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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 28 April 2016

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Drones (Safety Risks)

1. **Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of potential safety risks posed by drones to civil aviation. [904737]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): Drones have great potential, but it is important that they are used safely. There are already tough penalties in place for negligent drone use, including up to five years' imprisonment for endangering an aircraft. The Department continues to work with the British Airline Pilots Association and the Civil Aviation Authority to assess the safety risks of drones.

Paul Flynn: Should not the Government heed the warning of Heathrow and, instead of taking their rather complacent position, realise not only the potential for catastrophes as a result of vandals or careless people using drones, but the dreadful possibility of terrorists using drones against stores of flammable material or nuclear power stations? Already, drones are being used to take mobile phones and drugs into Wandsworth prison. Should not the Government wake up and realise that this new menace is a potential great threat, and take precautions to reduce universal access to drones?

Mr McLoughlin: There is no complacency whatever from the Government on the use of drones. As I have said, there is a prison sentence available, and obviously I will keep the situation under review. It is also important to find out the facts behind certain incidents. It is now thought that the incident reported on 17 April was not a drone incident.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Could the Secretary of State update the House on the state of investment in our roads in the north-east, particularly the A1?

Mr Speaker: No. That is a most interesting matter, but a little distant from the matter of drones. Save it for the long summer evenings that lie ahead.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): There are growing concerns about drone incidents that threaten public safety. It is not very clear whether the problem lies with the regulations themselves or with the enforcement of those regulations. Will the Secretary of State look at those issues?

Mr McLoughlin: Yes, I certainly will. Earlier this week I met BALPA—the meeting had been planned before the incident on 17 April—to discuss that issue as well as the problems that laser pen use is causing for civil aviation in this country. I will certainly keep those things under review and do further work, along with BALPA, the industry and the CAA, on drones and drone use.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend assure me that all regulations and guidance on drones and air safety will apply and be communicated to airports outside London, such as East Midlands airport in my constituency, to ensure that we have a consistent air safety policy across the country?

Mr McLoughlin: Yes. My hon. Friend makes a very good point: this is a matter not just for London airports, but for airports outside London and right across the country, which serve very important international connections.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I hear what the Transport Secretary is saying about his engagement with airports, but this is also an issue for stadiums, railway stations and other places where the public gather in huge numbers. What discussions has he had with the widest possible range of stakeholders, including local authorities, on the use of drones?

Mr McLoughlin: I have updated the House on the issue addressed by the tabled question, namely aviation. Of course, there are wider issues and the Government keep them consistently under review.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am grateful for that—even if it was not much of an answer, to be entirely honest. The Secretary of State also briefly touched on another very important issue relating to the threat that laser pens pose to airports across the United Kingdom. BALPA has called for all but the lowest-strength laser pens to be banned. What is his response to that?

Mr McLoughlin: As I informed the House a few moments ago, I met BALPA earlier this week. It has come forward with issues about laser pens. There is a bigger problem with laser pens, and much more evidence about the way in which they have been used. It is illegal to shine them in someone's eyes, and there have been more prosecutions, but I am willing to take further action once we have reached agreement on the best way forward.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you may recall that this time last month, I asked the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), when, after three years of working groups, we would be told what

the Government were going to do about the danger of drones to civil aircraft. His answer, you will recall, left us none the wiser.

This week, things became even vaguer when the Minister appeared to say in a written answer that he is not even going to consult on anything until the European Aviation Safety Agency has decided what to do. That is all happening at a time of reports that drones might have hit a civil aircraft, and of drones being banned over London altogether when President Obama was in town. Other countries have already brought in registration schemes and other initiatives, so when are we going to see some clear proposals from the Government, without having to wait for a US President to come to town?

Mr McLoughlin: Part of the point was made by the hon. Gentleman in his question when he said, “it might have been”. Governments do not legislate on what might be; they act on what the dangers are. As I have said, we are in discussions with the airline pilots’ union BALPA, as well as the CAA, about the right way to develop this. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that all drones should be banned completely, I should point out that the Labour party never thought about when it was in office.

Disruption Payment Scheme (Train Services)

2. **Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the schedule 8 disruption payment scheme for Network Rail and train operating companies. [904738]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): The framework and the amount of schedule 8 compensation are set by the Office of Rail and Road, which is conducting a review into this issue at the moment. The Department has provided input into the consultation, and the right hon. Lady is welcome to raise her concerns directly with the regulator.

Joan Ryan: I know that the Minister has concerns about schedule 8 payments, as do I. It is scandalous that train operators make millions from rail delays at the expense of passengers suffering from a poor standard of service. What immediate steps might the Government take to give power to the regulator to ensure that any net profits made by train operators from unplanned delays and cancellation caused by Network Rail go towards improving rail passenger services across the country, particularly in the light of the very low levels of passenger satisfaction?

Claire Perry: The right hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) have raised this matter with me eloquently on several occasions. I know that those things are part of the considerations of the current review. The right hon. Lady and I are as one on the view that the rail industry has to do more to improve the current compensation payments, which are rather generous in absolute terms but are not well advertised or well claimed, and I am looking forward to introducing the policy to reduce the delay repay threshold to 15 minutes. Ultimately, our goal should be to get the trains running on time so that passengers do not have to claim compensation. That is what underpins the Government’s record investment in the railway.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Constituents of mine wishing to get back to Bexhill and Battle after 9 o’clock on a Monday or Tuesday night are having to undertake a large portion of their journey by replacement bus, and we have just found out that that will carry on for the rest of the year. I declare an interest because that impacts on me on a Monday evening, but my intentions, as ever, are purely altruistic when I ask the Minister whether she would meet me to try to find out whether Network Rail can conduct this engineering work during the night.

Mr Speaker: It is good that the hon. Gentleman is doing more than just talking to himself about the matter. That is very encouraging.

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend represents many thousands of travelling constituents, and he is assiduous in raising their concerns. I will, of course, meet him and look at what can be done to speed up that particular piece of work.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Passengers are, of course, completely inadequately compensated for delays, and I welcome the support that the Minister is giving to my campaign to halve the delay repay timings. Would she also support my campaign to sack Southern, which has proved itself completely incapable of running a railway service and should have its services handed over to Transport for London?

Claire Perry: I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman is supporting the Conservative party’s manifesto commitment to reduce delay repay to 15 minutes. It is lovely that at least some shreds of that coalition co-operation are still in action. He and I have discussed the Southern franchise many times. It is difficult. There are record levels of engineering work taking place on the line, and we are doing all we can, as he knows, to ensure that passengers suffer the least disruption possible and get the compensation to which they are entitled when their trains do not run on time.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Schedule 8 compensation is not making its way to my travelling public. Eddy Leviten regularly contacts me from Acton main line station, where there are no staff, no way of buying a ticket, no indicator board and only two trains an hour. Travelling from Acton main line station, which is only one stop from Paddington, should not be a case of taking your life in your hands and leaping into the unknown.

Claire Perry: I am not going to give the House a boring diatribe about the purpose of schedule 8. [Interruption.] I know hon. Members would all be fascinated. The point of schedule 8 is slightly different from the point about compensation paid to passengers under the delay repay scheme or the national conditions of carriage. It is absolutely right that we should bring forward proposals. For the hon. Lady, a compensation threshold that kicks in at 30 minutes is probably not worth a lot, but one that starts at 15 minutes may be valuable. Ultimately, however, the hon. Lady’s constituents have a far greater choice of transport than many other people in this country, and that is why we are investing in the railway—north, south, east and west.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Some 80% of passengers entitled to a refund when their train is cancelled or delayed make no claim, largely because train operating companies make claiming too difficult. To improve passenger compensation arrangements, the Office of Rail and Road recommended that the provisions of the Consumer Rights Act 2015 should apply to rail. This month, however, the Government have further delayed introducing that by another year. Why should train operating companies have such beneficial compensation arrangements, while the Government intervene to delay giving passengers their right to compensation?

Claire Perry: The question that comes to mind is: why did the hon. Gentleman's Government do nothing about this for 13 years? It took a Conservative Government—*[Interruption.]* I encourage the hon. Gentleman to stay focused on the facts. Delay repay compensation levels have increased eightfold over the past five years, but there is far more to do. The actual amount of compensation available is more generous in this country than in almost any other country in Europe, but I want to reassure him about the CRA exemption. The industry had argued for a permanent exemption, which I found completely unacceptable. We have given the industry time to adjust to make sure it gets this right.

A30 and A303 Upgrade

3. **Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What plans his Department has to upgrade the A30 and A303. [904739]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The road investment strategy announced the upgrade of all remaining sections of the A303 between the M3 and A358 to dual carriageway standard, together with the upgrading of the A358 in Somerset from the M5 at Taunton to the A303 at Ilminster. Highways England is making good progress, and three major schemes are planned to begin construction by April 2020.

Neil Parish: I thank our excellent roads Minister for clearly stating the improvements from Stonehenge to Ilminster and through to Taunton, which are very welcome, but there is a stretch from Ilminster to Honiton that actually needs a little more improvement. We have got the co-operation of the Blackdown Hills AONB partnership, and we could actually get a 60-mile road through to Honiton, and on to Exeter, to make sure we have a second arterial route to Devon and on into Cornwall. I would like an update from our excellent Minister.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman wants a detailed disquisition from the Minister, and I fear he will not be disappointed.

Andrew Jones: The first road investment strategy did include some smaller scale improvements to that section of the road to improve safety and journey quality. However, it is a very challenging area in which to make improvements: it is a protected landscape and a very beautiful area, as my hon. Friend showed me when he drove me along the routes last summer and I heard at first hand the opportunity presented by such investment.

We have started the second road investment strategy process, and Highways England is developing route strategies to inform that process. I will obviously take account of my hon. Friend's contribution in the process, and I will make sure that Highways England liaises with him locally.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the upgrade of the A303, particularly where it joins the A358 and links from the A30. However, at the recent Neroche annual parish meeting, which I attended, it was suggested that the preferred options would be submitted to the Government by 2018 and there was a certain mithering in the audience about whether the Government would actually go ahead and build the road. Will the Minister confirm that this will take place by 2020, as it is so crucial for the wider south-west, not just Taunton Deane?

Andrew Jones: I can understand why there is local cynicism, because the scheme was cancelled by former Governments, but let me provide some reassurance. We are looking at consultations starting next year, the development consent order process in 2018 and the start of work in early 2020, so I am happy to provide the reassurance that my hon. Friend wants.

Heathrow Expansion (Transport Infrastructure Costs)

4. **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the potential cost of transport infrastructure for a third runway at Heathrow. [904740]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Airports Commission assessed the surface access requirements of each short-listed airport proposal as part of its work published in July 2015, and it estimated that there would be a cost of up to £5 billion for surface access works in relation to the Heathrow north-west runway.

Ruth Cadbury: There are clearly widely differing estimates of the capital costs of building an additional runway at Heathrow, but what is not in dispute is that building an additional runway there will cost significantly more than building one at Gatwick. If the Government decide to go ahead with expanding Heathrow, who will pay the difference—the airline passenger or the taxpayer?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that some of the estimates for surface access differ widely, even by the standards of some economists. One must bear in mind that the three sets of figures include different things over different timescales, the main ones being the work required exclusively for airport capacity, where the airport would be expected to make a major contribution; the projects that support airport capacity, but have wider benefits; and those in the Transport for London figures, which are needed in respect of wider population and economic growth during the next 20 to 30 years.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Do the Government accept the Airport Commission figure, which is £5 billion, the £2 billion from Heathrow or the £18 billion from TfL? Is this not just more of the 30 years of disinformation we have had out of Heathrow?

When are the Government going to come to a decision, make their view clear and stop delaying matters just because of elections?

Mr Goodwill: If the hon. Gentleman had been paying attention to what I just said, he would know that I explained that those figures relate to different things over different timescales. On the decision, perhaps he could wait until my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) poses her question to the Secretary of State.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Can the Government give us any indication of the time period for construction from when the decision has been taken until the runway at either Gatwick or Heathrow is completed?

Mr Goodwill: It is important to note that the additional time we are taking to look at a number of economic and environmental factors will not delay the delivery of a runway at whatever location is decided on.

Electric Cars

7. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What plans his Department has to improve infrastructure for electric cars. [904743]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Government have committed £600 million in this Parliament to support the uptake of electric vehicles. The UK has the largest network of rapid charging points in Europe, with a total of more than 11,000 public chargepoints. We will be announcing further details of the next phase of plans to expand the UK's charging network later this year.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for that response. I had a meeting a few weeks ago with Nissan, one of the vehicle manufacturers here in the UK. Nissan set out clearly the significant changes there have been in electric cars, with better acceleration and power, and longer battery life. We need charging points where people are: in the high street, in garages and in shopping centres. That is the way forward—to make them accessible in the places where the people and electric cars are. Does the Minister agree?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there is a much wider range of vehicles, many of which are built in the United Kingdom. We have seen a big increase; last year, more ultra-low-emission vehicles were registered in the UK than in the previous four years combined. I am very pleased that Ulster was one of the UK's eight plugged-in places, which received £19 million of funding from the Office of Low Emissions Vehicles.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): As the Minister will know, work has finally started on the new Ilkeston train station, where I am sure there will be at least one charging point for electric cars. It is vital that this major new investment brings as much benefit to our town as possible. With that in mind, will he back my campaign to establish a new electric bus route to link the station to the town centre, and will he look into how his Department might contribute to that project?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady did at least include the word "electric".

