That Members of the House shall be under no undue restraint from being able to attend the House, and that this principle has been, and continues to be, encompassed in the privileges of the House claimed at the beginning of each Parliament;

That this House accordingly:

(1) endorses the Second Report of the Procedure Committee, Session 2015-16, Notification of the arrest of Members, HC 649;

(2) directs the Clerk of the House and the Speaker to follow the protocol on notification of arrest of Members set out in Annex 2 to that Report; and

(3) directs each chief officer of police in the United Kingdom, immediately upon the arrest of any Member by the police force under that officer's command, to notify the Clerk of the House in accordance with the provisions of that protocol.

The motion stands in my name and that of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House and the Chairman of the Procedure Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker). I do not intend to detain the House for long. Although I would describe myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) as conviction politicians, I want the record to show that the motion before the House results from the publication of the report from the Procedure Committee on 15 December on the notification of arrest of hon. Members.

The report followed detailed consideration by the Procedure Committee, at the request of Mr Speaker, and the House is being asked to endorse that report and the protocol contained in it. A word of caution to hon. Members: the Government are facilitating the discussion and the decision of the House on this matter, but it is for the House to decide, and I will leave it to my hon. Friend the Chair of the Committee to set out the proposals in the report and to answer any queries and issues that have arisen since publication. I thank the members of the Committee for their diligent efforts, and I know that my hon. Friend the Chair is highly respected and will do his best to help hon. Members in this debate and beyond. As such, I present the motion to the House.

7.27 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): In the previous Parliament, the Procedure Committee was asked to look into the existing protocols around the arrest of Members of Parliament. We started preliminary inquiries in early 2015, and this work laid the foundation for the inquiry we launched shortly after the general election.

The findings of the inquiry were unanimously endorsed by the Committee, which reported to the House in December. I know that our moderate and proportionate recommendations relating to the arrest of Members have created a great deal of faux sound and fury in various quarters. On Monday morning, I had to smile at the assertion by Kevin O'Sullivan, a *Mirror* journalist, on Sky Television, that

"they should very much be named because everyone else is... that's always been the system. Once you are arrested, you can be named".

That was an enlightening observation for two reasons: first, because it was completely wrong, and secondly and more interestingly, because it gave a revealing insight into the conduct of too many national newsrooms and their own morality when it comes to obtaining information from public officials.

I accept that the media have a job to do, and that includes making our lives difficult, so my greatest disappointment in the reporting on the Committee's proposals is reserved for Sir Alistair Graham, the former chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life. From his pejorative comments about our report, it is clear either that he has not read it or, if he has read it, that he has no appreciation of, or regard for, the law. I know that Sir Alistair's time in the chair from 2004 to 2007 was not a happy one. During his three years in office, he felt deeply aggrieved that at no stage did the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, agree to his repeated requests for a meeting. I accept that the then PM was perhaps churlish in his refusal to meet him, but I gently ask Sir Alistair to pursue his grievance with the former Prime Minister, as opposed to taking his frustrations out on the House of Commons, which had no hand in his disappointment. On a personal note, it is sad to see a distinguished former public servant and knight of the realm allowing himself to be turned into little more than a misinformed talking head.

Let me be absolutely clear: the Procedure Committee is not asking for Members of Parliament to receive special treatment in the eyes of the law. Such a request, if made, would be alien to the values of our Committee and to the wishes of our constituents. All of us on the Committee believe that the law should be applied equally to all citizens of the United Kingdom, but currently that is not the case in this House, where, in matters of policing and public order, the point of public notification occurs not at the point of charge, as is the case with our constituents, but at the point of arrest.

That process of notification puts the police and the House at odds with the Data Protection Act and, potentially, article 8 of the European convention on human rights. Regardless of how people feel about the application of data protection and ECHR laws, that exposes both this House and the police to legal challenge by a named Member of Parliament.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Is it not the truth that this practice is an historical anachronism arising from the period of the titanic struggle between the monarchy and the legislature, when, at a time when the King would arbitrarily arrest Members of Parliament, it was quite proper for Parliament to be so advised of that happening? It has no place in a modern Parliament and a modern democracy.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, which I shall now go on to answer.

In brief, the House has five choices. Option 1, as set out in our report, is to ensure that the law of the land is applied equally to Members of Parliament as it is to our constituents. Option 2 is for the House to retain the status quo, thereby knowingly putting itself and the police on the wrong side of the law. Option 3 is for the Home Secretary to amend schedule 3 of the Data Protection Act 1998 to specifically exempt Members of Parliament from its universal protections,

[Mr Charles Walker]

which in itself would create a precedent for a two-tier system tier of justice—the very thing our constituents do not want.

Option 4 is to amend primary legislation, so that the names of all suspects are released by the police at the point of arrest, not at the point of charge. Of course, that would be welcomed by the press, as it would aid it in its pursuit of celebrities and other people of interest, but it would be devastating for those tens of thousands of people who are arrested but never charged with any crime.

Option 5 is for the House to abandon privilege in respect of our parliamentary duties in the hope that no future despot would want to detain us from them on trumped-up political charges. Of course, if we follow that route, tonight's entire debate would be a dead letter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): When the Anglo-Irish agreement was signed by Margaret Thatcher in 1985, Unionists were enraged because it totally ignored them. Unionists at all levels, including then Members of this House—this was before my time—were involved in a campaign of civil disobedience and a then MP was arrested in that campaign. Was any consideration given to those examples of civil disobedience?

Mr Walker: When people engage in civil disobedience, they tend to want to have it reported, so that would not be covered. They would be charged, and of course, at the point of charge, it becomes public information. Of the people who took part in those protests, I think that 10 individuals—on 13 separate occasions—were imprisoned.

Of the five options I have outlined, the Procedure Committee opted for option 1, as we generally think it is a good idea for the laws of the land to be obeyed by the Parliament that creates them. Indeed, that is the minimum expectation that our constituents have of us, so I am amazed that some colleagues are tying themselves up in knots about this modest proposal.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): In the unlikely circumstance that a Government less benign than the current one were to have a Member arrested on a trumped-up charge, would that Member have the right to insist that Mr Speaker brought it to the attention of the House?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. That Member would have the right, but if it were judged to be a matter of privilege, the Clerk would advise the Speaker and the arrest would be placed in the public domain. That is what would happen.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful for a second go. Is my hon. Friend saying that if the House has a chance to ascertain whether it is a breach of privilege, the Member concerned will also have the right to insist on it being made public by Mr Speaker?

Mr Walker: All Members, if arrested, will continue to have the right to have their names made public if that is

what they choose to do, but it will not be automatic. I hope that answers my hon. Friend's question.

If adopted, the proposed changes will mean that Members of Parliament subject to arrest will not automatically have details of that arrest published by the House. This change gives them only the same rights to privacy as are enjoyed by any other citizen—not enhanced rights, but equal rights. In accordance with standard police practice and privacy laws, the names of arrested Members will not be put into the public domain by the House unless the Member consents. The exception will be in cases where you, Mr Speaker, have been advised by the Clerk of the House that a Member has been detained for reasons connected to his or her role as a Member of Parliament. A recent example was the arrest of the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) when his parliamentary office and home office were raided by the police in 2008.

The Committee's report sets out the ambition that the arrest of a Member of Parliament still be notified to the Police Chief Superintendent of this House within 24 hours. However, we recognise that in circumstances where there is a live investigation, the police will not be in a position always to meet this ambition. In those circumstances, we hope that the details of an arrest will be provided as soon as operationally possible. For the avoidance of all doubt, should an arrested Member subsequently be charged with an offence, it is expected that in line with existing police practice, details of the name and charge would be published by the police force responsible at the time of charge.

In conclusion, the new arrangements detailed in the Committee's report and outlined here this evening do not, of course, affect the duties of police forces to notify relevant authorities of safeguarding risks under the common law police disclosure scheme, which was introduced in August 2015.

7.37 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): No Member of this House or the other place is above the law—nor should they ever consider themselves to be so. The reach of the law extends within the House, and Parliament would not seek to interfere with due process of a criminal investigation. Similarly, as the law applies to us all equally, so does the right to privacy.

Given that we are public servants, it is right that notification to the House would still take place in respect of matters such as imprisonment or remanding in custody; sentence of imprisonment; conviction of illegal or corrupt practice at a parliamentary election; and conviction of an offence relating to an MP's expenses.

I would, however, like to ask about the practicality of the proposed measures, and I shall direct my questions to the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) as Chairman of the Procedure Committee. I believe that to be the correct process. Does the Committee believe that the event of a Member of Parliament being arrested will be kept from the public domain as a direct result of these procedural changes? Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in the modern era of social media, it is increasingly likely that such information would quickly reach the public domain?

On the effect of social media, rumours very often take on a life of their own and become widely accepted truth before the interested party has a chance to respond.

Does the hon. Gentleman consider that, with the removal of the duty to notify of the arrest of Members to the House, that it could be more difficult for an individual to counter rumours of such an arrest?

I was interested to see that no notifications of arrest were made to the House for 30 years—from 1978 until 2008. Were no Members arrested during that time, or is there already a system available that allows the Speaker or Clerk to exercise discretion in these matters?

Under these proposals, it is specified that Members who are arrested are not to be prevented from notifying the House of their detention. Can the hon. Gentleman say how this can be ensured?

It is intended that police forces will be required to notify the Chief Superintendent at Parliament of the arrest of any Member within 24 hours. How will information about that new procedure be circulated to police forces, and how will it be enforceable?

Can the hon. Gentleman provide examples of what he considers would fall within parliamentary privilege, or would be of constitutional significance, that would require the House to be automatically notified of a Member's arrest, and can he explain how parliamentary privilege or constitutional significance would have affected the notification of arrests made in the past 10 years?

The recommendations in the Procedure Committee's report rely on protections enshrined in the Human Rights Act 1998, which I thought the Government wanted to repeal. Why are they more than happy to employ the Act to protect their own rights, while wishing to remove it from the British people?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. In due course, with the leave with the House, the Chairman of the Procedure Committee may well have the chance—and, I rather anticipate, will have the chance—to speak again. Meanwhile, I call Mr Patrick Grady.

7.40 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I note that, according to the Order Paper, the debate can continue until any hour. I am surprised that my hon. Friends have decided to go to the Burns supper rather than taking this opportunity to explain their thinking on a range of matters. However, Mr Speaker, I thank you for calling me, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) on his work in chairing the Procedure Committee, of which I am a member. I also acknowledge the work of the predecessor Committee, which did much of the heavy lifting. We inherited that hard work, and it has led to the report that we are discussing this evening.

The inquiry and the report—which proposes a small but fairly important modernisation of the House's proceedings—were instigated by you, Mr Speaker. This morning, there was a debate in Westminster Hall about other aspects of modernisation of our procedure, led by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). I hope that in due course the Committee will be able to consider some of the issues that were raised then, not least that of electronic voting.

It is clear from the report that this reform of our procedure is overdue. I agree with what the hon. Member for Broxbourne said about, in particular, the European

convention on human rights and his suggestion that Members should be given no special or differential treatment. The report seeks to strike a balance between the historic rights and privileges accorded to the House and the understood modern rights of individuals, especially the right to privacy. The procedure respects both by requiring the Clerk of the House to be notified, while requiring the details of an arrest not to be made public without good reason or without the consent of the Member involved. I note in particular provision 11, which states:

“There will be no notification under any of these provisions without previous contact with the Member concerned or his or her legal representative.”

The report elaborates on that thinking by giving a bit more detail, explaining, for instance, why the practice of notification should not be abandoned entirely. That is connected largely with the historic claim of the House on the attendance of Members, but the report notes that it has never been allowed to interfere with the administration of justice.

This is a comprehensive report, which has arrived at clear conclusions. It is the work of two generations of parliamentarians, and I pay tribute again to the predecessor Committee. This Committee has reached a clear and simple consensus, and I hope that, notwithstanding some of the questions that we have just heard, the House will be able to do so as well.

7.44 pm

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): I have been listening to the debate on the telly, and I do not know what all the fuss is about. I suppose I have been on nearly every picket line that has ever existed. I have been on one today, with the hospital doctors, and there was a tremendous turnout. But I remember being on one when the second eleven of the gang of four took over TV-am. Well, it was like a gang of four. They were very big and important people. One was a Member of Parliament, who later ran into some trouble. I think he got arrested, but I am not sure.

Anyway, I was on that picket line, and I do not remember there being any fuss and bother about the fact that a policeman came up and decided that he was going to arrest me. He put me inside—I think it was somewhere near Islington, not far from the TV-am picket line. After three hours, just as I was thinking, “I’m going to miss Prime Minister’s Question Time”, a man with all these pips on his shoulder came in and said, “Is there anything I can do for you, sir?” I said, “Yes, I’m trying to get out so that I can get to Prime Minister’s Question Time. I’m also struggling with 13 across in *The Guardian* crossword, but as a reader of *The Sun*, you probably don’t understand what I’m talking about.” So he kept me in another two hours, and I did miss Prime Minister’s Question Time.

Fortunately, there had been a cameraman on the picket line who had his own camera and he managed to prove, in all the further and better particulars, that I had not done anything at all. I had not hit the policeman; I had not been anywhere near him. The net result was that, when they saw the film, the police had to withdraw the charge. I turned up at Islington court expecting to get a hefty fine, and God knows what else, on this trumped-up charge, and suddenly the press came rushing out and stuck all these mics in front of my nose

[Mr Dennis Skinner]

and said, “What have you got to say, Mr Skinner? The case has been dropped!” Now that is the story of an arrest.

I do not want anybody to get the daft impression that you cannot get arrested if you are an MP. A lot of my colleagues got arrested on picket lines in other strikes, and it is a load of nonsense when people assume that it is impossible to arrest Members of Parliament. The only charge I finished up with was a hefty bill for the barrister I had employed. He looked like one of those West Indian cricket fast bowlers, but he cost a lot of money. I was given the chance by the union concerned to have the money paid back, but as a matter of principle I said, “I’m okay, I’m a member of Parliament and I can foot the bill myself.” That is the story of an arrest.

I have been watching on telly as all this fuss and bother have emerged. Believe me, if some policeman had wanted to arrest me on the picket line with the hospital doctors this morning, he could have done it. But of course, we were doing “Singing in the Rain” and all the rest of it. It was a wonderful experience. The hospital doctors are in good spirits, and I will tell you this is a matter of importance. The Secretary of State for Health wants to be careful what he is doing. If he thinks he can impose a settlement on those hospital doctors—[HON. MEMBERS: “Out of order!”] Yes, but this is only one little errant move, so don’t get excited, Mr Speaker! I think I have a duty to report back. The hospital doctors are not in a mood to give in. They have a right to win this battle. That is my report from the trenches today. Thank you very much for listening.

7.48 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I hate to break the consensus, but we have been here before when it comes to House business. I recall moving a resolution—but not getting a seconder—to stop the flipping of homes, some 18 months before the expenses scandal. If I had been listened to then, some Members might not be here today because others might well have survived; I suppose that outcome was rather double-edged. The reputation of Parliament might also have been partly salvaged if that resolution had been listened to, but it was not.

On this motion, I listened to the non-answer given to the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). I have a question about the impact on the British overseas territories if this goes through. Plenty of Parliaments across the world, not least those in the Commonwealth, listen to and watch what we do, and they copy and emulate it. We are not just talking about a possibility in some future stage of less democratic times under this Government. Plenty of Members of Parliament have been arrested and disappear, and it still happens to this day. They are taken by regimes citing the law, and therefore decisions we make have to be thought through for their consequences.

Ironically, the first name on the motion is that of the Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling). He is citing the human rights law here, but he is the man in Cabinet demanding we get rid of the human rights law. It seems that the rest of the country, including my constituents, can have no human rights, but we will create some extra ones tonight for Members of

Parliament—exclusively. That is precisely what this proposal does. It says that MPs will give themselves some special rights in law that do not apply to everybody else, and that is wrong. That principle is wrong and that practice is wrong. Until the question, theoretical though it may be, is properly answered, which it has not been, this becomes a double-edged sword in law for us as well. If people wish to change the law in relation to what happens when people are arrested, they should change the law. There is plenty of time in the parliamentary agenda for people to change the law. There are plenty of opportunities for the Government to change the law. This is not the way to change it for Members of Parliament, and therefore we should oppose this proposal.

7.52 pm

Mr Charles Walker: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall respond to the debate. I think the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) missed my speech, because I think I did answer most of the questions he raised. I hope I answered the one put by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), as I tried to do so twice.

The hon. Gentleman talks about creating another law for Members of Parliament. No, what we are doing is bringing Members of Parliament in line with the law—the law that governs our constituents. I greatly enjoyed the speech made by the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner). He is a fantastic orator, and whatever he has to say, I always enjoy listening to it, so I thank him for being here this evening.

Let me try to answer the shadow Deputy Leader of the House’s questions. There were quite a lot of them and I am not very good at writing very quickly. If I fail to answer any of them, she can come back in. First, I wish to draw the House’s attention to “Erskine May’s” first edition. It records the case in 1815 of a Member “convicted of a conspiracy”

and

“committed to the King’s Bench Prison.”

He escaped custody and took refuge in the Chamber of the old House of Commons, on the Government Front Bench, where the prison “marshal” found him and took him back into custody—rearrested him. Even though the marshal had come right into the House, albeit when it was not sitting, to take the Member into custody, the committee of privileges found that no breach of privilege had occurred. This measure is not to protect us; privilege has never protected us from being arrested for criminal activities, and it is a myth to suggest otherwise.

If a Member is arrested and chooses to tell the House of his or her arrest, or chooses to tell the media of it, they are perfectly entitled to do that. What we are suggesting—what this report suggests and puts to the House—is that there is no automatic notification of the arrest of a Member, in line with the rights that extend to all of our constituents.

Let me just say something about social media. We cannot govern social media, but a lot of what appears on social media is hearsay and gossip. Let us also not forget that the media in this country have been very good at extracting information illegally, through the payment of cash to public officials, and some of those public officials have gone to prison for that. Both the Metropolitan Police Commissioner and the Home Secretary

recently wrote to the College of Policing, reiterating the fact that police officers must not under any circumstances, unless it is to do with safeguarding, release the name of an individual on arrest. Details of their age can be given, but not their name.

Many people mistakenly believe that the point of arrest happens towards the end of an investigation. Actually, it does not. It happens very early on in an investigation. Indeed, someone could present themselves voluntarily to a police station to be arrested and then be released on bail. The Deputy Leader of the House asks where this would have made a difference in recent times. There were three arrests notified to the House between 2011 and 2014 where this would have made a difference. In reality, it probably would have made a difference in only two of the arrests, because one of the acts for which the individual was arrested was committed in public, in the precinct of this House, so it was seen and reported by many people.

There were two colleagues—one in 2011 and one in 2014—who were arrested. Their names appeared on the front of national newspapers and they suffered huge reputational damage. In both those cases no charges were brought. It would not make a huge difference to a lot of people, but it would certainly make a difference to some people in this House.

On circulating the procedures, there is a protocol attached to our report and that will be circulated by the Clerk of the House and those who work in his office to police constables across the country. That will happen only when—and if—this House approves the motion here this evening.

The hon. Lady asked when privilege would have applied, and I gave an example in my speech. There was clearly the case of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) whose offices on the precinct of the House of Commons and at home were entered by the police. That would have been a matter of privilege, but it would not be for me to determine whether that encroached on privilege, but a matter for the Clerk, in discussion with the Speaker and the legal counsel. That is the best example.

The hon. Lady also asked why there were no reports for 30 years—between 1978 and 2008. It was probably because this process fell into disuse—it is nothing more sinister than that. The reason that more arrests were reported goes back to what happened in 2008 when the police entered the precinct of the House of Commons without any advance notification. The Serjeant at Arms at the time was rather taken by surprise. It was a bit of a procedural disaster. An edict then went from the Speaker's Chair, saying that we need to be notified of action. The police being diligent then started notifying the Chair of all arrests and actions, and that is where the difficulty arose.

I have some scribbled notes here. I hope that I have answered most of the hon. Lady's questions. There is

still the ECHR question, and there has been some gentle chiding of the Leader of the House. I did say in my speech that, regardless of what we think about the ECHR—whether we like it or love it—regardless of what we think about data protection—whether we like it, love it, or tolerate it—the truth of the matter is that, as of today, they are the law of the land. As I said in my speech, we have a duty in this place to obey the law of the land. I know that some people have a great conscience and sometimes take part in demonstrations and get arrested. When they do get arrested, they want that to be in the public eye because that is part of their action. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), for example, was recently arrested, but that was very much in the public eye. I hope that I have answered most of the questions put to me by the shadow Deputy Leader of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): It is worth emphasising this point, because we had quite an incendiary speech from the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), and we need to nail this argument on the head. As a member of the Procedure Committee, with its Chairman sitting next to me, I can say that no extra privilege of any sort is being given to any Member of Parliament. We are being put on exactly the same level as members of the public.

Mr Walker: I can assure my hon. Friend that that is the case. He is right—no Member of this House is above the law, but likewise no Member of this House is below the law. We have to be equal in the eyes of the law, and that is what this report tries to do.

Question put and agreed to.

PETITION

Proposed Sale of the Kneller Hall Site

8 pm

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I present a petition on behalf of the residents of my constituency who oppose plans by the Ministry of Defence to sell off the site of Kneller Hall, the home of the Royal Military School of Music. I am grateful to all the constituents who took the time to add their names.

The petition reads:

To the House of Commons,

The petition of residents of the Twickenham constituency,

Declares that the Ministry of Defence's proposed sale of the Kneller Hall site should not go ahead; further that the site has played an important role in the local community over many decades; and further that the Royal Military School of Music is historically important.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to stop the sale of the Kneller Hall site.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P001672]

Autism Sunday Campaign

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Jackie Doyle-Price.*)

8.2 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I would like to begin by asking you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to pass on my thanks to Mr. Speaker for selecting this debate this evening, and to express my gratitude at having been given the opportunity to inform the House about Autism Sunday, also known as the international day of prayer for autism and Asperger's syndrome.

I declare an interest. I am a patron of the Romakey International Education Services charity based in my constituency. That charity provides young people with learning disability and autism with the necessary support to move from school into independent adulthood.

Autism Sunday was established to highlight the need to understand autism, and was one of the first global events of its kind. It was launched in 2002 here in the United Kingdom, with an historic service at St. Paul's cathedral. The size of the issue cannot be underestimated. In my own borough, the London borough of Havering, it is estimated that there are over 1,412 adults on the autism spectrum. Nationally, there are over 750,000 people with autism, and it is estimated that there are up to 65 million people with autism around the world.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining a debate on this important subject. Does he agree that alongside Autism Sunday, initiatives such as the world Autism Awareness Week, which is from 2 to 8 April this year, are pretty important? Does he welcome what the National Autistic Society is doing in that week—launching a public awareness campaign, because it is important that we continue to increase awareness of autism, and understanding among the general public, particularly as the incidence seems to be on the increase?

Andrew Rosindell: I thank my right hon. Friend for her helpful intervention. Of course, we can work in our constituencies to make people aware of the effects of autism, but national organisations such as the National Autistic Society are doing a brilliant job of promoting more understanding of the issue across the United Kingdom.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I also congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter to the House for consideration? A large number of my constituents also have autism or autistic children. About 2,000 children in Northern Ireland have been waiting more than 20 months for a diagnosis. It is clear to me as an elected representative, and probably to the hon. Gentleman as well, that early diagnosis is critical if children are to get the correct treatment and the help they need. Does he agree that greater priority needs to be given to autism diagnosis, especially given the rising number of autistic children and adults across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Andrew Rosindell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: more needs to be invested in diagnosis. I commend him on the work he is doing in Northern Ireland to ensure that there is more awareness of this condition.

Autism Sunday was founded by British autism campaigners and committed Christians, Ivan and Charika Corea, who live in Buckhurst Hill, in Essex. It began as a small acorn of an idea, hatched in their front room, but today it has grown into a major global event celebrated in many countries throughout the world. This year, it will take place this coming weekend, on Sunday 14 February.

Our own Prime Minister has personally supported Autism Sunday, stating:

“I would like to express my support for Autism Sunday. As many as one in a hundred people could be affected by some form of autism, and it is important that we recognise and raise awareness of the difficulties and challenges that they can face.”

Autism Sunday is now a permanent fixture in my constituency. Ivan Corea is a teacher at the Frances Bardsley Academy For Girls. When he joined the school in 2009, he set about creating awareness of autism, not only in the school, but across the whole of our local community in Havering.

In January this year, that culminated in a very special event in Havering town hall, when the mayor of Havering, Councillor Brian Eagling, and the leader of Havering Council, Councillor Roger Ramsey, presented a civic award to the Frances Bardsley Academy For Girls autism and disabilities club and to the school's autism ambassadors, many of whom are here today watching our proceedings, for reaching out to the most vulnerable sections of society in our local community.

The club has been working in partnership with local autism campaigners Ade and Ronke Ogunleye, who run the RIEES Autism Club based at the Romford Baptist church. That work has received praise from the leader of the council, Councillor Roger Ramsey, who stated:

“To my memory, there has never been such a successful relationship between a secondary school and a local charity regarding autism in this borough and the FBA”—

Frances Bardsley Academy—

“Ambassador Programme has been of supreme service to the community. Through volunteering in the community, members have helped support those with autism, as well as their parents and carers, who are often just as much in need of support.”

The Frances Bardsley autism and disabilities club has been working closely with the Step Up To Serve charity, whose patron is His Royal Highness Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales. Charlotte Hill, the chief executive officer of the charity, which is running the #iwill campaign, said:

“We are delighted that the Frances Bardsley Academy for Girls Autism & Disabilities Club has pledged to support our work, and shared their progress during #iwill week to inspire others to take part also. If we are to make involvement in social action the norm for 10-20 year-olds we need partners to commit to tangible actions just as they are doing. The involvement of the FBA Autism Ambassadors of the Autism & Disabilities Club will undoubtedly help us progress towards our goal.”

I must pay tribute to the school's headteacher, Julian Dutton, who was recently presented with a special award by RIEES for showing outstanding leadership in promoting charitable giving at the school. Frances Bardsley has a thriving charity committee raising funds for a number of local, national and international charities, and Julian Dutton has talked about the need for students to give back to the community and the need to show compassionate leadership to the most vulnerable sections of our society.

The chair of governors of Frances Bardsley Academy for Girls is the Rev. Father Roderick Hingley, who also serves as priest of the church of St. Alban Protomartyr in Romford. He has been hugely supportive of Autism Sunday. When Ivan Corea approached Father Hingley with regard to establishing the first ever Havering Autism Sunday service at St. Alban's church in 2010, he saw the need to reach out to parents, carers and the autism community, and agreed to host the annual service. I have witnessed at first hand the moving partnership between the Frances Bardsley autism ambassadors from the sixth form and young people with autism—surely a model of how a school can make an impact in this area.

All this work has certainly helped to act as a catalyst for change in the London borough of Havering. Frances Bardsley Academy for Girls is fully behind Autism Sunday 2016. Indeed, class 7E created school history by organising the first ever year 7 assembly on Autism Sunday, finishing with a flourish as they sang the Nimal Mendis song for autism, "Open Every Door". In so doing, they have raised much more awareness of the condition with their peers. I would also like to mention the assistant headteacher, Julie Payne, who has led school assemblies on the importance of Autism Sunday, and music teacher Amy Johnson and the Frances Bardsley chamber choir, who always perform on Autism Sunday and will do so this year.

As the MP for Romford, I am immensely proud of what has been achieved so far, but there is still a long way to go before all adults with autism start receiving the care and support they need. For example, in a recent National Autistic Society survey, 70% of adults with autism said that they are not receiving the help they need from social services. Furthermore, only 23% of those who did have contact with social workers felt that they had a good understanding of the condition and its effects. This must change. The Government's current review of the implementation of the strategy is a unique opportunity to urge local authorities and Ministers to ensure that they live up to their commitments.

Times are challenging, but that must not be used as an excuse for failing to meet obligations to adults with autism and their families. With the right support, many adults with autism can work for and participate in their communities. Difficulties in communication and social interaction might mean that someone with autism finds it hard to find and keep a steady job. They might find it challenging to prepare a CV, or find that they need support in preparing for an interview. Moreover, once they have a job, they might find it difficult to work with people who do not understand the complexities of their condition.

A number of barriers to successful implementation of the autism strategy have been identified. The good news is that there will be simple yet effective solutions to these challenges. For example, an innovation fund would support local authorities to improve the services currently available to adults with autism and help them to develop an understanding of the best way to deliver services and highlight areas of best practice. An autism awareness scheme would also allow volunteers and community groups to tap into resources that would help them to develop a programme of autism awareness and training in their local areas. That can be achieved in the simplest of ways, through things such as adaptations to public

buildings and local businesses, autism awareness training for front-line staff in public services and more autism-friendly activities.

I conclude by urging the Minister to consider my proposals. In so doing, I commend to the House the work of the Frances Bardsley Academy for Girls autism and disabilities club and the important concept of Autism Sunday, which is a beacon of light and compassionate leadership in action in my constituency, reaching out to those who need that support most of all.

8.15 pm

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) on obtaining the debate. As chair of the all-party group on autism, I am privileged to have an insight into this area. I am glad to see my predecessor as chair of the all-party group, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), who has done so much work on autism, on the Front Bench next to the Minister.

I congratulate Ivan Corea and the Frances Bardsley Academy for Girls, because initiatives such as theirs really help to demystify autism. It is important that we hear from the Minister how we can mark Autism Sunday and Autism Awareness Week in Parliament. I am proud of the fact that when we hold APPG events, we try to make admission to Parliament autism-friendly. We put aside a silent space where people can feel calm, and we have made the Serjeant at Arms and all who usher people into this place aware of the little things that can make life much more comfortable for people with autism.

Too many families and individuals still experience judgmental attitudes or face isolation or unemployment, because of the misunderstandings that surround autism. Although 99% of the public say that they are aware of autism, an astonishing 87% of people who are affected by autism do not think that the public have a good enough understanding of it, and more needs to be done to deepen that understanding. My hon. Friend the Member for Romford has done a great deal tonight, and so have his constituents, who may be listening to the debate. May they go from strength to strength, and may they bring about more awareness of autism with their wonderful work.

8.17 pm

The Minister for Children and Families (Edward Timpson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) on securing this important debate. He has afforded the House the opportunity to raise awareness of autism and mark Autism Sunday in Parliament, albeit on a Wednesday. As my hon. Friend has mentioned, Autism Sunday is an event with worldwide recognition, as well as being a permanent fixture in his own constituency. That is a fantastic achievement, of which Ivan and Charika Corea, who have grown the event since 2002, should be proud.

I commend Ivan Corea for his promotion of autism awareness in Romford through his work at the Frances Bardsley Academy for Girls, his role in creating FBA autism ambassadors and the #Iwill campaign, which I know well. Such local partnership working is vital if we are to change the lives of people with autism, to ensure that they achieve and lead fulfilling, happy lives. It was uplifting to hear about the incredible impact that Corea's

[Edward Timpson]

vision has had in and around Romford, and I am sure that it reverberates much further.

As we have heard, autism is a lifelong condition that affects how a person communicates and relates to people around them. As a result, people right across society, from school teachers and bus drivers to general practitioners, need to be aware of autism and what it means for those who live with it.

I will start by outlining the framework that is in place to improve the lives of people with autism. Since the Autism Act 2009, which was spearheaded by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan)—I thank her for reminding us that world Autism Awareness Week is from 2 to 8 April—the 2010 cross-Government autism strategy was updated by the “Think Autism” strategy in 2014 and new statutory guidance in 2015. The aim of all of this work was further to improve the care and support that local authorities and NHS organisations provide for people with autism.

“Think Autism” placed greater emphasis on involvement and awareness within the local community and on ways of looking differently at support and engagement. That is very much what is happening in Romford, as we have heard. It moved the original vision of the strategy on, including to an increased focus on areas such as young people, criminal justice and employment.

The reason we have kept up the momentum is that there is more to do to ensure that all those with autism get the help and support that they need. Last month, we published a progress report, which is designed to challenge local partners delivering a wide range of services, such as health, education, children’s services, adult services and transport to “Think Autism”. With over 500,000 people in England estimated to have autism, this was done for a very good reason: because it matters.

These organisations and services come into contact with people on the autistic spectrum daily. By engaging with them effectively, we can ensure that such people do not miss out on accessing services and support. By doing so, we can bring about a positive influence on their mental and physical health. That is why it is so important that the Department of Health is continuing to make autism a top priority for the NHS. The NHS mandate sets the priorities for the NHS, and signals what the Department of Health will hold the NHS accountable for. Next year, it will include an important call on the NHS to reduce health inequality for autistic people.

In launching “Think Autism”, we wanted to promote innovation and awareness, and we made available over £4 million to do just that. My hon. Friend the Member for Romford rightly argued strongly for a further drive on innovation in how we deliver services for people with autism. Until last year, the Department of Health ran an innovation fund of £1 million to promote innovative local ideas, services or projects that could help people in their communities. Forty-two projects were chosen, with a focus on people with autism who do not qualify for social care support. The projects focused on four key areas: advice and mentoring, gaining and growing skills for independence, early intervention and crisis prevention, and support into employment.

Some £3 million has been given out in capital funding to councils, so that they can make public spaces, such as inquiry offices and libraries, more autism-friendly, and provide IT and technology to make life easier for people with autism. For example, in the London Borough of Havering in my hon. Friend’s constituency, funding was allocated to improve autism-friendly safe spaces, allowing people with autism greater access to Romford town centre. I know that that is an opportunity that he would not want anybody to miss.

As a Minister in the Department for Education, I have a particular focus on the education of children and young people with autism. A key part of that are our recent fundamental reforms to the new nought-to-25, family-centred, outcomes-focused special educational needs and disability system. We have made changes to the law to ensure we provide the support that children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities require. The work I have seen so far, which is putting families at the heart of the process, is in many ways inspiring, but we know that we still need to do more to engender the culture shift necessary to achieve that end. I am pleased that we were recently able to announce an additional £80 million to boost support for children with special educational needs and disabilities during the next financial year to help to ensure that our reforms have real impact on the ground, including for children and young people with autism.

We are doing specific work to help to support children and young people with autism. First, we want to ensure that all education staff are able to recognise and support children with autism in schools. We have therefore funded the Autism Education Trust from 2011 to 2016 to provide training for early years, school and further education staff. To date, the AET has provided training for about 87,000 education staff. I know that the trust is aiming to reach the milestone of 100,000 trained staff this summer. I hope that I will be able to celebrate that achievement with it.

Secondly, we know that young people with autism can find dealing with change particularly hard, so it is important that they make a successful transition from school to post-16 provision. We have therefore funded the Ambitious about Autism charity from 2013 to this year to develop an innovative, integrated model of transition support. That model enables more young people with complex autism and learning difficulties to access further education and training beyond school, helping them more successfully to move on to adult life and work.

We know that a disproportionate number of children with autism are excluded from school. As a result, we have funded the National Autistic Society to provide families with information and advice on exclusion and alternative provision, and to support education professionals with advice and guidance on early intervention to reduce the risk of exclusion.

Finally in relation to children and young people, the expansion of the Government’s free schools programme has benefited many children with special educational needs and, specifically, with autism. Several specialist autism free schools have opened, including Church Lawton School, which is near my constituency in Cheshire. There are 11 more free special schools in the pipeline, of which seven are specifically for children with autism. That demonstrates the demand and desire of parents

and charities that we meet that need and offer a truly outstanding education for autistic children.

Jim Shannon: I applaud the initiative that has been taken by Sunderland football club, although they are not my team, to provide a small room in the stadium where autistic children can go with their parents and enjoy the football match, without the noise that disaffects them. That initiative clearly helps autistic children. Would the Minister encourage other premier league football teams and, indeed, all football teams to do likewise?

Edward Timpson: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman. The Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People has worked hard with the premier league and football clubs to improve the facilities for and awareness of people with disabilities, whether they be physical, mental or otherwise, at football grounds. There is clearly more that can be done. Clubs such as Sunderland are taking the lead and showing what can be done. With a little bit of thought, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham said, we can go a long way. I encourage every club to look at what Sunderland are doing and to make such easy but important adjustments, so that they can fill the seats in their stadium, which Sunderland has struggled to do this season.

In addition to what we are doing at the Department for Education, my colleagues right across Government are thinking autism. They are doing more to raise awareness of autism and to provide support across a range of Government services. The National Autistic Society is doing excellent work in this area. We wish to support other charities in their endeavours through the strong partnerships that are needed.

The Department of Health has funded Autism Alliance UK to undertake an awareness campaign that seeks to dispel the myths around autism, which still exist all too readily, as well as to improve training, create employment and make reasonable adjustments in how everyday services are provided for people with autism. The alliance is working with local and national businesses, and with providers of services in the private, public and voluntary sectors. In my hon. Friend's county of Essex, the awareness work has involved another football club, Colchester United, who are having an indifferent season, the Essex County Council equality and diversity service, and councillors in Chelmsford, so it is really starting to reverberate around Essex.

Autism Alliance UK is also working to improve knowledge and awareness of autism in the Department for Work and Pensions by, for example, building an autism network across Jobcentre Plus by training nominated autism leads, including work coaches and dedicated employment advisers.

To build knowledge and expertise among health professionals, the Department of Health has provided financial support to the Royal College of General Practitioners' clinical priorities programme on autism, which is undertaking practical work on autism awareness and training for GPs. Health Education England has developed the online MindED portal, which contains learning resources for enhancing the effectiveness of working with children, young people and young adults who are on the autistic spectrum.

Last year, the Department of Health also provided funding to a number of organisations, including the British Psychological Society, the Royal College of General Practitioners, the Social Care Institute for Excellence and the National Autistic Society to upgrade their autism e-learning training tools and materials. Those tools will assist GPs, social workers, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Romford mentioned, clinicians and nurses. The intention is to enable the training to have a direct impact on the quality and effectiveness of the services they provide. As a result of building staff capabilities on autism awareness, there will be better outcomes for people with autism and their families.

The Ministry of Justice must play its part, too. It is working to achieve better awareness of autism in the criminal justice system, for victims, witnesses and perpetrators of crime. For example, my hon. Friend the Minister for Prisons, Probation, Rehabilitation and Sentencing wrote to prisons last year to encourage them to apply for the National Autistic Society's autism accreditation. Under the pilot, several prisons are currently in the process of working towards accreditation, and by October 2015 a further 20 prisons had expressed their interest.

Finally, Disability Matters is a Department of Health-funded e-learning tool to provide training in understanding and supporting the needs of people with a disability, and it will help those with autism, too.

As you can see, Madam Deputy Speaker, from this short summary, there is a raft of activity going on to ensure that, across Government, we are "thinking autism" and raising awareness, alongside other events such as Autism Sunday. Our mission is to help people with autism to fulfil their potential, to have full, happy lives and to live as independently as possible. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Romford in embracing Autism Sunday and the golden chance it gives us to raise these issues in Romford and beyond, and I look forward to working with him on this further as we continue to work to improve the lives of all those with autism in our society.

Question put and agreed to.

8.31 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Immigration and Nationality (Fees) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 11 January, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 313, Noes 67.

Division No. 190]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, Alun
Cameron, rh Mr David
Carmichael, Neil
Carswell, Mr Douglas
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James

Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Elliott, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
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
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
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
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
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
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny

Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Osborne, rh Mr George
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
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
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vaizey, Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin

Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 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
 Wilson, Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Crawley, Angela
 Day, Martyn
 Docherty, Martin John
 Donaldson, Stuart Blair
 Durkan, Mark
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Hendry, Drew
 Hermon, Lady
 Kerevan, George
 Kerr, Calum
 Law, Chris
 Lucas, Caroline
 MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
 Mc Nally, John
 McCaig, Callum
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, Dr Alasdair

McGarry, Natalie
 McLaughlin, Anne
 Monaghan, Carol
 Monaghan, Dr Paul
 Mullin, Roger
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Paterson, Steven
 Pugh, John
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Robertson, rh Angus
 Salmond, rh Alex
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Stephens, Chris
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Michelle
 Weir, Mike
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Corri
 Wishart, Pete

NOES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
 Arkless, Richard
 Bardell, Hannah
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, Ian

Blackman, Kirsty
 Boswell, Philip
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 10 February 2016

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

Asylum Support Contracts

9.30 am

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That the House has considered contracts let by the Home Office for the provision of asylum support.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Stringer, and it is also a pleasure to be joined by many colleagues from across the House to consider this important issue this morning.

It is my hope that this debate today will elicit some better answers from the Home Office in response to the serious concerns that have been raised by many Members from all parties in the House about the provision of support to asylum seekers under contract to the Home Office.

I begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), who have done an excellent job, alongside many others, in bringing concerns about the practical implications of the failures of companies providing asylum support service across the UK to the attention of the House and the country. These include examples involving G4S and Clearsprings, including the two particularly shocking examples of the stigmatisation of highly vulnerable people by placing them in houses with red doors or forcing them to wear red wristbands to get food. I will come back to those shameful episodes in a moment, but it is clear that there are additional serious concerns on top of those two high-profile examples.

To begin with, it is worth putting asylum into the wider context of the immigration debate. I make it clear from the start that I believe in a tough and robust immigration system. Successive Governments—it is important to be frank, so that includes those of my own party—have failed on a number of measures regarding the immigration system, including counting people in and out. Exit checks were not introduced until recently—I had long argued that they should be introduced—and until relatively recently we had failed to begin to address the debate on, for example, EU migration and benefits, which has deeply and corrosively damaged public confidence in the many positives that immigration has brought and can bring. My own diverse city and constituency know those positives only too well.

Let me also be crystal clear that I am very proud of the role that Britain has played in offering a place of sanctuary to those fleeing persecution and violence, and it should continue to play that role. I was proud that in the midst of the Mediterranean refugee crisis last year, a cross-party group, brought together by young people from the Butetown and Grangetown areas in my constituency, stood up in my city of Cardiff and made it clear that refugees are welcome in our city, just as they always have been.

I am particularly proud of the work of organisations such as the City of Sanctuary movement in cities including Cardiff, and local organisations such as the Oasis trust in Splott in my constituency, which are working to support these vulnerable people in many different ways.

There is a huge amount of misinformation about asylum seekers and refugees, and the truth is in short supply. The 1951 United Nations convention relating to the status of refugees states that a refugee is a person who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

In the UK, a person is officially a refugee when they have their claim for asylum accepted by the Government, and an asylum seeker is a person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been concluded.

I am sorry, Mr Stringer, to have to remind us of these raw facts, but because we are in a time of misleading information and hyperbole about immigration, when the media, debate in this House and indeed the Prime Minister himself frequently and dangerously blur the distinctions between asylum seeker, refugee, EU migrant, economic migrant, overstaying visitor and many other categories, we can come to the wrong policy conclusions, fail to support those seeking sanctuary with dignity, and, at the same time, risk community relations and the potential for integration.

To illustrate my concerns, let me give another example, which gets to the nub of some of the concerns about the issue of these contracts and the way that providers are behaving. A number of constituents and local representatives have contacted me in recent weeks with their concerns about a supposed new asylum facility opening up in a residential area of east Cardiff. They had seen the horrible crowding of people into Lynx House in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central, and the media reports, and they are fearful that, for example, a large group of young men might be placed in another unsuitable location, in order to make quick money for a landlord or the contracting company, and with no consultation or dialogue with local residents.

Like most good Cardiff and Welsh people, these constituents and local representatives made it clear to me that they had no objection to asylum seekers or refugees living locally. For example, one older resident told me personally how she would happily welcome in the streets or the local area Syrian families fleeing the horrors that she had witnessed on TV. However, she and others also had very natural fears, which were compounded by rumours that had circulated and the apparent lack of any consultation or dialogue.

In yesterday's sitting of the Home Affairs Committee, I asked the chief executive of Clearsprings directly whether or not he plans to operate more facilities like Lynx House in east Cardiff, as he had indicated to my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) that he was likely to want to expand his company. I await the chief executive's urgent reply. Perhaps the Minister can enlighten me, if he is aware of any facts relating to the further plans of Clearsprings in Cardiff.

[Stephen Doughty]

Many other people have expressed fears, which are often unfounded and based on the hyperbole in the media debate, and other concerns have been fuelled by disgraceful comments, such as the Prime Minister referring to a “bunch of migrants”. As I have said, herein lies the nub of this issue. We appear to have a situation in which the Home Office is contracting with a small number of companies to place highly vulnerable people, often, it seems, in crowded or unsuitable accommodation, in a very small number of areas in a small group of dispersal centres and cities, and frequently in areas of low rents and deprivation. It is good to see the Minister for Immigration himself here in Westminster Hall today, but he admitted yesterday that he had most likely zero or very few asylum seekers accommodated in his own constituency.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Regarding how these properties are let, was he as amazed as I was to discover that different people can be put into a single bedroom quite inappropriately? A young man in my community who is gay and who has come to this country is having to share a bedroom with somebody who was once a member of the Taliban. Does my hon. Friend not find that an utterly ridiculous state of affairs?

Stephen Doughty: I find that absolutely extraordinary; my hon. Friend gives a shocking example. As a gay MP myself, I would find it horrendous to be placed in accommodation with somebody who potentially had persecuted me or potentially would persecute me. However, that is the reality of many people’s experience—they find themselves in unsuitable accommodation. Yesterday in the Home Affairs Committee, we heard one example of 11 people being crowded into a room, and I have heard examples of individuals being placed with people who allegedly may have persecuted them in the past. Some very serious concerns are being raised.

The asylum dispersal and integration process appears to have stopped, and the principle behind it appears to have been abandoned, not only at the limited number of dispersal locations but at the localities within them. I would be interested to hear the Minister’s views on that and on whether we are getting things right. Simply put, the system as it stands is not good for those seeking sanctuary, not good for the communities that those people are being placed in and not good for wider integration, and I also question whether it is good value for the Government.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech and I thank him for securing this debate. Does he agree that services to asylum seekers have basically been reduced since March 2012, when the Government took the decision effectively to privatise those services? In Glasgow, for example, it was the local authority that was providing the services for asylum seekers.

Stephen Doughty: I am not aware of the specific history in Glasgow that the hon. Gentleman refers to, but there are serious questions to be asked about whether these private companies are operating in the most effective way, not only for their users but in terms of their value for money to the taxpayer.

Before I express some detailed concerns about the COMPASS contracts and Clearsprings specifically, let us finally remind ourselves of a few crucial facts. The Refugee Council states that asylum seekers make up just 10% of those people arriving in Britain and that in any case many of those asylum seekers are not granted refugee status. Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Italy, France and Austria all receive significantly more asylum applications than the UK, and very few asylum seekers make it to this country.

Asylum seekers made up just 4.1% of immigrants to the UK in 2014, and the UK is home to less than 1% of the world’s refugees; those figures are from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 2014. The fact is that the vast majority of the world’s refugees live, often in camps, in the poorest developing countries in Africa, Asia, and the middle east. Between them, those regions host more than three quarters of the world’s refugees. Turning specifically to Wales, an answer from the Immigration Minister on 28 January stated that just 1,086 asylum seekers were accommodated in Cardiff by Clearsprings in 2015, and just 2,384 were accommodated in Wales overall.

I know that other Members will want to get into the detail of their concerns in their areas, but as I have stated publicly before, no one is asking for special treatment for those seeking sanctuary in Cardiff, Wales or anywhere else in the UK. We are simply asking for them to be treated with the dignity and compassion that we would all expect from our fellow human beings. It is easy to pick up a few examples of alleged luxury accommodation or temporary accommodation in mainstream hotels, for example after arrival at an airport, but the reality in Cardiff for many of those seeking sanctuary who I have met and heard from appears to be very different.

The Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), outlined to the Minister the direct comments of those in Cardiff who have experienced discrimination as a result of being forced to wear the red bands, and I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central will want to tell us more about that. Over the past few months, I have been approached by a number of constituents whose treatment by Clearsprings is seriously concerning. I have written to the Home Office on a number of occasions to raise specific cases. Numerous concerns and allegations have been raised by my constituents on the substandard nature of accommodation offered. Those reports have come directly from users and others working with asylum seekers in Cardiff.

Allegations I have received include short-notice evictions, intimidating and abusive behaviour, and people having their bedrooms entered without their consent, which, incidentally, the Home Office has confirmed to me in a letter is entirely consistent with the principles and guidance of the COMPASS contract. That raises some serious questions, especially when we are talking about vulnerable women and children fleeing sexual violence. To have their room entered without consent by a man—even in itself that is a serious concern.

One constituent, who I will refer to as Mrs A, fled rape and sexual violence. That horrific circumstance is faced by many female asylum seekers. With her children, she was settling into her new community in my constituency in Cardiff. She was receiving medical support and had a supportive network for her family via the school and

local community. After spending time integrating, establishing that network, getting her life back on track and providing a safe space and sanctuary for herself and her children, Mrs A was suddenly informed at short notice that she had to leave and move more than an hour away to Swansea. ClearSprings provided her with no official letter or communication; there was just an anonymous note posted to her room telling her at very short notice that she should pack up and be prepared to leave.

I was approached by another woman in a very anxious and depressed state who had a young child. She had been made to share a room with a woman with mental health issues who allegedly spat on their possessions and crockery and would leave her child's potty with the pots and pans in the kitchen. The woman was too scared to complain for fear of jeopardising her situation. That is a crucial point. The chief executive of ClearSprings appeared to suggest yesterday that he was not aware of a lot of the complaints or was not made aware of them by staff or others. The reality is that the vulnerable people living in such accommodation have come from countries where complaining to the authorities will lead to them being incarcerated or, worse still, tortured or killed, so they are naturally nervous about raising concerns with authorities.

Another vulnerable young constituent approached my office earlier this month. She had been encouraged hurriedly to sign a tenancy agreement by ClearSprings, but was not told in advance that she would have to share a room. She was bullied and victimised by other tenants and was distressed as her landlord had complained about and then stopped her brother visiting her. He was her only relative in Cardiff and lived in separate accommodation. The young woman complained that her landlord repeatedly let himself into her room unannounced, including while she was in bed or undressed. She was then told she would be moving with very short notice of two days.

Those are just a few of the stories I have had about ClearSprings, on top of the well-publicised information about the standards at Lynx House. The chief executive of ClearSprings admitted yesterday that 11 people had had to share a room there at one point. We see further revelations in *The Guardian* this morning about a local authority report into the conditions and the serious concerns about the facility. Indeed, in answer to a recent parliamentary question that I tabled, the Minister confirmed that between 2010 and 2015, the Department received 60 complaints in total regarding services provided by ClearSprings. Staggeringly, 59 of those complaints have been made in just the past six months.

Yesterday the chief executive appeared woefully unaware of those concerns. He appeared bemused about the furore over the red bands and only apologised to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee under repeated questioning. Highly revealing, however, was his claim that despite repeated visits from Home Office inspectors, no one had raised concerns about the use of the red bands. Given that the Minister rightly admitted yesterday that they were wrong, can he explain why it took the revelations in the media for action to be taken? It is one thing for the chief executive of ClearSprings to dismiss the concerns, but if the property was being inspected by the Home Office, as many of these properties are, why were they not picked up on previously?

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): My hon. Friend talked at length about people's fear in many of those situations. Perhaps the chief executive did not receive complaints because people were too fearful to make them, because they just did not know what would happen as a result.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. People who have been through those fearful situations—many of them are fleeing such places as Eritrea, Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan—will be fearful of expressing concerns.

The situation is apparently not unique to Cardiff. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who unfortunately cannot be present today, wanted me to highlight her experience of working in the asylum system. She noted how women who have fallen through the gaps of the national referral mechanism for victims of human trafficking have suffered greatly under the lack of specialist provision in Government-contracted asylum accommodation. She told me that, for the women who end up housed in G4S accommodation in the centre of Birmingham, none of the same stringent checks and balances that are normally in place for victims of human trafficking are catered for. There are no non-gendered services and there is next to no security in place to protect that vulnerable group of people. Indeed, she was able to walk into the accommodation and witness the name of a woman who had been trafficked written on the wall in the hall, displaying to anyone who might have walked in looking for her that she was there. That is totally unacceptable and raises serious concerns about the special provision needed for some of the people fleeing such situations.

On the COMPASS contract, an answer from the Minister made it clear that in 2012 ClearSprings Ready Homes was awarded two contracts for the provision of asylum accommodation, transport and related services. The estimated contract value for ClearSprings over the seven years—that is, five plus two—for each region is £75 million for Wales and £55 million for London and the south of England. The ClearSprings chief executive admitted yesterday that in 2015, while things were not quite as profitable as he would have liked, he received a salary package of more than £200,000 in return for delivering the contract. His chair, Mr King, received a package totalling £960,000. Most people, whether they are taxpayers or vulnerable asylum seekers, would find those figures astonishing. Other significant and valuable contracts have been let to other providers, including G4S—I am sure we will hear more about those.

The COMPASS contract has a statement of requirements for dispersal accommodation and transport providers. It is worth being specific about the key requirements under the contract. The first is to provide safe, habitable, fit for purpose and correctly equipped accommodation to asylum seekers and to ensure that properties adhere to the standards established in the decent homes standard. The second is to provide adequate transport to and from initial accommodation, dispersal accommodation and medical appointments. The third is to abide by contractual management regulations at all levels, ensuring that there is a complaints procedure for those living in dispersal accommodation and that organisations report on their performance against the specified standards. Each of those duties must fulfil the broader contractual duties to promote and safeguard the welfare of children

[Stephen Doughty]

in particular, to ensure the safety and security of those living within dispersed accommodation, and to ensure that staff have an overview of the asylum process and the needs particular to those seeking asylum.

Yesterday, I made that point directly to the chief executive of Clearsprings, who appeared to imply in his evidence to the Home Affairs Committee that his duties relate only to the bare provision of housing. The words he used were that he was “contractually compliant”. Given the very specific needs of the group of people he is accommodating, I argue that his company and the Home Office should be acting proactively to ensure that the duties set out in the contract are fulfilled.

I have given a number of examples already, but it is not only from my experience that I question whether the standards are being met. During 2015, the Welsh Refugee Council collated a series of complaints demonstrating persistent failings to meet the standards. Analysis of the data reveals a series of persistent concerns around standards of accommodation, size of accommodation, and harassment and antisocial behaviour experienced in accommodation from other tenants and members of staff.

The complaints reveal that it is not simply the physical condition of the properties provided by Clearsprings—we have heard about the situation at Lynx House—that are of concern for service users and providers; the standards of service provision were identified as a serious concern, and there was a general feeling that the service provider had little appreciation of the difficulties faced by asylum seekers and their reasons for seeking sanctuary in the UK. There was a common perception in the survey that there was a greater focus on internal targets and profit generation than on providing a service that protected and supported vulnerable people.

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend is eloquently analysing the structure of the contracts. Does he share my frustration that Jomast, a subcontractor in my area, has some 3,000 properties, and if they are paid £11.50 per person per night, the back of an envelope calculation shows an income of £12 million a year? Such access to taxpayers’ money could surely provide a better service than the one we are currently enjoying.

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend’s comments. Serious questions need to be asked when such a large amount of taxpayers’ money is provided under the quite stringent terms of the contract, but are those terms followed through and delivered? Given that Home Office inspectors regularly visit the properties, as the chief executive of Clearsprings made clear yesterday, why have those concerns not come to attention before?

The concerns that sanctuary seekers face are a constant source of worry and anxiety, often aggravating pre-existing experiences of trauma in what should be a place of sanctuary. Some have reported that their interactions with Clearsprings staff are not consistently facilitated through interpreters, and there have been multiple incidents of perceived hostility and verbal abuse from staff towards residents. Another issue that has been raised with me is the question of male versus female staff in the properties. It has been suggested that there is a significant weakness in terms of the numbers of female members of staff, so can the Minister tell us what the numbers are?

The Welsh Refugee Council and various other charities that deal with refugees and asylum seekers have strongly advocated a radical change in the Home Office’s approach to housing. It is clear and evident that more care must go into supporting this distinct group of people with complex needs, many of whom have experienced persecution, torture and violence.

I will conclude shortly because I know other Members wish to speak, but I want to talk about what needs to happen with the COMPASS contract, and I have specific questions for the Minister. It is my belief that the Home Office should initiate and lead a comprehensive review of the COMPASS contract in Wales and nationwide to deal with housing standards and the experience of users. The review should be multi-agency and should involve, at the very least, the Welsh Government, local authorities, key housing bodies, refugee representatives and the support organisations that work with them.

The review needs to have clear objectives, including improving the monitoring and contract compliance practice within COMPASS, and it needs to underscore the existing COMPASS statement of requirements with a new person-centred framework and guidelines to ensure that high-quality planning, policy and practice exist within COMPASS for all asylum applicants in the UK. It needs to look at the Home Office’s wider equalities duties and its commitments to those who face human trafficking, because it is clear that there are failings in that area. It also needs to look at the experience of users. At a senior level, a contractor might promise to deal with X, Y or Z and to uphold certain standards, but if that is not filtering down to those who actually interact with the relatively small group of vulnerable people, that is simply not good enough.

My final questions for the Minister are these: is he satisfied with the compliance of Clearsprings and other asylum contractors with the terms of the COMPASS contract? Does he consider that they still represent good value for money? Why did no Home Office inspector raise concerns with Clearsprings about the red band issue prior to its exposure in the media? What other concerns have been raised with him about Clearsprings operations in Cardiff or elsewhere in the UK?

Does the Minister consider the salaries and remuneration of the Clearsprings directors and CEO to be appropriate for a public sector contract of this nature? The chief executive of Clearsprings admitted yesterday that the £960,000 payment to his chair resulted from a discussion with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs about the best “tax approach” to take to a loan. Can the Minister tell us any more about that and whether he was aware of any such discussions involving HMRC? How many individual sites does the Clearsprings contract house asylum seekers at in Wales? Is he aware of plans to expand those facilities? Obviously, I have specific concerns about the plan to expand into another potentially unsuitable facility in the east of Cardiff.

Finally, is dispersal evenly spread across localities and local government wards in Cardiff and other dispersal locations across the UK? I have a concern that we are not dispersing to enough locations in the UK. There is a question of what happens within cities and the localities into which individuals are placed, which is crucial when we consider integration and balance within a city.

I conclude by reminding Members that we are not asking for special or VIP treatment. We are simply asking for human beings to be treated with the dignity and compassion that they rightly deserve, and it is the Home Office's duty to ensure that that is the case.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at 10.30 am. That leaves us 34 minutes. There are seven people standing. The arithmetic is straightforward.