Mr Goodwill: I can tell my hon. Friend that great advances are being made not only with electric cars but with electric buses. I was at the Wrightbus factory in Ulster recently, where buses that will go all day are on a charge. Those vehicles would be perfect for the sort of project that she suggests.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Not just physical but intellectual infrastructure is required to support the electric vehicle industry, not least because the extreme voltages are extremely dangerous to people who do not know what they are doing and because the engines are entirely different from petrol and diesel engines. Has the Minister seen the campaign by the Institute for the Motor Industry for a proper accreditation, training and licensing system to spread knowledge about electric vehicles, and might his Department be able to support it?

Mr Goodwill: It is certainly important that the people who work on these vehicles are adequately trained. But I would caution the hon. Gentleman about suggesting that electric vehicles are more dangerous than the alternatives; anyone who has seen a petrol tank catch fire will realise that electric vehicles are intrinsically very safe.

Airport Expansion (South East)

8. **Dr Tania Mathias** (Twickenham) (Con): When the Government plan to announce a decision on the location of a new runway in the south-east. [904744]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): A number of important decisions on airport capacity were taken by the Government in December, including to accept the case for expansion in the south-east. However, we must take time to get the decision right on a preferred scheme. The Government are further considering the environmental impacts, and the best possible measures to mitigate the impacts of expansion.

Dr Mathias: On 24 March, as chair of the all-party group on Heathrow and the wider economy, I wrote to the Secretary of State with 64 questions about his Department's work in that area. Unfortunately, I have received answers to none of those questions. Will he accept that it is essential to address important questions on noise, air quality and deliverability before he makes this decision, so as to give confidence in the decision-making process?

Mr McLoughlin: When that decision is made, I will be accountable to the House for why certain decisions were taken. In a letter from my hon. Friend that I did reply to, I pointed out that it would not be appropriate for me to provide a running commentary until the Government have come to a final decision. When we do that, we will be fully accountable for the decisions and recommendations that we make.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister at least a little ashamed of the fact that a major inquiry under Howard Davies has made its recommendations, but nothing has happened? At the same time, we are putting all our national treasure into

High Speed 2, but by the time that arrives in 2033 we will find that the driverless car has made it totally redundant.

Mr McLoughlin: I will take no lectures from a man who supported a Government who saw our position on the infrastructure league tables move from 7th, when Labour entered government in 1997, to 33rd by the time it left government in 2010. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman says that it was all his fault—those were his words and not mine.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): More than 700 businesses have chosen to locate their headquarters in Buckinghamshire, not least because of the proximity of that excellent local airport, Heathrow. Far from building on the previous question, it is fair to point out that whereas HS2 brings absolutely no net economic benefit to Buckinghamshire, Heathrow does. It is a long time since Howard Davies reported. Will the Secretary of State get a wiggle on?

Mr McLoughlin: You have chastised a few people this morning, Mr Speaker, for making tendentious links with airports and HS2. My right hon. Friend refers to Heathrow as her local airport—I have not heard it described like that before, but in her case it is a good description and her constituents are well connected to that airport. I want other parts of the country to have the same opportunities that London is getting in its good transport connections.

Mr Speaker: I call Alan Brown, who I do not think will refer to Heathrow as his local airport.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is not, Mr Speaker, but this decision could impact on Scottish airports.

To return to the Secretary of State's earlier comments, I think that the Government should provide a running commentary on what they are doing about this important decision. Will he state clearly what additional work is being done to refine considerations on air quality and noise? When will that work be completed, and what else needs to be done for the Government to come to a decision?

Mr McLoughlin: I am afraid that I disagree with the hon. Gentleman about providing a running commentary, for the reasons that I gave in my earlier answers. That work is being done, and I hope soon to inform the House of the Government's recommendations.

Low-carbon Transport

9. **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What steps he is taking to promote low-carbon transport. [904745]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Government are committed to delivering the emissions reductions needed to meet our climate change targets. That includes promoting the uptake of low-emission vehicles, reducing emissions from the road freight sector, and encouraging sustainable choices such as walking and cycling.

Dr Cameron: A quarter of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions come from transport emissions, which the Government have pledged to cut. Will the Minister follow the example of the Scottish Government, who are committed to investing £62.5 million to create low-carbon infrastructure?

Mr Goodwill: I will take no lessons from the Scottish Government on low-carbon infrastructure. We have some very tough targets—for example, for the electrification programme on our railways—which we are determined to meet. We will set our fifth carbon budget later this year and publish our emissions reduction plan shortly afterwards.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Electric cars are a form of low-carbon transport. Given the disasters with the nuclear power stations in Normandy and Finland involving EDF, will the Minister explain whence the electricity for all these electric cars?

Mr Goodwill: Electric cars can benefit from surplus electricity overnight and use that off-peak electricity very effectively, and I for one believe that nuclear generation will be part of our future energy strategy.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Too few companies in east Lancashire either offer or advertise the cycle to work scheme. What can the Government do to extend the scheme in areas such as mine?

Mr Goodwill: The Treasury is an enthusiastic backer of the cycle to work scheme, and I know that many people have taken it up and that many companies can make sure their employees get information about it. It is a great scheme that gets a lot of people on to two wheels and reduces not only carbon dioxide emissions but other pollutants that cars produce.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The most low-carbon forms of transport are cycling and walking. Extraordinarily, the Government chose to release the long-awaited "Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy" on Easter Sunday, although I can understand why the Minister did not want people to notice it, because while it is long on aspiration it is rather short on investment. Cycling UK has produced a detailed breakdown and concludes that by 2020-21 the amount of money spent on cycling outside London will be just 72p per head. How far does he think that the CWIS can go on 72p?

Mr Goodwill: I think we should hang on a minute. When we came to power in 2010, we were spending £2 per head, but by the end of the coalition we were spending £6 per head, which is a very good record of investment in cycling. In the spending review, the Chancellor confirmed more than £300 million for cycling over the next five years, and many of the decisions on cycling are made by local authorities, some of which, at least, are still run by the Labour party.

Daniel Zeichner: I think that was an admission of a dramatic cut to cycling, but let us move on to walking. As we approach walk to work week, which I am sure we will all be doing, it is interesting that the strategy contains no measurable targets for walking at all. When I pressed the Minister in written questions, he sidestepped

the issue and claimed that the strategy contained two “objectives” for walking. Why do we have to wait until 2025 to have any measurable targets?

Mr Goodwill: We are determined to increase levels of walking—children walking to school and people walking as part of their everyday lives—and I know that many people understand the importance of walking not only to improving our transport infrastructure but to contributing to cleaner air in our cities.

Train Station Ticket Offices (Disabled Access)

10. **Mrs Caroline Spelman** (Meriden) (Con): What steps are being taken to ensure that ticket offices at train stations are accessible to disabled people. [904748]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): As my right hon. Friend knows, rail travel in this country is booming. A vital part of that growth is ensuring that rail is accessible to all, including passengers with disabilities, at every stage of their journey. The statistics suggest that disabled people are using the railways in ever greater numbers. In fact, the number of disabled persons railcards in circulation has risen by 12% year on year—a growth rate that far outstrips that for passengers without disabilities.

Mrs Spelman: The concourse at Birmingham International train station in my constituency is to be improved to provide better access for the disabled, but will the Minister put pressure on the Chiltern line, where the carriages are much higher than the platforms? Would it not be possible to replicate what Transport for London does, at Westminster station, for example, by elevating a section of the platform?

Claire Perry: My right hon. Friend raises the valuable point that there has to be a joined-up approach—we need operators and Network Rail to work together. I will look at the issue she raises about the station, but she should be aware that any improvement works carried out at a station in the UK have to comply with UK disability standards.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for her reply earlier, but given that Network Rail has financial issues and that £50 million is being taken out of the Access for All scheme, will the Minister explain what pressure she can put on Network Rail to make sure that stations that are not accessible to disabled people, such as Reddish North in my constituency, are upgraded, so that everybody can have access to a good rail service?

Claire Perry: I am afraid that many of this country’s stations date from Victorian times when this was not even an issue. We are very proud of the Access for All scheme. Almost half a billion pounds has been spent, and money will continue to be spent, with the prioritisation of stations based on footfall and other such criteria. I would be more than happy to see whether anything can be done at the station the hon. Gentleman mentions, but we have to make sure that the money is spent in areas where most people are travelling. For me, this is absolutely part of railways for the future: it is vital for

people with disabilities to be able to access their trains, and rolling stock will be fully disability compliant by 2020.

Regional Airports

11. **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What plans he has to support the development of regional airports. [904749]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): I recognise the very important role that regional airports play in providing domestic and international connections and the vital contribution they make to the growth of regional economies. UK airports operate in the private sector, and it is for them to determine levels of investment and to attract airlines to operate from them.

Dr Whitford: Inward tourism is a major industry in Ayrshire, whether it be for golf and sailing or the Scottish Dark Sky Observatory. My local airport, Prestwick, has 660,000 passengers a year, but no connection to London—and, on the basis of discussions I have heard in this place, there is no sign of a connection to London. Will the Minister consider developing a strategy to support regional airports with connectivity in the short and medium term to bring more inward tourists?

Mr McLoughlin: The hon. Lady talks about connections and connectivity into London. This is one of the reasons the Davies commission was established. When we look at expansion in the south-east, we need to bear regional connectivity very much in mind. We must provide some reassurance to those who want further services from regional airports into London that they will have that opportunity.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I am reliably informed that Cornwall Airport Newquay is now the fastest-growing regional airport in the country. I thank the aviation Minister for his support in helping us to open up a new route from Newquay to Leeds Bradford. It will be essential to have regional air connectivity in place to make sure that, as our economy grows, the benefits are felt right across the country. Will the Secretary of State please confirm that the regional air connectivity fund will continue to be available to help smaller regional airports to open up new routes?

Mr McLoughlin: I am very glad that the route mentioned by my hon. Friend did qualify for the regional air connectivity fund. It is there and continues to be available. I believe it has made an important difference. The route my hon. Friend mentioned is certainly one that I have used on a number of occasions when travelling to his and other Cornwall constituencies.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): The Minister will know that London Luton airport is undergoing a substantial and welcome expansion, but there is also enormous spare capacity at Birmingham airport. Birmingham could make a significant contribution to the air travel needs of London and the south-east with a simple and inexpensive upgrade in electrification of the railway line through Leamington Spa and Banbury, linking Birmingham airport directly to Crossrail and

thus to central London and Heathrow, with a fast, non-stop, one-hour service. Will the Minister undertake to look at this proposal seriously?

Mr McLoughlin: The hon. Gentleman is always making the case for traditional railway links, although I know he is not so keen on high-speed links. I certainly commend what is happening at Luton airport. A few months ago I saw the regeneration work going on there, which is proving important for the wider area as well.

Local Major Transport Projects (Funding)

12. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps he is taking to provide funding for local major transport projects. [904750]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): This Department is providing over £7 billion for the local growth fund, which will fund over 500 local transport projects by the end of the Parliament. As part of that fund, we have launched a new £475 million fund for transformational local transport schemes that are too large for the main allocations, and we have invited local enterprise partnerships to bid by July.

Fiona Bruce: The construction of a 20-year awaited bypass for Middlewich would not only alleviate local congestion but open up employment land and thus support the regional economy by helping to create jobs. Will the Minister meet me and Cheshire East Council representatives to discuss the merits of a funding application for this project?

Mr Goodwill: I would be happy to have that meeting, particularly if my hon. Friend involves the local enterprise partnership, as LEPs are central to putting these bids together. These types of investments are important for the local regional economy and some of the councillors' own objectives might be relevant.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Minister look very carefully at the plans that are being forwarded by the Mersey Dee Alliance for a direct strategic rail link to Manchester airport? Such a link would have a dual benefit, speeding traffic to the airport while taking cars off the M56.

Mr Goodwill: That is just the sort of project that Transport for the North will be looking at. As aviation Minister, I understand the importance of good surface connectivity to airports to ensure that they can continue to grow, and Manchester airport, with its £1 billion investment programme, is an example for others to follow.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Government have given considerable amounts of money to the Labour-dominated West Yorkshire combined authority, which spends most of the money in the Labour heartlands, ignoring the needs of areas such as mine. A Shipley eastern bypass, for instance, is vital to my local economy. How can the Minister ensure that the Government's money is spent in areas like Shipley as well as in the

Labour heartlands? If he cannot persuade the Government to act, will he directly fund the bypass that my constituents so desperately need?

Mr Goodwill: One of the important changes that have taken place since our move from regional development agencies to local enterprise partnerships is a tendency to give more consideration to business and economic matters than to some local political objectives. I think that that is a great change, and I hope that, as a consequence, there is far less pork-barrel politics in Yorkshire.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): A number of major transport projects are mentioned in "The Northern Powerhouse", but west Cumbria seems to have been omitted. Will the Government look into how we can improve our transport links, and, in particular, will they give consideration to the nuclear developments that are taking place in the region?

Mr Goodwill: We recognise that all parts of our country, including the peripheral areas, benefit from transport investment. The good news is that this Government understand the importance of infrastructure investment, unlike previous Governments who did not see it as such a priority.