9.56 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I consider myself told, Mr Stringer, and I will duly comply—I will just speak very quickly.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) not only on securing the debate, but on a comprehensive speech that shows a clear understanding of the needs of asylum seekers and the problems occurring at the moment. It is important that those of us who stand up for asylum seekers keep on doing it. I am sure the Government must be sick of the sight of us by now, but we have to keep saying it until we get it right.

The situation with refugee support contracts highlights the problems with the Government's agenda in a number of areas. The contracts singularly fail to deliver a service that supports the integration and success of our refugee communities. They hand over money to the private sector, despite the repeated failure of the companies to deliver the services that they are paid to deliver, and they fail to account for the important differences across the UK in terms of the devolved context and local authority arrangements.

It is only right that we remove the abstraction, as the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth has, and remember that we are dealing with real people who have fled unimaginable horror of a sort that we have been lucky in this country to avoid since the end of the second world war. Now, having safely fled the brutality of a new fascism, people arriving in our communities deserve and need our support to integrate and to build new lives. Hopefully, that is something on which we can all agree.

After the introduction of the COMPASS model in 2012, in which Serco became responsible for the delivery of asylum support in Scotland and Northern Ireland, we had the subcontracting of the contract to Orchard & Shipman. However, as a housing provider operating in Scotland, it is still subject to Scottish housing law, even if the contracts themselves remain under the control of Westminster. Given recent reports from across the UK, it seems likely that the contravention of local housing and environmental health law is of increasing importance.

Across the UK, we have had some truly horrific situations, which we have heard about today and over the past few weeks. We have had refugee houses easily identifiable by the colour of the door; stories of humiliation and harassment caused by the requirement for refugees in Cardiff to wear coloured wristbands; and a level of overcrowding that would be more appropriate in the slums of the 1900s, not the 21st century. It is clear to me that the system is broken, not just in one location and not just with one provider. That is why the Scottish

National party is calling for an urgent inquiry. The Government must ensure that those who are given refuge in the UK are not demeaned by being forced to face stigma or conditions that no one born in the UK would be asked to face. Support and assistance must be there to assist resettlement and integration. The refugee situation is not going away. We need urgently to fix the system. That is why we need an urgent inquiry into this matter in the UK.

It is clear that there are problems with the contracts right across these islands. I know of some great local initiatives from community organisations and charities to support integration. In Glasgow North East, and I am sure in other constituencies, there are groups working really hard to support integration. In my constituency, we have groups such as the North Glasgow Integration Network, Royston Youth Action, A&M, and many others. We also have the Scottish Government's new Scots initiative. But we must accept that the UK-wide contracts are causing UK-wide problems, and they merit a UK-wide inquiry.

It is crucial that we get it right from the moment asylum seekers or refugees arrive in this country, because we are setting the tone for the rest of their stay. Just as we welcome tourists when they come here, we should welcome anyone who comes to these shores. Fifteen Syrian families were brought to my constituency in December, and I want to tell Members what happened to them the moment they arrived. I asked the Home Secretary last year whether we could have welcoming groups to show people coming into this country a true Scottish, Glasgow welcome, and she said that a taskforce was going to look into it. When the 15 Syrian families, who were mainly Muslim, arrived at Glasgow airport, I am told that they were greeted by Glasgow City Council with a packed lunch of ham sandwiches. I have nothing more to add to that.

There are now 15 new Syrian families living in my constituency who, as the Government tell us, were among the most vulnerable of those living in the camps in Syria. I am not in touch with them—none of them know that they are entitled to my help—but there are dozens of asylum seekers in my constituency who are living under the contracts we are discussing and who do know that they are entitled to my help. They do come to me, but I know of many more who are too afraid to do so.

We have seen in recent weeks that, under those contracts, the system is utterly failing. Will the Minister have the courage to recognise that and deliver the urgent inquiry that is so obviously needed?

10.1 am

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing the debate, which comes on the back of extensive media coverage over the past three weeks about Lynx House in my constituency and, before that, the G4S accommodation contract in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald).

The coverage initially centred on the Clearsprings policy of requiring people at Lynx House to wear wristbands so that they could access food, which made them identifiable to the public as asylum seekers. Some of them suffered abuse and threats as a result of having

[Jo Stevens]

to wear the wristbands. That was followed by reports of overcrowding and unsafe and unsanitary conditions at Lynx House. There is further coverage in *The Guardian* today about the likelihood of prohibition notices being served on Clearsprings by the City of Cardiff Council, and the partial closure of Lynx House following an inspection last week that was prompted by concerns raised by South Wales fire and rescue service.

I shall offer two perspectives, first as the MP for the constituency in which Lynx House is situated, and secondly the wider perspective of my growing concern at what are at best inadequacies and, at worst, possible incompetence in the management of taxpayer-funded contracts, which are extremely lucrative for the private contractors who have them. I have a number of questions that I hope the Minister will be able to answer when he responds. If he is not able to address them all, will he write to me following the debate, as I am yet to receive a reply to the letter I sent him on 1 February in which I raised some urgent issues about Lynx House?

The story about the wristband policy at Lynx House broke on 24 January. I immediately contacted Clearsprings and, that afternoon, spoke to the operations director to raise my concerns. We had a conversation in which he readily accepted my view that the policy was inappropriate and agreed that it would be withdrawn. I asked him to implement an alternative identification system for people to get food, such as photo ID cards. He confirmed that a pilot was already under way and that it would be fully implemented within the next few weeks. That change was confirmed in a statement issued by Clearsprings on 25 January.

The Home Office had declined to comment at all on the issue. I wrote to the Minister on the same day to outline my concerns and to ask him 10 questions about Lynx House. I was grateful for his response on 5 February, but it did not answer all my questions. The policy was implemented in May 2015. The Minister's letter makes it clear that his Department was aware of complaints about the policy in Lynx House as long ago as October 2015. Between May 2015 and January 2016, Home Office compliance officers inspected Lynx House eight times, but nothing was done about the wristbands. It took an exposé in *The Guardian* and call from me on a Sunday afternoon for the policy to be withdrawn. I asked for the inspection reports to be published, but I have not heard from the Minister, so I repeat that request today. I also asked what improvements the Minister was making to the inspection and monitoring regime for the private companies with which the Department has contracts, but, again, I have not received a response.

There have been further allegations about unsafe and unsanitary conditions and overcrowding, with up to 11 people having to share a small room. The Home Office inspected Lynx House on 27 and 28 January. Subsequently, people have been moved out to a local budget hotel in the constituency, and some have been moved to London. Clearsprings told me that that was so that some painting and decorating could take place; in the light of the probable prohibition orders, it would seem to be much more than that. I do not know whether the Minister has seen today's *Guardian* report about the prohibition notices, but it has been reported to me that another 30 people have been moved out to Southall and to accommodation near Gatwick.

I visited Lynx House in November because I had heard concerns about safeguarding issues. I was reassured that those issues had been dealt with, but the managers told me that the numbers of people being sent to Lynx house were "crazy at the moment". A lot of single men had been sent through by the Home Office—individuals who had been through a lot to get to Cardiff. Many were injured, and there were cases of scabies. I was told that 397 people were at Lynx House that week. That is the biggest number ever, and the staff told me that it was

"well over double the amount we are here for and can manage properly. It's a crisis."

Yesterday, I listened to the Minister, along with Mandie Campbell, his director of immigration enforcement, give evidence to the Home Affairs Committee about the inspection regime and the key performance indicators that are discussed at monthly management boards. I suggest to the Minister that that structure does not seem to be working. Will he please make improvements to the inspection regime?

10.6 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on setting the scene so well, as he always does for every subject that he speaks on. I thank him for that.

I want to give the perspective from Northern Ireland, which it is always important to do in debates so that other Members are aware of it. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief. I have been aware of the issue of refugees for a great many years and have been trying to make a difference since long before the current crisis.

Although the middle east is the epicentre of where refugees are being created today, there are unfortunately plenty more examples of persecuted minorities throughout the world who are in just as much need of asylum. Tomorrow there will be a Westminster Hall debate on religious minorities in Pakistan, to which I hope to contribute along with other Members. I am not sure whether the Minister will respond to that debate, but none the less it is another very important issue.

Without doubt, one of the defining issues of 2015 was the migrant crisis. It is hard to find a member of the general public who does not have an opinion on it, and it is near impossible to avoid the issue. There are 13.5 million Syrians who need help in that country, of whom some 6.5 million are internally displaced, including 600,000 Christians. Some 4.2 million Syrians have fled abroad, mostly to neighbouring countries in the region.

As the Minister probably knows, many people see the potential for a great crisis this summer as the focus on Syria builds. We have seen on our television screens the horrific scenes from the middle east, and I can only imagine what it must be like in reality. The debate about how many people from the region we can realistically take in and how safe that process would be is one for another day, but regardless of how many we take and how we resettle them, we need to ensure that the provision of support is effective and fair.

I am not sure whether other Members have had a chance to look at the Order Paper, but there are three debates today on migrants, asylum seekers and refugees—

they are all on the movement of people. It is a testament to just how big an issue this is that we are devoting so much time in Westminster Hall to those debates.

We have all seen how the rows erupted over the painting of refugees' doors, the coloured wristbands and the like—other Members have mentioned them today. In reality, the purpose behind those measures was to make it easier to identify those who required services, but we have seen the arguments that resulted and how they made it possible for refugees to be singled out for attacks and harm. They had the opposite effect to what was intended. I hope and believe that lessons have been learned about how best to do such things—the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth laid out very considerably and gently what had happened and how things could be done better. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have made well-intended arguments, but we need to focus on helping people and ensuring that they have the services they need. We should not use this issue as a political football to score points.

I am happy to report that we do not have the same problems in Northern Ireland; that is good news. The horror stories that other hon. Members talk about underline the lessons that we must learn. We do not want to make those mistakes in Northern Ireland, and I do not think we are doing so. Northern Ireland is taking in its first refugees ever, so providing services to them is new to us. It is for the mainland to lead the way. The Government must work closely with contractors to ensure an effective, inexpensive and safe service. As the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) said, housing is allocated regionally, so the Northern Ireland Housing Executive will deal with that. Housing allocation is important to integrating people fully into society.

Churches have made a massive contribution. That is the way it should be, of course. It is good that churches are helping. The Holy Bible tells all Christians to reach out and be compassionate to their neighbours and those in need. The churches have done that in a practical and physical way by providing clothes and food, and by getting everybody to work together. Society shows itself at its best on such occasions. People come together to help because they want to do so.

Refugees in Northern Ireland are to be offered free English lessons, which will help those vulnerable people to settle and integrate into their host society. It will make life easier for everyone by offsetting the social or cultural tensions that may arise. It is important that we do that. The lessons will cost £20,000 a year, but it is a long-term investment. That sum covers translation services and other expenses associated with providing services to those who cannot speak English. I am not sure whether those asylum seekers will have an Ulster Scots accent when they are taught English, and whether they will speak with my brogue and at my speed. Whatever the case may be, they will be able to use the English language as a means of communication, which will help them to integrate and express themselves. Those lessons will be available only to refugees, not to economic migrants. That will ensure that only those in real need benefit from lessons funded from the public purse, and that illegal economic migrants cannot take advantage of the generosity we are offering to those poor refugees. I am keen to hear from the Minister about what communication there has been with the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive.

We in Northern Ireland are doing our best to integrate Syrian refugees and asylum seekers and to offer support from the Northern Ireland Assembly and Government. That is good, but let us also recognise the contribution of individuals, church groups, charities and others who are doing their best to help. The Government can issue contracts, but it is the people who make it happen.

10.13 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this important debate.

As we have heard, the COMPASS contracts for asylum seekers have been far from problem-free. When the second five-year contract came to an end in 2010, interim contracts were issued while the coalition Government assessed whether and how to proceed with the COMPASS programme. In 2012, G4S, Serco and Clearsprings were awarded contracts to house 23,000 asylum seekers as part of Home Office plans to save £140 million on the service over seven years. Jomast, from Teesside, was awarded the two-year interim contract for the north-east in 2010, which has since been subcontracted to G4S to provide accommodation. It is interesting that the north-east was the only region of the UK where local authority consortia were cut out of the process. We do not know whether that was a dry run for privatisation, but that is certainly my impression. There is no doubt that there are huge profits to be made in the business, otherwise those landlords would not be in it.

Perhaps of greater significance, G4S had not previously been a housing provider and was completely unfamiliar with the rigours and requirements of delivering services in such a sensitive sector. It is hardly surprising, then, that it completely failed to source suitable accommodation in Yorkshire and Humberside. It was let off the hook only when the previous local authority providers' contracts were extended to fill the gap. How G4S was able to emerge as the preferred bidder for such contracts, let alone pass the required due diligence test, is beyond me. Will the Minister outline how the Home Office assessed providers' suitability and how performance and delivery were monitored and assessed? I would be interested to hear whether he still believes that those procedures are rigorous enough.

The Tees valley is absorbing high dispersal rates, but I am concerned about the high levels of uncertainty and opacity. We must make the companies involved more accountable to the taxpayer. Private companies that deliver public services, such as G4S and Jomast, are exempt from the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act. The Information Commissioner has no power to investigate private contractors. The commissioner cannot serve information notices requiring a contractor to supply information for an investigation, nor can he take enforcement action if a contractor fails to comply with contractual obligations. Bluntly, it is nigh on impossible to get our hands on the details of much of what private companies are up to with public money. That oversight must be addressed. There has long been a lack of transparency around public money handed out to private companies and other organisations. Billions more pounds of public money has been distributed away from the public sector and into the private sector in recent years, so the need for corrective action has become even more important.

[Alex Cunningham]

Without the transparency of the Freedom of Information Act, we will not be able to share what succeeds and bring new ways of working into the asylum system. Critically, unless providers are designated public authorities in accordance with the Act, we will not be able to discover what does not work. Many of those things come to public notice through the media and campaign groups, but we need more information.

I would be the first to acknowledge that freedom of information provisions can at times be cumbersome, but, unlike the Leader of the House, I have no doubt that they serve the greater good. It is a core tenet of our democracy that taxpayers must be able to access such information to examine what is going on. Surely something is going wrong if tens of millions of pounds of public money is being exploited by private developers, which make huge profits, when it could be better deployed through local authorities to improve the quality of service.

The Government decided to ditch local authority housing in parts of the country, and I think we should be able to find out exactly how much profit is being creamed off by landlords. If public and private providers are responsible for delivering equivalent services, should they not be subject to the same scrutiny? Private contractors providing such services should undoubtedly be held to the same standards of responsibility as state providers, and I hope nobody in this room would argue to the contrary.

In the public sector, the amount of available data has rightly expand hugely, but many private companies simply refuse to publish detailed information about how they operate. They choose instead to shelter themselves away from open scrutiny and operate behind a screen of secrecy. That is simply not compatible with the principles of public sector provision. The prolonging of that level of concealment will prevent future contracts, whether delivered by the Home Office, the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence or any other Department, from being properly scrutinised.

Justice First is an excellent organisation in my constituency that works with refugees and asylum seekers. It is run by Pete Widlinski and Kath Sainsbury, who daily see people living on the edge after the most serious traumatic experiences. They know what those people have to put up with, and they question what is being delivered. They tell stories of a house in multiple occupation in which women and children are living; social services had to take action to put things right.

Accountability must not stop where private sector involvement starts, and I hope the Minister will address that anomaly. If large profit-making organisations such as G4S want to operate public sector contracts, they should be subject to the Freedom of Information Act. That will give the public confidence that there is sufficient scrutiny and ensure that taxpayers can see how their money is used. We will know that vulnerable people who need support are not left barely existing while private organisations make millions of pounds of profit.

10.19 am

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank all hon. Members who have spoken so far in this enjoyable debate and the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Dougherty) for securing it.

Glasgow City Council was the first UK local authority to accept dispersal asylum seekers, and we are proud of that. Approximately 10% of the UK's asylum seekers have come to Glasgow. I have concerns about the contract that Serco was awarded in March 2012, which, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin), was then subcontracted to Orchard & Shipman to manage the properties.

Before I go into my concerns about accommodation, I want to put on the record a case that was presented to me by the Govan and Craigton Integration Network, which does an excellent job of assisting refugees and asylum seekers. I find it unacceptable that a gentleman was handed an Asda gift card instead of money on an Azure card and then placed in accommodation that was 2.1 miles away from the nearest Asda. He had no access to travel or to breakfast at a hotel. The error was then compounded by the individual being moved to another location where the nearest Asda was 4.4 miles away. I have real concerns about how that situation was handled and have written to the Home Office about it.

The statement of requirements of the COMPASS contract secured by Serco states that its responsibilities include providing safe, habitable, fit for purpose and correctly equipped accommodation to asylum seekers; ensuring that properties adhere to the standards established in the decent homes standard; providing adequate transport to and from initial and dispersal accommodation and medical appointments; abiding by contractual management regulations at all levels; and ensuring that there is a complaints procedure for those living in dispersed accommodation and that organisations report on their performance against the specified standards. I contend that Serco's providers continue to fail to meet those contractual standards.

In another case brought to my attention by the Govan and Craigton Integration Network, an asylum seeker was sharing a room with eight other asylum seekers with no financial support. That is a clear breach of point C.1.3.7 in the COMPASS statement of requirements, which states:

"Sleeping quarters must always be appropriately sized for the number of occupants and the occupancy of a room shall not exceed that specified in the appropriate space standard."

The space standard set out by an initiative of the European National Red Cross Societies states:

"Single adult residents should, as a rule, be housed in rooms with a maximum of four beds, and have at least have six square metres of space in the bedroom."

That is clearly not being adhered to in the case I describe.

Inspections have confirmed that many properties remain below the required contractual standard, for reasons ranging from minor to major defects. Weaknesses in the frequency and quality of inspections have resulted in vulnerable asylum seekers being housed in filthy conditions, with witnesses citing bedbugs and sores from living in such accommodation. In another constituency case, a single man was allocated a one-bedroom flat alone. On entering the flat for the first time, he discovered blood splattered on the bedroom wall, which had clearly not been cleaned since the previous occupant left. He reported it to Orchard & Shipman along with the non-locking front door, mould in the kitchen, stains everywhere, the intercom system hanging from the wall with exposed wires, and non-opening windows. The response was

that he had signed to accept the flat, even though he had not actually seen it, so Orchard & Shipman was not responsible for the flat's condition. I find that quite disgraceful, and I hope the Minister will respond to it.

In another case, a single mum of two children, aged 18 months and seven months, was housed in a two-bedroom flat with another family she did not know. Unrest towards the young mum from the other family has resulted in them not allowing her to access the kitchen or cooking facilities until late at night, preventing her from being able to feed her young children during the day. She suffers from post-natal depression, which is being aggravated by the situation she finds herself in.

Another of my concerns relates to communication, which the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) touched on. Communications are not routinely translated for asylum seekers, resulting in their not understanding what has been asked of them.

It is clear that my examples amount to serious contractual breaches. I support the review that the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth called for, and I ask the Minister to investigate the matters I have raised today. What steps will he take to ensure that service providers are keeping to Home Office contracts?

10.25 am

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this incredibly important debate. My constituency has the highest concentration of asylum seekers anywhere in the United Kingdom. In December 2015, we had 1,042 asylum seekers, which is way in excess of the cluster limit. The Minister may say that the number has been reduced by some small amount, but the figures are clear. In some communities, there is an asylum seeker for every 18 residents, and I hope the Minister will take that fact on board.

I am terrifically proud of Middlesbrough's long history of compassion and support. We have Justice First, the Churches—Methodist Action, the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church—and other faith groups, charities and individuals. A fantastic network of love and compassion underpins all that work, and I am delighted to celebrate it.

It was the red doors issue that brought this matter into focus. While I do not criticise Andrew Norfolk of *The Times* for his excellent piece of work that brought the issue into the light, I do not agree that the local contractor, Jomast, deliberately set out to mark the properties occupied by those seeking sanctuary, but it was clearly known to the contractor. They were its properties and it painted the doors red, so for it to plead ignorance of the issue is indicative of the arrogance that characterises how it goes about its business. However, it was not deliberate so let us paint the doors in other colours and move on.

G4S is the main contractor in my region. It has no record of running housing contracts and yet it still got the contract. The local subcontractor, Stuart Monk of Jomast, then had them over a barrel. He held out for the best deal that he could possibly extract, because he had the properties and G4S did not, and he has made a mint. G4S says it does not make any money out of the contract. Well, diddums. If it does not like it, let us bring the contract to an end and get G4S out of the

picture as quickly as possible. It has demonstrated that it should be nowhere near Government public service business. Just look at what it did in our prisons. We only have to cast our minds back to the dreadful fraud it perpetrated on the taxpayer over the prisoner tagging contract. It is not a fit and proper company and the sooner it is out of our national life, the better.

The arrogance and contempt that characterises so much of G4S's behaviour was never more evident than when John Whitwam, a managing director, recently appeared before the Home Affairs Committee. He quite deliberately tried to leave the Committee with the impression that the local authority was totally engaged throughout the process, but that is simply not true. Indeed, the problem is that local authorities have no standing in the business of housing asylum seekers and have been cut out of the loop. Following Mr Whitwam's suggestion that local authorities are somehow involved in the approval and inspection of properties, I trust that the Minister will speak to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee because I think that Parliament was grossly misled and I hope that action follows.

What on earth are we doing as a country? Why do the Government think that the right thing to do in response to a humanitarian crisis is to create a structure that is all about making money—profits created by handing over taxpayers' money to private companies? There is something wrong here. Of course, we want to carry on providing succour and support for our sisters and brothers, but the Government simply abuse our good nature. That support and sanctuary should come with a commitment to support the local services that have to respond. My town has been hammered by the lunacy of austerity. My local authority has suffered cut after cut, so that I am now questioning whether it can even begin to discharge the barest of statutory functions.

In addition, what do we learn today on the back of the abolition of the revenue support grant, which will cripple communities up and down the country? In *The Guardian* this morning it is laid bare: again, the Tory Government punish Labour councils and give support to their Tory boroughs. The Government's behaviour is partial, inequitable, grossly discriminatory and ill-becoming a party that purports to govern for the entire country. It is beneath the shires and City bankers to trouble themselves with such matters—leave it to the northerners, the Scots and the Welsh—because those in their cosy world do not want to be troubled.

It will escape no one's attention that in the Prime Minister's constituency we will not find a single person seeking sanctuary, even though areas such as his receive the favourable local government finance settlement transitional relief, while areas that take asylum seekers get nothing at all. The unfairness is stark. Perhaps the Prime Minister's mother should write him a letter. Understandably, the Tories will say, "Look to the regions, look to the Labour heartlands. They won't protest, they won't complain, so we can get away with it." Therein lies the dilemma.

We are proud of our compassion and of the welcome given to strangers in our communities—many of us and the people we represent have been strangers too. We try to recognise our good fortune and to be generous to those who have not been so fortunate. Yes, we will not walk by on the other side of the road and we will try to treat people as we would like to be treated ourselves, but

[*Andy McDonald*]

we look to the Government to behave in a patriotic, fair and balanced way. That means that we respond generously as a nation and we do not leave it only to those parts of our country that are already facing immensely difficult times.

We look proudly at our history as a nation. We are rightly marking the 71st anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. We rightly remember the Kindertransport of the 1930s as a positive response to the crisis faced by thousands of children throughout Europe. It therefore pains me to hear the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland describing the modern-day Kindertransportees as a “bunch of migrants”. I want better from our country’s Prime Minister and so do millions of our fellow citizens. I am afraid that that laid bare the true thinking of this cruel and pernicious Government.

If every town and city in the United Kingdom welcomed 5% of the distressed, vulnerable and persecuted people that my wonderful town of Middlesbrough does, no one would even notice that they were here. What happens instead? The whole exercise has been turned into a profit-making, value-extracting one for the likes of Stuart Monk and his company Jomast to make millions of pounds of profit from.

The Minister is a decent man and I look forward to further discussions with him about how things might be progressed. However, I met with him in November 2014 and many of the issues that are being raised now were raised with him then. I regret to note that absolutely no progress has been made since. I hope that he takes on board the comments of hon. Members from throughout the United Kingdom today and accedes to the request for a formal review of a rotten contract. Let us start behaving properly.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before I call Stuart McDonald, I advise the Minister that the proposer of the motion does not require the two minutes or so at the end of the debate.

10.33 am

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer.

I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this timely debate and on an excellent speech. Indeed, I am in the happy position of having agreed with pretty much everything that everyone has said so far—though I might yet disagree with myself.

The red doors and red wristbands have rightly grabbed a lot of headlines. As I said in the Chamber at the time of the urgent question on red doors asked by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), such issues have to be looked at and dealt with urgently, but the real concern is that they are only the tip of the iceberg. What hon. Members have set out in the Chamber today about asylum accommodation confirms that to be the case. Members have spoken about the poor quality of accommodation, which is overcrowded and unsafe, inappropriate sharing, poor placement facilities, short notice evictions, issues of privacy and unannounced visits to the property, poor treatment by staff and many other problems.

Red doors and red wristbands were perhaps crass and eye-wateringly negligent rather than anything else, but the growing number and widespread nature of the complaints we are hearing suggest that we need to look much more closely at the operation of the contracts. There is also now a good spread of research that backs up the view of all hon. Members that there are fundamental problems with the operation of the existing contracts. It is worth looking briefly at the detailed evidence and research available.

Back in 2013 the Home Affairs Committee reported:

“The reports that we have received on the quality of the accommodation are extremely worrying...Problems cited in evidence include pest infestations, lack of heating or hot water, windows and doors that could not be locked, lack of basic amenities including a cooker, a shower, a washing machine and a sink and a general lack of cleanliness. Furthermore, many of those who submitted evidence cited difficulties in contacting housing providers and the slow resolution of problems.”

All that sounds incredibly familiar.

In 2014 a National Audit Office report criticised G4S and Serco for “poor performance” and “still failing to meet some of their KPIs”.

The report found that the companies had taken on rented

“housing stock without inspecting it, and subsequently found that many...did not meet the contractual quality standards.”

The Public Accounts Committee later published a report concluding:

“The standard of the accommodation provided has often been unacceptably poor for a very fragile group of individuals and families.”

In 2014 the Scottish Refugee Council also undertook research into the extent and impact of accommodation issues in Scotland. In short, it pointed to poor standards, poor treatment by staff, poor information on rights and entitlements, and poor oversight by the Home Office of whether contractors are meeting obligations.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the practices of some of the companies, Orchard & Shipman in particular, which turned up one night with no notice at 9.30 pm to evict one of my constituents? Only by good luck was he able to contact my office and prevent his eviction. Does my hon. Friend agree that such practices also need to be reviewed?

Stuart C. McDonald: I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend. That case fits in exactly with the narrative that we have heard from so many hon. Members today.

A final piece of evidence comes from an October 2015 investigation by Jonathan Darling at the University of Manchester, which highlighted similar problems, including increased distance between asylum seekers and providers, with buck-passing between contractors and subcontractors; breakdowns in communication between key partners; and considerable variations in dispersal accommodation quality, support and opportunities for community integration. In any view, all that is a considerable evidence base and a considerable cause for concern.

As hon. Members have noted, the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), is always quick off the mark, so we have already heard evidence from G4S and its Middlesbrough subcontractors about the red doors incident,

and yesterday we heard from the contractors responsible for the wristbands in Cardiff. There was extraordinary consistency between the two evidence sessions. Everyone in essence said, “Our performance under the contract is fine,” and, “We meet our key performance indicators”—indeed, staff at one contractor were actually paid bonuses for meeting those KPIs. “We are inspected,” they said, and Clearel even said that Home Office inspectors were well aware of the wristband scheme and had raised no complaints. Clearel also said, “We don’t get many complaints.” In fact, at one point the Clearel manager seemed to be saying that there had been about 19 complaints from 6,500 householders over a certain period of time, if I noted his evidence correctly.

I am not usually a cynical person, but what all that says to me is that we should also be concerned about the key performance indicators, the complaints system and the inspection system, because those processes are not flagging up red doors or wristbands and, too often, not flagging up the myriad other complaints that we have heard about today. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth made that point well.

Jo Stevens: On the KPIs, I understand from the evidence to the Home Affairs Committee yesterday that nine or 10 things are looked at monthly by the contract management board. An executive oversight board provides further scrutiny. Does my hon. Friend agree, however, that that system does not seem to be working at all, because nothing is picking up the problems that we have all been talking about this morning?

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point and I agree wholeheartedly. Having only 17 Home Office inspectors for some 36,000 placements seems wholly inadequate. Furthermore, the lack of complaints is not surprising given the vulnerable nature of many of the people who use the services, as hon. Members have said, and given the evidence that induction packs are often insufficient, if they are even given out at all. It is little surprise that it is not the KPIs, inspections or complaints that are throwing the problems up—it is campaign groups, non-governmental organisations and diligent investigative journalists.

The question is, what more would we discover if we had a thorough inquiry into how the contracts are working? At the moment we can only speculate, but we can all agree that there are enough danger signs for us to say that we definitely need such an inquiry. I have asked for the Home Affairs Committee to undertake that task, although I agree that other possibilities exist.

In fairness to the Immigration Minister, he did not make the decision to switch to the COMPASS contract. That decision was made in 2009, with the then target contracts phased out in time for COMPASS kicking off in 2012. As the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) pointed out, the ambition was to save £140 million on services over seven years by replacing 22 separate contracts with six larger COMPASS contracts.

Although the Minister was not responsible for instigating the contracts, he will soon have to decide whether to extend them and I hope that he will not do so without a thorough and wide-ranging review of contractor performance. I also hope that the Home Office will wait for such a review before pressing ahead with the welcome plans to broaden the number of local authorities involved in dispersal.