DVSA (Driving and Theory Tests)

13. **Iain Stewart** (Milton Keynes South) (Con): When he last had discussions with the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency on the administration of driving and theory tests. [904751]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State in the other place, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, has been having discussions with the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency about trialling changes in the practical driving test to make it more reflective of modern driving conditions, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has recently had discussions with the DVSA about future provision of the UK driving theory test.

Iain Stewart: I have received a number of complaints from driving instructors and pupils about significant delays in the provision of dates for tests at the Bletchley centre in my constituency. The DVSA has said that it is investing more resources, but this remains an issue. May I ask the Minister to take it up with the new chief executive, as a matter of urgency?

Andrew Jones: Demand for driving tests has been increasing rapidly. It has increased by more than 50% since 2013-14, and we expect the trend to continue. We are seeing the same pattern in relation to HGV tests. The DVSA has responded by bringing in more examiners and improving its forecasting model to match resource better with demand, as well as redeploying examiners from shorter-wait centres to those with longer waiting times. As for the specific issue of the Bletchley centre, I should be happy to take it up with the new chief executive.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I too am receiving complaints about delays in Kettering for driving tests and about cancellations of appointments. May I urge our excellent roads Minister to get on top of this problem before it gets out of control?

Andrew Jones: I am happy to take up any local problems affecting any colleague with the DVSA.

Cycling (Rural Areas)

14. **Stephen Phillips** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What plans the Government has to encourage cycling in rural areas. [904752]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): On 27 March—during the Easter break, when people had plenty of time to read it—we published the draft “Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy.” We want everyone in the country, including people in rural areas, to have access to safe, attractive cycling routes. Local authorities have a detailed understanding of their roads, and are well placed to decide how best to provide for cyclists on them.

Stephen Phillips: Safe and attractive cycling routes are important, but a number of constituents who are keen cyclists have written to me about the problem of potholes, of which I have personal experience—and a scar to prove it, although I do not intend to show my hon. Friend where it is. Will he join me in welcoming the £28.4 million that Lincolnshire County Council will receive this year for highways maintenance, and will he also encourage highways officers in Lincolnshire to continue to do what they can to reduce the risk posed by these dangerous potholes?

Mr Goodwill: Lincolnshire is a wonderful county for cycling, not least because it is relatively flat. The Government have allocated substantial funds for the repair of potholes, but I would encourage local authorities to concentrate on how effectively they are using that money. There is some good new technology out there which will mean that potholes can not only be repaired but stay repaired. We often hear stories about potholes being temporarily repaired and then opening up again very quickly.

Rail Electrification (North of England)

15. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent progress has been made on rail electrification schemes in the north of England. [904754]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): We have electrified five times as many miles of track in the last six years as the previous Labour Government did in 13 years, and almost all that work has been in the north of England. I call that good progress.

Diana Johnson: Can the Minister explain why the privately financed £100 million Hull to Selby rail electrification scheme has been stuck in the Department for Transport for nearly two years, while her Department is announcing schemes such as the one involving £27 billion for Crossrail 2 between Hertfordshire and Surbiton? If she is really serious about the northern powerhouse,

why can she not get a wriggle on and get this privately financed scheme to happen?

Claire Perry: I think that that is Humberside for a wiggle, Mr Speaker. Rail North and I completely share the hon. Lady’s enthusiasm for faster and better rail journeys for her constituents, which is why the new franchise that we let last year will give her constituents brand-new trains—bye-bye, Pacers!—more services and more direct connections. Hull is getting £1.4 million for its station in time for the city to take pride of place as the UK city of culture 2017. She should be pleased with that record.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): The Southport to Manchester line has been prioritised for electrification, but we might lose our direct link to south Manchester and the airport through Piccadilly. Why is that happening, and how does it constitute progress?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman has raised a service question that I am not across, but I will get back to him.

Topical Questions

T1. [904727] **Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): We have continued to deliver on issues that affect the motorist, following the findings last year that defeat devices were fitted to Volkswagen vehicles. I instructed the Vehicle Certification Agency to test 37 different vehicle types in the UK over a period of six months to ensure that similar devices were not present on other models. The tests confirmed that they were not, but they did confirm that existing lab tests designed to ensure that emission limits were being met were inadequate. That is why we have been at the forefront of securing tough new Europe-wide real-driving emissions tests. We have also announced further funding to help with the problem of potholes across the country.

Mrs Gillan: I recently completed a blindfolded walk with that excellent charity Guide Dogs to try to understand the challenges faced by visually impaired people, and I am greatly supportive of its campaign to improve access for guide dog owners and their dogs. It is not right that they should be often refused access to businesses and services because their dog is with them. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that taxi and private hire vehicle drivers receive adequate disability awareness training, given that a large number of guide dog owners are still being turned away from those vital transport services?

Mr McLoughlin: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question, and I entirely agree with the point she makes. Taxis and private hire vehicles are essential for many disabled people, and drivers are required to make reasonable adjustments for disabled passengers. It is also a criminal offence to refuse carriage to an assistance dog. Failure to comply with that requirement can result in prosecution and a fine on conviction of up to £1,000. A driver was recently fined £1,546 for refusing access to a guide dog; that figure included legal costs as well as the fine. That message

needs to go out right across the industry, and we will draw it to the attention of the licensing authorities.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): On Monday, the Minister of State said that Volkswagen had not yet fixed any cars in this country. NOx emissions pose a serious health risk to drivers, and indeed to everyone. As he acknowledged, we now know that all manufacturers produce diesel models that pollute above approved limits. How will he address the problem of higher NOx emissions across all models, and will he take urgent action to ensure that when it comes to Volkswagen, the UK is not left at the back of the queue?

Mr McLoughlin: We certainly will, and the Minister of State and I have been dealing with the matter. Before I get to the hon. Lady's attacking us for not doing enough, she needs to remember who started the dash for diesel. Gordon Brown reduced the duty on low sulphur by 3p in his 2001 Budget—just before a general election—which increased diesel car registrations in Great Britain from 3.45 million, or 13% of the UK fleet, to 8.2 million, or 28% of the fleet.

Lilian Greenwood: That decision was of course based on the science at the time. As the Secretary of State knows, American VW owners may be entitled to up to \$5,000 in compensation, while the owners of the 1.2 million VW vehicles in this country are not receiving a penny. Last week, the No. 10 press machine assured us that the Secretary of State had pressed VW specifically on the discrepancy in compensation. However, the Minister of State said on Monday that compensation was a matter for the courts, not Ministers. This is a matter of basic fairness, so when will the Secretary of State step up a gear and fight for a decent compensation deal for UK VW drivers?

Mr McLoughlin: I have made it clear in the meetings that I have had, as has my hon. Friend the Minister of State in his conversations, with not only Volkswagen but other motor manufacturers, that we take this subject seriously. We want to see action. When the hon. Lady responded to my point about the huge increase in diesel cars in this country, I am glad that she said that the decision was based on the evidence at the time; that shows that the proper research was not done.

T2. [904729] **Paul Maynard** (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): The Minister will be aware that the House of Lords recently completed a review of the impact of the Equality Act 2010 on disabled people. A large part of the review focused on the accessibility of taxis and private hire vehicles. Will the Minister update the House on what action the Department will take as a consequence of the review?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I can indeed update the House. The Government are committed to ensuring that disabled people have the same access to transport services and opportunities to travel as everybody else in society. We plan to commence sections 165 and 167 of the Equality Act by the end of this year. I was pleased to see that raised in the Lord review, as I have been working on it

for some time. Drivers will be required to provide assistance to wheelchair users, and to refrain from charging extra.

T7. [904736] **Grahame M. Morris** (Easington) (Lab): Will the Minister take the trouble to come to the north-east and take the train from Nunthorpe, Middlesbrough, to Newcastle? Using an ancient Pacer train, it takes almost 90 minutes. The journey might be quicker by bicycle. If we had had a new train every time it was announced that the old ones would be replaced, we would have a whole fleet of them. If the Minister came and got a wiggle on, that might speed things up a bit.

Mr McLoughlin: I think I need a bit of mentoring in the dialect being used this morning. I accept that the last Labour Government did nothing to improve the system in their 13 years. I am glad to say that new trains will be operating on that line by 2020 as a result of a decision that I took, which was to override the advice, and to instruct the permanent secretary that the Pacers would be phased out, and that we would have new trains on the line. I am very proud of that decision.

T3. [904730] **Stephen Phillips** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Every time I come across Network Rail, it seems to have a great deal of power, but to be utterly unaccountable to central Government. As we are seeing in Lincolnshire, that power can be used to frustrate growth infrastructure schemes that have the support of local authorities. What can the Minister do to ensure that Network Rail does not act to stop schemes that are in the best interests of local people and supported by local authorities?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): The best schemes are those that are strongly supported by local authorities, local enterprise partnerships and local businesses. Network Rail is in a new phase in which route responsibility will be devolved, and it will work to a set of investment plans that are agreed, based on important bottom-up analysis.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Over the past 10 years, destinations and routes from Scotland have doubled, but flights to London have fallen by more than a third. Not only do we need starter routes, such as the Inverness to Heathrow route that we will have next week, but we need to up the frequency of these routes and guarantee them, as that would allow them to bed in and become fully established. Will the Minister establish a point-to-point public service obligation, including specific regional hub airports, and do all he can to create PSOs for airports such as Skye in my constituency?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): We absolutely understand the importance of PSOs and of aviation, particularly for island communities. I am pleased that we have seen such a successful uptake of many of these routes, a number of which have been started without needing subsidies because of the buoyancy of the economy and the aviation sector.

T4. [904731] **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): The slogan of CrossCountry trains is "Going that bit

further”; my constituents would be delighted if it did exactly that and instructed more than three out of 63 trains a day on the inter-city service between Birmingham and Bristol to stop at the city of Gloucester. Will the Minister with responsibility for rail confirm whether the Department will require CrossCountry to restore decent commuter services from Gloucester on that line as part of its franchise extension?

Claire Perry: Nobody could be more assiduous in calling for those service requirements than my hon. Friend, but we must not have services to cities such as Cheltenham lost as a result of a change that he is requiring. I can confirm that discussions are ongoing. We have asked CrossCountry to report on the best way to deliver the services that he is talking about, and I am looking forward to discussing that with him shortly.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Despite the Secretary of State’s pride in the Pacer announcements, there remains huge under-investment in transport in the north, compared with London in particular; the ratio is 24:1. Ministers are now saying that they are going to cut the subsidy to the Northern franchise by up to 85%. Does he really think it adds to the credibility of the northern powerhouse if it takes half a day to cross it, in trains that are better suited to a railway museum than a railway system?

Claire Perry: I would sometimes like to offer Opposition politicians another briefing about what these new franchises are going to deliver. It sounds a bit like “The Generation Game”, but thanks to my Government, the hon. Lady’s constituents will be rid of those outdated trains, and will get many more services of a much better quality; that will be delivered at less cost to the taxpayer. Only a Labour politician could argue for worse services and more subsidy.

T5. [904732] **Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): We have been very positive about the new Northern rail franchise. However, there are throngs of people who want to get from Leeds to Goole but cannot do that at the moment; there may even be some who wish to get from Goole to Leeds. The situation is the same on the Brigg to Sheffield line. Both lines are very under-utilised, so what opportunities are there under the new franchising agreements to get those improved services? Will the Minister come and ride the train with us?

Mr McLoughlin *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) wanted the Minister with responsibility for rail, but he is lumbered with the Secretary of State.

Mr McLoughlin: What my hon. Friend wants and what he gets are two entirely different things, Mr Speaker. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for talking about the need to improve capacity on the networks, and I am very interested to hear of all the people who wish to travel between Goole and Leeds. The new rail franchise for the north will provide a tremendous increase in capacity and a lot of new routes, and we will see whether his argument stands up.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): With the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrim Fathers, can we get a helping hand to do up Retford railway station, including the car parking, so that people can see the best of British when they visit my area?

Mr McLoughlin: The hon. Gentleman is far more familiar with Retford station than I am, but this is certainly something that would be considered by the local growth fund. I suggest that he goes through the necessary procedures to encourage his local enterprise partnership to apply for that funding.

T6. [904735] **Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The Roadmaster velocity patcher can fill 300 potholes in a day, and Lincolnshire has got one—but we would like more. What help can the Minister offer my county council in getting more? Will he consider incentivising councils to work together so that we can increase the nationwide fleet of these fantastic machines?

Andrew Jones: I am aware of the Roadmaster velocity patcher, and the Government certainly support the use of innovative and efficient methods to maintain our local highways. We have provided a budget of more than £6 billion for highways maintenance, plus there is the pothole action fund. We have introduced incentive elements to the highways maintenance fund, which includes an element of collaboration. I should like to see local authorities working with their neighbours right across the country in exactly the way that my hon. Friend describes.

Mr Speaker: The Minister clearly enjoys a life of undiluted excitement.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What are the Government doing to stem the flow of job losses among British qualified seafarers? In particular, will the Minister with responsibility for shipping have a look at how some of our regulation operates here? My constituents tell me that the operation of the certificates of equivalent competency, for example, are putting them at a disadvantage compared with seafarers from other parts of the world.