We on the Opposition Benches doubt whether such services can ever be amenable to contracting when the only possibility to maximise returns is cutting corners and costs and the people accessing services have no choice in who provides their housing. In other words, they have to like it or lump it, and many asylum seekers will lump it silently. Serious consideration should be given to changing fundamentally how we provide housing for asylum seekers, including a possible return to provision by local authorities. We also have to consider whether the savings envisaged by the COMPASS contracts have been delivered.

Andy McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is making an important contribution. On local authorities stepping back into the breach, does he share my concern that while that is desirable, it would be a disaster if money did not follow that move? If that path is pursued, my fear is that Government will simply expect local authorities to take that on without that qualification.

Stuart C. McDonald: Absolutely. There is a huge question mark over whether sufficient resources have been provided to fund the contracts and that remains as a question whether services are returned to local authorities or not.

We must consider whether the savings envisaged in the COMPASS contracts have been delivered by so-called efficiencies or simply by lowering accommodation standards. I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth for ensuring that the House considers asylum support contracts, which will require even more detailed and thorough consideration in the months ahead.

10.41 am

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing the debate and for the powerful speech he made at the beginning of it. I pay tribute to all this morning’s speakers not only for their contributions, all of which were powerful and excellent, but for the good work they have done in their constituencies to try to alleviate the problems and shine a torch on where things have gone wrong.

This is clearly a timely debate. As Members have touched on, the provision of accommodation services has a sorry history. The contracts were awarded in 2012, and as has been mentioned, the National Audit Office looked at the transition when it produced its report in January 2014. Already at that stage it flagged up the fact that the transition to the new contracts had been poor, that there was a lack of inspection by the incoming contractors of the accommodation that they would provide, and that the Home Office was failing to apply its key performance indicators.

That NAO report was followed pretty swiftly by the Public Accounts Committee’s report in April 2014. I remind hon. Members of the early warning that report gave:

“The transition to six new regional contracts to provide accommodation for destitute asylum seekers, and their operation during the first year, did not go well. Only one of the three contractors had past experience of managing asylum accommodation and overall performance has been patchy: there were delays at the outset and the Department and contractors have all incurred additional costs. The standard of the accommodation provided was often unacceptably poor and the providers failed to improve quality in a timely manner.”

The Scottish Refugee Council also carried out work in 2014.

[Keir Starmer]

Since then, and particularly in recent months, there has been example after example of the continuing problems. The issue of the red doors in Middlesbrough has been highlighted not only in the press but by my hon. Friends the Members for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), who have spoken powerfully about it. When it was discussed on the Floor of the House, the Minister rightly accepted that the red doors were inappropriate and wrong, and that what happened should not have happened. He instigated a review, and it would be useful to have an update on that.

In the debate on the Floor of the House, I asked whether the case of the red doors was an isolated example or whether there would be others. Within a few weeks we had the example of the wristbands in Cardiff. That is a different part of the country and a different issue, but again, as soon as the torch was shone on that policy, it was declared by all to be inappropriate, wrong and something that should not have happened. In this debate we have heard powerful examples of other contracted provision that is inappropriate and wrong and that should not have happened. That seems to be the pattern: the flushing out of examples of the inappropriate, wrong use of contracts and then, after the event, a review. Can the Minister give us any assurance that those are the last examples of their type, or whether there are others in the pipeline? The concern when the red doors were first identified was that that was not an isolated example, which gives strength to the call for a proper review.

I suspect that there are further examples to come, and it may be that in the course of the Minister's inquiry he has already uncovered examples that will need to be dealt with. There is now a short period until most of the contracts come up for renewal, so now is the time for a review to be carried out so that whatever mistakes were made in the past can be avoided in the future. I think some contracts will expire in 2017, with a possible two-year extension clause, so time is of the essence.

Last Thursday and Friday, I visited Wolverhampton, Dudley and Oldham. I want to touch on what I found in Oldham, where Serco runs the contract. More than 600 asylum seekers are being accommodated in a town that struggles economically and with the provision of public services. The more I dug down into why so many asylum seekers were being housed in Oldham, the more it became apparent that it was not because someone had assessed the provision of services and decided that Oldham was an appropriate place for asylum seekers, where their needs could be dealt with better than in other places. Nor was it because the local community thought that was the right way to approach accommodating asylum seekers.

I spent the whole day in Oldham, and in the end I came away with the conclusion that the only reason why more than 600 asylum seekers were there was that the unit price per head of accommodating them was lower there than anywhere else. That was the sole driver, without regard to the destitute, fleeing individuals who are in great need, as hon. Members have pointed out, or to the needs of the community. It was solely by reference to the unit price. That needs to be part of a much wider ranging review.

I will put on the table one further concern that has not been addressed, by mentioning the position of a young Syrian woman I met in Oldham. She was 26 years old. She was grateful that the Home Office had processed her claim within three months and given her refugee status, and I applaud that example of a woman in need being recognised and dealt with efficiently by the Home Office. As a result, she came off the support provided to her as an asylum seeker and lost her accommodation—that is a natural consequence of the support regime, and I accept that. She applied for accommodation in her new capacity as a recognised refugee and was told that she was not in priority need and that she would not be so unless and until she slept on the streets of Oldham. She relayed that to me face to face. She is a 26-year-old architect from Syria and the prospect of having to spend some time on the street in order to have priority support filled her with horror. As it happened—and as happens in many other areas—people providing voluntary support for asylum seekers stepped in. There may have been a glitch in the system or a misunderstanding of the rules, but I ask the Minister to look into not only that example but others in which individuals have been told they must spend a period without accommodation before they can move from one regime to the next.

I lend my support to the call for a review. There is now a window of opportunity. I suspect we shall hear further examples of the provision of wrong or inappropriate support, and that the Minister and others will say that it should not have happened. That means, I think, that it is time for a review of the contracts, and of support for asylum seekers in the round.

10.50 am

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing the debate, and on his approach to it. I want to give credit to the charities and organisations that he referred to, which provide support to refugees and asylum seekers in his constituency and across the country.

This country has a proud history of many years of offering sanctuary to those genuinely fleeing persecution. We can look at our record with pride. That was underlined in the speech of the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), who also described the welcome that asylum seekers and refugees fleeing conflict receive in his area. It is important to recognise that clear message, and the Government remain committed to providing an asylum system that protects and respects the fundamental rights of individuals who arrive on our shores seeking refuge from persecution. I have made it clear in previous speeches in the House that I expect those who arrive and receive support to be treated with dignity and respect. I have also underlined the fact that actions that stigmatise, isolate or publicly identify asylum seekers should not be taken. Obviously, several cases that have been mentioned this morning highlight such a picture. Such actions are completely inappropriate, and I welcome what has been done to remedy the situation.

I will come on to the inspection regime and reflect on some of the results of the audit of properties in Middlesbrough. During this financial year, about 50% of properties in Middlesbrough have been visited as part of the most recent audit, in addition to ongoing work.

The focus of the team of inspectors is on inspecting about one third of all the properties in the overall portfolio.

The Government provide support through the COMPASS contracts with three contractors—Serco, G4S and Clearsprings Ready Homes. Those contracts provide asylum seekers who claim to be destitute with full-board accommodation in so-called initial accommodation while their means are assessed and, following that, in dispersed accommodation in dispersal areas throughout the country. Since 2012, following a rigorous governance and approval process, UK Visas and Immigration has delivered asylum support services via the COMPASS contracts with the three external providers: Serco in the north-west, Scotland and Northern Ireland; G4S in north-east Yorkshire, Humber and the midlands; and Clearsprings Ready Homes, in London and the south and Wales. The COMPASS suppliers are contractually required to provide safe, habitable, fit for purpose accommodation to comply with the Housing Act 2004 and the decent homes standard. The Home Office has governance and approval processes for all services that we procure externally, including consultation with other Departments as appropriate. All Home Office service contracts include performance standards, which are defined in the contract and managed using key performance indicators.

I want to talk about the issue raised in the National Audit Office report, and some of the assessments that have been made since. As the report highlighted and as hon. Members have said in their speeches, it was clear that the transfer to the COMPASS contracts in the initial period was difficult and bumpy. There were issues, and that was reflected in the fact that the service credits that we impose where key performance indicators are not met stood at £5.6 million in 2012-13 under the COMPASS contracts.

Since the NAO report we have worked closely with COMPASS suppliers to improve standards, using the NAO's recommendations. That has included conducting joint accommodation inspections and training to ensure consistency in monitoring activities. It has also involved suppliers improving the policies and processes that they use to deliver their maintenance service, investing in existing stock, and replacing properties that did not meet quality standards. In the early years quality standards were not good enough. The situation has improved since then, and in the financial year 2014-15 the service credits that were levied had fallen to £158,000.

Jo Stevens: Is there anything in that contract—because, of course, we cannot see it—that provides for the Government to terminate it if there is persistent failure against the KPIs?

James Brokenshire: The contracts, with commercial details redacted, are available through the gov.uk website.

Obviously I can point the hon. Lady to the relevant details. However, I want to underline the change in the KPI position and the fact that sums levied under service credits have markedly reduced. That is not to say that I am satisfied with the issues that hon. Members from across the House have presented to me today, particularly about the complaints process and the complaints that are being raised.

One issue that has come from the Middlesbrough audit, which I hope to publish later today, relates to inspection. I mentioned that a third of properties were being inspected, and I believe the focus is primarily on the accommodation itself—whether the decent homes standard is being met and what steps are being taken to remedy defects that are identified. The audit has not indicated complaints coming through about the red doors issue, for example, or indeed wristbands. Therefore, as one of the actions coming out of the audit, I have asked my officials to review the issue of complaints and how they are escalated, as well as the questions that inspectors ask the people who use the accommodation, to see that any concerns related to the performance indicator on complaints can more readily come to our attention.

Stephen Doughty: Given the points that have been made today, is the Minister satisfied with what is happening in relation to the specific issues affecting women and children? Is there is the right staffing balance to deal with them, and is there the right level of training, particularly for dealing with people who may have been trafficked or subjected to sexual violence? Will he commit to looking specifically at that issue?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman knows that I am happy about the steps that we have taken with the national referral mechanism, and he knows the importance that we attach to the issues of enslavement and trafficking. The information received from Europol is that about 90% of those who arrive on our shores have been trafficked in some way to get to their destination.

I want to underline the message that the COMPASS contracts are delivering savings. We see them as being on track to deliver about £137 million of savings. Two of the contractors have said publicly to the Public Accounts Committee that they are making losses in this context, so we believe we are getting value for money. We are getting improvements in the quality of the accommodation; it is the issue of complaints that concerns me. Some of the refugee charities have highlighted issues, which I will reflect on in light of the audit and inspection. I will see how things can be better targeted, how the contracts can continue to deliver and, equally, how the voice of the recipients can be better reflected. That will enable us to improve the way we pick up on issues such as those that have been identified, which have rightly caused concern.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Digital Democracy Commission

11 am

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the implementation of the recommendations of the Digital Democracy Commission.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. Just over a year ago, the Speaker's Digital Democracy Commission published its report. The commission had been established by Mr Speaker in January 2014 because he was concerned that the world outside Parliament was leaving Parliament behind, and that outside of this place, digital tools were being used to enhance engagement and interact with the public, but we were still living in a different century.

Mr Speaker set up the commission, bringing together a group of outside experts and two MPs: I was one, and the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) was the other. The eight commissioners pledged that the publication of the report would not be the end of our engagement, which is one reason I am here today. I pay tribute to my fellow commissioners for their continuing support and scrutiny, to officers of this House and for challenging and ensuring that the recommendations are carried through. They are doing too much to highlight in the time I have for this short debate, but I was impressed to work with a number of them on Monday, when we had updates from the House of Commons authorities.

The Digital Democracy Commission labelled its report "Open Up" because it was about opening up not only Parliament but democracy as a participatory exercise, rather than just using technology to carry on doing what we already do. In January last year, we published our report—online, of course—and made five headline recommendations that I will remind the House of, though I know that the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons was present at the last debate as well.

We recommended that, by 2020, the House should ensure first that everyone can understand what it does and secondly that it should be fully interactive and digital; we felt that those two things were connected. The third recommendation was that the newly elected House of Commons in 2015—today's House—should immediately create a new forum for public participation in the debating function of the House of Commons. Fourthly, secure online voting should be an option for all voters by 2020. Finally, by 2016, all published information and broadcast footage should be freely available in formats suitable for reuse and *Hansard* should be available as open data by the end of 2015. At the same time, we adopted a declaration on parliamentary openness, which commits us to making parliamentary information more transparent and providing easier access to the public—the very reason the commission itself was established.

I am pleased to tell Members that the new forum for public participation, which has been dubbed by many a "cyber Chamber", has made great progress in the short time since it was created. The idea was that a third Chamber would be established in Parliament, allowing the public to debate an issue ahead of MPs. We all know from our constituency work how often there are hidden experts out there who have a lot to contribute, if only we know where they are. Sometimes they find us, and this forum is a way to enhance that participation.

The forum has been open since June last year and has so far focused on debates in Westminster Hall. The idea is that, ahead of a debate, the Member who leads it is asked to engage in an online debate with interested members of the public. Up to 1,000 people have participated in a single debate via that route. I pay strong tribute to the one member of staff in the House of Commons who has single-handedly turned that idea into the reality it is today. On Monday, she reported to the commissioners on progress, and we were keen as a group to see more support for embedding the idea of a cyber Chamber as business as usual in the House.

On Monday, we also received updates on the Data.Parliament open data project, on the ease with which anyone can now clip a video from a debate and on how our publications, web content and social media are being developed to make engagement easier and more meaningful—for example, through the use of plain English.

The Petitions Committee deserves a special mention for its swift embrace of the commission's principles from the onset. Of course, that Committee was only established in this Parliament. It enables hundreds of thousands of individuals to better understand how they can influence policy making, and sets an example for how other parts of the House can embrace engagement better.

When we published our report, we very much saw it as a road map to improve the way that MPs engage with the public and to allow the public to better engage with Parliament. As a commission, we were mindful that we were reaching out to under-represented groups. My fellow commissioner, Helen Milner, who runs the Tinder Foundation, had particular expertise in that area. We touched on how to ensure that we do not leave behind those who are digitally excluded—it is not our intention to do so—but rather, to use digital tools to reach more people where they are willing.

Just as with Government services that are going online, we need to be mindful of those who are unable to use digital options. We see digital as enhancing and improving what we do, rather than replacing human interaction. We want to expand the human interaction we have as MPs week in, week out on doorsteps to digital methods and to the wider House.

Today, my comments will be a little more parochial, focusing on the changes that still need to take place in Parliament and that are within the hands of Members of this House.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady agree that the electronic voting systems in place in Scotland and Wales free up a significant amount of time for Members there to focus on more important matters, rather than spending 20 minutes going through the Lobby for each vote?

Meg Hillier: The hon. Lady must be a mind reader as well as an MP, because I was just about to move on to the issue of electronic voting using MPs' smart identity cards. We had some serious discussion about that on the commission. I will touch on the history of the idea, which might inform the hon. Lady's thinking.

The commission's headline recommendations 29 and 30—we had many more—were as follows. Recommendation 29 said:

"During the next session of Parliament"—

this Session of Parliament—

“the House of Commons should move to record votes using MPs’ smart identity cards but retain the tradition of walking through division lobbies.”

Recommendation 30 said:

“The House of Commons should also pilot an electronic version of the practice of ‘nodding through’ MPs who are physically unable to go through the division lobbies, which would enable MPs who are unwell, or have childcare responsibilities, or a disability, to vote away from the chamber.”

This is not the first time that electronic voting has been discussed here; we may be slow, but we sometimes come back to things. In 1998, the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons issued a consultation paper to Members of the House at the time on voting methods. Just over half of MPs—53%—preferred the current system, with 70% finding it acceptable, although there were suggestions that voting could be made quicker by the use of smart cards, fingerprint readers or even infrared handsets.

The reason that the commission did not push hard for remote voting in the end was a strong concern from Members about losing the opportunity to speak informally with Ministers in the Lobby and to have contact with other Members; the Lobby is dubbed the Lobby for a reason.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am interested to hear the points that the hon. Lady is making. While it is important for people to be physically present in the Chamber or in Parliament to vote, does she agree that a key part of having an electronic method of recording votes is that people could quickly find out how their MP voted? We would then not have situations such as the one we had yesterday, when an hon. Member asked the Deputy Speaker in a point of order how three members of the Cabinet had voted. Of course, the Deputy Speaker could give no answer.

Meg Hillier: Absolutely. The problems with the current system will be evident for many people. I have talked closely with the Clerks of the House about how they record votes. For those who are not initiated, once Members have been through the Lobby, we are crossed off a list with a black marker pen. That piece of paper is then taken by parliamentary staff and reconciled. It not only takes us about 15 minutes in total to walk through the Lobby; it is a considerable length of time—some hours—before the vote is published digitally.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Lady on both her work on this issue and on securing this important debate. I very much welcome the commission’s findings, in particular those on electronic voting. My office worked out that in the previous Parliament, we spent 245 hours queuing up in order to cast 1,153 votes. Does she agree that having an electronic way of voting would also mean that we could record abstentions? Abstentions sometimes matter. They do not just mean that MPs were not here; they mean that neither of the two choices in front of them were any good.

Meg Hillier: The hon. Lady raises an important point. These are all issues that we need to debate and discuss if we are going to make any progress. I hope that, at the end of this debate, we will get some assurance from the Deputy Leader of the House that the matter will be taken seriously and that further work will be done.

As I said, a vote takes about 15 minutes in total—the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion has also done her maths. In the previous Session of Parliament, there were 544 Divisions in the Commons. Even if three minutes had been saved on each one—a modest improvement on our current practice—it would have meant a time saving of up to 27 hours for each MP. I hope we would have used that time productively; others may want to comment on that. That just goes to show that an awful lot of time is spent on something that could be done more quickly. We have also recently had experiments with iPads. They certainly speed up digital recording, as the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) indicated, but there are still issues with human error and accuracy.

The record of votes is important. In the modern age, it is ludicrous that people have to wait several hours to find out how their Member of Parliament voted on an issue. As the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) said, other things are not recorded. People get confused about what was an abstention and ask, “Was someone not there?” We should be able to record if someone is absent, for instance, because they are on maternity leave, or absent because they are sick or because they chose to abstain. That is common sense, one would think.

Clearly, any new approach will have problems, so it is worth teasing out what some of those are in the hope that they will be openly discussed and resolved. MPs could lose their smartcards, if that system is the one implemented, which may mean that fingerprints could be a preferred method. MPs could pass their cards to the party Whip or other MPs who could impersonate them or vote in their place, so we would need a system for verification. Verification currently allows for those who are on the premises but unable to vote in person to be nodded through by the Whips. I voted that way a number of times after my youngest daughter was born. The Whips nodded me through, but only after an Opposition Whip was satisfied that I was present, so we have a very crude way of verifying now. I think that could have been done differently and, certainly, we could look to improve it.

The cost of upgrading the system is not to be sniffed at. On Monday, the commission had reports from Officers of the House that it could cost more than £500,000 over the next three or four years, if decisions were made quickly. However, the long-term benefit could justify the one-off cost. Restoration and renewal of this Parliament provides a big opportunity to modernise this core activity of MPs.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate and apologise that I cannot stay until the very end. On time-saving, time represents cost—it is not just about time for MPs, but for staff and security, especially when Divisions go on late into the evening. The costs involved in a one-off cost would surely be offset by the time saved.

Meg Hillier: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about time-saving, because clearly, some votes are consequential on other votes, so there is always going to be a time when we may have to wait for the result of a vote before we can vote again. However, sometimes, as with deferred Divisions, a number of votes could be carried out simultaneously, whereas currently we have to queue for separate 15-minute time periods to go through the Lobby.

[Meg Hillier]

It is worth stressing, as the hon. Member for Torbay said and as we heard from many Members—this is why we did not go for distant, remote electronic voting as a recommendation—that the ability to work closely and talk to Members on a daily basis is a very big part of the work of this House. It is important that that spirit is seriously considered in any change. However, I am directly asking the Deputy Leader of the House to take this matter very seriously and to ensure that the Government do not knock it into the long grass. It is a matter for the House. She is our champion, along with the Leader of the House, to Government. I hope she takes this seriously, because we need a green light to investigate change.

From talking to officials in the House, I know that, at the moment, there is a lot of enthusiasm for embracing the commission's recommendations. A number can take place without interference—dare I say it?—from hon. Members. However, this is one where we really need to be engaged and I hope that today, the Deputy Leader of the House will set out a clear timetable on the measure and commit to serious consideration of its potential benefits and to reporting back to the House on that progress.

We can look at other examples in other Parliaments. Egypt, only two weeks ago, introduced an electronic voting system. It has had some problems with impersonation, so that is a lesson to be learnt. In Romania, politicians have 10 seconds to vote once they have initiated the smartcard voting system. In the United States, electronic voting was introduced to Congress in 1973. Members there vote by inserting their voting card into an electronic dock and by pressing the appropriate button. In South Korea, they vote electronically and can change their vote as they go, so there are very important issues that we might want to discuss about the change of culture that this would bring. Of course, as hon. Members have highlighted, in the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the European Parliament, voting is done electronically. It is not a new phenomenon, and we need to ensure that it is properly embraced.

In my lifetime, Parliament has evolved very slightly to reflect technological change. Voice recording was introduced in 1978, when I was a schoolgirl. In 1989, the Chamber was first televised, and only last year, a low-level camera was installed—I was a student in 1989, and I hope that, before I am a grandmother, we might have considered electronic voting, bringing Parliament into the 21st century.

Caroline Lucas: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady again. In the European Parliament model, people can see instantly how the vote has gone. Does she agree that, if we had the technology to see how a vote has gone, it would enable us to hold over votes to a particular time in the day—or at least a couple of times in the day—which would, again, mean that we are not running backwards and forwards from one part of the Estate to the other?

Meg Hillier: The hon. Lady brings valuable experience from her time in the European Parliament. All these things need to be thrown into the mix. We need to have a discussion about our culture here—it is an important part of this—but there are ways of resolving the issues without sticking rigidly to the current system. A change would save time and money, and critically, just be clearer to the public, so that they can see what is happening.

Overall, in terms of engagement, many people are keen to get involved in Parliament and politics but find them very opaque. This would be one step to improving that. Evidence from a survey carried out by Cambridge University showed that 46% of people say that they would like to get involved in politics and Parliament if they could, but less than 10% are currently engaged with Parliament. As we know, there is often a large gap between those who say that they will get involved and those who actually do, but even if half those who wanted to were able to, it would be a significant increase in the number of people engaging with what we do. That is not to decry what hon. Members do; week in, week out, we engage with and talk to people on the doorstep, but we reach relatively few. With better digital engagement overall—so, just moving away from the issue of electronic voting—we can enhance the face-to-face contact that we have. There are other elements of the DDC that we need to make sure we set in train and with which we can bring about change.

I think we are on the cusp of a revolution. The Digital Democracy Commission's report lays out a pathway. We hoped on that commission that the new Parliament elected in 2015 would see the opening up of Parliament as nothing revolutionary, but as business as usual in the modern world. In preparing for this debate, I have been heartened by the number of hon. Members who were keen to register their interest, even if they were not able to be here for a short half-hour debate today. I had more than 30 Members who were keen to speak had this been a longer debate, and we may seek a further opportunity to raise the matter, perhaps when we hear from the Deputy Leader of the House about her timetable.

If we are to be more accountable and accessible to the people whom our Parliament serves and who elect us, we must not let this opportunity pass. This could be the Parliament when we finally get into the century we are in. As Members of Parliament, we need to be bold and embrace this change to engage more constructively with the public. We need to open up Parliament, listen to our constituents better and not simply broadcast what we do, which I am afraid to say, is a tendency of this institution.

Mr Speaker had the vision and the commission has done its work. We are now a year on. Officers of the House have made huge progress and I pay testament to them, as do other commissioners, on opening up data, making House publications more accessible, making it easier to use broadcast clips, improving our web and social media interaction and on developing a cyber Chamber. It is now for Members to show that we are firmly in favour of modernising our working practices. We who are privileged to be elected to this House must be the facilitators of this change. We need to lead by example.

11.17 am

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Stringer, and to contribute to the debate secured by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). She is a member of the Speaker's Commission and has spoken with passion about its work and her views. I thank her for the update on the progress made, including that reported at a meeting of the commission earlier this week.

The commission outlined five key targets, but as the hon. Lady has already stated those, I will not repeat them. There are further recommendations in the report, many of which are for the House to consider and debate. To some extent, a large part of that should be done, in my view, via the Procedure Committee. I will try to highlight key areas where, in particular, the Government can contribute to that debate.

Promoting public awareness of the role of Parliament and of Members of Parliament, and increasing public participation and engagement, are both worthy aims. Much has been achieved, particularly in recent years, as a result of the efforts of many hon. Members and our dedicated House staff—the service and the Clerks—and undoubtedly, that engagement will continue to increase.

The attempts to engage the public in different formats are very valid, as there are several recognised ways of learning and engagement, and people will have a natural tendency towards one or two. Traditionally, people have always had the written word, in the form of *Hansard*, legislation and business papers, accompanied by the occasional visit to Parliament to see how it works in practice, elements of which are open to everyone in this country. Aural transmission through radio and the screening of proceedings has been a step change. Further elements such as videos explaining Select Committee reports and the use of social media have continued to reach different audiences and interact with people in different ways. They are to be welcomed.

I will try to address the points raised by the hon. Lady and by other hon. Members during the debate. Turning to some of the commission's recommendations, particularly focusing on the targets, the House service continues its work on engagement and outreach, guided by its strategy—I believe that was praised at the commission the other day—although I think it has found the feedback from the commission helpful, in that it was not necessarily achieving all that it thought it had and had a higher bar to reach. That said, I congratulate those involved in some of the improvements. Improvements to the digital service for both internal and external users are a key priority but there is still a considerable way to go.

The Commission made some useful recommendations about engaging the public. Some aim to improve understanding of Parliament and the work of MPs—for example, simplifying language, clarifying online publications and improving the website, including for people with disabilities or sensory impairments. Much has been achieved in these areas already, but I am sure that there is further to go. Making it easier for people to track specific areas of interest to them is one example of how we could improve interaction. I think some MPs are not aware of some innovations that would be useful to them. I am an evangelist for the apps for tablets and smartphones that have been created and help both MPs and the public in their daily work and to access documents that can be read alongside debates.

The public inquiries team has reviewed and rewritten every Commons glossary entry on the Parliament site and about 400,000 users access this. Content now focuses on explaining in clear, plain English the word, phrase or acronym, and includes links to further learning and business content to extend users' knowledge. Previously, content had been overly long and often unclear.

A recommendation that cuts through to the legislative process is the commission's suggestion for a new procedure for amending Bills so that amendments are written in plain English. In my view, this is where the role of explanatory notes comes in. We saw in the last Parliament, and see it more and more now, that Members are encouraged to add explanatory notes to the amendments they table.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the legislation they put before Parliament is of a high standard, but I know we can always do better. It is vital that Parliament has the necessary means by which to perform its scrutiny. Further recommendations to change that process further are for the House to decide, but I suggest to the hon. Lady that we are creating law, so to some extent, the clarity and the explanation come from the debate on Second Reading and the examination in Committee, where the Minister and the Opposition—any Member in fact—can talk to amendments. We could do more and, in my role on the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Committee, I often push for further detail on the explanatory notes when I do not think they are clear or we need to be more explicit in stating the intention of amendments and clauses.

One recommendation is to improve the search engine. There are other search engines, but many hon. Members use Google to find information on the external parliamentary website. That is a shocker and apparently work is being done on it, but perhaps we should just leave it to the market. If Google and other search engines have already cracked the issue, we may want to use the House's financial resources for other matters.

Kevin Foster: The Minister is rightly talking about how better to explain legislation, but sometimes we need to explain better to the viewer what is going on. For example, the most common question I am asked on school visits is why MPs are standing up and sitting down.

Dr Coffey: That is an interesting point, and new Members often ask that question when they arrive. To some extent, the induction process helps with that. There are matters not covered by the commission that many Members would like to see changed but—dare I say it?—some of the more traditional people, and I include the Speaker in certain elements of this, are resistant to that change. Examples include speaking lists and understanding how to participate in a debate. Perhaps we can do more on the video front and if we stop trying to improve our own search engine, it could free up a bit of cash to do that.

On crowd sourcing questions, the party leader of the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch is doing that for PMQs, which is an interesting experiment. I will leave it to hon. Members to draw their own conclusions on whether it is successful, but I am sure it is good for the Labour party's communications database. It is an interesting approach and some Select Committees have considered it as part of their reviews. I seem to remember the use of #AskGove to generate questions for a Select Committee. It is for Members to decide how best to use that and to manage expectation without just using it as a gimmick.

Meg Hillier: The Minister rightly highlights managing expectation. I refer her to the Petitions Committee, which has done a good job at a very early stage of beginning

[*Meg Hillier*]

to make sure that engagement happens. It is about managing expectation, which is where the clear circulation and exchange of information is important. There is a precedent in that area. I hope that she will have time to touch on electronic voting.

Dr Coffey: I certainly will—I assure the hon. Lady of that. I want briefly to flag up some of the other recommendations before coming to the issues on which she spent a lot of time in her speech.