Mr Goodwill: We certainly have the best-qualified seamen in the world, due in no small part to the tonnage tax scheme and the SMaRT—support for maritime training—funding of £15 million a year. It is of concern if less-qualified people are taking jobs. I know that there are particular problems in the North sea with regard to jobs being cut. I would be pleased to meet the right hon. Gentleman to talk about the matter in more detail.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Will my hon. Friend reassure me that the Department is training apprentices and investing in apprentice-training programmes, so that the country can continue to have the skills and expertise to keep on with our world-leading transport infrastructure programme and improvements?

Andrew Jones: I can indeed give my hon. Friend that assurance. The transport infrastructure skills strategy sets targets for delivering apprenticeships throughout the supply chain, and will deliver them via procurement contracts. One apprenticeship will be created for every £3 million to £5 million of contract value, or for 2.5% of

the workforce per year, depending on the contract type. Apprenticeships are right at the heart of our skills agenda.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I freely admit that I want the Secretary of State, and I hope that I get him. He has visited Bullsmoor Lane in my constituency, and he knows that it is being used as a slip road off the M25. It is a residential area with a very serious accident record. There is a lot of freight coming into north London and using the road as a route to central London. May I ask him in good faith to meet me and two of the leading resident representatives to discuss this very, very serious issue, and to find a satisfactory way forward?

Mr McLoughlin: Well, sometimes we get what we want, Mr Speaker. I am more than happy to meet the right hon. Lady on this. There does seem to be some confusion over whether it is a matter for Transport for London or for Highways England. That is no answer to the people who are suffering from the problems. It is a very difficult area to deal with, because of all the residential implications, but we will have that meeting.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I do not really care who answers my question. From the Minister's description earlier, the local major transport projects fund could have been tailor-made for the Carrington bridge and the Worcester southern link project, which the finest minds at the Worcestershire LEP are preparing a bid for. May I say to the Secretary of State and his team that there should be no wiggle room for the Government in approving this project?

Mr McLoughlin: I visited—probably almost a year ago to the day—the bridge to which my hon. Friend referred. I cannot quite remember what was going on at the time. I viewed it from a site that was opened by his father some 30 years previously. The point that he makes about it being a suitable scheme for the local

majors fund is certainly one that should be considered, and I urge the LEP and the local authority to ensure that they put in an application for it to be considered.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State work with the new Labour—obviously—Mayor of London to ensure the effective development of the HS2 Crossrail interchange at Old Oak? In particular, will he revisit the deal he made with the current Mayor of London in 2014, which means that no development—commercial or housing—can take place on the site unless there is a very extensive movement of the lines almost immediately after they open at great public expense?

Mr McLoughlin: Unlike the hon. Gentleman, I take no election for granted and I will meet whoever is the Mayor of London, but I very much hope it is my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), who will be able to work much better with the Government than the right hon. Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan). With reference to development around Old Oak Common, that site will be a major transport hub in the United Kingdom, so it is very important to get the infrastructure right.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The Department has responsibility for delivering a number of local and national transport infrastructure projects, so will the Secretary of State undertake to write into every funding agreement that at every opportunity we will procure British steel for the construction of those projects?

Mr McLoughlin: I am happy to say that we have made a number of changes to our procurement process to reflect exactly the point that my hon. Friend makes. Wherever we can, we should support our own industry. That must be on a competitive basis, but there is a special case for British steel and about 98% of the steel that Network Rail purchases is British.

Trade Union Bill (Discussions)

10.35 am

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Prime Minister if he will instruct his adviser on ministerial interests to launch an inquiry as to whether discussions between Ministers and officials and representatives of trade unions or the Labour party concerning amendments to the Trade Union Bill constitute a breach of the ministerial code of conduct. I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

The Minister for Skills (Nick Boles): The Cabinet Office has advised me that there is no breach of the ministerial code and nothing for the Prime Minister's adviser on ministerial interests to investigate.

The Trade Union Bill is now in ping-pong and, as is customary at such times, Ministers have held regular discussions with shadow Ministers to discuss possible compromises that would secure passage of the Bill and delivery of the commitments made in the Conservative party's manifesto. On the basis of the amendments passed by this House yesterday evening, I can reassure my hon. Friend that we are well on the way to securing all our manifesto commitments—ballot thresholds for strikes, reforms to the role of the certification officer, a tightening-up of rules around facility time, action to stop intimidation of non-striking workers, and the introduction of a transparent opt-in process for union members' contributions to political funds.

The question of compulsory opt-in to trade unions' political funds was one of the most contentious, especially in the House of Lords. Noble Lords referred the clauses in the Bill to a special Select Committee under the chairmanship of Lord Burns. Following the Select Committee's report, the House of Lords voted by a large majority to accept an amendment to restrict the opt-in to new members and to exclude existing trade union members.

My hon. Friend will not be surprised to learn that I hold regular meetings with trade union leaders and the general secretary of the TUC, not just in relation to the Bill, but in relation to other responsibilities of mine, including our support for the excellent work of Unionlearn.

Trade union support for the campaign to remain in the European Union is not new and should not come as a surprise to anyone. The TUC declared its support for the campaign in February. The GMB union did the same on 22 February, Unite on 14 March and Unison on 13 April.

Mr Jenkin: We all remember the Prime Minister foretelling that the next great scandal would be a lobbying scandal, and here it is. Trade union leaders have been complaining that they are unable to campaign effectively for a remain vote in the EU referendum while the Government's Trade Union Bill has been threatening trade unions and their funding. The Bill would have implemented a Conservative manifesto commitment to "legislate to ensure trade unions use a transparent opt-in process for union subscriptions".

As a result of the amendment being accepted, a 19-year-old who has just started a job and is a member of a trade

union will now never be asked by a trade union whether he wants his political fund subscriptions to be taken out of his pay packet.

The Prime Minister told the House of Commons on 15 July last year:

"There is a very simple principle here: giving money to a party should be an act of free will. Money should not be taken out of people's pay packets without them being told about it properly"—[*Official Report*, 15 July 2015; Vol. 598, c. 885.]

and he likened that to mis-selling. On 16 March, the Minister in the other place described the Labour amendment, which the Government have now accepted, as a "wrecking amendment". Yesterday, the Minister made a wholly unexpected concession when he announced his decision to abandon opposition to the change in the Bill.

It is now being reported on Channel 4 News and in today's papers that those unexpected concessions are linked to a £1.7 million donation that trade unions might make from their political funds, which are now much larger than they would have been, to the Labour remain campaign, Labour In For Britain. Until recently, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) was trying to raise £75,000 for a few leaflets, balloons and badges; now the campaign is getting £1.7 million. It has been confirmed to me by more than two independent sources that No. 10 instructed those concessions to be made after discussions with trade union representatives. That being true would amount to the sale of Government policy for cash and political favours.

Lest there be any doubt about the impropriety of this deal, Her Majesty's Opposition should ask themselves this question: what would they be saying if this Government had altered a Bill in order to give extra money to the Conservative party or to the Conservatives' remain campaign, Conservatives In? My hon. Friend the Minister should ask himself this question: what would have been the reaction if a Labour Government had changed a Bill in order to favour the Labour party's ability to support the Government on some controversial policy and in order to give the Labour party money? This stinks—it reeks the same as cash for questions. This shows that this Government really are at the rotten heart of the European Union.

The seven principles of public life require public office holders to

"avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence...their work."

The ministerial code states:

"Ministers must ensure that no conflict arises",

or appears to arise,

"between their public duties and their private interests".

In this matter, the Labour party constitutes one of their private interests.

Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister instruct his adviser on ministerial interests, Sir Alex Allan, to launch an investigation? If my hon. Friend the Minister and the Cabinet Office are right, he has nothing to fear from such an investigation.

Nick Boles: May I start by saying that I have the greatest respect for the passion and commitment, which have lasted for not just years but decades, that my hon.

Friend has brought to the cause he advocates with such vigour—that we leave the European Union? I have nothing but total respect for that passion and commitment.

I just want gently to correct my hon. Friend on a few points of fact, because he focused so much on the important question he raised that a number of the things he suggested about the current mechanism for union members' subscriptions to the political fund were not absolutely correct.

The first point to make is that it is not the case that somebody who has recently joined a trade union, and to whom the new requirement for an opt-in will therefore not apply, will never be asked whether they want to pay into the political levy—very far from it. There is a long-standing legal requirement that they are offered an opt-out from that political levy and that that is communicated clearly to them. That opt-out is not just a one-time thing; it is not something they are offered only when they join—it is something they can exercise at any time, and they need to be reminded of it regularly.

The other thing to say is that, while estimates from different unions vary, the overall estimate is that roughly 13% to 14% of all trade union members joined in the last year. I am not going to suggest that all trade union members will have needed to opt in to the political fund over this Parliament, but a substantial proportion will have.

I am afraid my hon. Friend is also not correct to say that we are talking about a Labour amendment. The amendment was moved by Lord Burns—somebody for whom I know my hon. Friend has the greatest respect, as a fearsomely independent former permanent secretary. The amendment flowed out of a Committee in which there was some very fearsome representation of all parties. It was clearly inspired by Lord Burns's argument that it is not reasonable to ask people who have signed up to an arrangement in good faith then to have to sign up again through a different process simply because we have changed the law later on. I did not agree with that argument, and nor did we in this House, but what happened often happens when the House of Lords feels very, very strongly on an issue, when there is a very, very large majority against the Government's position, and when an Independent Member of the House of Lords has moved an amendment that has secured support not just from the official Opposition and from the Liberal Democrats but from a huge number of Cross Benches—and not just from Cross Benches but some very significant members of our own party.

I urge my hon. Friend to look at the people who spoke in the debate and voted, or very assertively chose not to vote, in support of the Government's position. They included not just Lord Cormack and Lord Balfé but Lord Forsyth, who supports the same campaign on the European Union that my hon. Friend has supported and who, both privately and publicly, said that he thought it was a profound error for us to pursue a compulsory opt-in for all existing members. So it is not right to say that it was just a Labour position.

My hon. Friend suggested that it was inappropriate for the Government to do anything in terms of making changes to legislation to further private interests, and of course he is right. However, it is not right, and not even in the passion of the moment is it fair, to categorise the official policy of Her Majesty's Government in that way. We support the proposition that the United Kingdom

should remain a member of the European Union. He disagrees, honourably and valiantly, but it is not a private interest—it is Government policy.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is very good to have this further opportunity to re-emphasise our implacable opposition to the execrable Trade Union Bill, which is entirely unnecessary, bad for workers, and bad for businesses. As the Minister said, the Lords set up a cross-party Committee chaired by Lord Burns to look at the unworkable proposals on trade union political funds and party political funding. That Committee came up with a series of Salisbury-convention-compliant recommendations that were voted for by an overwhelming majority of peers from all parties and from none.

Will the Minister confirm that he recently met Lord Burns, who made clear the strength of feeling in the other place on this matter? Will he also confirm that he has received overwhelming representations from all quarters, including the trade unions? By the way, it is hardly surprising, given that this is the Trade Union Bill, that he should receive representations from the unions. Is it not the case that all these various representations made it clear that the proposals on political funding were unworkable and breached the long-established convention that major changes to the funding of a political party should happen only by agreement?

It would appear, at least partially that the Minister listened—well done—but he should have listened earlier, and he needs to keep listening. Will he therefore have a few more meetings with trade unions, which have made entirely reasonable proposals on e-balloting and facility time that still remain in the Bill? There is still time for him to think again.

Nick Boles: I can confirm that, as the hon. Gentleman said, earlier this week I held a meeting, at my request, with Lord Burns in which I discussed with him an amendment to the Bill that we had put down and were intending to move. That amendment would still have applied the compulsory opt-in to existing members of trade unions but would have built a longer period of transition for trade unions to implement it and would also have changed the arrangements on the requirement for renewal of their opt-in to align it with the political fund ballots that need to take place every 10 years.

I had hoped that Lord Burns would feel, if not enthusiastic about that compromise, at least able to indicate that he would not actively oppose it when the Bill went back to the upper House in the next stage of ping-pong. Lord Burns, who is a man for whom I have huge admiration and a great deal of liking, was very clear to me that that was not an acceptable compromise and that not only would he not support it, but he would actively propose the reinstatement of his amendment, which excluded existing members.

Lord Burns made it very clear that his judgment was not so much a political one—it was certainly not particularly inspired by questions about the balance of party funding. It was simply based on his experience in the financial services industry, where he said it was very unfair to ask people to sign up to new things when they have already expressed an opinion on that very same question by a means that was previously legal. He said that that applied in this case; he thought that it was wrong and he

[Nick Boles]

could not support it. We then reflected on Lord Burns's position and tabled the amendments that we passed last night.

As for the comments made by the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) about the rest of the Bill, I want to be very clear with him and other Labour Members: this Bill is going to dramatically improve the state of employment relations and the state of industrial action. At the moment, a trade union, including various education trade unions, can hold a strike three years after a ballot has been passed with a turnout of less than 20% of their members and close more than 1,000 colleges. That is currently legal. When the Bill—which will pass through this House with the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin); I anticipate that the noble Lords will pass it next week—receives Royal Assent, it will no longer be possible to inflict on hard-working parents the closure of a school in the middle of the week on the basis of a tiny turnout secured several years ago. That is why I am proud of this Bill and why my hon. Friend can be proud of it: we have secured our manifesto commitments for all working people.

Mr Speaker: The Minister, regrettably, has been diverted from the path of procedural virtue as a result of the cheeky inquiries of the Opposition Front Bencher. We cannot now have a Third Reading of the Trade Union Bill. We must focus narrowly instead on the matter of the urgent question, which I know will be done faithfully by Dr Liam Fox.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Given this change to the Trade Union Bill, and following on from our abandonment of our manifesto commitments on immigration by not renegotiating free movement, will my hon. Friend tell us which of our election commitments we will not now abandon in trying to seek a remain vote?

Nick Boles: Your cautionary tone is ringing in my ears, Mr Speaker, so I will answer my right hon. Friend's question by narrowly focusing on the measures in the Bill that demonstrate, as I said at the start of my answer, that we have genuinely secured everything that was in our manifesto. This point came up in my discussion with Lord Burns, who really knows a thing or two about legislative drafting. Having read and re-read the precise words in our manifesto about the commitment to introduce a transparent opt-in for the political fund, he said that he was absolutely confident and very clear that the amendment that he tabled, which was passed in the other place and which we have now accepted, fulfilled that manifesto commitment in full; and not only that, but that the further introduction of the opt-in to apply to existing members was not given cover by the Salisbury convention, and that he would make that very plain in his speech in the upper House, if we were to try to restore that position. I mean no criticism of those who wrote our manifesto—it is a wonderful document that will live through the ages—but their wording was not so precisely established as to secure that additional application of the opt-in to existing members of trade unions.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): We in the Scottish National party reiterate our complete opposition to the Trade Union Bill. Can the Minister confirm that it would be strange, on a piece of legislation that affects 6 million workers, for a Government not to consult bodies that represent those 6 million workers? Can he also confirm that the Government were considering concessions as far back as 26 January, when a memorandum in his name was leaked to many media outlets? Can he confirm what ongoing discussions he is having with devolved institutions, which still have major problems with the Bill and its extent as it relates to facility time and other issues?

Nick Boles: The hon. Gentleman made a valuable contribution to our deliberations at all stages, but perhaps especially in Committee. I seem to remember that his criticism was both vocal and incisive on almost every measure in the Bill. Of course, he is right. Not only do we hold discussions with institutions in society about which we are legislating—I think it would be a little unfair if we did not—but we actually invited them to give evidence to the Committee. One of the most terrifying sights that I have seen in a long time was the general secretary of Unite, the general secretary of the GMB, the general secretary of Unison and the general secretary of the TUC all sitting in a row giving evidence to that Committee. Of course it was right to do that.

The hon. Gentleman is also right to say that we have consulted the devolved Administrations. I have had a number of conversations by phone and in person with Ministers in the devolved Governments, who have expressed some concern about whether all the provisions in the Bill should properly apply to them, although we are absolutely confident that all the provisions in the Bill relate to reserved matters and therefore apply to everyone and every trade union in the United Kingdom.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I chaired the Trade Union Bill Committee, and therefore I am not going to comment on the Trade Union Bill, but may I make a general House of Commons and constitutional point? There would be concern if, as part of the ping-pong process, any Government at any time made concessions on a Bill as a result of something that had nothing to do with that Bill. My hon. Friend is an honourable man, and I am sure that he can confirm that no Government of which he was a part would ever do that.

Nick Boles: I think I have explained pretty clearly what the process was. I speak for myself in simply saying that when I met the immovable force of Lord Burns, I decided that perhaps discretion was the better part of valour. That is not to say that Ministers do not have discussions on all sorts of issues with all sorts of people in society. It is the Government's policy to support the remain campaign. The previous general secretary of the TUC is a board member of Stronger In and has been for months. The trade unions that I have listed made their positions very clear long before the Bill came back to this House or, indeed, the opt-in was considered in the upper House. I gently say to my hon. and right hon. Friends that not every compromise is a conspiracy.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Now that the Government, according to the barmy idea that is being propagated this morning by the right wing of the Tory

party, are seemingly prepared to give way on different subjects, can I ask the Minister: what is the price for dropping this lousy, rotten Trade Union Bill altogether? I will try to get it.

Nick Boles: It is the goal of my life to give pleasure to the hon. Gentleman, but I have to tell him that there is no price, because we believe in this Bill. We believe in our manifesto, and we are well on the way to delivering it.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I hope that the Minister will understand why people are asking these questions when we read from a senior political journalist in *The Telegraph* the following words:

“Last night a union source said bosses had always been clear that it would be ‘difficult’ to spend significant amounts on the campaign to keep Britain in the union while fighting against the Trade Union Bill. But they revealed that unions will now step up their campaigning and funding efforts in light of the concessions”, Can he confirm right now that this journalist is absolutely wrong, that her sources are incorrect and that no such trade took place?

Nick Boles: I am afraid that I will just have to repeat what I have already said. There is a natural process towards the end of a parliamentary Session in which concessions are made on Bills to secure their timely passage. What trade unions decide to do about their long-standing commitment to back the remain campaign is entirely a matter for them.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I think this is a very rare occurrence of the Government actually listening to Members of Parliament both in the upper House and in this House. I welcome that, and it is the right thing to do. It is right that the Government should meet trade unions—of course they should. The legislation is an attack on trade unions and does nothing whatsoever for employee-employer relations. It is a wrecking piece of legislation, and any concessions can only improve the Bill. I hope we can have more concessions in the short time left for the Bill’s passage.

Nick Boles: The right hon. Lady is far too kind to me. I did not want to listen at all. I am afraid I simply acknowledged that, faced by an array of forces—it is not just led by Lord Burns, but includes most of the Cross Benches, all the Liberal Democrats, all the members of Labour party and very influential Conservative peers, such as Lord Forsyth, Lord Deben, Lord Balfé and Lord Cormack—neophytes in this game like me perhaps need to concede defeat.

Mr Speaker: It is true that the noble Lord Cormack is a very special “parli-a-mentarian”.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): As the grandson of a trade union shop steward who went on to become a Conservative activist and whose son made it to the other place, I can say to the Minister that he has had correspondence on this issue from Government Members raising the concerns of their constituents who also happen to be trade unionists. May I thank him for listening in relation to that correspondence and paying attention to it? It is a profoundly Conservative principle not just to get through the business in our manifesto, but to engage with the other place to improve it.

Nick Boles: My hon. Friend’s father did not just make it to other place, but made it into the Cabinet and was a very significant performer in the area of employment law and industrial relations, so we have much to learn from his work. My hon. Friend is right. I hope it is not breaking a confidence to say that I have had conversations with other Members of the House who were deeply concerned about this specific provision. I should not mention their names, but they include very significant—in fact, leading—supporters of the campaign to leave the European Union.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Has there ever been any psychological explanation of why so many Tory MPs have such a loathing of trade unions?

Nick Boles: I do not recognise such loathing, and I certainly do not feel it myself.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May I join my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) in congratulating the Minister on the way in which he has handled the Bill? Again, is it not the case that the Minister has had conversations with many people from all parts of the House, including on the Government Benches, both in the Commons and in the other place, about their concerns and that many of those concerns have now been addressed without any concessions at all being made to us?

Nick Boles: I can confirm that, and none was more important than my hon. Friend, who had some very serious concerns. He did exactly the right thing: he came to see me privately about them as we were deliberating in the House. He tabled an amendment on Report, which he did not move because I had reassured him that we would look at closely as the Bill progressed. Yesterday, when he was not in the Chamber, I specifically mentioned that he had been influential in our decision ultimately not to press ahead with the measure that would have removed the check-off arrangement for trade unions in the public sector.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I declare an interest as someone who has paid the political fund levy since 1969, and is a former president of Unison and a member of the TUC general council. I assure the House that the trade unions are quite clear that they do not want the Bill at all. When the Government were pushing this Bill they were reminded that even Winston Churchill spoke against what they are trying to do. I will also say very clearly that, whatever gossip people are hearing, there is no doubt that the trade unions would have funded the Labour party’s remain campaign, because they realise that the people who the Prime Minister of this country described as swivel-eyed loonies and the other right-wing reactionaries who would deregulate this nation will be worse for working people. Whatever the outcome of the Bill, and even if it had not been changed at all, I am convinced that the trade unions would have been in that position on behalf of their members, putting their money where their mouth is.

Nick Boles: The hon. Gentleman’s words speak for themselves and are very powerful.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): This is a shabby political episode. The Government have been caught diluting trade union legislation to persuade the trade unions to come on board with the campaign to stay in the European Union. Is it not clear that the Government, big business, the big banks, the BBC and now the big trade unions are all ganging up on the British people to try to persuade them to stay in the European Union?

Nick Boles: Nothing pains me more than to have angered my hon. Friend, as I clearly have. I have huge liking and respect for him; whenever he asks me to visit his constituency I drop everything to come, because I just think he is a great man. But I reject what he has said. Unlike in any other case, perhaps in this case he is blinded a little by his passion for the issue. I simply point out that all he need do is look at the front pages and editorial pages of every single newspaper that is traditionally seen as a Conservative supporter to see that there is a balance of opinion in this debate and his arguments are being well represented.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Given the impact the Bill will have on workers' rights across the whole of the United Kingdom, what discussions has the Minister had with the devolved Administrations since the Lords amendments?

Nick Boles: I have not yet had that pleasure, but I anticipate it.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): This is a very simple issue, on which the Minister could give a very straightforward answer. The allegation is that the Trade Union Bill was watered down for the benefit of the trade unions on the understanding that they would then make a considerable donation to the campaign to stay in the European Union. Will the Minister give us a clear denial, with the authority of the Dispatch Box, that any such discussions took place with Ministers or officials, and that in no way whatever was the watering down of the Bill done with any mention of funding from trade unions for the EU remain campaign? It is very simple for him to deny it if it is not true.

Nick Boles: I aspire—and probably always will—to be as straightforward as my hon. Friend. I have been very clear: we went through a process of negotiation, not just with shadow Ministers but with members of other parties and none in the other House. We have secured a package that, I have to say, I do not believe any hon. Member on the Government Benches would have predicted; when we introduced the Bill, no one would have predicted that we would have secured as much of it as swiftly and as easily as we have, because it was probably the most politically controversial Bill in our original Queen's Speech. As for decisions by trade unions to back the campaign for which they had already declared long before yesterday's consideration of the amendments to the Bill, the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) spoke very clearly when he said that the trade unions would have supported the campaign wholeheartedly and full-throatedly anyway, because they believe that it is in their interests and the interests of their members to do so.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): I do not think that there was anything so grubby as a deal, but if an agreement was reached I congratulate the Opposition Chief Whip on showing how politics can be done. May I urge the Minister now to ask the private sector to follow the leadership of the trade unions and contact their employees to make the case for Europe and the terrible threats to jobs, investment and growth if we leave a single market of 500 million consumers?

Nick Boles: I am not sure, Mr Speaker, whether you would count that question or my likely answer as directly relevant, but I will venture on until you stop me. It is clear that the overwhelming majority of businesses, small and large, have many beefs about the European Union—I do, too—but ultimately think that it is in our interests to stay. I agree with the hon. Gentleman to this extent, that I think all of us should be doing all we can, whether financially or in other ways, to encourage the people we represent to see that their interests are best protected by staying in.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) who asked this urgent question speaks passionately on behalf of his own union, which is the general and municipal union of Brexit bigots. [HON. MEMBERS: "Order!"] It is extraordinary that he asked for the adviser on ministerial interests to be woken from his slumber—that adviser has been virtually unemployed since he was appointed, after the previous holder of the office, Sir Philip Mawer, resigned because he believed that he should have been called in to investigate the conduct of the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), who gained absolution through resignation. As Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, why on earth is the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex not demanding an inquiry into the two Ministers who gave £3 million to Kids Company in the face of advice from civil servants, three days before it collapsed? It is because the office of the adviser has been degraded and politicised. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Calm down. Calm. The benefit of yoga, even for Ministers, should not be underestimated. Let me intercede briefly because there were calls of "Order" when the hon. Gentleman used a word about Members on the Government Back Benches. I did not intervene because I judge that to be a matter of taste. There is no imputation of dishonour and—I mean this in no unkind spirit—the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), and other likeminded souls, are perfectly capable of looking after themselves. Their honour has not been impugned in any way, and that is why I did not intervene. The remark stands, and the Minister must reply.

Nick Boles: There are no bigots on the Government side of the House, least of all my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), or any hon. Friend who disagrees with me on this subject. The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) does himself no credit by hurling that kind of playschool abuse across the Chamber. He is a disgrace, the comment was a disgrace, and he should withdraw it.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister is entitled to his view, but I hope the House will not take offence if I say that I will judge whether a remark needs to be withdrawn. With great force and eloquence the Minister has offered his view, and I respect him for that, but we will leave it there.

Paul Flynn: But he hasn't answered the question.

Mr Speaker: If I were to intervene on grounds of order every time a question is not answered, nothing else would ever happen in the Chamber.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I confess to a sense of bemusement at this urgent question, which seems to be little more than a contrived confluence of the pet prejudices of right-wing Tories, namely trade unions and the European Union. That said, I restate my absolute opposition to this Bill. Will the Minister confirm that trade unions remain a part of civil society and have an absolute right to make representations to the Government on behalf of their members, irrespective of what right-wing Conservative Back Benchers might wish?