For young people the new education centre has been a huge success and I hope the House will record how successful it has been throughout the United Kingdom.

In terms of the new forum, the cyber Chamber has been talked about. The Petitions Committee and the debating of e-petitions have probably been the most significant change in that regard. Parliamentary time is provided to the Government, the Opposition and Back Benchers, and now the public, through the organisation of petitions, also have time for their business to be debated. That is a welcome step and although it is in its infancy, the hard-working Clerks and the Chairman of the Committee to whom the hon. Lady referred—the interface between the House and the public—who have taken on the challenging job of moderating petitions, are to be commended on their work to extend that engagement.

I was interested in the idea of trying to delay the selection of Westminster Hall debates to a fortnight to have more engagement with civic society. I think that would take away from Members the element of urgency and topicality.

The daily edition of *Hansard*, one of the key data sets identified by the commission, is now available as open data in a variety of formats. There is still a lot of work to be done on digital media. “Erskine May” is now available freely to Members and their staff on the intranet. I have spoken briefly to a trustee of the May Memorial Fund about the next edition and I have written to him. He has promised to report back to me and I will share his response with the hon. Lady.

On voting, there are two recommendations. I will touch briefly on electronic voting so that I have time to finish on the other one. What can the Government do on electronic voting? The Speaker’s Commission recommended that secure online voting should be an option for all voters by 2020. Concern remains about the security of e-voting and it is vital that any new system attracts the confidence and trust of voters. Estonia is often mentioned, but turnout has not increased there and it has a compulsory national identity card. Electronic voting is certainly not a priority for the Government, but the experience of elections, and the referendum on Scottish independence, shows that if people are really

interested in the issue being debated, they will turn out to vote using the existing mechanism. After the drop in the number of people turning out to vote in the 2001 election to 59%, engagement and voter turnout has gradually increased to about 66%.

On Lobby voting, the House service has been investigating the electronic recording of Divisions and the hon. Lady will be aware that we had several attempts in the last Parliament and this. Errors occurred, but were addressed by the tellers to make sure that Members’ votes were recorded. Full implementation of tablet recording of Divisions is expected later in this Session—certainly before the summer—but among the many goals set out by the commission, it recommended retaining the tradition of walking through the Division Lobbies.

The hon. Lady referred to swipe cards and raised issues such as verification. I understand that some of the early scoping and ideas that are being discussed so far suggest that Clerks would still do a physical check to ensure that an hon. Member’s photograph on their swipe card goes with their face.

The hon. Lady referred to fingerprints. I think hon. Members would be anxious about that and I suggest, in the kindest way, that it needs a lot more work and engagement with colleagues. She mentioned 30 people. Scottish National party Members are obsessed with electronic voting because of their experience in the Scottish Parliament, but I suggest that the Procedure Committee should look at that.

On time saving and cost saving, this Parliament debates more than any other Parliament in the world. On average, we have 48 hours of debate every week and perhaps longer when we sit on a Friday. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) seemed to be suggesting that perhaps we should have a shorter schedule.

Meg Hillier: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I have only 30 seconds left, and I suggest I continue the debate with the hon. Lady separately because I want to answer the points already raised.

I value the tradition of linking debates to votes, and I think that matters. I realise that the hon. Lady’s swipe card idea would still do that, but the physical presence of MPs really matters. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) referred to abstention. I suggest that voting in both Lobbies is a way to record that now.

On progress, I cannot tell the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch that I have made a timetable. I suggest that considerably more debate needs to be had with a wider range of Members—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Migration into the EU

[ANDREW ROSINDELL *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mr Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered migration into the EU.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. When I stood in this place last year and said that I thought that Germany was bonkers to give permanent residency to all the migrants arriving on the shores of Europe, that was met largely with derision. I stressed the importance of refraining from doing what made us collectively feel better at a time of appalling images of young children drowning on north African beaches and instead supporting pragmatic and moral solutions that represented the views of the British public, but also effectively served the needs of genuine refugees. I stressed that the message that Europe needed to give should be much clearer that those making the journey will not automatically get the right to stay in Europe if they arrive in Europe, and that if we did not break that link, we would have potentially hundreds of millions of people on the move. Within 3,000 km of the Mediterranean, which is four or five days' drive away, nearly 1 billion people live. If I came from a poorer or less stable country, I might well make what would be a rational decision for my family and myself to move to a more peaceable area such as Europe to settle. However, we have not managed to break that link—that message has not gone out there in the world—and the drowning and the chaos continue. I believe that collectively we in Europe play a part in that, because we have not yet made it clear that if people arrive in Europe, they will not end up staying in Europe. The only people who have really profited from that chaos are the people smugglers.

Since that debate, we have seen the near-collapse of the Schengen agreement as countries opt for razor wire—some of them—over the open borders of the European Union. Sweden is the first casualty as a country that has failed both those whom it was trying to help and its population. With a proud history of taking in refugees from across the globe during the past century, its Government tried to do the right thing, in their view, by taking 200,000 refugees last year, but they have now had to admit that they do not have the financial means to assimilate such numbers and more importantly they have lost the backing of their population. Indeed, this is the great tragedy that seems to be playing out right across Europe. Governments such as those of Germany and Sweden have created a great backlash against even the most deserving people who require support, as a result of what in my view has been incredibly misguided altruism.

Following the debate last September, some newspapers mocked me for a “bizarre rant” in relation to a comment that I had made about a haircut. That only went to strengthen my point that any talk of what we actually do in response to the migrant crisis is almost politically toxic. Only recently, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was accused of using offensive language when making reference to a swarm of migrants in Calais. In my view, the Prime Minister—I am not known for toadying to him—actually has been ahead of the game on this and

has realised that, if there is fallout from countries such as Syria, we get the most bang for our buck in terms of aid if we look after people in the region. The Prime Minister has also been very clear, which many of us have not been, that there is a very clear difference between a refugee and an economic migrant. It is fair to say that he understands the difference between a refugee and an economic migrant.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. We must talk about these issues. He will be aware that in *The Times* and YouGov poll in January 2016—it was very recent—six out of 10 people put immigration and asylum as one of the top three troubling factors facing the country today, so if we do not talk about that as politicians in this place, we are letting our country down.

Mr Holloway: Absolutely. I read an excellent piece in *The Guardian*, I think, by Nick Cohen, who said that if we really want to help people who find themselves in difficulties, we have to understand that there is a difference between economic migrants and asylum seekers. Indeed, the vast majority of people who come to live in this country are the former. A friend told me earlier that 90% are economic migrants and 8% are asylum seekers.

To go back to the haircut point, the fact remains that people who have successfully claimed asylum in the UK do indeed go back to places that they claimed asylum from. I would like to thank those members of the public who, after the September debate, sent me emails with many examples that they had known in their own lives. I sense that much of the media and much of the political class are rather out of sync with what the British public think about this issue.

Years ago, I lived covertly in the Sangatte Red Cross camp in Calais. I remember arguing with one of the producers when I was editing the piece, because my experience in the Sangatte camp was that most of the people—99%—were fit young men who had paid people smugglers to make that very long journey and were indeed economic migrants, not desperate refugees. I remember having an argument, when we were going to voice the documentary, about the use of the word “refugee” or “economic migrant”.

During the September debate, one hon. Member accused me of being out of step with what the British public feel about accepting large numbers of refugees, but that does not stack up. Following the Prime Minister's announcement that the UK would resettle 20,000 Syrians, a YouGov poll found that 49% of those asked believed that Britain should be accepting fewer or no refugees, which was a 22 percentage point increase from the month before—my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) pointed that out. I was also derided for “blurring” the boundaries between what a refugee is and what a migrant is, but I think that that point is finally beginning to be taken on board, even by Mr Juncker in the European Commission. I argue that not recognising the difference between migrants and refugees has done more damage to the case of genuine refugees, in terms of public opinion, than any ghastly things that have happened in Paris or may have happened in Cologne. Of course, there is an appetite among Europeans to help people, but there is a limit, and that limit comes in earlier when we fail to recognise that distinction. That really helps no one.

[Mr Holloway]

Do not get me wrong. As I have said already, economic migrants make rational choices for themselves and their families, and all of us would do the same, but either we are a nation state or we are not and either we decide who comes into our country or we do not, and at the moment it strikes me that we are not doing that in Europe and we are not doing it in the UK, either.

Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): I agree with the thrust of what my hon. Friend is saying. Does that not underline how important it is that Britain remains out of the Schengen area?

Mr Holloway: Absolutely. That was a great bit of foresight, so I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

Some years ago, as a television reporter, I experienced the plight of refugees—as opposed to the economic migrants whom I met in the Sangatte camp—when I was covering the wars in the former Yugoslavia and I lived undercover as a deaf and dumb Bosnian Muslim in Serb territory. I joined Bosnian Muslims and Croats being ethnically cleansed by Serb forces, and we ended up in a refugee camp in, I think, Slovenia—actually, I ended up in prison in Austria, but that is another story. Those people really were refugees. They travelled en masse as families with their possessions over the border into a neighbouring safe country—very different from many young men who travel to a country of their personal choice.

It is hard to swallow the UN figure that 62% of migrants who arrive into Europe must be genuine refugees purely because they come from Eritrea, Afghanistan and Syria. Frustratingly, these people continue to be muddled with genuine refugees, and there needs to be a clear distinction. Since September, the enormous number of migrants has continued with some 55,000 making the crossing last month alone, 244 of whom, I regret to say, drowned or are missing. The breakdown of Schengen and the rise of nationalism have been two predictable results of the mismanagement of the crisis by the European Commission. The only encouraging sign is that the Commission has finally admitted that there needs to be some distinction between the treatment of economic migrants and the treatment of refugees.

Last week, it was announced that 40% of migrants, most of whom are Syrian, require international protection. That is a stupendous revelation following much fudging of the figures but it comes too late to stem the millions who are currently en route for Europe. However, despite that realisation, there is still a bit of a gulf between the beliefs of Eurocrats and those of the ordinary man or woman in European cities, including those in Britain. Juncker and many of the political classes are still pushing the view that the Cologne attacks were a public order problem and nothing to do with migrants from different cultures.

The EU has become emblematic of slow growth and rising unemployment. Unemployment across the continent is currently at almost 10% and youth unemployment is almost double that at 20%. Greece and Spain are suffering from youth unemployment rates of nearly 50% and I believe that Italy's youth unemployment rate is almost 40%. Unemployment is destroying the prospects of a whole generation of young Europeans and the impact of new arrivals can only have a detrimental effect.

The British Government suggested that immigration should be brought down to tens of thousands—incidentally, a YouGov poll found that 78% of the population thought that that was a good idea—but despite the best efforts of my right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister, it simply has not happened. It is estimated that more than 1 million migrants will end up in Europe this year, and immigration figures for the year ending June 2015 show total net migration of 336,000 into the UK, of whom nearly 200,000 are non-EU migrants. Under the high net migration assumption of 265,000, the population will grow by 12.2 million over the next 25 years.

The European Commission has proved to be inept at dealing with the crisis and continues implicitly to encourage more people to make the dangerous maritime crossing instead of staying in safe countries. The epic mismanagement of the crisis has been politically destabilising for all concerned. The British Government need to push for what I think the previous Government referred to as extraterritorial processing centres—reception centres in safe countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, which surround the conflict zones. At the same time, we must stop the boats that are endangering lives and reducing the security along European borders.

European countries should indeed do more—as the Prime Minister has been trying to do—to support countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, which are hosting huge numbers of refugees in proportion to their resident populations. Britain is already the second-biggest bilateral donor supporting Syrian refugees but, of course, more can be done. I read in *The Economist* that the amount of money spent by the international community on looking after refugees in the region is the same as the amount that German citizens spent on chocolate last year, so there is quite a lot more we can do.

Many Syrian families arriving in places such as Germany are professional, educated people—precisely the sort of people Syria will need in the post-conflict environment. Having hundreds of thousands of its most skilled and educated people relocated in Europe will not be very helpful when things improve. Recent refugees from Syria are more skilled than other groups and those who came, for example, during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. Those skilled, middle-class workers will urgently be required when rebuilding Syria, and they will not be a lot of use if they are living in Germany.

The decent and humane response is in a systematic manner to process and differentiate genuine refugees from economic migrants, to repatriate those who fail the asylum process and, overall, to try to keep people in their home regions. It is immoral to send out messages to people that if they arrive in Europe, they can stay in Europe. We have to accept some culpability for the deaths of men, women and children in the Mediterranean. As I said in a previous debate, the moral conclusion is that, frankly, we should build a great big bridge from Africa because at the moment we are encouraging people to drown at the hands of smugglers.

The Prime Minister's recent attempts at renegotiation have shown that the EU is pretty unwilling to change. We go cap in hand and get almost nothing. The British Government currently have a raft of legal constraints. Any one of the people arriving in Europe in a year or two would be able to come to live in the UK. It is self-evident that, as a nation state, we no longer have any meaningful control of our borders. While Britain

remains in Europe, it will be impossible to control our borders—a point that was described by William Hague in 2008.

Europe lacks a collective voice and has had no greater tragedy than in Syria, where the EU has been pretty ineffective over the past few years. A failure to offer real solutions in regional geopolitics and to understand that conflicts sometimes only finish when agreements are made with some pretty unpleasant people has not helped the untold suffering for millions of people in Syria and on its borders. The resulting exodus to Europe and the ensuing mismanagement by the EU has highlighted that the whole European project is destined to fail.

With each of the 28 member states having its own economic limitations, historical memory and political culture, it is impossible to reach an agreement on almost anything bar trade and logistics. The varying attitudes and experiences that each country brings have shown that they cannot be homogenised because there is no political will in each country for the EU's ultimate political goal, and there lies the problem. The migrant crisis has exposed the unsustainability of the undemocratic and bureaucratic EU.

The suppression of the fervent nationalism that contributed to the second world war was the noble aim of the EU's founding fathers. Through the EU's failure to create a robust and systematic way of coping with the migrant influx in a fair way whereby genuine refugees are differentiated from economic migrants, it has destroyed its founding principle. Through epic mismanagement and failure to agree on anything between the 28 member states, Schengen is in ruins as countries rapidly get on with their own solutions. With hundreds of millions of people in the borderlands of Europe suffering oppression or wanting a better life for their families, this tide of migrants will continue until drastic action is taken. For a country such as Britain, that can only happen outside the EU.

The migrant crisis, like nothing else, has tragically exposed the limitations of the European project. Undemocratically elected politicians in Brussels talking of the redistribution of hundreds of thousands of migrants across willing Governments only strengthens the vast gulf between the political classes and the people they are elected to serve. That has had disastrous results for countries such as Sweden. Either we are a nation state, or we are not. Either we are serious about helping the many millions of people affected by war and oppression, or we are not. We—not the German Government, the people smugglers or the EU—need to decide who comes into this country. Britain needs to take firm action, but that can only take place out of the European Union.

2.50 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Rosindell.

Contrary to what the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr Holloway) has just said, we are facing a refugee crisis in Europe, not a crisis involving economic migrants. I will particularly address the plight of women and child refugees. The First Minister of Scotland has said that we should be in no doubt that what we are witnessing is a humanitarian crisis on a scale not seen in Europe since the second world war. Most of the people travelling through Turkey, Greece and the Balkans to try to get to western Europe are doing so because they are desperate.

The images of their suffering will continue to haunt our consciences and the reputation of this union of nations for many generations to come if we do not do more collectively to help them.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about public opinion. In so far as I can judge public opinion in my constituency of Edinburgh South West, the vast majority of emails that I have received—many hundreds have come in batches and waves since September—have been asking this Parliament to encourage the Government to do more for the refugees in Europe, as opposed to doing nothing or less.

I recognise that the UK Government are making a substantial contribution to humanitarian initiatives on the ground in some of the countries that refugees are coming from, and I recognise the significant financial contributions that have been made to aid. I also recognise the United Kingdom's commitment to take 20,000 vulnerable refugees over the next five years, but I regret to say that I do not believe those initiatives are enough. We, as a union of nations, are required to do more, and we are required to encourage the European Union to have a better co-ordinated response. We also need greater international effort through the United Nations.

I often hear what the hon. Gentleman said about the moral argument—that if we encourage people to come, we are simply throwing them into the arms of people smugglers and encouraging them to take their life in their hands. If one looks at the situation in the round, these refugees have not been met with a particularly welcoming attitude in Europe—certainly our union of nations has not been welcoming to them—yet they are continuing to come, so I feel that that moral argument falls down somewhat.

The majority of these people are refugees, not economic migrants. They are, of course, seeking a better life, but their main reason for doing that and leaving their countries is that those countries have been destroyed or deeply compromised by conflict. It is particularly inappropriate for the United Kingdom to wash its hands of taking any of the people who are now in Europe given that we have joined in with those conflicts. Whatever the rights and wrongs of that, and there were respectable arguments on both sides, as a Parliament we took the view that we would join those conflicts and interfere in other countries' civil wars by dropping bombs, which is all the more reason for not washing our hands of responsibility for some of the refugees who are coming to Europe.

I strongly believe that the United Kingdom should take a fair and proportionate share of the refugees who are now in Europe. How we go about doing that, and how we address the situation, is complex, but it is fundamentally morally wrong—I use the word “morally” advisedly on Ash Wednesday—for us to say that we will do nothing for these people who are so desperate. I recognise that we are helping them in their own countries and on the ground, but people are coming to Europe in droves. We see their suffering on the news every night, and it is wrong for a relatively wealthy union of nations such as ours to do nothing about it.

Mr Holloway: I see where the hon. and learned Lady is coming from, and I appreciate the great good will that she shows to all these people, but in law they are not refugees. Someone is a refugee until they find refuge in a

[Mr Holloway]

safe country, and at that point, although apparently they can later be designated as a refugee, they are an economic migrant.

My other point is that just because someone comes from, say, Afghanistan, it does not necessarily mean that they are fleeing violence. I met a guy from Afghanistan the other day in the “jungle” camp in Calais who comes from a part of the country where there is no fighting. We need to wise up.

Joanna Cherry: As the hon. Gentleman probably knows, I am a lawyer, but in this situation the niceties of whether these people are refugees in law matters not. We did not bother ourselves unduly in the United Kingdom about the legal position of the Jewish children when we took them in on the Kindertransport, or about the legal position of the Ugandan refugees. Even the former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was persuaded to take some of the Vietnamese boat people. So this is not a debate about legalities; it is a debate about the correct humanitarian response, the responsibility of the world’s relatively wealthy nations to take responsibility for people who are suffering greatly and our particular responsibility to do that when we have chosen to become involved in the conflicts that are creating refugees. I hasten to add that I make no comment about the rights or wrongs of that, but we are involved now, so we have to recognise the implications of our involvement.

Mr Holloway: I am sure that the hon. and learned Lady’s constituents would like to know what percentage of the populations of Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya she thinks should come to live in this country if they want to do so.

Joanna Cherry: The position of the Scottish Government has been clear. We will take a fair share of a proportionate number coming to the United Kingdom. Indeed, some Syrian asylum seekers and vulnerable refugees have already been resettled in my constituency of Edinburgh South West.

Mr Holloway: How many?

Joanna Cherry: I am not at liberty to reveal the precise figure. It is not a large number, because the United Kingdom Government do not permit us to take a large number, and it is a reserved matter, so our hands are tied. Our First Minister has made it clear that we are willing to take a fair and proportionate share. How that is done has to be decided at a higher level even than the UK, which is why European Union co-operation is so important.

I want to say something about the plight of women and child refugees, because earlier this month, about a week or so ago, UNICEF reported that for the first time since the refugee and migrant crisis in Europe started, there are more women and children on the move than adult males, and that children and women now make up nearly 60% of the refugees and migrants crossing the border from Greece to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Children now account for 36%—that is more than a third—of those risking the treacherous sea crossing between Turkey and Greece. The figure of 330 having drowned in the past five months has often been mentioned on the Floor of the House. UNICEF

has emphasised that children should be prioritised at every stop of the way. Particularly when they get to Europe, they need to be informed of their right to claim asylum and their right to family reunification.

It is important not to forget the terrible conditions from which many women and children are fleeing. It has been well documented that women in Iraq and Syria are the targets of brutal oppression and sexual attacks perpetrated by Daesh. Rape is considered useful by Daesh as it traumatises individuals and undermines their sense of autonomy, control and safety. Rape is always an issue in war, but it is a particular issue in these wars. The former UN assistant commissioner for the protection of refugees said last year that

“Syria is increasingly marked by rape and sexual violence employed as a weapon of war...destroying identity, dignity and the social fabrics of families and communities”.

Female and child survivors of such sexual crimes are often shunned by their own communities, which is all the more reason why they come to Europe seeking refuge. When those people come, it is essential that they are treated with dignity and respect and that their particular vulnerabilities are recognised.

Save the Children has called on the UK to take 3,000 of the unaccompanied child refugees in Europe, and there is a moral imperative for us to consider that carefully—I am aware that the Government are considering it at present. I appeal for recognition of the reality of the desperation of the situation and of the vulnerability of so many of these refugees, particularly female and child refugees. There should be recognition of the reality of sexual violence perpetrated as a weapon of war, which many women and children are fleeing, and of our moral obligation as a wealthy first-world nation to take our fair share of the burden.

Jonathan Lord: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for giving way. She is making an eloquent speech, but there is something that I do not quite understand. The thesis of my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr Holloway) is that while hundreds of thousands have already come to Europe, if we offer a home to millions there will be an almost inexhaustible supply of further people who will then want to come, and that is surely unsustainable. I do not understand how she is really addressing my hon. Friend’s main thesis.

Joanna Cherry: I do not accept the main thesis of the hon. Member for Gravesham, which is why—

Jonathan Lord: In what way?

Joanna Cherry: I am coming at this from a different angle. These are not straightforward matters, but my point is that we cannot wash our hands of these people. It is not right for the United Kingdom to say that we will take nobody from Europe. We need to get together with our European partners and talk about how to address the complex issues that arise as a result of this massive refugee crisis—or massive migration, depending on the language that people wish to use. It is really tragic that the United Kingdom is abdicating its responsibility to lead at such talks and discussions when we look back at the United Kingdom’s proud history of taking in refugees at other times when countries washed their hands of them—I am thinking of the Kindertransport in particular.

I would be foolish to deny that there is a potential issue in considering how many people may come and the sustainability of that process, but at the moment there is space for the people who are here. There are some estimates that there are 20,000 unaccompanied children in Europe at the moment. Is it really this country's position that we will not take any of them? We seem to be moving in the right direction on that issue, but it should not stop at unaccompanied children. Sure, there are strong young men who manage to make it as far as Calais, but there are also very vulnerable people. The point of my speech today is an appeal for a humanitarian response to the crisis rather than a purely utilitarian response.

3.1 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Thank you, Mr Rosindell, for calling me to speak. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today.

This debate should focus on immigration and not necessarily on refugee status, because we are talking about people who wish to make a home in our country and not necessarily those who are fleeing persecution. I will therefore confine my remarks more to immigration than to refugees. I say to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) that I would not base my views simply on what turns up in my postbag. Many surveys carried out regularly by reputable companies have shown that migration and population control is an important concern of the British public.

Joanna Cherry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Main: No, I will not. The hon. and learned Lady had 10 minutes, and there are many people wishing to speak.

We should be talking about immigration, which includes some people with refugee status but also a large number of people who come to this country either because of our membership of the EU or because they are coming here as economic migrants. My hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr Holloway) made a powerful and well informed set of comments, based on having been in the camps, not just on people writing to him in his postbag.

If this issue was not such a concern to the British public, I do not believe that even now our Prime Minister would be trying to thrash out some deal that allays the fears of the British public about our loss of control over immigration into this country as a result of our membership of the EU.

It is telling that Mr Manuel Barroso said last night in an interview that what we are trying to achieve is a form of control on immigration through benefits packages, and that his view is that that will make no difference whatsoever. I share that view, because I do not believe that people necessarily come here because they have been lured by benefits. I believe that many people come here because they wish to work. They wish to take advantage of the opportunities that this country offers and of a better economic future for themselves and their family, and there is better healthcare here, and indeed better package as a whole. Whether we can afford for a large number of people to come into this country—a number that the British public would like to see reduced—is a different debate, but I do not believe that the benefits package that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister

might achieve by 18 February, however well secured, will make a jot of difference to immigration. Indeed, when my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration responds to this debate, I would like to hear whether he thinks such a package will make a jot of difference.

It is interesting that England—not the UK—is the second most crowded country in the European Union, if we exclude the island state of Malta, and the ninth most crowded country in the world when the city and island states are excluded. That contributes to the British public's perception of whether, and how much, immigration into the UK is a good or bad thing.

I speak as someone with a highly desirable constituency that is surrounded by green-belt land, although it does have areas of multiple deprivation. I can assure the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West that how many houses are built to accommodate newly formed households is a source of concern, and we should look it straight in the face. These are not separate issues, they are all interlinked.

Government household projections show that in England—not Scotland, obviously—we will need to build enough housing to accommodate the additional 273,000 households a year between 2012 and 2037, which is a total of five million homes. That is a vast number of houses and it means sacrifices of things such as the green belt, which many of us have to consider as constituency MPs. It also means that there are huge pressures on jobs in certain areas, and it is no good whingeing about jobs not being available to British workers. I seem to remember Her Majesty's Opposition saying, "British jobs for British workers", and the reason they say such things is that they know the British public are concerned about these things.

Currently, there are 2.1—

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Main: I will give way briefly to the hon. Lady, because I do not wish to take too long.

Pat Glass: Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the great strengths of this country has been its ability to absorb and to integrate hundreds of thousands of people over the centuries? They have included who have come here to work, my family being one of them. Those people came here to work, paid their taxes, raised their children, fought for this country and died for this country.

Mrs Main: I completely agree with the hon. Lady, but it should be up to this country to decide the numbers. I do not disagree at all with what she has said; she is absolutely right. However, the British public tell me that they wish to be in control of those numbers. They also say that to many opinion pollsters, and I believe it is why the Prime Minister is currently negotiating. If they wish to make those numbers even greater, that is the decision of the British public; it should not be a decision imposed by an unelected bureaucrat in Brussels.

In total, 41.5% of the 5 million workers here who were not born in the UK were born in the EU, and most were originally from outside the EU, so some people do cross the EU and come through that route. There are currently 2.1 million EU-born workers in Britain. That accounts for a large number of people who are working and paying their taxes in this country.

[Mrs Main]

British workers say that they are worried about their jobs. It is estimated that only 982,000 of the jobs that have been created recently have been for British workers. We are creating jobs and making opportunities, and that is why immigration is a big pull to our country—we are not the basket case that some EU economies are. They have not got the jobs to offer. I do not blame people for looking for jobs, but the British public expect us to discuss this issue robustly.

What number of people can we accommodate in housing? Where are we going to plan the additional housing that is needed to support and house those workers? House prices are rising because of supply and demand. In areas such as mine, which are near enough to London to commute to it, it is not a surprise that house prices are exorbitantly high, with an average house price of nearly £500,000. It is because of the pressures on getting on the housing ladder.

We are really being unfair to the British public if we do not look at the two sides of the same coin. Overall we are a prosperous country—although some areas of the country are struggling, there are no two ways about it—that offers opportunities to people in less fortunate situations. However, if those people are attracted to our country to take up the jobs that are being created as a result of our prosperity and the Government's long-term economic plan, we have to accept that they will need housing, services and all that comes with it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham is absolutely right to have secured this debate, but we are tinkering around the edges of the issue if we are looking at red cards and a benefits-based policy. I do not suspect at all that migrants are drawn to this country because they wish to claim a few pounds in benefits. I believe that they want to come for the opportunities that I have described, and it is up to us—as it is to countries such as Australia—to decide at what pace that immigration takes place, how we can accommodate it and the numbers involved in that immigration. We can do that only when we regain control of our borders, which of course we can do only when we leave the European Union and all the constraints that it brings with it.

3.9 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak on this matter. I congratulate the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr Holloway) on bringing this important issue to the House. It is important to debate these issues and to get everyone's point of view on the best way forward. I suppose we would all agree—well, maybe not entirely agree—that we should get the balance of the debate right. We should take the level of refugees and migrants to a number that is achievable and sustainable, but at the same time, as elected representatives we cannot fail to be moved by the distressing images of the people on the boats who have drowned. One would need a heart of stone not to be moved by that, and I think everyone in Westminster Hall today would be of that opinion. At the end of the day, we also need to be compassionate and able to integrate the refugees and migrants who wish to come here for the right reasons.

I want to put some statistics on the record. The European Commission's chief spokesperson admitted that the majority of people moving across Europe are in

fact economic migrants, and we need to ensure that we use similar approaches to the English lessons offered in Northern Ireland. I mentioned that in the debate at 9.30 am, which was on a slightly different issue. The Minister who responded to that debate is here again. There will be another debate at 4.30 pm, and through those three debates we will touch on many of the same issues.

When it comes to integrating refugees in Northern Ireland, through the Assembly we have initiated language lessons. The money is coming directly from Westminster. That is an effective way of integrating refugees and migrants into society by enabling them to speak and understand the language and be part of it. Their cultures and ethos can be integrated, but how do we do that? We have got to work at the system, but we also have to put a limit on the numbers that are coming. We have to be careful about that.

We need a system where only those in genuine need can avail themselves of services and where we can discourage those not in as desperate need from making the perilous and often fatal journey to Europe—when we see the images, it is difficult not to have a tear in our eye. Of course, it is not just about protecting those coming in. The public are concerned about levels of immigration and have been for many years, so it is no wonder that the subject has been such a hotbed of debate. This debate has shown some of that. We need to ensure that we have a responsible immigration policy at home, especially given that we are outside Schengen. We technically control our external borders with the EU, although it may not always seem like that to many of us in this country.

Without doubt, one of the most defining issues of 2015 was the migrant crisis. It is hard to find a member of the public who will not say it is near impossible to avoid the issue. Whether it is the negative consequences we have seen 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. I attended a meeting today that was chaired by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). The discussion was a Syrian delegation debrief on the humanitarian situation. Several Syrians were there, as were some learned people from Jordan and Lebanon.

We cannot ignore the fact that of the 4.2 million who have been displaced from Syria, 600,000 are Christians. Nor can we ignore the impact it is having on them. In the next week or two, I will have the opportunity to visit Lebanon and Jordan and perhaps see at first-hand how those two countries are dealing with the refugee crisis, because they are feeling it directly. One thing that the Jordanians are seeing is that many of the Syrians coming into their country want to find employment, and why not? That, however, has a knock-on effect on the Jordanians, who are then unable to get employment for themselves. There are many implications for those countries, and we have to look at that.

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, as it is clear that the plight of Syrian refugees is being capitalised on by some illegal immigrants set on purely economic migration. The figures from the European Commission are clear. Around 60% of the migrants arriving in the bloc are now economic migrants, according to the European

Commission's chief spokesman. That leaves 40% who are genuine refugees and migrants, and we have to look at how we can help them in whatever way we can.

One thing that came out of that meeting earlier today—the Syria delegation had a chance to debrief us and tell us about the situation—was that they said that the solution for the Syrian crisis is in Syria, and I do not think anyone in the Chamber would disagree with that. If we want to address the issue of refugees and migrants coming, we have to address the issue in Syria. Perhaps peace in Syria will happen, but there is a question over what the demarcation lines will be. The Russians and the Syrian army together have, over the past few weeks, taken more land and are restoring some semblance of peace in Syria, whatever that might be, but those are things that we have to look at.

Regardless of the approach we take, we need to ensure that refugees are processed correctly. We need to give genuine refugees the dignity they deserve and to root out potential criminal elements or security threats. Those are some of the things that we need to look at. Sweden has been mentioned by other Members, and there have been social instruction classes there, particularly around how to treat women. Those classes have been fairly successful in helping to educate refugees and migrants from the middle east on how to behave appropriately in western society.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) mentioned the Kindertransport in the second world war. I can proudly say that my constituency as it was then—the boundaries have changed—brought many of the Kindertransport children into our area during the second world war. That was long before I was born, but in Millisle and Newtownards they integrated well, and many of them are still there. Sometimes when there is crisis we have to reach out. We cannot ignore that, and it is important that we do not. We could learn from that innovative approach. Without doubt, it would go some way to improving integration and ensuring that we do not have another Cologne.

My contribution is about getting the balance right with the different opinions in the Chamber. There will of course always be debate on the numbers of immigrants, migrants or refugees we should take and the quality of them, how we control that, how we adapt as a society to accommodate them and whether it should be down to the new arrival to adapt to their host society. There is an integration period and an accommodation period that has to be given, and it needs both sides to look at that. It is a debate that will continue for the foreseeable future and it needs to be discussed in a respectful and rational manner.

We all know of the crisis developing in Aleppo as the Russians and the Syrian army tighten their hold on that part of the country. Many have moved out to the Turkish border. Turkey has said, “No more refugees,” and that is understandable. It has some 1 million-plus refugees on its borders, as do Jordan and Lebanon, so the squeeze is on. Over the next few months, we will be looking at an even greater push from those who want to get out and get away. If we can solve the issue in Syria, many of them will wish to return to their country and move back to the place that they love.

In conclusion, the debate has always been there, but given the threats from Daesh, which stated that it intends to use the migrant crisis to “flood Europe with

jihadis”, we can surely all agree that there needs to be a screening process and security checks for new arrivals. That is of paramount importance for our national security as well as for the safety of our citizens at this time of great uncertainty and unease.

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): We have only 10 minutes left for the remaining debate before the wind-up speeches begin, so I ask the remaining two speakers to keep their remarks to a reasonable length.

3.18 pm

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr Holloway) for securing this debate. As always, it is a pleasure to speak after the thoughtful and well-considered comments of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

In this debate, we have touched on the European Union. One thing I said before I became an MP was that I would not talk about the EU in debates unless it was absolutely necessary, but it is necessary in the context of this debate. As we often find with debates on the EU, polarised viewpoints have been put across today, but the point is that whether or not we are in the European Union, the world as a whole—Britain, the EU and the world—is facing a forced migration crisis, the like of which has not been seen for a generation.

Of course a legitimate discussion can be had about whether membership of the European Union is beneficial in tackling the crisis and the humanitarian challenges that it throws up; but it would be simplistic and wrong to say that not being a member of the EU would make the crisis go away for Britain. We need to be clear about that, because sometimes in these discussions it appears that some of my colleagues think that it would be a magic wand to make the problem go away. The problem is not fundamentally about membership of the European Union; it is about a number of push factors that are due to the humanitarian situation in a number of countries in Africa and the middle east. That is clear from the evidence.

The countries where the majority of migrants come from—particularly when we look at Italy and Greece, the two countries on the frontier of the EU that receive the greatest number of migrants—are Eritrea, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Greece. Those are the main sources of migrants going into the countries in question. Many of the countries that the migrants come from have serious humanitarian issues or are in war-torn areas. As the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) pointed out, because of terrible domestic circumstances in those countries a large number of people legitimately and rightly come to claim asylum. We have a proud tradition in this country and in the European Union generally of granting asylum to people in genuine need.

Jonathan Lord: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the horrific humanitarian crisis. I am pleased to say that in Woking we have, under the Prime Minister's scheme, taken families from the Syrian camps. My hon. Friend talked about push factors; but surely there are also important pull factors at large. If the German Chancellor says she will take 1 million people and the

[Jonathan Lord]

EU also says it will allow people to stay in Europe, is not that a potential pull factor for economic migrants as well as genuine refugees?

Dr Poulter: My hon. Friend makes a good point about what the Government are rightly doing in Woking, in Suffolk and elsewhere, in accepting 20,000 refugees during the lifetime of the Parliament, and in their commitment to deal with the tragic circumstances of child refugees. We should be proud of that. It is a good thing that the Government and those local authorities are doing.

On the point that my hon. Friend raised—also an important one—it would clearly be a pull factor to accept migrants into the European Union unconditionally. It is not my understanding that other EU countries—or indeed Britain—are accepting migration unconditionally. However, there is acceptance that we have an international duty to respond to humanitarian crisis. That is why we are accepting 20,000 refugees. We have a proud tradition of doing that, which we have heard about, going back to the second world war, Uganda, the Vietnamese boat people and the Kosovan and other conflicts. We should be proud because this country has always been a home for people in genuine need fleeing persecution. We should never shirk that, and the Government's current response to the crisis is the right one.

However, we should also make the distinction that others have made during the debate, that, while we have a humanitarian responsibility to people seeking asylum from persecution, we clearly cannot have an open door to mass migration. The country's infrastructure would not accept that. At the same time, when people have settled in the UK migration has almost always been hugely beneficial to our country. We are very proud of the multicultural NHS that we have, where 40% of the workforce are from outside the UK. In my part of the country, migrant workers come across for the summer period to work in the agriculture sector. Agriculture needs those workers to support the picking of crops, and do other essential work. It would be wrong to lump all migration together as a bad thing, because it has so often been beneficial to the British economy, and if people want to come here and work it can be a very good thing. The NHS would not function today if it were not for migrant workers who have come from Australia, New Zealand and all over the world, as well as the EU, to support it.

I want finally to highlight some possible solutions. Whatever the rights and wrongs, and the terrible record of the Gaddafi Government in Libya, agreement was reached in 2010 with the Libyan regime to work to reduce the flow of migration through that country and across the Mediterranean. Clearly, there is war and a terrible situation in the country. A process is going on at the moment in Algiers to bring the two sides together and I hope a resolution to the conflict can be found. That would be to the benefit of the people of Libya, and it might also make it possible as part of the reconstruction to reinstate an agreement and look at the migrant flow through Libya, as has happened in the past—when it worked to reduce migration.

There are issues involved that we cannot deal with just as Britain. At the EU-wide level, benefits are gained from working together and from supporting Italy and

Greece and other frontier states in tackling the problem. That is something that the British Government support, and put money towards, rightly. Both unilaterally and with our European partners we must continue to take in genuine asylum seekers and refugees, and do our best to mitigate the push factors by providing support in the form of humanitarian aid in Syria and elsewhere. We should be proud of the Government and what we are doing on the issue, and of our past and present humanitarian record.

3.26 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I think I have only three minutes, so I shall be short and sharp.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr Holloway) on securing the debate. He is straight talking and forthright and, although I fundamentally disagree with him on a number of points, I thank him for giving us the further chance to discuss what is undoubtedly the defining issue of this Parliament.

I want to speak briefly about the argument, which is often put, that we should seek to support refugees near the conflict zone, rather than protecting them within Europe. Who would disagree with that, on paper? I do not think anyone would; but the plain fact is that it is almost impossible for all refugees from countries racked by several years of conflict to be supported in that way. Those countries have neither the resources nor the capacity to cope. It is a challenge, indeed, but it is not unsustainable for Europe to offer protection to more refugees. What is unsustainable is to take the approach of not offering shelter for further refugees.

For millions of Syrians in neighbouring countries there have been years of living in tents with no prospect of education or work. For many, life as a refugee in neighbouring countries is grave. Lebanon, a country the size of Devon and Cornwall with a population of under 5 million, already hosts 2 million refugees. Amnesty International's report "I Want a Safe Place" notes that Syrian refugee women face the risk of serious human rights violations and abuse in Lebanon, including gender-based violence and exploitation. Jordan, a country of 6 million people, has taken in 1 million since the Syrian war in 2011, but has now blocked access because, it says, international donors have provided only one third of the funding needed to support those already there. Syrian refugees in Jordan also face huge challenges. More than half are children and although legally they can attend school, they rarely do, because most work 12 hours a day in jobs such as scrap metal collection or construction. More than one in four Syrian refugee women in Jordan, as elsewhere, head households alone, struggling for money while suffering isolation and a fear of sexual violence.

We should bear in mind that, although Turkey ratified the refugee convention, it did so with a geographic limitation. It recognises only refugees originating from Europe, so Syrians receive only a restricted form of temporary protection, with limited rights. Its record on respecting refugees is far from unblemished. Asylum seekers' access to adequate housing, health services and work is limited and bureaucratic problems prevent refugee children from getting access to secondary education.

On Monday, the Secretary of State for International Development said:

“If we can give Syrians hope for a better future where they are, they are less likely to feel that they have no choice other than to make perilous journeys to Europe.”—[*Official Report*, 8 February 2016; Vol. 605, c. 1320.]

Again, implicit in that is a recognition that many have felt and continue to feel that they have no choice but to make that journey. The question remains the one that I asked on Monday: what happens with the million that are already in Europe and the other million that will come before the measures announced on Monday are put in place? The only possible answer is the sharing of responsibility throughout the EU, as proposed by the Commission. It is time for this Government and Governments on the continent to step up to that challenge.

3.30 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr Holloway), a colleague on the Foreign Affairs Committee, on securing this debate. He will be surprised to hear that I agree with him on the need to differentiate between refugees and immigrants. I was very pleased that he made that distinction in his comments, but that is the only common ground that we have. However, I congratulate him on securing the debate and on speaking about the subject so forthrightly. It is an issue that we sincerely need to discuss, and we have had a good debate with some good contributions.

I want to briefly touch on immigration since other hon. Members have touched on it today. I hope the hon. Member for Gravesham will forgive me for doing so, given the comments that have already been made. Immigration is a good thing for the United Kingdom. It has been a good thing for a long time past. Huge contributions have been made by immigrants and refugees to all of our communities the length and breadth of the country. Similarly, within the European context, freedom of movement is a good thing. It is good for our economy and it is good socially. I am somebody who has benefited. There is a great myth that somehow it is only the United Kingdom that bears the brunt of freedom of movement, whereas the reality is that UK citizens benefit from freedom of movement as much as EU citizens benefit.

The hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) was keen to highlight the English challenges, which I am sure there are. She made a sensible case for devolution of immigration because it is something that the Scottish Government have looked for. It would benefit the Scottish economy, so we want more immigration. I know that the agriculture sector in my own constituency benefits, as it does in the constituency of the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), who also highlighted that the NHS benefits hugely from immigration. We in Scotland are keen to see more. The hon. Member for St Albans made her case on behalf of her constituents and I respect that, but there is a case to be made for devolving immigration. In fact, in countries such as Australia, different states already take responsibility for immigration.

On refugees, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) made an impassioned case. The hon. Member for Gravesham talked about how many we should take. We should certainly

take a lot more than the 0.25% we currently take. The EU is looking to relocate 160,000 refugees, and that goes to the heart of the points he makes. I hope the Minister will give a thorough explanation about why the UK Government are not opting into the project. The United Kingdom has taken 400—0.25%—of those 160,000 refugees. That is a disgrace. Ireland, our neighbours to the west, have an opt-out, as has the UK, and Ireland has decided not to use it. Perhaps the Minister can tell us why the Irish have decided not to use their opt-out but the UK has. I am sure he will cover that.

Furthermore, I hope the Minister will touch on why the Government are not taking up offers of support from the Scottish Government. They have offered to help the UK Government and to take more than our fair share. Some 40% of the refugees who arrive are going to Scotland—the first batch went to Scotland. The Scottish Government have put their money where their mouth is. We are not just talking about this; we are doing it and we are taking action. Will the Minister touch upon the Scottish Government’s offers of help?

On the issue of refugees, we are talking about people fleeing conflict and failed states such as Libya. The United Kingdom had a hand in its becoming a failed state. We spent £320 million bombing Libya and then £25 million on reconstructing it. I believe we have a responsibility in such areas.

We also have the dreadful civil war in Syria. I was fortunate enough to spend time in a refugee camp on the Turkish border. I met one person who did not want to go back to their country. The only reason he did not want to go back was because he could receive the medical treatment for his wounds from the conflict only in Sweden, where the last remaining members of his family lived. We need to remember who is holding the front line on this—countries such as Macedonia, Croatia, Italy and Greece—and we have an obligation to show a little bit of European solidarity. I hope the Minister addresses that point.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) ably pointed out, immigration has a huge impact, but it is a positive one. I noted his remarks about the Kindertransport children in his own constituency. We also have to remind ourselves of the challenges that refugees face. There are 2.5 million refugees in Turkey, and one in four people in Lebanon are refugees. The challenges are huge. That was something that my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) mentioned. I hope the Minister addresses those issues.

3.36 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I, too, thank the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr Holloway) for securing this debate. It is really important to discuss these issues, even if there are deep divides between us on the right way forward. The challenge of migration into the EU is clearly a huge one. Last year it was the biggest challenge in a generation. All the forecasts are that migration into the EU is likely to be greater this year than last year, so there is no doubt as to the nature and scale of the challenge.

Syria has been discussed this afternoon. When we look at the size of the challenge, it is worth reminding ourselves of the figures in relation to those fleeing Syria:

[Keir Starmer]

13.5 million of the population of 22 million are in dire need and 6.6 million are displaced, of whom 4.3 million have fled abroad. That is a huge issue that will be even bigger this year. Last year, nearly 1 million of those fleeing from Syria claimed asylum somewhere in the EU.

It is important to reflect on the causes of migration into the EU, which are predominantly persecution; gross human rights abuses; extreme poverty; and climate change. We can find all those causes reflected in any refugee camp in Europe. I was in Calais, which the hon. Member for Gravesham mentioned, and Dunkirk at the beginning of January. In Dunkirk there are many families. One of the men spoke to me and explained that he had fled from Kurdistan as a result of ISIS taking over his town, and he ended up in Dunkirk. There are lots of different reasons why people are on the move in the numbers that they are.

The first imperative in dealing with the challenge is joint international work upstream to try to reduce the conflicts that cause so many people to leave in the first place. I concur with the comments about how the vast majority of people from Syria would very much prefer to be back in Syria at the first opportunity. We must have upstream work to de-escalate conflict, and we must work with our international partners wherever we can to reduce the likelihood of people having to flee their home country.

There is also the question of people smuggling. Our Government and various Departments are working jointly with partners in Europe and beyond to deal with people smuggling, not only in Europe but upstream. My staff in the Crown Prosecution Service were involved in that when I was the Director of Public Prosecutions. Again, that is work that needs to be done upstream.

As for our contribution to rescuing those who are desperate and at risk of losing their lives, I thought it was a wrong turn when we withdrew some support for the rescue operations. I am glad that we are now fully engaged in those exercises on the Mediterranean again. Assuming that all that work is carried out, we then have to consider how to process individuals quickly when they get to Europe.

I have been pressing for some time on the issue of family reunification. There are rules, such as the Dublin III agreement, on family reunification and the rights of some of the people who are currently in Europe to reunite with family here. In some of the camps, such as Calais and Dunkirk, it is absolutely clear on the ground that those rules are not working in practice. We could do more about the refugee crisis than we are currently doing. Of course it is welcome that we are relocating 20,000 people from the camps outside Syria, but, along with others, I am concerned about the number of unaccompanied children in Europe. It is not only about the number, but the fact that more than 1,000 have disappeared. They are particularly vulnerable, so I urge the Government to do more for unaccompanied children.

We must also address the question of how we support people if and when they arrive in this country. This is the second of three Westminster Hall debates on refugees and migration. We had a debate this morning on the support for asylum seekers when they arrive in this country and how the contracts to provide accommodation are not working as they should.

The central point of this debate was made by the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter): in the light of the scale of the challenge and the reality of the steps that need to be taken, leaving the EU will not help. We need to be playing our part upstream to reduce conflict, playing our part in rescuing those who are desperately in need, and co-ordinating the response to the challenge in Europe. I do not think that there are many Members of this House, or many members of the public, who genuinely think that we should simply step away from Europe, or who think we should recognise the huge numbers of people fleeing into Europe and the desperate conditions from which they are coming and simply say, "It's not our problem. We will somehow exit from Europe and play no part."

Pat Glass: Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that, if we exit Europe, unless we become a city state like Singapore—a tax haven on the edge of Europe—and have absolutely no trade agreements with Europe, we will still be subject to all the surcharges on everything we make and export? Unless we do that, we will have to abide by the rules and regulations that apply for all EU member states, along with those states that trade with them, such as Norway and Switzerland. That includes the rules on the free movement of people. Whether we leave or not, it is not going to make any difference to the free movement of people across Europe.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I agree. I have tried to make a similar point about criminal justice measures. A number of EU criminal justice measures are critical in the UK and used 24/7. Almost all those involved in criminal activity above a certain level operate across borders, and we rely heavily on EU criminal justice measures to combat that activity. By that I mean that we locate our own staff in Europe and are co-ordinating with our partners all the time. Without those measures, we would be at much greater risk in relation to criminal justice.

If we come out of the EU, I accept that there is no rule to prevent us from trying to renegotiate the economic and criminal justice measures, but it would be a very difficult renegotiation that would, in all likelihood, take us back to precisely the same measures. Take, for example, the European arrest warrant. It is extremely unlikely that our European partners would negotiate with us an approach to such warrants that was different from the existing arrest warrant. We would therefore step outside Europe and have to renegotiate the same provisions as we have now, but we would lose all influence. I saw that when I was Director of Public Prosecutions: the moment the Prime Minister suggested that there was going to be an EU referendum, our voice around the table on what future measures should be crafted to deal with crime was reduced in both volume and influence.

There is also a point of principle, touched on by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), as to whether we really want to retreat from the world stage or play our part. We see our role in the world as one in which we will involve ourselves in, for example, the conflict in Syria. The argument that the Prime Minister made to the House before the vote on Syria was premised on our responsibility as a nation state to play our part in combating Daesh. That is the sort of nation that we are: we want to play our part in combating Daesh. I voted against the motion before the House,

but not because I disagreed with the principle that we should play our part internationally to resolve the crisis in Syria. So, too, with humanitarian aid—

3.45 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

[MR DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

3.57 pm

On resuming—

Keir Starmer: I was about to conclude my remarks, so the Division was timely.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): There we are. Great speech.

3.58 pm

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): It is a rare privilege to see you in Westminster Hall, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, and previously that of Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesend (Mr Holloway) on securing this wide-ranging debate, which has touched on a number of issues relating to migration into the EU. I thank other hon. Members for their contributions.

It is important to set out the context of the debate, as others have. We are experiencing movements of people into the EU on a scale that has not been seen for generations. Some have sought to liken it to past events, but the situation we are dealing with is very different, given the number of nationalities involved, the nature of the situation and the mix of refugees with those who come to the EU seeking a better way of life, so looking for parallels with past events is challenging.

We can be clear that European member states face an unprecedented number of refugees and migrants, primarily from the middle east and Africa. More than 950,000 refugees and migrants reached the EU last year on the Mediterranean routes. About 800,000 arrived in Greece, the majority of whom were Syrian. Some 150,000 arrived in Italy after making the dangerous sea crossing from Libya. More than 3,500 people drowned, and many more have died or suffered at the hands of smugglers and traffickers en route.

Some Members called today for the Government to provide a humanitarian response. Some, such as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), even suggested that we were washing our hands of the problem. I would rather characterise it as the Government and the country rolling up our sleeves. We can be proud of the steps that this Government have taken, which reflect our moral approach to such issues. We have considered the problems at hand, dealt with them at source and brought countries together to solve the problems that lie behind the migration crisis into the EU.

It is notable that this debate comes hot on the heels of last week's London conference, where nations came together to pledge £10 billion. Important though it is, however, this is not just about money; it is about direct assistance for hundreds of thousands of people. Indeed, the conference's outcomes included the commitments to create 1.1 million jobs for Syrian refugees and host country citizens in the region by 2018, and to ensure that none of the more than 1 million affected children will become part of a lost generation, with assurances

about quality education and equal access for girls and boys. The UK has contributed an additional £1.2 billion, raising the money that we have committed to £2.3 billion. We are not "washing our hands"; we are responding appropriately to a huge crisis.

People have asked about our contribution within the EU. The UK has just increased its aid to migrant children in Europe and the Balkans to £46 million, divided among the most affected countries and including specific support of £2.7 million for UNICEF. We have also announced in recent weeks a new £10 million fund to support the needs of vulnerable refugee and migrant children in the EU.

Securing the EU's external borders is a key part of addressing the crisis. Although the UK does not participate in Schengen border arrangements, a well managed external EU border is in our national interest. The Government fully support the European Commission's hotspots proposal, which is aimed at addressing the continuing failure of some member states quickly to fingerprint and process arrivals and to provide protection to those who need it and return those who do not. It is unfortunate that implementation has been regrettably slow, and we will continue to press the Commission and all member states to act with urgency in establishing processing centres. We will also provide resource and expertise as and when required to ensure that people are processed when they arrive in the Greek islands or elsewhere, and that those in need of support and those not can be identified.

Mrs Main: I support my right hon. Friend in that aim. Frontex has shown that more than 1.8 million people have entered Europe illegally, yet only several hundred thousand have been sent back, so there is an obvious need for the additional support that our country has given.

James Brokenshire: We will provide assistance to the European Asylum Support Office and to Frontex to help with the establishment of processing centres right on the frontline, to help deal with the problem and co-ordinate things on the ground. That is a core priority. We also continue to support Frontex in its mission to rescue people from the sea. I pay tribute to the Border Force officers, Royal Marines and military medics currently on the VOS Grace, which has rescued several thousand people over recent months and will continue its operations, transferring to off the coast of Libya at the end of this month.

The link between organised crime and migration is clear and unprecedented, and has contributed directly to ongoing suffering and loss of life. For that reason, the UK is playing a leading role in tackling people smuggling and is increasing joint intelligence work to target the cruel gangs that exploit human beings for their own gain. The work of the organised immigration crime taskforce is progressing, bringing together 100 officers from the National Crime Agency, the Border Force, immigration enforcement and the Crown Prosecution Service to pursue and disrupt the organised crime gangs operating across Europe and Africa. We are also harnessing intelligence through Europol, which is proving helpful and fruitful.

I have been challenged about our response in Europe, and I have already identified not only the support that we are providing in the Syrian region but the direct support that we are providing in Europe. Since the crisis began the Government have been clear about our view on relocation: it is the wrong response. It does absolutely

[James Brokenshire]

nothing to address the underlying causes of the crisis, and it does nothing more than move the problem around Europe. The reality is that it has not even been good at doing that. Commitments have been made over recent months to relocate 160,000 people, but only 497 people have been relocated to date. Instead, we believe that it is most effective to provide support to countries facing particular pressures, and our focus will remain on helping the most vulnerable who remain in the region as part of a comprehensive strategy to end the crisis.

Stuart C. McDonald: If the Government will not take part in relocation, what should happen to the million people who arrived last year and the million who will arrive this year? Where should they go? Who should take on that responsibility?

James Brokenshire: We have clear rules in Europe that those in need of humanitarian protection should claim it at the first opportunity. We have provided aid assistance and expert support within Europe, and we stand ready to commit more to the hotspots initiative, ensuring that those in need of protection can be better identified. In the past fortnight, we announced the £10 million fund that I mentioned earlier, part of which is intended to harness the Dublin regulation by supporting effective identification of children who need to be reunited with their family. Where family reunion under the regulation is achievable, we will help to match things up by having better systems in place. That is about direct assistance.

Stephen Gethins: Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), is the Minister suggesting that Malta, for example, should deal with the refugees that arrive there on its own without the UK lending a supporting hand?

James Brokenshire: As I have indicated, the UK is more than lending a hand by dealing with some of the significant factors that push people to cross the sea and with the organised immigration crime that is facilitating that. We are also providing expert support to the European Asylum Support Office, Frontex and Europol. The UK is demonstrating, through a broad range of measures, its commitment to solidarity with European partners in dealing with the crisis at hand.

On returns, which some Members have referred to in the debate, the unprecedented numbers of migrants and refugees arriving in Europe mean that it is more important than ever that each and every EU member states fulfils its responsibilities to process all those arriving, provide refuge to those who need it and return those who do not. As part of those efforts, all member states must have legislation and processes in place to identify and weed out abuse of their asylum system.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Will the Minister praise the work of local councils in stepping up to the plate when it comes to the migrant crisis? For example, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council has dealt with a large number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and has become a beacon of best practice in the west midlands.

James Brokenshire: I commend a number of councils on the support that they have provided in welcoming refugees under the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, and I commend my hon. Friend for highlighting his own council. I pay tribute to councils in Scotland that are providing such support, as well as to the charities and other organisations standing behind them. On the work on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, I recognise the pressures in counties such as Kent, and measures in the Immigration Bill, which is currently in the other place, are intended to assist with that.

The Government's consistent focus has been on finding a comprehensive and sustainable solution to the refugee crisis. The Prime Minister has continued to emphasise the need for the EU to deal with the root causes of the crisis, not just to respond to the consequences. In Syria that means working with the international community to bring about an end to the brutal conflict there and to defeat Daesh. The UK has been at the forefront of the response to the crisis in Syria and the region. In Libya that means helping to form a Government of national accord who can regain control of Libya's borders and tackle the smuggling gangs. In Turkey it means working towards comprehensive border management, ensuring a humanitarian response to those reaching that country and disrupting the organised criminal networks that look to profit from the plight of others. The UK is also playing a leading role in Africa.

The migration crisis continues to evolve. The Government maintain a leading role in seeking to join together international partners in the EU and elsewhere. We can be proud of our response, but we remain vigilant. We need to carry on providing support in many different ways, but the UK can look with pride at the steps that have been taken already. We will continue to do our bit.

4.11 pm

Mr Holloway: In summary, we have got to do what is right, what works, what is sustainable and what is moral, not just what makes us feel better about things. A good example of what I am talking about could be the case mentioned by the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), of someone from Kurdistan in Dunkirk whose town had been taken by ISIS. The rest of Kurdistan is relatively peaceful and, after 18 months, the peshmerga had taken back places such as Sinjar, so there is no reason for someone to move from Kurdistan to Calais to seek safety. There is plenty of safety in other bits of Kurdistan and within the region. The driver in that case is, I think, economic; it is not about security.

When we think about the refugees, we should be helping the many, not the relatively privileged few who have the money to make long journeys. We should be helping people in the region, and helping them properly, as the Prime Minister and the Minister for Immigration have done. We have to send out a firm message to the hundreds of millions of people within only a few days' drive of the Mediterranean: if they come to Europe, they will not stay in Europe. Until we do so, the crisis will go on and on.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered migration into the EU.

Mobile Infrastructure Project

[MRS ANNE MAIN *in the Chair*]

4.13 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the mobile infrastructure project.

It is a pleasure and an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main.

The purpose of the debate is to express the concerns of four distinct communities in my constituency, in Ebbesbourne Wake, the Woodford valley, Broad Chalke and Bowerchalke, with what is in essence the failure of the mobile infrastructure project. We hoped that the project would improve the poor or in many cases non-existent mobile phone coverage in those areas, but none of the proposed masts at those sites have been seen through to completion. I will set out the challenges of the project and the lessons to be learned from it. I will also make constructive suggestions about how we can move forward. It is heartening to see a number of colleagues in the Chamber with experience, I suspect, of similar disappointments with the project.