Nick Boles: Of course I confirm that, but the position governing strike action, the proper regulation of trade union activities with regard to finances and membership, and the position on picketing and intimidation of non-striking workers, were not acceptable until this Bill was introduced, and they will remain not acceptable until the Bill has secured Royal Assent. Of course I accept that trade unions have an important role in society, but they needed and will benefit from this reform. I put on record my gratitude to all my hon. Friends, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex, for their support for the Bill.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Today is International Workers Memorial Day, which serves as a poignant reminder of why we need good and strong trade unions in our society. I also think it right that the trade union movement is opposed to many of the measures in the Bill, which is an attack on how it operates on behalf of its members. On the substantive point of the urgent question, the Bill is not yet legislation and has not been enacted. Surely the fact that a Labour-affiliated trade union has decided to donate some of its Labour-affiliated political fund to a Labour-supported campaign is perfectly within the law.

Nick Boles: The hon. Gentleman is correct.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the Minister and all colleagues.

Mr Jenkin: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Points of order really come after statements. The hon. Gentleman has had a good run, and he should be patient. I am sure his point of order can be heard later, if it is sufficiently important to warrant either his staying in the Chamber or his returning to it.

Business of the House

11.15 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 2 MAY—The House will not be sitting. It is the May Day bank holiday.

TUESDAY 3 MAY—I remind the House that we will be sitting Monday hours, not Tuesday hours. We will be debating a motion to approve a Ways and Means resolution relating to the Housing and Planning Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Housing and Planning Bill.

WEDNESDAY 4 MAY—Opposition day debate (un-allotted half day). There will be a half-day debate on an Opposition motion, subject to be announced, followed by debate on a motion relating to education funding in London. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

THURSDAY 5 MAY—General debate on the contribution of faith organisations to the voluntary sector in local communities. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 6 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 9 May will include:

MONDAY 9 MAY—Debate on a motion on Government Departments outside London. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee, followed by consideration of Lords amendments.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall on Monday 9 will be:

MONDAY 9 MAY—Debate on an e-petition relating to the Government's EU referendum leaflet.

Chris Bryant: Ed Balls! Do we actually have a Government at all? They are all over the place. We all thought that the referendum was a simple question of "EU—in or out?" but this week it got much more complicated, as we learned it was also about "ECHR—in or out?" The Home Secretary is an "in, out", but the Lord Chancellor is an "out, in". The Chancellor is an "in, in", along with the Attorney General and the Solicitor General, but the Leader of the House is an "out, out". As for me, I am out for in, but that is more of a gay pro-EU kind of thing.

The Health Secretary says he is in his last big job in politics—hurrah!—and I hear that with an impending reshuffle several Ministers have been scouring the jobs market. I have even heard rumours of new government postings to overseas territories being planned. Boris is off to St Helena to cultivate his Napoleon complex and Whitto to the Falklands, and for the Health Secretary there is Inaccessible Island, in the south Atlantic, which is probably where the junior doctors want to send him anyway.

As for the Leader of the House—this is very exciting news—I gather that he is 33:1 to be the next Chancellor of the Exchequer and 80:1 to be the next Tory leader, but I have a much better idea. On this day in 1789, as I

[Chris Bryant]

am sure Members know, Fletcher Christian mutinied on the Bounty. Christian ended up on Pitcairn Island, which is 9,000 miles from here. I can just imagine the Leader of the House as the governor of Pitcairn, dressed in his white linen shorts, his solar topee and his white socks and sandals, lording it over all 56 inhabitants. If he wants, I can put in a word with the Prime Minister for him—because I see that the Prime Minister is trying to advance my career.

Can we have a debate on irresponsible politics? I suspect the Leader of the House might never have heard of Arfon Jones, but he tweeted:

“I think we should have a protest where thousands of us send emails containing the words bomb+terrorist+Iran. That should keep GCHQ quiet.”

Now Arfon might be a stupid crank, but he is also the Plaid Cymru candidate for North Wales police and crime commissioner.

Can we have a statement from the Home Secretary on the deeply worrying breakdown of the e-borders system on 14 and 15 June last year? We need to know, first: have there been other breakdowns? Were full warnings index checks implemented and, above all, why did the Home Secretary cover this up for so long? The Leader of the House says that we should leave the EU so we can control our borders, but surely the lesson we should learn is that the greatest threat to our borders is, frankly, Tory incompetence.

The Leader of the House says that we should consider Lords amendments to the Housing and Planning Bill on Tuesday. As I walked into Parliament this morning, the police were moving on two homeless people who have been sleeping on the doorstep of this parliamentary palace for the last week. Under the Tories, rough sleeping has doubled and funding for those sleeping rough has halved. We believe that this Bill will make the housing crisis in London even worse. So will this Government ensure, for heaven's sake, that for every single social housing unit sold off, at least another is built in its place?

On 29 November 2012, the Prime Minister said of the Leveson inquiry that there would be

“a second part to investigate wrongdoing in the press and the police”.—[*Official Report*, 29 November 2012; Vol. 554, c. 446.]

I listened to the Home Secretary very carefully yesterday. She made an excellent statement, but she also said:

“We have always said that a decision on Leveson 2 will be made when all the investigations have been completed.”—[*Official Report*, 27 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 1441.]

Well, that is not right. Up until now, the Government position and the Prime Minister's position has always been that Leveson 2 will start—not might start—as soon as the police and prosecuting authorities have finished their work.

Surely, one of the many lessons we must learn from Hillsborough is that when the relationship between the police and the press gets too close, it corrupts them both. After all, some have argued that the law of libel means there is no need for a strong independent press regulator, but the 96 people whose reputation was dragged through the mud by the police, *The Sun* and *The Spectator* could not sue for libel, could they? So surely we need Leveson 2 now more than ever.

As Passover ends on Saturday, let me say again as clearly as I possibly can that anti-Semitism is wrong—full stop, end of story. I am sick and tired of people trying to explain it away—and, yes, I am talking to you, Ken Livingstone. Of course the illegal settlements are wrong and the Palestinians deserve a better deal. Of course, too, rocket attacks on Jewish kibbutzim are wrong, and Hamas and Hezbollah must acknowledge the right of Israel to exist. I was taught to judge people not according to the colour of their skin, their race, their religion, their gender or their sexuality, but according to the strength of their character.

Frankly, it is no better when a senior politician looks at the President of the United States and sees only the colour of his skin and his “part-Kenyan ancestry” or when the Tory candidate for the Mayor of London runs a deliberately racially charged campaign against his Labour opponent. It is profoundly irresponsible, and it offends the fundamental decency of the British people. I hope I speak for all Members when I say that racism and racial prejudice are simply not welcome in our political system or our political parties.

Chris Grayling: I shall come back to that issue in a few moments, but I of course share most of the sentiments that the hon. Gentleman has just raised. Let me deal with other issues first.

I start by wishing you, Mr Speaker, and the shadow Leader of the House a very happy Ed Balls day. I never thought they would come to miss him as much as they apparently do.

I was asked about the European convention on human rights. The hon. Gentleman spoke about in-out policies and out-in policies, but what he did not talk about was all-over-the-place policies, which is the Labour party's position on this issue. Labour Members do not want prisoners to have the vote, but they do not want to change our human rights laws. They should be smart enough to realise that those two positions are completely incompatible.

The hon. Gentleman raised the matter of the Health Secretary's comment about his last big job in government. What we would remind the hon. Gentleman of is the fact that he does not see his job as his last big job in government, as the Prime Minister wisely reminded us yesterday. The hon. Gentleman spoke of odds on jobs for the future, but I suspect that the odds on his becoming Speaker of this House are longer than the odds on my becoming manager of Liverpool football club.

On the subject of Liverpool football club and the hon. Gentleman's comments on Hillsborough, I would like to say a couple of things. First, when we were in opposition, I served as a shadow Minister for Liverpool, and I have enormous regard for that city, its people and their resilience. I would like to pay a personal tribute to all the Hillsborough families and all the people in Liverpool who supported them through their long years of struggle. They achieved justice this week.

I also wish to pay a personal tribute to the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham). I thought that what he said in the House yesterday was incredibly moving. It was a fine moment in our parliamentary history, and the right hon. Gentleman deserves enormous credit for what he has done.

The shadow Leader of the House talked about Leveson 2. Let me simply remind him of the Government's position, which is that we will not move forward until the cases are complete. That is the right thing to do, and we will continue to stick to our position. The hon. Gentleman also made a point about Arfon Jones. Yes, I do know who he is, and I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the views he has expressed are objectionable. It is my sincere hope that he is not elected as police and crime commissioner in that part of north Wales.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that the e-borders programme was supposed to arrive and be put into effect when Labour was in power, but that did not happen, because Labour failed to deliver it. When Labour Members talk to us about what we have done in government, they should bear in mind that they were in power for 13 years, and that they started by dismantling the exit checks at our borders and then completely failed to provide an alternative.

The hon. Gentleman talked about homelessness. Let me just remind him of his party's record in government. In 13 years, the Labour Government built fewer council houses than we built during the first Parliament in which we were in office.

Let me now return to the question of anti-Semitism, and pay a personal tribute to the hon. Gentleman. When it comes to this issue, his has been a voice of reason, sanity and common sense in the Labour party, and he deserves credit for that. However, I wish that all his colleagues saw things in the same way. What he said about Ken Livingstone was absolutely right. Ken Livingstone's comments yesterday, suggesting that the matters that were at the heart of yesterday's controversy were not anti-Semitic, were disgraceful. I do not understand—as, indeed, many Labour Members do not understand—how Ken Livingstone can still be a member of the Labour party today. He should be suspended from the party for the things that he said. I also think, however, that there has been some naivety on the Labour Benches this morning.

The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) said on the "Today" programme that she regarded these events as "trial by Twitter", and likened what had happened to the tweeting of a picture of my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) on a zip wire. It is clear that she does not fully understand the gravity of the situation. We heard wise words from the shadow Leader of the House, and I respect him for them, although I profoundly disagree with what he said about my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip. He made a powerful point, and, in this regard, he is a beacon of sense in his party; but where is the sense on the rest of the Labour Benches in respect of what is a deeply, deeply serious matter?

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): A number of my constituents have been victims of what appears to be a financial scam, and Humberside police have referred them to Action Fraud. The contact that they have had with Action Fraud is minimal, and they are very dissatisfied. Will the Leader of the House arrange a debate on the work of Action Fraud?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend has made an important point, and I pay tribute to him for raising this issue in the House. We are, of course, aware that a range of

different scams are taking place throughout our society, and that the victims are often vulnerable people. The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills will be here next week, and I hope that my hon. Friend will take advantage of the opportunity to ensure that the issue is on his radar as well.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week's business.

Let us forget about Ed Balls day. Today is International Workers Memorial day, when we remember all those who have been killed in the workplace. The slogan for this day is "Remember the dead—fight for the living". I think that those words are very apt, given that we are currently considering the Trade Union Bill.

Will the Government not simply do the right thing, and accept the unaccompanied child refugees who are currently languishing in a variety of refugee camps in southern Europe? When even the bleeding hearts on the *Daily Mail* are calling for the Government to accept these wretched children, surely the time has come for even this, the most callous of Governments, to reconsider their position and do the right thing. They will have their chance, for it seems that on 9 May, the Lords amendment will return to the House of Commons. Will the Government look on it positively, and, for the sake of the country and all its people—even the right-wing press—will they do the right thing by these children?

When I was growing up in Scotland, a little announcement was sometimes made during previews of the television programmes that people would see on their analogue sets: "not for viewers in Scotland". It occurred to me that we could resurrect that announcement and apply it to Prime Minister's Question Time, because most of the last two sessions have dealt exclusively with the academisation of English schools: not for viewers in Scotland, and not for viewers in most other parts of the United Kingdom. The Leader of the Opposition can raise whatever issues he wants—it is up to him to do that—but perhaps the time has now come to review Prime Minister's questions to see whether we could make them more inclusive for everyone throughout the United Kingdom, particularly as we now seem to have two Labour parties as well. Perhaps the Leader of the House will support that call.

May we have a debate on the Government's commitments on defence spending in the Clyde shipyards? I remember only too well some of the things that were said during the independence referendum. I particularly remember a leaflet that went round—it was common currency—that had been designed by the Labour and Tory alliance. The suggestion was that "separation kills shipyards". It was actually quite a neat little slogan, implying that it would be all boom within the Union and doom and gloom if we secured independence. Of course we now recognise that for the nonsense it was. It is not independence that is killing the shipyards; it is this Union that is killing them slowly and painfully by diminishing the orders and delaying the start of the works. The Scottish people feel duped by all the commitments that were made during the independence referendum, so may we have a full debate so that the Government can explain fully what is going on? We need to ensure that the work is started on time and that all their promises are honoured.

[Pete Wishart]

I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman, as Leader of the House, has full access to the Prime Minister's diary, so perhaps he can explain why there will be no prime ministerial visit to Scotland in advance of the Scottish election. In fact, the Prime Minister is probably the last person Ruth Davidson wants to see if she has any ambition, given the likelihood of the Conservatives beating Labour into third place. We would love to see him, however, because every time he appears, the Scottish National party gains an extra two percentage points. Will the Leader of the House encourage his right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to come to Scotland? He could even come himself. The more Tories there are in Scotland in advance of the election, the better it will be for the Scottish National party.