The mobile infrastructure project, on which I am sure the Minister will give us authoritative detail later, was first announced in 2011. The Government envisaged working in partnership with a private firm, Arqiva, and providing it with capital funding to build new mobile phone masts. The masts were to be operated by four large operators, which would fund the operating costs for 20 years. The aim was to improve the coverage and quality of mobile network services for the 5% to 10% of consumers and businesses living and working in areas with poor or non-existent coverage, and to ensure that 99% of the population had mobile service.

In a series of debates on broadband infrastructure and mobile telephony everyone has been impressed with the progress made by the Government generally in increasing the percentage of people who can access new services. For those who cannot, the situation is extraordinarily frustrating. My understanding is that 600 potential sites were identified at the beginning of the project, and the contract with Arqiva commenced in May 2013. By December 2015, a couple of months ago, the project had cost £9.1 million and only 15 masts were live. The Secretary of State announced that the project will not be extended past its deadline of March 2016, so it is anticipated that by the time the project ends only about 50 masts will have been built, which is perhaps a sixth of the number of masts envisaged five years ago.

The project faced significant challenges from the beginning. First, the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport was told that Arqiva had to wait almost a year to receive accurate data on “not spot” zones aligned with operators’ network maps. Arqiva said that it had not anticipated that delay when the project was scoped.

Secondly, perhaps the most typically vexing experience has been of the delays in planning permission and the difficulty of obtaining it for a number of sites. The Minister contacted me about sites in my constituency, acknowledging uncertainty over where they might be, and I engaged with the parishes concerned in an effort to find agreeable sites quickly. In such rural areas with

the poorest mobile coverage, however, two factors are significant. The proposed sites are often in areas of outstanding natural beauty or national parks—we have both in my constituency—which can provoke numerous representations, because if a mast is not in the right place, it is there for a long time, causing significant environmental challenges. We must, however, recognise the need to overcome that obstacle, because better mobile coverage is absolutely necessary. Getting right the planning permission, with an economically viable power connection, has been a significant barrier.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): We had three proposed masts in my constituency, one of which will be going ahead and will be transformational, proving the possible impact. Does my hon. Friend agree that the lesson we might have to learn if the scheme returns—I hope there will be some kind of renewed funding—has to be on the basis of communities coming forward to an extent and being proactive and willing to accept masts, so that we know there is a good chance of getting planning permission? Instead, the other way around, we have been saying, “Here’s a load of money,” and people get excited, but nothing actually gets delivered.

John Glen: I am extremely grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention. That is where we need to get to by the end of the debate: a real sense of what can be achieved, with a call-out to those communities that are most keen to secure a mast location under the MIP or a successor project, if there is one, so that we can make things happen. Raised expectations that are dashed after two or three years is a most frustrating phenomenon for constituency MPs to deal with.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

John Glen: I will happily give way to my parliamentary neighbour.

Dr Murrison: I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing this important subject. Does he agree that it is not so much that the project is at fault, but that perhaps it was a bit over-ambitious in the timeframes in which masts can be brought forward, noting difficulties with planning permission, which as he will fully know can be protracted, and issues around the powering up of masts? Perhaps he may want to encourage the Minister to extend the programme.

John Glen: As ever, my hon. Friend and neighbour alights on the right points. I would like to talk about the short timeframe, because Wiltshire Council tells me that Arqiva contacted it on numerous occasions but the project was dropped at the first sign of local difficulty in obtaining a planning consent because the short timeframe to deliver on a completed mast made it too difficult. The other issue Arqiva said it experienced was that initially the coverage was intended to be for 2G voice and data services, but there was a subsequent extension to future-proof the project with capacity for 4G. I suspect that change of scope mid-way through the project did not help the smooth delivery of masts.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are going to go for new masts, it is right to use the latest technology that provides the data and broadband that people want access to as well as voice services?

John Glen: I absolutely agree. It is critical that we have additional capacity for spectrum frequencies delivered in a cost-effective way. There is no point in taking a quick option that is now out of date and it is imperative that we take that lesson on board.

I want to be constructive in how I address the Minister in the debate, because whatever has happened, the Government's aims were absolutely correct. It is extremely disappointing that the project did not meet its original aims. It has underspent and I understand that that money has been returned to the Treasury, so there is scope for representations to be made to the Treasury in the coming weeks to look to repurpose that money for further projects. I want to put on record my support for the legally binding deal the Government secured with mobile phone operators to guarantee mobile coverage for 90% of the UK land mass by 2017, tackling partial "not spots". However, that is of little comfort to those who have no hope because they are in "not spots" where there is no prospect of achieving mobile coverage. We need to intervene quickly.

If we are to be successful, we need to overcome the planning permission issue. Given the need to gain planning permission for such a large number of sites, was the project's three-year timeframe realistic? Wiltshire Council found the timeframe that Arqiva had to deal with the technical feasibility, stakeholder engagement and planning processes too short.

Questions should be asked about the tender process for the contract. Arqiva made much of its ability to engage with stakeholders and obtain planning permission quickly—I saw that in an article on its website last year—but it would be useful to understand what the Department believed Arqiva was capable of doing in terms of the project's aims and what its assessment was of why technical and planning difficulties were not overcome.

When there are future projects to tackle "not spots" and improve capacity, the Minister should consider working with the Department for Communities and Local Government to create fast-tracked and more streamlined infrastructure planning consent routes specifically for that purpose. I am a strong advocate of this Government's and the previous Government's commitment to localism and working constructively with local councils, but I would observe the feedback I received from Councillor John Thomson, the deputy leader of Wiltshire Council. He told me:

"we feel the lack of early and timely engagement with the right stakeholders such as AONBs and the right landowners from the very beginning of the project has significantly contributed to the failure across all nine potential sites. Wiltshire Council have asked Arqiva for an explanation as to why individual sites did not get taken forward, but to date have not had any report from them".

The project has been deeply disappointing and frustrating for so many of our constituents. Future projects must work with stakeholders, who are often committed to the aims of the project and want the work to be completed, but it seems that when anxiety was expressed in the early stages, projects were pushed aside and not completed as they should have been.

In conclusion, I would like to focus on the challenge. I know that the Minister has worked extremely hard to find solutions, but we are all very aware that we need to have timely, appropriate and technically achievable goals

that we can take back to our constituents and say, "This will be delivered in a reliable timeframe", because many people are cynical about the initiative.

I am anxious that the Minister should update us on what the Government are doing to tackle poor mobile phone coverage in the light of the experience in Salisbury and south Wiltshire and the failure of the project, notwithstanding the positive initiatives in other respects. We need to give business the infrastructure it needs and meet its need for connectivity. Some of these communities have poor landline connections, broadband is intermittent and they are not in the phase 2 for the roll-out of superfast broadband in Wiltshire.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. These issues affect not just Wiltshire residents, but Dorset residents. Doubtless the Minister will be positive and bullish, as is his custom, but I would invite him to recognise that while the 90% target is good, for the 10% who are left, including those Dorset residents who do not have coverage, it becomes more and more frustrating for them as more people get coverage.

John Glen: My hon. Friend makes the exact point that we all wish to make. There is real urgency around the project. We know that the money has gone back to the Treasury, but I urge the Minister to focus on how we can re-establish the scheme and ensure that individual applications can be expedited quickly in the second half of the year, when so much work has already been done, so that we can go back to our constituents and say, "There is hope." There will be an opportunity and if applications are in and certain criteria are met, we can go back to our local authorities with an assurance and deliver on a promise, which, while I do not want to be melodramatic, has been cruelly taken away. That is a significant inconvenience to businesses, individuals and families who find themselves unable to speak to other family members—they cannot ring their children—and feel totally cut off just five or six miles from the city of Salisbury. It is not good enough, and the Government need to address that.

4.28 pm

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I still fondly recall my visit to your constituency to see the wonderful heritage and that brilliant museum that you have there—what a lucky MP you are!

I feel in a relatively philosophical mood as I gaze at 12 colleagues who are a sort of jury, ready to give a verdict on the programme. I must admit that I am guilty as charged. I do not think the programme has been a success, and I do not think that Ministers often say that about their programmes. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) predicted that I would be bullish about the programme in my usual bombastic—he did not say that word, but perhaps he meant it—fashion, but I will not be bullish about it.

I think that when Ministers defend their programmes, they should have credibility. I am happy to defend the superfast broadband roll-out, which I think has been an

unequivocal success despite the occasional criticism I receive. I am also happy to defend our record on libraries, despite the brickbats that I get from library campaigners, but I am fully prepared to stand up in the Chamber and admit that the mobile infrastructure project has not been as successful as we had envisaged. We set aside £150 million. We talked about 600 sites. Our heart was in the right place. We wanted to eliminate “not spots”, precisely because of the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) raised: mobile phones are essential to many people in their daily lives. We wanted to eliminate the “not spots” that exist as best we could. I am grateful to him for securing this important debate.

Dr Murrison: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vaizey: I am in the middle of my mea culpa, but I might as well give way and make this as tortuous as possible.

Dr Murrison: I am rather concerned, because the Minister seems to be beating himself up. The truth of the matter is that if his Department is guilty of anything, it is perhaps not having anticipated how long it takes to get infrastructure projects of this sort off the ground. All he needs to do is say that the project essentially is a good one but we need to allow it a little more time, so that projects of the sort to which my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) alluded have a chance.

Mr Vaizey: I hear what my hon. Friend says, and I will address that point in a minute.

I want to start with some of the obstacles that we encountered. First, there was the issue of coverage. I said earlier that I was in a philosophical mood. What we had to try to establish, to quote Shakespeare, was, “What is a not spot?” Trying to establish where a “not spot” is—that is, exactly where we will get no mobile coverage—can be difficult when dealing with radio frequencies. For the benefit of hon. Members who have not taken a close interest in the programme, a “not spot” is where no mobile operator can get a signal. A partial “not spot” is where there may be a signal from one mobile operator but not from another.

We therefore had to narrow down what a “not spot” is. That proved a useful exercise, because it allowed us to work with Ofcom and the mobile operators for the first time to establish a much more robust system of identifying where we were not getting mobile signals. Of course, the programme was announced at around the same time as the 4G auction, so we ran smack bang into the middle of the 4G roll-out programme, which was clearly going to change coverage criteria and therefore add another factor.

The next issue was planning. My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury makes a good point—we had not anticipated just how difficult some of the planning issues are, particularly when we were dragging four operators with us, metaphorically kicking and screaming. Although we were paying for the mast, we were asking them to meet the operating costs going forward, which include the land rental as well as the transmission costs for what is, by definition, an uneconomic area.

As an example, I will take my hon. Friend through the saga of North Hill farm in his constituency. A planning application was approved at the end of October 2015,

but the council—I am sure he knows some of its councillors—then decided that even though planning approval had been given, the colour of the mast had to be subsequently approved. Apparently, if a range of colours had been given, that would not have caused a delay, but the council wanted specific approval of the mast’s specific colour. That was compounded by the fact that the council and the area of outstanding natural beauty partnership did not respond to Arqiva’s request for guidance on what colour mast they wanted, to enable the council to make an application to discharge the planning condition—in other words, the colour of the mast.

James Cartlidge: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vaizey: I just want to finish the saga. Arqiva submitted a discharge of condition application in November. That was received by Wiltshire Council, which discharged the condition on 30 November. That was a full month after the deadline we had set for all planning applications to be determined, thus taking it out of the MIP programme.

Planning issues have proved difficult. We have had communities campaigning against masts and putting concrete blocks in front of the base stations to prevent any further work.

James Cartlidge: It is good to hear the Minister nailing his colours to the mast, as it were. We have had similar issues in South Suffolk. It seems to me that all of the problems point to this: masts can go up and we can have new projects, but we have to learn lessons, and the communities that want the masts will have to be far more engaged and willing to come forward and accept them, rather than just be passive in the process.

Mr Vaizey: I agree with my hon. Friend.

Let me say what we have done since the MIP programme. My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury talked about light at the end of the tunnel and giving people hope, and we have made some important changes. For a start, we are bringing in changes to allow mobile operators to erect taller masts, which will enable the signal to go further and have a significant impact in rural areas. We are going to change the electronic communications code, which governs access to masts and has a significant effect on the cost of maintaining infrastructure. We want to bring that forward through a digital economy Bill.

Subsequent to the MIP programme, we negotiated a change in the licences for mobile operators so that they now have to meet 90% geographic coverage, not just the 98% premises coverage. That will make a difference. The merger of O2 and Three, which we are waiting to see the result of, may make a significant difference. We have made Government property available for mobile masts, and all hon. Members might consider engaging with their councils on any property that would accommodate a mast. Those are all significant changes.

Of course, the emergency services programme that is just getting under way with EE should see the erection of 300 masts across the country, which will have a significant effect on “not spots”. As the 4G roll-out continues, we expect the area of “not spots” to fall to as low as 2% of the entire country, and the area of partial “not spots” to fall to as low as 12%—half what it is at the moment.

[Mr Vaizey]

I hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury says about a possible way forward, and I will certainly keep my mind open. We would have to overcome the scepticism of the mobile operators. One difficulty of the programme is that the companies do not want to participate in it—I do not say that pejoratively—because they are landed with the operating costs of the masts. We, the Government, pay the installation costs, but the companies are landed with the operating costs for masts that are, by definition, uneconomic.

I am sympathetic to the proposal about communities coming forward with sites where the council is willing to give planning permission. I remind my hon. Friend that planning permission for a mast still exists on the site I mentioned, should he be able to tempt a mobile operator to erect a mast on it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Vaizey: I now have at least three hon. Friends who wish to intervene. I will start with my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole.

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful. The Minister mentioned a 2% target for “not spots”. Can he give a date for when he envisages that being achieved?

Mr Vaizey: End of 2017. Next?

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): The Minister will be aware that permission has been given for a very large mast in Exmoor, which my constituency covers. Unfortunately, the licence for the site is running out because it has taken so long to get, so we cannot build a mast. Is there any way that extensions could be given where masts have been given approval but cannot be built because of that problem?

Mr Vaizey: I am not sure which licence my hon. Friend is referring to, but as he and I talk almost every day about broadband issues, I am happy to follow up on that specific point about licences. I have to put on the record what a vociferous constituency MP he is on behalf of his constituents’ broadband and mobile coverage.

I thought I had a third hon. Friend wishing to intervene, but they seem to have disappeared. I am not sure how long I have, Mrs Main.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Until 4.43 pm, unless you feel you have finished.

Mr Vaizey: I was working to 4.37 pm.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): There is no need to continue, if you feel you have finished.

Mr Vaizey: All I will say in the time remaining is that we have erected 16 of the masts and are hoping to get 60 up and running. Arqiva has a chief executive in the saddle, Simon Beresford-Wylie, who is very much focused on the project and has pushed through a lot of the applications.

A lot of my hon. Friends have suggested that the scheme could be extended. We took the tough decision, given the problems we have had with it, to impose a deadline. We had regular meetings about the scheme and how we could make it work more effectively and so

on, and it was finally decided, partly in the light of the changes I outlined earlier—the taller masts, the electronic communications code, the emergency services programme, which is significant, and the changes to mobile licences—that it was right to concentrate minds and bring in a deadline. However, the Government’s mind remains open to any suggestions from my hon. Friends who are quite rightly advocating better mobile phone coverage on behalf of their communities.

There is a juxtaposition: there is, of course, a social priority for good mobile phone coverage, but it remains the case that the mobile phone operators are private companies. They are therefore investing their own money in building networks, as well as paying the Government significant sums for the spectrum allocated to them that they won in an auction.

Just as we have done with the superfast broadband programme, it is right that the Government intervene as and when we can. Given the significant difficulties we have come across with the mobile infrastructure project, the way forward is changing the licences, changing planning regulations to allow taller masts and give better coverage, and implementing the emergency services programme, which comes in behind. I should add that the emergency services programme will benefit from the MIP, because a lot of the groundwork on identifying “not spots” and identifying some of the very significant logistical errors in erecting masts will go a long way towards informing the emergency services programme.

I am sorry that I sound a bit Eeyore-ish in responding to this debate, but hon. Members can tell that I have been living with this programme for the past three or four years, and I thought it was time I came to the House and gave a frank view from the Government Benches on how the programme has worked.

James Cartlidge: The Minister says, absolutely fairly, that the last scheme was stopped. Perhaps, to interpret what my hon. Friends are suggesting—this is certainly what I feel—we could have an improved and amended scheme in the months ahead. Therefore, if there is a village that does not have access to the emergency services programme and has no credible other technology to provide a mobile signal—for instance, if it is in a dip and needs a mast—will there still be the potential for a scheme whereby willing communities can come forward within the next 12 months?

Mr Vaizey: At the moment, no. To meet my hon. Friends halfway, I suggest that if we had a series of proposals whereby a community was genuinely willing to have a mast and the council was onside, it would be incumbent on the Government to consider those proposals. To refer back to my earlier remarks, we need to look at the particular sites that concern my hon. Friends, then see whether they fit within the emergency services programme and consider the potential way forward. I suggest that if my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury convenes a group of colleagues who wish to come and see me with definitive statements of masts that they would like to see progressed, I will happily hold that meeting after the February recess.

John Glen: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for his constructive remarks and see them as a green light to carry on the campaign.

Mr Vaizey: Quite right, too.

John Glen: Notwithstanding the reticence of the operators to engage in the project, there is a real imperative for the Government to force them to deal with this issue. I hope that the Minister recognises the widespread interest in the matter across the House and across our constituencies, where many people feel let down. However, I am grateful for what he has said and for the hope that he has given so many people who have contacted me in recent months.

Mr Vaizey: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks, and I am grateful for the additional six minutes, which I think took the debate forward significantly.

4.42 pm

Question put and agreed to.

Refugees: UK Government Policy

4.43 pm

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered UK Government policy on refugees.

It is a huge privilege to serve under your chairladyship, Mrs Main.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Chairladyship!

Richard Arkless: It is perhaps a little bit more politically correct.

Make no mistake—this country faces its biggest humanitarian crisis of our lifetime. The civil war in Syria has cost the lives of almost a quarter of a million people since it began. The UN estimates that over half of Syria's pre-wartime population of 23 million is now in need of emergency assistance. Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt have so far received over 3 million people, with the figure set to increase by another 1 million this year. Some 1.2 million refugees have managed to navigate their way to Europe, with the estimate, again, of up to 1 million to come this year.

The total estimated figure for displaced persons as a result of the Syrian war now amounts to just under 4 million people. Syrians are now officially the most displaced population in the world, with the majority of those displaced being children. The war has not only sparked the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time, but has exposed a region, already destabilised, to becoming one where chaos reigns freely on the ground. In my view, that is the core reason why so many have left their homes and their lives in search of a more secure immediate future. It is not just Syrian; Afghanis, Iraqis, Libyans and others are all fleeing this destabilised region and we must recognise that the UK has played its fair share in the actions that have resulted in that destabilisation.

People's lives and their human dignity are on the line. The perils of a journey across the Mediterranean pale into complete insignificance for them, compared with the terror that they leave behind. Only last week, more than 50 people drowned in the Aegean sea. The numbers continue to grow as the weeks and months go by and they will not slow down if we stay on our current course.

Such people are certainly not making an easy trip to claim benefits from our welfare system. Do we honestly believe that people fleeing for their lives have logged on to the Department for Work and Pensions website, analysed our benefits system and said to themselves, "Do you know what? The UK will do for me.?" To suggest so is to misunderstand completely the situation that these people find themselves in.

The benefit-chasing myth—so easy to peddle and excite UK Independence party voters with—should be dismantled here and now. These are human beings fleeing terror and likely death. They want to work in an environment where their families are safe and can be provided with a good life—that is it. These are values that we all share as human beings and I say that we should approach this problem, first and foremost, in our capacity as human beings.

[*Richard Arkless*]

I voted against UK airstrikes in Syria because I believed that the risk of exacerbating the problem was too great even to quantify, and a few months on there is little sign that our involvement has in any way stopped the war or the flow of refugees. However, because our pals were doing it, we thought that it was the right thing to jump in with them.

Bob Stewart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. The reason why airstrikes on Syria are required is to stop these murdering people from carrying out further murderous crimes and to keep them bottled up. That is why I support airstrikes and I hope that in the end, that is what will happen: they will stay there and be bottled up until we can find a political solution. That is why airstrikes are necessary.

Richard Arkless: Of course, I disagree with that assertion. There was a very prolonged debate on the Floor of the House when both sides had the opportunity to put their points of view across. I sincerely hope that the hon. Gentleman's assertion is proved correct—history will be our judge—but my view is firmly on the other side of that argument. I hope he can respect that difference of opinion.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Like him, I voted against the airstrikes for similar reasons. It is right for us to address the refugee crisis as human beings, and does he agree that a credible proposal to establish, through concerted international action, safe areas within Syria in which people could seek refuge would be worthy of international support?

Richard Arkless: Yes, of course; I agree completely with the right hon. Gentleman's comments. Although we must find a solution to the war, that focus should never alleviate our responsibility as human beings to do something more about the displacement and creation of refugees. I have started by summarising the current state of the problem facing us in the hope that Members present will take an open-minded approach, as human beings, to why the UK response to this crisis is inadequate and falls short of the moral and necessary minimum.

Let me be clear that nobody here doubts the efforts made by the UK in the large camps that litter the middle east. I welcome the UK's leading role in that. I accept that the UK is a major donor to that effort, and I support those initiatives and commend the Government for their efforts in that regard. However, I make this plea to the Minister: when he sums up, will he please not waste time waxing lyrical about our efforts in the camps? We all accept that. The point of difference is what extra we can do, and I hope his comments will be restricted to that point.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I am proud to say that two local authorities in my constituency, Camden and Brent, have pledged to take in 50 families between them, despite staggering cuts in their local government budget and the fact that these families will cost between £29,000 and £40,000 per family per year. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government should work with these local authorities to help them to

fulfil their pledges and with other local authorities to see how many families they can take in? Collective effort will put pressure on the Government to do something about the refugees.

Richard Arkless: I agree completely with the hon. Lady. Later in my speech, I will touch on some of the alternatives that the Government could use to encourage other people do more. We have all but turned a blind eye to the crisis facing our European partners and the Government seems to have joined the race to become the least attractive place for someone to seek refuge in the hope that refugees will aim to settle elsewhere. If that is the foundation of this Government's response, it is truly pathetic. The focus does not seem to be on how much we can help, but on how little we can get away with.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am the first to say that we need to be doing more in Europe and many hon. Members will know that I was in Lesbos with colleagues the weekend before last. The hon. Gentleman's statement is shameful and wrong.

Richard Arkless: Every Member is entitled to their opinion and I stand by my statement. It is unfortunate that the hon. Lady and I disagree about it.

The Prime Minister and the Government have massively underestimated the scale of the problem. The UK's response to the crisis has been a commitment to resettle 20,000 refugees in this five-year Parliament. It is a welcome contribution, but falls way short of what could be described objectively as a fair share. Oxfam tells us that a fair share would be 23,000 in 2016 alone and my simple calculation is that we seem to be taking in around 20% of what others are telling us our fair share is. Twenty thousand may sound a lot, but colleagues in the Chamber should recognise that it equates to six refugees per parliamentary constituency per year between now and 2020. If that is the extent of our humanity, I am deeply embarrassed.

The number could easily be larger, and the refugees could be accommodated through charitable initiatives and adequate partnerships between charities and local authorities. The Government could even ask people whether they can help. They may be surprised to learn that not everyone hovers between Tory and UKIP. Only this week, the Prime Minister used the incredible argument that if we left the European Union, we could end up with camps like that in Calais in the south of England. The implication was clear: it is fine if they are in France, but we do not want them here. I find that attitude inhumane.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making the important point that the numbers need not be large if they are spread out across the country. Will he make it clear whether his view is that it should be imposed on local authorities to take a certain number of refugees? I say that having spoken to local councils who have told me that it is important that they can choose how many to take.

Richard Arkless: The responsibility is with the Government and this place to decide what our moral contribution is. There should then be discussions with

local authorities to see what capacity they have and to come to some sort of agreement. The responsibility rests with this place and its elected Members to decide what our moral obligation is.

Striking the right balance between helping people in the region and those who have fled is crucial and the Prime Minister should encourage further debate in Europe on how those currently displaced within the EU could be spread proportionately. Would it not be refreshing if the UK was the voice of humanity in the EU?

It is estimated that 26,000 unaccompanied children came to Europe in 2015. Last month, we were told by Europol that 10,000 of those little kids are missing. A third of the total number of refugees entering Europe are children. Article 26 of the universal declaration of human rights and the European convention on human rights remind us that we have a moral duty to ensure that these children receive an education. That is non-negotiable, yet the ever-likely scenario is that these unaccompanied minors are more likely to fall into the hands of trafficking rings than to attend a lesson that could inspire their future.

We fully back Save the Children's call to the Government to give sanctuary to 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees. If we do not do that, what will we say to them: "Oops, sorry, we are one of the richest countries in the world, but we can take only a few hundred of you"? Will that clear our conscience and alleviate our moral obligations as elected Members? I think not. The UK must act now to take more than a fair share of these kids. They are children, for goodness sake. I cannot imagine that this place will ignore that call. Surely it will not.

There are strong economic indicators and arguments for welcoming refugees into the UK, supported recently by 120 leading economists in a letter to the Prime Minister. Even the Home Office has admitted in its own reports that migrants have offered a net contribution, which runs into billions. Time and again, migrants prove that they put in more than they take out, which prompts the question: what are the UK Government afraid of? Call me a cynic, but I think it is UKIP.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): I am looking at how many Back Benchers want to speak. I will call the Front Benchers at 5.23, so I hope hon. Members will do the maths and make way for their colleagues to speak. Otherwise, I will have to impose a limit.

4.56 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) on securing the debate. I did not agree with all of what he said, but he made some important points about our moral obligation and how we should raise our sights as high as we can when considering what we can do about the humanitarian crisis that is upon us. I had my airtime on this topic a couple of weeks ago, so I will be brief.

My perspective is that one cannot help but feel compassion when one sees the pictures of refugees, wherever they are in Europe, including Calais. That includes the pictures of Alan Kurdi on the beach last year and of the 70,000 or so refugees massed on the Turkish border right now. One feels that compassion,

but we must approach the situation with our heads as well as our hearts and make sure we do the right thing as well as being humane. I visited a refugee camp in Turkey last year, having visited the camp in Calais, which was so much worse than what I saw in the camp in Turkey. I have spoken to several local councils to hear how they are getting on with the resettlement of refugees under the Government's programme and how well the new arrivals who have already come to the UK are getting on.

Bob Stewart: My hon. Friend refers to "refugees". My wife, who is a delegate to the International Committee of the Red Cross, reminds me that refugees are people who are fleeing from a country in fear of their life, and that economic migrants are people who are trying to find a better life. Not all migrants are refugees, and the vast majority of those at Calais are probably economic migrants.

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I completely agree. Some of the people I spoke to in Calais are refugees, some are economic migrants and sometimes it is difficult to determine.

Bob Stewart: It is difficult to tell.

Helen Whately: Indeed. What they need to do is to apply for asylum and go through the process, when it will hopefully become clear what their right to remain is.

I want to share a few reflections this afternoon. First, although we want to bring refugees here and give them a chance of a new life—it can be life-changing—there is no point in doing so unless we genuinely give refugees a chance of a good life and a good experience here. It would be terrible to bring thousands of people here and for them to be put in an area that does not want them, in poor-quality housing, or for there to be resentment in the community surrounding them because it believes they are competing for housing and jobs, or just that there are too many people from another culture being imposed on the area.

It is critical that refugees who have come all the way across continents to come to the UK have a good experience, because if they do not, it may well be better for them to stay in the region, closer to extended family and closer to being able to get home afterwards. To ensure that refugees here have a good experience and are in good housing, that their children can go to school and that they can get jobs and are welcomed by communities, it is critical to continue the current scheme of local authorities stepping forward and saying that they believe that they can take two families, five families, 10 families or 50 families. They are the ones saying, "This is what we believe as a community we can do, and this is what our community will welcome."

Tulip Siddiq: I agree with many of the hon. Lady's points. My constituent, Alix Wilton Regan, has just come back from volunteering in Calais, and she said that the majority of people she met there were midwives, nurses, doctors and so on. Those are skills that we could use in our country; there is a shortage of such professionals in the UK at the moment. Does the hon. Lady agree that it would be mutually beneficial if we could bring such people over? It would not just benefit them, it would benefit us as well.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I ask that interventions be brief, especially as the hon. Lady is not down on the list to speak. I am mindful that other colleagues wish to speak.

Helen Whately: I am surprised by that account, because of what I saw when I was there. I think that it is widely accepted that the vast majority of people in the Calais area are men rather than women. Of course, that is not to say that there will not be both men and women from those professions. It is tempting to have an asylum policy whereby we welcome people who have particular skills that we need as a country, but I do not think that would necessarily be right. I think it is better to prioritise people by their need, rather than our need. Also, I would be worried about taking people from Calais, because I think that that would create a pull factor for people to come across Europe to Calais. It is so much better to take people from the region, rather than tempting them to come here.

As I said, I have been to Turkey. The conditions in the refugee camp that I saw were pretty good. I know that many people are choosing not to be in the refugee camps, because they want to work, but for most people it is at least a safe environment. I know that it is not for all people, and particularly for some from minority religions, but for many people in the region it is safe.

Heidi Allen: By and large, I agree with my hon. Friend that this pull factor is a dreadful thing, but could there be an exception to the rule for children who genuinely have not a soul left in the world? There is no pull or push factor for them. They are abandoned. Surely we have a duty to take them.

Helen Whately: I would defer to my right hon. Friend the Minister for a more detailed reply on that point. One's compassion for children means that of course it feels awful to imagine children abandoned. I think that we have to be very careful, though, not to encourage a situation in which we might see families and even parents letting—no, encouraging their children to try to head into Europe, because of the chance that they might have a new life. That would be really dangerous, and I imagine that there is a risk that it could happen were we to take children. There is a risk of that pull factor, although we are absolutely right to be looking at what we can do for those children, particularly those who are in Europe in awful conditions. How can we help? I do not think that it is remotely an easy answer.

On the point about children, I want to give the Kent perspective, as I represent a Kent constituency. We have more than 1,600 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and care leavers in Kent at the moment. We have appealed to other areas of the country to help Kent look after those young people, as Kent foster homes and the Kent fostering system are kind of full. Only about 90 have been taken by other local authorities, so in welcoming other children and child refugees, we need first to ensure that we are doing a good job by those who are already in the UK. We need to ensure that we look after those we have, not just try to help others. Let us do a good job for those who are here now.

As I said, when I went to Turkey, the conditions in the camp were relatively good—not lovely, but pretty good. Often, the grass looks greener in Europe to refugees, and we think, “Wouldn't it be better if we could have

more refugees here and help them get here?” But the grass is not necessarily greener in the UK—it would not be if we were to take huge numbers—and we know that the British pound goes much further in the region than it does here. Therefore, we are right to press on with the strategy of taking a limited number of refugees—those we can particularly help because of their health needs and what they have been through. However, all of us as MPs can press the local authorities in our areas to work together and say, “Let's see whether we can take more”. Maybe—let us hope—we can take more than 20,000 and do it faster, but we should do it from the bottom up, and we can all play a part in it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I ask that hon. Members divide the time among themselves—it is roughly five minutes each—as opposed to me imposing a time limit.

5.5 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): *Diolch yn fawr, Mrs Main.* I will do my best to keep to the time limit. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) for securing the debate.

It is safe to say that the geopolitics of human suffering that is bringing tide upon tide of desperate refugees to Europe is the greatest ethical and moral challenge of our time. Plaid Cymru has constantly and consistently called on the UK Government to recognise the enormity of the crisis and to respond appropriately. We have also joined charities such as Oxfam and the Welsh Refugee Council in urging that the nations of the United Kingdom take our fair share of refugees. However, the number of people reaching Wales remains small. It is a distressing fact that more people lost their lives in the Mediterranean last year than found refuge in Wales.

Wales has a proud history of offering sanctuary to refugees, but we need to do more, and doing more means that there is a complex jigsaw of authorities, responsibilities and budgets to negotiate, against a background of austerity. The UK Government, the Welsh Government, Welsh local authorities and Welsh charities need to pull together to ensure that refugees are welcomed in Wales, that they have the means to settle and thrive and that their host communities are sufficiently resourced. There are concerns that the funding allocated to individuals for health services may not be sufficient in specific cases. I have spoken to my own local authority, Cyngor Gwynedd, about that.

Both the Home Office and a given local authority might feel that individuals with certain health conditions—perhaps disabled people—should warrant humanitarian priority. I ask the Minister to consider special categories of health needs and to ensure that local authorities can afford to provide proper care. Councils and communities should not be placed in a situation of picking and choosing who to accept from the camps not on the grounds of need but on the grounds of affordability. It is to be feared that the result of that, as matters stand, will be leaving sick and disabled people in the camps, which must be the least suitable place imaginable.

With specific reference to Wales, I would also like to address concerns about asylum accommodation. The recent exposure of systematic failings by Clearsprings in Cardiff warrants an urgent inquiry. It is clear, following

yesterday's evidence session of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, that Clearsprings was aware of the practice of using red wristbands and decided not to challenge that practice. I propose that that indicates an unjustifiable level of insensitivity to refugees' experience that calls for an inquiry.

I would like to take this opportunity also to raise the plight of ethnic groups suffering at the hands of Daesh in countries beyond the boundaries of Syria. The media news cycle is fickle. What pulls at our heartstrings one week is next week's recycling fodder. Two years ago, the fate of the Yazidi community was headline news when Daesh besieged thousands of Yazidis on Mount Sinjar in Iraq between August and December 2014. Daesh's cynical demand of "Convert or die" amounted to nothing less than a veil to conceal genocide. Members of the Yazidi diaspora talk about 35 mass graves containing 6,000 dead. The Yazidis are a community of 500,000 people who have suffered extreme religious persecution. They have been displaced from their homelands in Sinjar, the Nineveh plain and Syria, where they have lived for 3,000 years. The Yazidis, as I am sure many people are aware, are not a Muslim people, and they have been treated with particular harshness because of that.

Yazidi women have been, and remain, the victims of systematic sexual violence at the hands of Daesh fighters. They are especially vulnerable to enslavement and forced sexual abuse because of their ethnicity and religion. This week, I had the honour of meeting a young Yazidi woman, Nadia Murad, and learning something about her experiences. I was horrified to learn that some 3,400 Yazidi women and girls—children among them—are still held captive by Daesh.

My request is that the degree of our concern is not dictated by the latest media story, and that the quality of people's suffering is not defined by the immediate horror of today's news bulletin. Along with many hon. Members, I urge the Government to take our fair share of refugees from Syria and beyond, and to ensure that we provide proper care for them here in the UK. I beg the Government to remember the other ethnic groups caught up in the maelstrom, in the name of religion, in the middle east.

5.10 pm

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) on securing an important debate. It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Lady—I am not going to insult her by trying to pronounce the name of her constituency in Welsh—who made a powerful speech about Yazidi women.

The refugee crisis facing Europe is one of the defining challenges of our time. Millions are fleeing the catastrophic conflict, and are asking and pleading for our help and humanity. So far, the UK's response has been shamefully inadequate. While other nations in Europe have stepped up and offered refuge to tens or hundreds of thousands, the UK has committed to taking just 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020. That pales in comparison with the numbers taken by other countries in Europe. Although I do not want to put an arbitrary number on how many refugees we should accept and by when, I would very much like to see the UK Government step up their efforts to support those affected by the Syrian conflict and others by providing shelter and refuge.

As an MP for Glasgow, I am proud and heartened that Scotland has led the way in welcoming refugees from Syria—a nation all but destroyed by civil war. A third of those who have come to the UK thus far have been settled in Scotland, which is down to the work of the Scottish Government, councils, housing associations and other organisations that have put a concerted effort into making that the case. These people are not simply coming to our shores in search of a better life. They are desperately seeking any kind of normal violence-free existence—the kind of life we all take for granted.

The plight of child refugees fleeing conflict zones is especially touching, and is an area in which the UK Government could and should make tangible progress. The Government have recently announced their intention to identify and help more vulnerable unaccompanied children who have already reached Europe from Syria and beyond, but that simply is not enough. Save the Children estimates that in Calais and Dunkirk alone, 2,000 unaccompanied children are living in refugee camps in horrific conditions that we would never wish our own children to be anywhere near. Many of those children already have families living in the UK, but the reunification process can take as long as 11 months to complete. Save the Children estimates that there are more than 20,000 unaccompanied children without shelter and stability across Europe, and they are vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.

Any truly humanitarian response from this Government would treat helping those young people as an urgent priority and ensure safe refuge. Sadly, the Government's record has been to put many refugee children back into harm's way rather than to rescue them. This week the Home Office admitted that, over the past nine years, 2,748 young people who sought asylum in the UK as unaccompanied children were deported to conflict-torn countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria—the place we are taking refugees from. I hope the Minister can justify that situation.

It is deeply disappointing that, instead of stepping up and offering leadership in tackling this humanitarian crisis, the Prime Minister has chosen to denigrate refugees seeking asylum and to treat them as political pawns. In referring to vulnerable people desperately seeking our assistance as a "swarm" or a "bunch of migrants", he betrays a callousness in his approach rivalled only by the UK Independence party.

Language matters. Sometimes in the debate about refugees, humanity is lost. Refugees are ordinary people like you, Mrs Main, and like me. They are people with lives, not merely pictures on a screen. They have lost their homes, their dignity and their way of life. They are scarred by conflict and are fleeing in very real danger of their lives. In October, I met people like us in Camp Newroz in Rojava in northern Syria. Many of them were Yazidis who have suffered the most catastrophic and horrendous circumstances and continue to do so. Their homes in Sinjar have been completely destroyed—their way of life obliterated. They cannot see a safe future in returning to Sinjar. It speaks of the scale of horror and destruction if it is safer in the sea than it is on land. Does our humanity allow us to turn our back on those people?

It is deeply concerning that, instead of leading efforts in Europe to find a humane and sustainable solution to the crisis, the Prime Minister has dragged refugees into

[*Natalie McGarry*]

an EU referendum campaign. A constructive vision of how co-operation across Europe can provide answers to major contemporary challenges such as the refugee crisis would be a far better argument for staying in the EU than his petty scaremongering that a vote to leave would see refugee camps at Dover.

The simple fact is that the refugee crisis is not going away, and the UK Government must step up their plans to support desperate people fleeing warfare and disaster. That means reviewing their refugee policy here in the UK and engaging far more actively at EU level to find a Europe-wide solution to this global humanitarian crisis. The Government still have an opportunity to act, expand their support and improve their international engagement, but they must first admit that they need to do more. I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

5.16 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mrs Main, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) on securing the debate.

I start on a positive note by paying tribute to the Minister for his work in resettling 1,000 vulnerable Syrian refugees. These things never operate completely perfectly but on the whole the resettlement scheme appears to have got off to a positive start and I thank him for his contribution to making that happen. More broadly, we should recognise that, compared with many countries, the position of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK is positive. However, the role of the Opposition is to point out what the Government could do better, and there is a lot that the Government could do better in their treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. I could probably speak all day on this subject so please do not treat this short shopping list as a comprehensive one. In the time I have, I will try to make three or four short points.

This morning we had an excellent debate on asylum accommodation and the COMPASS housing contracts. We heard about the red doors in Middlesbrough and the red wristbands in Cardiff. More broadly, we heard of myriad complaints about poor accommodation standards and services in various parts of the UK. Many hon. Members argued that, before the Government consider renewing the contracts, there must be a thorough independent review of the operation.

This afternoon, we had a robust debate on migration into Europe and our approach to the refugee crisis. In my short speech I made the case for UK participation in the relocation of refugees around the EU. More than 1 million people fled to Europe by sea last year—about 800,000 to Greece and 150,000 to Italy. Some 84% of those people were from refugee-producing countries. Almost half were from Syria, 21% were from Afghanistan and 9% were from Iraq. On any view, hundreds of thousands of refugees are among those arrivals. Many more—probably a greater number—will be coming this year and the year after.

No two countries can possibly cope with the task of receiving, registering, checking, supporting and processing claims for the refugee status of thousands of people every day, and no two countries can reasonably be

expected to absorb the hundreds of thousands of refugees that are among their number. Nor, indeed, can they take on the task of removing all those who require to be removed. Yet, in essence, the approach of this Government appears to be that Greece and Italy should have to serve as home for all several million refugees.

Heidi Allen: It is not only the UK. Every European nation is relying heavily on Greece to take the workload, and the international community needs to come together.

Stuart C. McDonald: I agree that the failure has not only been of the UK's participation in the relocation scheme. Even countries that, on paper, have agreed to take part in the relocation scheme are not doing so. Germany and Sweden have tried to take well more than their share and have run into difficulties. Ultimately, 1 million people among two, three or four countries is an almost impossible task; 1 million people shared around a union of 500 million is a tough challenge, but it is surmountable. I honestly think that when we look at the maths, the only reasonable approach is to share responsibility for those who have made that journey.

Two other causes for concern will suffice before I run out of time. I continue to object to the fact that destitution appears once more to be becoming a tool of choice for immigration control. My party shares the concern of the British Red Cross that certain provisions in the Immigration Bill, which is currently making its way through the House of Lords, and particularly the end to section 95 support for families with children who have exhausted their appeal rights, will force those families into destitution and put them at significant risk of harm. It will also increase the risk that such families abscond, and it will pass significant costs on to local authorities. We also recall that a similar project by the Labour Government had precisely those results and made immigration control harder, not easier. Again, when the Government look at the evidence, I ask even at this late stage for them to reconsider their approach.

My final key point is on immigration detention. The current system is in need of urgent reform because it detains too many people, because it detains people who should never be detained, because it detains people for far too long, and because it is costly and inefficient. Our estate is one of the largest in Europe, with places for almost 3,400 people. This country detained more than 30,000 different people in 2013, which is significantly more than any of our European colleagues. Some 4,300 people were detained in Germany, which, incidentally, received more than four times as many asylum applications. We are locking up vulnerable people, including victims of trafficking, torture and sexual violence, with absolutely no need.

We welcome Stephen Shaw's very thorough report and the Government's fairly positive response, and we will be pushing for the report's implementation as soon as possible. On another day we could discuss the use of fast-track detention, the right to work, the problems with decision making, the policies on unaccompanied children, the inclusion of refugees in the net migration target and the Secretary of State's rather alarming speech on redefining the concept of what it means to be a refugee, but I finish by paying tribute to the Minister's work and ask him to persuade some of his colleagues to up their game, too.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the Front Benchers, I remind Members that this debate will finish at 5.43 pm. It is customary to allow a minute or two for the proposer of the debate to sum up at the end. I will be calling Anne McLaughlin as the Scottish National party spokesperson, although she is sitting on the Back Bench—I am just explaining for other Members who are watching.

5.22 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I did not realise that I was supposed to sit on the Front Bench. I will do so next time.

I am delighted to sum up for the SNP in this debate. There have been a number of interesting contributions, and it is important that those of us who are fighting for better and more support for refugees continue to say so. I said that in the debate this morning, and I am sure the Government are getting sick of the sight of us, but many refugees listen to or read these debates. Opposition Members cannot change much of the Government's policies at the moment, and although we find that incredibly frustrating, we should not underestimate how much of a difference it makes to people seeking asylum to hear words of support from those of us who will, at some stage, be in a position to make changes.

That said, there are countries that help nobody and I acknowledge, as others have, that the UK at least helps some people—it does not help enough, but at least it does something. A number of crucial points have been made about the UK's policy on refugees, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) on securing this debate and on a fantastic speech. He said that half of Syria's pre-wartime population is now in need of support from the rest of the world, which is frightening. He also said that the UK has played its part in causing some of the refugee crisis in some of the region, which we cannot deny.

The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) gave an excellent example of some of the people we are helping, such as the Yazidi women who in many cases are victims of brutal rape and who cannot be protected in their own country. They are just some of the people about whom we are talking. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) talked about the importance of language, and I completely agree. Some Government Members need to change the language that they are using. My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) talked about his concern, which I share, about policies coming through now that will lead to further destitution and, disturbingly, further destitution for families.

The most powerful argument comes from the fundamental disagreement between Members of this House. Some of us believe that refugees make a positive contribution to these islands, and others believe that they do not. They may say they believe that refugees make a positive contribution, but they are paying lip service because their actions speak far louder than their words. If Government Members truly believe that refugees make a positive contribution to the wellbeing of the UK, their policies and rhetoric would be very different: as my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway said, they would not have an ethos that asks not how

much we can help, but how much we can get away with. I know that the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), for whom I and a number of SNP Members have a lot of respect on a number of issues, is unhappy, but the way that we treat asylum seekers in this country can often be described only as horrendous and shameful. Actions speak louder than words.

We are trying to have a debate about refugees, and we all know the definition of a refugee, and still the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) felt the need to state that the majority of people in the Calais camps are economic migrants. Apart from the fact that I do not know how on earth he knows that—I am quite sure he does not—what, as they say in Glasgow, has that to do with the price of fish? We are talking about refugees, and I will not be deflected from that.

Like many Members, I was surprised when I looked back over the historical contribution that refugees have made to the United Kingdom. I was not surprised that they had made a significant contribution; I was just surprised by how significant that contribution was. When I looked at the list of British institutions and facets of everyday life shaped by refugees, I started to recognise how the nations of these islands have been shaped by people fleeing conflicts. Marks and Spencer, Burton, Hampton Court Palace and the Mini Cooper—refugees are often as British as fish and chips, which apparently also have a refugee connection, believe it or not.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend about the contribution of refugees to UK society. Does she agree that the thousands of Ugandan Asian refugees who arrived in 1972, and who were initially the subject of much anxiety, made a huge contribution to British life and are a perfect example of why we must do more for refugees?

Anne McLaughlin: Absolutely. We need to get away from the idea that refugees take and do not give anything. They are not a burden; they are part of the fabric of our society. The much lauded Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that the contribution made by a large number of new arrivals would cause a significant reduction in the national debt as a percentage of GDP. The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) rightly said that we need to approach this with head and heart, and it is logical that educated, self-funded migrants, as many refugees are, will make a great contribution to the UK. Should we not have an asylum policy that says “We will support you to escape persecution, now let's see what you can do to help us improve the economy and build our country”? We should be doing that, rather than leaving people languishing in limbo for years, losing their professional skills and the entrepreneurial impetus that they could have been using to benefit their host country.

Heidi Allen: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anne McLaughlin: I do not have time. I am being told to wind up.

In the history of the UK there are some astounding stories of people fleeing tyranny, arriving here and contributing in all sorts of ways. Refugees are not a long-term burden on society. We are lucky to have them and their contribution, and our policies ought to reflect that.

5.28 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairladyship, Mrs Main. *[Interruption.]* I am taking my lead from the SNP.

This is an important debate. We have had three debates today on aspects of the refugee crisis, which is clearly the issue of our time. I will not take up time by repeating the numbers, because I know the Minister wants to respond to some of the questions that have been put to him. Millions of people have fled Syria, as everybody knows. Millions are registered as asylum seekers in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, and now of course in Greece and Italy. There are millions, taken together. We stand at a moment when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the EU are calling on the international community for a collective response to a huge crisis. We have not seen a crisis of this size and order for many generations.

I pay tribute to the work of this Minister in particular—the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees—in this field, and to what the Government have done. The steps that have been taken are welcome. However, in 20 years' time chapters in history books will be written about this moment in world history, in European history and in our own history, and I have concerns that—on reflection and looking back—our response will be judged as reluctant and limited, and in comparison with others not fair and not proportionate.

I just remind hon. Members that, back in January 2014, we agreed only to aid the neighbours of Syria in their efforts but not to have any part in the resettlement scheme at all. That work was extended in 2014 but only in relation to vulnerable persons—broadly speaking, those who had suffered sexual violence and torture—and it was expected that a few hundred people might resettle. Then, in September 2015, there was the resettlement programme for 20,000 Syrians.

Those steps were all welcome, but all of them were, in truth, a response to overwhelming pressure from the public, the media and the Opposition in this House. The same is true in relation to unaccompanied children. There has been a debate about this issue for some weeks. There was a statement just a few weeks ago, but again it was more limited than many of us had hoped for. There is the sense of reluctant and limited steps being taken, welcome though those steps are.

There are a number of questions for the Minister to deal with now and in the coming weeks and months. The first is this: can the hard stop line about Europe really be maintained any more? In other words, can we really say that we have no responsibility to deal with those people who have arrived in Europe and that we simply have to put the burden on the states where they are now, and play no part in relocation? I understand why it is important not to undermine the Dublin III agreement, but on the other hand there are countries that are clearly struggling with the number of people they have, and I wonder whether that hard stop line can be justified for very much longer.

I also raise again the question of unaccompanied children. I listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) said about this issue, and it is an argument that is made about the influence that our action might have on future action. However, we have to face up to the fact that these

children are in Europe right now, unaccompanied, and they are desperate, and the push-pull factors do not apply to them, as others have already said. Also, a number of these children are disappearing. Are we really going to stand here and say that, for fear of what might happen in the future, we will do nothing for them now? I am very uncomfortable that, as a country, that could possibly be our position, and I think that view is shared across the House in different ways and with different forces.

Bob Stewart: Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way on that point?

Keir Starmer: Of course.

Bob Stewart: I will be very quick.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): I was going to call the Minister in about 30 seconds.

Bob Stewart: I will take seconds. Unaccompanied children need to be properly processed, because if we act too fast they might never see their parents or their other relatives again. We have to get that processing right.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention and I agree.

I will use up my remaining 30 seconds simply to say that whatever processes are applied, either to unaccompanied children or to adult asylum seekers arriving in this country, they have to be better managed than they are now. There are disproportionate burdens in different areas, and we have to address that sooner rather than later. Also, as we debated this morning in relation to accommodation, there are real concerns about the way that services and accommodation are being provided to asylum seekers.

These are big questions, but they are the questions of our time.

5.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Refugees (Richard Harrington): Thank you very much, Mrs Main, for calling me to speak. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairladyship.

I do not have time to go through everything; I would have liked to go through all hon. Members' speeches. Obviously, I congratulate the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) on securing the debate. Unfortunately, Mrs Main, every time you said, "Richard", I jumped up. So, the hon. Gentleman and I have something in common.

In fact, I think we have more than that in common, and I pay tribute to the partnership between the Scottish Government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Home Office. This is one of the things that we can say that we have all really worked together on, and I commend the Scottish people for what they have done for the refugees through the resettlement programme.

I apologise for not mentioning every single speech by every hon. Member but it really is because of time and not because I do not want to. I could probably have taken up the whole hour of the debate myself, as hon. Members can imagine.

I will try to cut out a lot of the general stuff, but I will put something on the record. I have been doing this job since the middle of September and I do not see the cold lack of a humanitarian attitude of the Government towards refugees. Those people who know me know that I am not the most partisan of people; this job is not the most partisan of jobs. However, I genuinely do not see this complete lack of humanitarianism. If anybody would like to discuss that separately, I would be very happy to do so. I am not saying that I take offence at comments about a lack of humanitarianism, but I genuinely do not see such an attitude.

The UK has a proud reputation for giving asylum to people. I myself am only two generations away from refugees and if this country had not taken my family—well, there certainly would have been another Member of Parliament for Watford, which would probably please quite a few people in this room.

It is obvious, as many hon. Members have said, that the sufferings of the Syrian people are a stain on humanity. When I think what my father saw in the second world war, and what the generation before him saw in the first world war, not to mention the movement of people after the second world war, it seems that we have all learnt nothing if this can happen in our time—really.

However, in the time I have left I must return to what the UK has done. Since the war started in Syria, we have granted asylum to more than 5,000 Syrians in Britain. We have the resettlement scheme, and I very much commend and personally thank those hon. Members who mentioned what has happened since the beginning of September, when we started the scheme.

Several SNP Members were really saying that the Government should do more, and not only in terms of the number of refugees. I agree that the number is arguable; anybody can have their views on that and it is very easy in these debates to come up with numbers. However, I can say that we have had the sort of partnership that hon. Members said has not existed. I spend my whole time with local authorities and talking to them, and the Government have included so many different groups under the strategic migration partnership—the SMP. We have always had the SNP but now we have the SMP. In every area of the UK, we have an SMP and it includes the local authority, the Home Office and nearly all the NGOs involved in this field. I will point that out.

The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway secured this debate. Personally, in my experience, I agree with what he said about people not coming here for benefits. Certainly with the Syrian refugees I have met, I think it has been the last thing on their minds. Unfortunately, however, I reject what he said about the Syrian bombing campaign—that it is simply something the British Government are doing to keep their “pals” happy. I would also argue that our response to what has happened in Syria has not been inadequate.

The hon. Gentleman and several other speakers wanted me to avoid going on about the camps. In fact, there are very few camps, but people can see in the areas around Syria quite what this country has done. With the exception of the United States, our humanitarian programme is by far the most significant, and it can be seen everywhere—in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan.

Everything we do is through the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UNHCR policy is to settle people in the countries around Syria,

and particularly to try to relocate children to extended families in that area. The UNHCR says that the vast majority of them—up to nine out of 10 of them, as far as we are aware—are resettled within the area that is called “the camps”, but actually it is just the area around Syria with extended families. I believe that that is the right policy, because obviously they all hope that they are going to go back to Syria. That does not mean that there are not unaccompanied minors, and the Government made a statement on that, as the shadow Minister said, the week before last. Tomorrow, the Immigration Minister and I are holding a roundtable discussion with most of the non-governmental organisations involved, including the UNCHR, to discuss where we go from here.

The Government are not doing nothing about children in Europe. Only last week, a further £10 million was announced. We are talking not just about money. There are many attempts to sort out what children are there and exactly where they are from, as well as to verify their identity and provide safe places for them to go within Europe. I am pleased to say that our Government, through the Department for International Development, are very much at the forefront of that. That is unusual for DFID, because in normal circumstances France, Germany and so on are not lower-income countries, but we are doing our bit. I know it is not what Members want, but I would not like to allow the assumption that we are doing nothing in mainland Europe to pass by, because that really is not true.

The main point that I would like to make is on numbers. It was mentioned that some economists wrote to the Government and that the bishops approached the Government. Lots of people write to the Prime Minister with numbers, and we have been both complimented and criticised about what we are doing with the 20,000 people. It is quite normal that people have their views and that they lobby. The shadow Minister said that what the Government have done is because of pressure from the Opposition and other groups, but to some extent that is how Governments work. The Government get criticised for not listening to what the Opposition and lobby groups say, or it is regarded as weakness if they do listen.

I feel that this is probably the least politically contentious part of Government. There is general cross-party consensus, perhaps not on extent, but on substance. In my life as a Minister in this field, I speak to so many groups and conferences—I am going to the east midlands tomorrow. Perhaps this is the last thing one should do to a group of politicians, but I do not even know who is Labour or Conservative or Scottish National party, because that does not enter into it. The SNP Members made a political point about a fear of UKIP, but I have not seen it, and I am happy to go on the record on that. It is the last thing on our mind, and I hope that the Labour and SNP council leaders whom I have spoken to would agree with that sentiment.

This is a complex issue. I feel personally and professionally that the Government are on the right tracks. We have a long way to go. The resettlement programme alone will run over the course of the Parliament. We have to select who we take over here through the UNHCR. The vulnerability criteria are not subjective.

Anne McLaughlin *rose*—

Richard Harrington: I am sorry, but there is not time. Otherwise, I would love to give way. The vulnerability criteria are calculated and worked out in a professional, impartial way. The criteria have expanded from two to seven, so they are wide.

We are determined that those who come here do so with the consent of the people in this country, which generally there has been. I have paid tribute to Scotland, but people have been taken in all over the country. It is not right to say scathingly that some places take one or two or three families. For a small community, that can

be pretty good. Other communities, such as Bradford, are very much used to taking in refugees and asylum seekers. They have done that for many years, and they have the set-up to do so.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order.

5.43 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 10 February 2016

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Homes and Communities Agency

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): I am today announcing the launch of a review of the Homes and Communities Agency in line with the requirement on all Government Departments to regularly review non-departmental public bodies. Established in 2008, the agency is the national housing, land and regeneration agency and the regulator of registered social housing providers in England.

The spending review underlined the priority this Government attach to our ambition to build a million homes this Parliament and to double the number of new homeowners. Building on the successful contribution the Homes and Communities Agency made in the last Parliament, this review will ensure that we are well-placed to deliver the Government's objectives and will:

- i) Examine the continuing need for a non-departmental public body, covering:
 - how each of the agency's functions contributes to Government objectives;
 - whether each function and the body is still required; and
 - the best future delivery options.
- ii) Examine the capacity of the Homes and Communities Agency to deliver more efficiently and effectively.
- iii) Examine whether corporate governance and management arrangements are sufficiently robust and transparent and ensure that agency is operating in line with recognised principles of good corporate governance.

We will be seeking evidence from a wide range of sources, including the agency itself, and there will be an opportunity for interested stakeholders to feed in views. I will inform the House once the review is complete and copies of its report will be placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS520]

DEFENCE

Defence Votes A: Annual Estimate

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): The Ministry of Defence Votes A estimate 2016-17, has been laid before the House today as HC 715. This outlines

the maximum numbers of personnel to be maintained for each service in the armed forces during financial year 2016-17.

[HCWS522]

Defence Votes A: Supplementary Estimates

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): The Ministry of Defence Votes A supplementary Votes 2015-16, has been laid before the House today as HC 716. This outlines the increased maximum numbers of personnel to be maintained for service in the reserve marines force during financial year 2015-16.

[HCWS523]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Joint Fraud Taskforce

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Today I announced the launch of the Joint Fraud Taskforce.

Fraud is a serious crime which shames our financial system. Fraudsters not only prey on vulnerable members of our society, but use the proceeds of their crime to fund terrorism, and other heinous acts. Fraud damages the lives of individuals, the bottom line of businesses and negatively impacts on the UK's economy.

The Home Office has worked with the financial sector and law enforcement to develop a Joint Fraud Taskforce to strengthen our collective response on fraud. The taskforce will make it much more difficult for fraudsters to operate by improving intelligence sharing and close the loopholes which they exploit. It will help protect individuals and businesses from becoming victims of fraud by increasing public awareness and put in place interventions to support those who have been a victim. It will develop a much richer understanding of how fraud happens, and what can be done to stop it.

The only way we can effectively tackle fraud is for much closer and effective collaboration between industry, Government and law enforcement. Senior representatives from the financial sector and law enforcement have given their commitment to fully support the objectives and the work of the taskforce.

The taskforce will report progress under Home Office governance. Public updates will also be provided.

[HCWS521]

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