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have great regard for him as a parliamentary colleague, but sometimes his rhetoric lets him down. He describes us as the “most callous of Governments”, but we are providing the second largest amount of aid to all the refugee camps around Syria and doing as much as any nation in the world bar the United States to help the people affected. We are taking 20,000 people not from other European countries but from the refugee camps where they are most vulnerable. He talked about unaccompanied children, but we are taking unaccompanied children not from other EU countries where they are safe and under the control of the Governments of those countries but from the camps where they are vulnerable. Surely that is the sensible, wise, thoughtful and considerate thing to do. We are not saying, “No, we will provide no assistance.” We are providing assistance to those who have not been able to make it to Europe, and that is a policy that we resolutely stand by.

The hon. Gentleman talked about Prime Minister's questions dealing with education. I would simply remind him that that is a consequence of devolution. This is a United Kingdom Parliament, but it is true that in his constituency, education is a matter not for him but for the Member of the Scottish Parliament. This is one of the differences that we have debated over recent months. The reality is that this is a consequence of the devolutionary settlement that he has championed from the start.

The hon. Gentleman talked about defence spending in the Clyde shipyards. He is absolutely right to suggest that if Scotland were independent now, it would not be getting big orders from the Ministry of Defence. He wants a debate and a chance to vote on these matters; he will soon have an opportunity to vote on whether to remove from Scotland one of the biggest defence facilities in the United Kingdom, on getting rid of the jobs there, and on removing from Scotland what is an important part of its economy as well as an important part of our nation's defences. When he can explain his position on that in the context of the welfare of Scotland, I will take him seriously on these issues.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the Scottish election, and about the Conservatives in Scotland. I have been to Scotland since the start of the election campaign and I am delighted to see that the Conservatives are moving up in the polls, although I am sure that there is no connection between the two. All of us on this side of the House believe that we have the best leader in Scotland.

We believe that she will play a crucial part in Scotland's affairs over the coming years as people come to realise that the SNP Government in Edinburgh might make a lot of noise but are actually incapable of getting the job done.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): On 12 May, the Prime Minister is hosting an anti-corruption summit in London. That has never happened before, and it will have a far-reaching impact. May we have a debate on the British overseas territories and Crown dependencies, and on our progress towards creating fully open public registers of beneficial ownership information?

Chris Grayling: That subject is due to be debated in Westminster Hall shortly, but my hon. Friend is right about the role that the Government have played over the past six years—first in coalition, and then on our own. We have delivered more change and progress on such issues than any previous Government, and that is something of which we should be proud.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the announcement of the business. With this afternoon's business, which was nominated by the Backbench Business Committee, the day and half-day next week, and the half-day in the following week, we are inching ever closer to the 27 days to which the Backbench Business Committee and Back Benchers are entitled within the parliamentary Session. I thank the Leader of the House for that.

As has been mentioned, today is International Workers Memorial Day, which is commemorated by the TUC and trades councils all around the country, including at a memorial service at noon in Saltwell Park in my constituency of Gateshead. This day, on which we say, “Remember the dead; fight for the living,” is for those who died in industrial accidents or from diseases contracted due to workplace conditions. Will the Leader of the House consider recognising International Workers Memorial Day in the parliamentary calendar in future?

Chris Grayling: On the subject of International Workers Memorial Day, may I first say that this country is a better place than it was in the past? Representing an area where there have been large industrial accidents in the past, the hon. Gentleman is right not only to recognise the progress that has been made, but to remember those who died before progress was made. None of us would wish to go back to those days. Even though we often debate the complexity of health and safety regulations, I put it on the record that it is not in the interests of anyone in this country, from business owners to workers to those who are not involved at all, to have an environment in which people are at risk in the workplace. When industrial accidents occur, as tragically happened at Didcot power station recently, we all bitterly regret it. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman and hon. Members on both sides of the House for the work that they will do to mark this occasion. Let us never go back to the days when such things were commonplace in this country.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, who now dominates the parliamentary calendar, controlling far more of it than the Government, will find an opportunity to recognise this important day and to ensure that Members have the same opportunity in coming years.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Macey, a nine-year-old little girl from my constituency, is not very well at the moment; in fact, I think she was taken into hospital again last night. To make her completely better, she is going to have to go to the United States and the NHS is providing for that. There was a problem, however, because she could not get a passport. She and her mother do not have passports, and it would have taken up to six weeks to get them. Thanks to the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) and the personal intervention of the Home Secretary, the passports will now be sorted out tomorrow. Macey asked whether I could thank the House, and the Home Secretary in particular, for that. Perhaps we could have a general debate some time in the future about how the Government can, at times, work together for common sense.

Chris Grayling: I think my hon. Friend's words say it all. We wish Macey all the very best in her treatment and a full recovery. The image of this place is often one of political debate and confrontation, but there are decent people on both sides of the House, one of whom is my hon. Friend, working on the behalf of their constituencies and trying to solve problems such as this, where all of us want the right thing to be done.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): The Leader of the House will know that Calvin Thomas is retiring today after 26 years' great service to the House, including 16 years as a Doorkeeper, working in the Special Gallery since 2009. I know Calvin well, in part because we have sometimes been confused due our similar, if different, names. Calvin has been consistently friendly, helpful and charming in carrying out his duties as a valued member of our staff, so may I ask that the Leader of the House conveys the whole House's thanks to Calvin and wishes him a most happy and well-deserved retirement on our behalf?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman has said it eloquently on all our behalves, so I simply echo his words and not only wish Calvin a happy retirement, but express our thanks to the Doorkeepers, who are great servants of the House, treating us all with great courtesy and good humour and performing enormously valuable work for us. We value what they do enormously.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): As my right hon. Friend may know, the UK Sepsis Trust has been working for some time with the Health Secretary to establish a public awareness campaign on Sepsis. Sepsis currently claims about 44,000 lives in the UK every year and the symptoms of the disease are still not well recognised. May we have a debate about what could be done to introduce a sepsis-specific public awareness campaign for both children and adults? I believe that such a campaign would have the potential to save the lives of thousands of people every year.

Chris Grayling: May I start by congratulating my right hon. Friend on the work she is doing in this important area? I am aware that the Health Secretary is taking this issue enormously seriously and has had meetings with those campaigning for the kind of public

awareness work that she is talking about, and I am certain he will wish to take that forward. This is a very serious matter and it behoves us, as representatives of our constituents and as members of the Government, to try to look for ways to deal with challenges such as this.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): May I ask the Leader of the House to condemn the Labour police and crime commissioner candidate for north Wales, David Taylor, for appallingly callous Twitter comments that can be interpreted by right-thinking people only as mocking Hillsborough families?

There are growing concerns that Government links with Tata and the Warwick Manufacturing Group will result in the sacrifice of heavy-end primary steel production at Port Talbot. Will the Leader of the House press the Business Secretary to make a statement to assure Port Talbot workers that this Government prioritise their future in deeds as well as words, and that all proposals for a UK steel solution will be assessed based on the evidence and with the interests of UK citizens first and foremost?

Chris Grayling: I can simply assure the hon. Lady that the Government take this matter enormously seriously, and the Business Secretary will be here again next week. The Government have taken an interest in this from the Prime Minister downwards—he has taken a personal interest in what happens at Port Talbot. None of us wants to see Port Talbot disappear; we want to see it continue to make steel. It is in all of our interests that that happens and we will work as hard as we can to make sure it does.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the conduct of the EU referendum campaign thus far? When canvassing in my constituency, I have found that local residents, regardless of their political views, are angered by the intervention of the outgoing President in our domestic affairs. They are also furious about £9 million being spent by the Government on leaflets and they think the Treasury booklet making forecasts for 2030 is crazy, given that, just like weather forecasters, these people cannot even get their projections right for the next day.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is a vigorous campaigner on these matters and feels passionately about them. As I announced earlier, there will be a Westminster Hall debate on this on 9 May, when he will have the opportunity to express himself as succinctly as he wishes about the booklet that went through people's doors. The interesting question is whether the factors that he has described will and are having an impact on the polling relating to the campaign.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): We have heard from the shadow Leader of the House this morning that a British Airways computer system designed to stop the movement of terrorists crashed for 48 hours last year. Furthermore, I have learned that the British Airways outsourcing programme threatens 800 skilled workers who are working to protect our country. May we therefore have a debate to discuss the role of outsourcing in this event and to stop BA threatening our national security in a bid to save money?

Chris Grayling: The Government take our national security enormously seriously. While the failure the hon. Lady talks about took place, border control checks remained in place—as they always do and will. People's passports are checked when they arrive in this country. The e-borders system is mostly about trying to ensure that we check people when they leave the country, which has never happened previously and is very important; we had hoped it would happen many years ago but, for various reasons, it never came to pass under the previous Government.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time on the implications for the United Kingdom of the five Presidents' report on economic and monetary union? As my right hon. Friend will be aware, under the guise of single market legislation the proposals are to take control over insolvency law, company law and property rights. Do the Government not have a duty to tell those in financial services and the City about the consequences of remaining in the European Union?

Chris Grayling: The five Presidents' report, a major document published by the European Union, sets out the vision of those who lead its institutions for the next 10 years. It has provoked—and will continue to provoke—a lively debate about the future direction of this country and of the European Union as a whole. If my right hon. Friend feels that the matter should be debated in the House, I should say that I suspect that the Backbench Business Committee still has time available for a debate in the next couple of weeks. I suspect that this subject might attract fairly widespread participation.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Last week, during business questions, I raised an issue that is very serious in my constituency: the 20% increase in the use of food banks over the past year. That increase is precisely due to benefit delays and, even more criminally, benefit sanctions. I mentioned my constituent Paul who has been sanctioned for three whole years. The Leader of the House told me that that could happen only if three reasonable job offers had been turned down.

I want to return to this issue today to ask another question. First of all, let me point out that Paul is on £36 a week. His three-year sanction was due to his filling out his job logbook incorrectly, turning up 10 minutes late after having problems getting a bus, and expressing dissatisfaction after waiting for an hour at the jobcentre. He has therefore been living on £36 a week for three whole years. Will the Leader of the House consider, as a matter of urgency, a debate on the issue of sanctions, as an increasing number of people are having to depend on the charity of others?

Chris Grayling: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman goes back and looks very closely at the circumstances of the case. I personally introduced the three-year sanction for people who, on three separate occasions, turn down a reasonable job offer—in other words, people who refuse to work. It remains my view to this day that if people who can work refuse to work and refuse to work again and again, they should not be entitled to carry on receiving support from the benefit system.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last week came the really welcome news that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education had safeguarded the qualifications and teaching of community languages. I will list those languages for the benefit of the House: Gujarati, Bengali, Urdu, Punjabi, Japanese, Arabic, modern Greek, modern and biblical Hebrew, Polish, Portuguese and Turkish. That means that we have safeguarded the qualifications and the teaching of those vital languages in the modern world so that everyone can communicate. Unfortunately, the Secretary of State was not able to regale the House with the good news at questions this week. Something such as this should not be left to wither on the vine. Surely we should have a statement on that position, so that we can ensure that everyone understands that, from 2018, those languages are safeguarded in our education system.

Chris Grayling: Of course that is enormously important. Although we have the benefit in this country of having the nearest thing that there is to an international language in the English language, it is right and proper that, as a cosmopolitan society, we champion languages that not only preserve the culture of the different communities that live here, but open up enormous opportunities for Britain around the world. My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I have no doubt that he will look to the different channels available to him to ensure that these matters are debated and explored more in this House.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Last week, I spoke in the national living wage debate to highlight the potential injustice of the decision to deny the living wage to those under 25. A young person could start work at the age of 18 and be in a role for seven years before being paid the same as their older and potentially less experienced colleagues. Can we have a debate in Government time to give Members the opportunity to persuade the Government to right that wrong and extend the living wage to the under-25s?

Chris Grayling: It has been the policy of this Government, and indeed of the previous Government, to differentiate in respect of minimum and living wages when it comes to younger workers and older workers precisely because when a young worker enters the workplace the employer is making an investment decision as well as a recruitment decision. The employer takes responsibility for training and developing that young person.

We did not want to see—indeed the hon. Lady's party previously did not want this—a situation in which it was unattractive to hire a young worker, and we stand by that principle to this day. Of course many young people who start on the national living wage will move up the pay scale either through success in their own workplace or by moving to a different job. I still think it is important to do everything that we can to incentivise employers to take on young people.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): As we are talking about the dodgy behaviour of police and crime commissioner candidates, may I say to the Leader of the House that a number of folk standing for election next week are ex-coppers trading on their record as police officers? Does he agree that the Government

should bring forward proposals to ensure that ex-police officers standing to be PCCs make their police service record available for public scrutiny?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am aware of allegations about the Labour PCC candidate in Humberside. If the stories alleged about that candidate are true, he is unfit for public office, and it is a matter of public interest that the truth should be known before election day.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Back in 1847 when Lord John Russell was Prime Minister, our taxi licensing laws were developed. We now have a problem in the north-west of England, where one local authority is handing out hackney carriage taxi licences like sweets. The problem is that with a hackney licence a person can operate as a private hire vehicle driver anywhere in the country, so there are now taxis from that local authority operating as far afield as Bristol without appropriate checks and balances. May we have an urgent debate on how we can bring our taxi licensing regime up to date?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I was not aware of the situation that he describes. I will make sure that it is drawn to the attention of the Secretary of State for Transport who I am sure, if he was also unaware of it, will want to look at the matter very seriously.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has threatened to introduce legislation that would make it illegal for Stoke Gifford parish council in my constituency to charge for an organised sporting event that attracts several hundred people to quite a small park every weekend. Given that the Government have been a champion of localism and passed the Localism Act 2011 in the previous Parliament, that is a tad hypocritical. May we have a debate on the freedom of local councils to charge organisers who run sporting events in their parks?

Chris Grayling: I am not aware of the proposal that my hon. Friend refers to, but I understand his concern and I can see why he would raise it as a matter of importance in the House today. I will draw that issue to the attention of the Secretary of State. Clearly, we want to encourage local authorities to support, develop and underpin events that bring communities together. My hon. Friend makes an important point about his own constituency; I will make sure that we get a proper response for him.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): This week has seen another dispute between the other place and this Chamber. I am sure that instead of leading to unaccompanied child refugees being brought into the country, it will lead to more cronies being appointed to the House of Lords. The Leader of the House has said previously that there is no appetite for proper reform. Where is the public appetite for even more cronies and donors than the current 800, and where is the manifesto commitment to continue stuffing the other place? May we have a statement on the matter?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman and his colleagues insult many of the very deserving and effective people who operate in the other place—people who represent

the disability lobby, who have serious disabilities themselves; people who represent the arts world, who have long track records in the arts; and people who represent the business world, who have long track records in business. The expertise in the other place brings something significant to our parliamentary system, even though sometimes the two Houses disagree over issues, as we do currently.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Given the delays that a number of my constituents have faced in receiving their basic farm payments this year, may we have a debate on the process for issuing payments to farmers whose land crosses the English-Welsh border or the English-Scottish border so that such delays are not repeated next year? Those farmers always appear to be at the back of the queue.

Chris Grayling: That remains an issue. I have spoken to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about it. It is true that across the country the vast majority of payments have been made, but I hear the point that my hon. Friend makes. I will ensure that the Secretary of State is aware of his concerns. She will be here next week and will be able to respond to him fully.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Leader of the House will be aware of the emerging crisis at the yard on the Clyde tasked with building the Type 26 frigate. A late start to the project and uncertainty over the future workflow threatens hundreds of jobs at Govan and Scotstoun. May we therefore have a debate in Government time to allow Members to discuss in depth the future of the Clyde shipbuilding industry and give a voice to those workers who are unsure of their future?

Chris Grayling: The Clyde shipbuilding industry has a strong future for two reasons—first, because it remains part of the United Kingdom and therefore benefits from United Kingdom defence spending, and secondly, because this Government have committed to the 2% spending level as part of our commitment to NATO. If those things were not happening, the future, of course, would be much more uncertain, but I am convinced that the Clyde shipyards have a strong future. They are an essential part of our defence and we need to ensure that they continue to flourish in the years to come.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May we have a statement on the treatment by the House of public petitions that attract a large number of signatures? As the Leader of the House knows, there will be a debate on 9 May about the petition to stop the Government spending public money on pro-remain propaganda in the EU referendum. As of a few moments ago, 217,072 people had signed the petition, but the debate on it, like others of a similar nature, will be held in Westminster Hall, where no vote can be held. Should it not be possible for the Backbench Business Committee to hold such debates in the main Chamber? Otherwise, petitioners will be disappointed to find that, although their concerns are debated, the House is unable to vote on them.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which relates to not only this subject but others. I would encourage discourse between the two hon. Members who chair the Petitions Committee and the Backbench

[Chris Grayling]

Business Committee so that they can see how, when a petition reaches a certain number of signatures and clearly commands overwhelming public support, a debate can be brought to the Floor of the House.

Mr Speaker: For what it is worth, perhaps I can say from the Chair that I think that would be a very, very good thing. I would not dream of taking sides on the issues, but in terms of the link between Parliament and the people, it is very important that it be not just tangible but meaningful, and there is real scope for progress there, so I very much appreciate what the Leader of the House has said.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On the topic of democracy and having votes, the House voted 278 to 0 last week on a motion to ask the Government to bring to the UN Security Council the issue of the genocide against Christians, Yazidis and others. What will the Leader of the House do to bring the Government to account and to ensure they respect the democracy of this place by doing what they have been asked to do and taking these crimes to the UN Security Council so that action is taken?

Chris Grayling: To reiterate, the Government's position is one of shock, horror and condemnation regarding what has taken place—that is an unreserved statement. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is taking careful note of the view of the House, as expressed in the debate the hon. Gentleman refers to.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I recently had cause to write to the President of the European Commission to ask what role he saw it playing in our EU referendum. I have had no answer, but given that the Commission spent £560 million directly promoting itself in 2014 and that it interfered in the Irish referendum in 2009, may we have a statement from the Government on whether European Commission interference in this referendum is welcome? As I understand it, the Electoral Commission has no powers whatever to prevent the EU from being an unwelcome active participant in our democratic process.

Chris Grayling: I can indeed confirm that that is the case. However, I am sure there will be different opinions in the House on whether such an intervention would be helpful or unhelpful to either side of the argument.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): A former Minister, who spoke from the Dispatch Box less than a year ago, is now employed by industry in China—presumably using his insider knowledge—whose firms are in competition with British firms. Some 70% of former senior civil servants who worked on income tax are now working in the tax avoidance industry. When can we debate the need to euthanise the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, which should be a fierce Rottweiler watchdog, but which is nothing but a poodle without teeth or claws, bark or bite, and is totally and utterly useless?

Mr Speaker: I do wish the hon. Gentleman would learn to tell us what he really thinks.

Chris Grayling: I am not sure if my memory is correct, Mr Speaker—you may correct me otherwise—but if I remember rightly, the Committee to which the hon. Gentleman referred was set up by the party of which he is part. I remind him that it was a senior member of his own party who described himself after leaving office, and while in pursuit of commercial opportunities, as a “taxi for hire”.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I have had the privilege of visiting the Rugby young carers project, which is based at Hill Street youth and community centre in my constituency, under the inspirational leadership of Annette Collier. It is for amazing young people who play a part in the care of family members. I was deeply concerned to learn that Warwickshire's young carers project faces losing funding that will affect those under eight years old, as that will have an impact in Rugby. May we have a debate about the importance of properly supporting these young people?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. One of the most invisible groups of heroes in our society are our young carers. Until we come across them at first hand, none of us really understands how a child can be left, in effect, as a full-time or semi-full-time carer of a parent. I have a young carers group in my constituency that does enormously valuable work. His local group clearly plays a really important role, and I know that he will do everything he can to make sure that its future is guaranteed because it is important to the communities he represents.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am becoming increasingly concerned about the discriminatory language that has been used in the Chamber recently. The Education Secretary recently called us—the Opposition—“deaf”, using deafness as a pejorative term, which is unacceptable. Yesterday the Prime Minister used the word “poncey”, which many people take to be homophobic. May we have a statement about our duty under the Equality Act 2010, which includes the language that we use in this Chamber?

Chris Grayling: I think that people will hear in words what they want to hear. The one thing that nobody could accuse my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister of is homophobia. The man who brought to this House and saw through same-sex marriage is not somebody who could ever be described as homophobic.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): This morning there has been a very thorough Committee hearing on the UK steel industry, but will the Leader of the House organise a statement next week so that all Members are able to put questions to Ministers on behalf of our steel towns? Despite the commercial sensitivities, it is very important that we and our constituents know exactly what is happening and what progress is being made to secure the future of the industry.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend and Opposition Members who represent steel towns have done a really important job in recent weeks of reminding us of the importance of this industry. I commend him, and them, for that. I am happy to say that I can lay on just such

an opportunity, because next week we have Business, Innovation and Skills questions and he will be able to put his point to the Secretary of State then.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Hot off the press this morning is early-day motion 1432.

[That this House notes last week's by-election in the House of Lords, which saw Viscount Thurso elected to the other place following the sad death of Lord Avebury; further notes the size of the electorate was only three; calls into question the legitimacy of this by-election; believes now is the time for the abolition of the remaining 92 hereditary peers' right to vote and speak in the House of Lords; and agrees to bring forward the second stage of reform following the House of Lords Reform Act 1999.]

That backs up the Bill I introduced on Tuesday to abolish the right of hereditary peers to vote and to speak in the House of Lords. Given that there are currently the same number of Members on the Government Front Bench as voted in the election of a hereditary peer last week, is it not time that we had a debate on ending this farcical process?

Chris Grayling: What always slightly puzzles me is that although Labour was in power for 13 years and brought through House of Lords reform, it did not address the issue on which Labour Members are calling for change. I think we all admit that there was something curiously quaint about the Liberal Democrat electorate of three, but of course one has to cut them a bit of slack because there are so few of them these days. My view is that there are pressing issues facing this country, and dealing with the Lib Dem electorate of three is probably not at the top of the list.

Mr Charles Walker (Bromley) (Con): May we have a debate on the London licensed taxi trade? Black cab drivers in my constituency offer a lot more to London and their community than Uber does.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Of course, in a free market London taxi drivers do face challenges, but I believe they are the best in the world and bring something of immense value to our city. I do not believe that in anything that any of us does in politics, at this level or at a London level, would we ever wish to jeopardise their future.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Given statements made in the Back-Bench business debate in this House a couple of weeks ago, I presume that last week the Government received for security review the Chilcot report. Will the Leader of the House update us on progress and when we can expect a debate in the House?

Chris Grayling: The report is now going through what I hope are the final processes before publication. As I have said to this House before, there is no Conservative Member who would not wish to see the report out and published. We were not in power at the time, so the issues do not affect us. We want to see the truth out there and we need to learn lessons about the Chilcot process for the future, in the event of similar inquiries

needing to take place. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I would like to see it published and out of the way so that people know what is in it.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): May we have a debate on making it easier for metropolitan councils to switch to all-out elections or elections by halves so that councils such as Dudley can cut the cost of local politics?

Chris Grayling: That is an important issue and, of course, local councils have the freedom to do it: it is for them to decide whether they have elections in thirds, halves or individually. My personal view is that it is a real hike for a local council to be doing elections every year and I prefer all-out elections, but it is, of course, a matter for local decision making.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Every year on the Sunday closest to St George's day, Enfield scouts and guides organise and take part in a St George's day parade through Enfield town. I usually accompany them and it is a fantastic day. I pay tribute to the scouts and the guides, particularly to all the volunteer leaders for the good job they do in enabling scouts and guides to happen every week for our young people. I am very concerned that youth services are severely at risk from the cuts that the Government are passing down to local authorities, so may we have a debate in Government time to consider the problem, which is affecting our young people and their families?

Chris Grayling: May I start by paying tribute to the right hon. Lady for what she said about anti-Semitism in her party? The comments that she and the shadow Leader of the House have made are to their credit.

I absolutely agree with the right hon. Lady about the role played by the scouts and the guides, but what they represent is the best of our voluntary sector. Sometimes we depend too much on Government and the public sector for the best work. That work is happening without any Government involvement, as it has done over the century since the scouts and guides movements were formed, and long may that continue.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The Jewish community has a history with Scotland going back beyond 200 years. I know that Members of this House will want to send a message that we value the Jewish community and the contribution it has made not just in Scotland but across the United Kingdom. With that in mind, and given this week's events, may we have a debate on the valuable contribution that the Jewish community has made to civil society in this country and, equally important, on how we root out anti-Semitism in this country's political discourse?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, whose sentiments will be shared across most of this House. We have heard some important contributions on the subject today. It might also be appropriate to say that this is not just about anti-Semitism; it is also about Islamophobia and prejudice against other groups in our society. There is no place in our society for racial prejudice. It should not be tolerated and we should unreservedly condemn it whenever we find it.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): In the light of the changes to the railways suggested by the Hendy and Shaw reports, may we have a debate on how community groups such as mine in Bury can drive forward local ownership of railway assets that are to be disposed of, so that local people get a say in what happens in their locality?

Chris Grayling: That is a very important point. We have to be careful about disposing of rail assets, for two reasons, one of which my hon. Friend has just given. The other is that local authorities often have a vision to bring back into use transport corridors for the future, but if they are simply sold off for development, that option is taken away. I am proud that, over the past 15 years, this country has seen the reopening of railway lines and rail corridors. A new service was recently opened from Oxford to London Marylebone and it runs across previously disused lines that have been brought back into operation under Chiltern Railways. My hon. Friend makes an important point, because had it been decided to dispose of some of those facilities, that route would not have been possible. In reopening the line from Oxford to Cambridge, we are already seeing that there are barriers as a result of a previous development. My hon. Friend makes an important point about her own constituency, but it is one that should be learned right across the country.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Last month in business questions I raised the case of my constituent who took the drug sodium valproate, which is an effective treatment for epilepsy but which left her children with birth defects. The Leader of the House recommended that I try to raise the matter at Health questions, but unfortunately I was not successful. Does he have any advice for me on how I can raise the issue of sodium valproate and birth defects?

Chris Grayling: The Minister for Community and Social Care has just arrived in the Chamber, so he probably heard what the hon. Lady said. I will raise the issue directly with the Department of Health for her at the end of this sitting, and I will ask the appropriate Minister to respond to her. She makes an important point, and we have to be enormously careful about it. There are many drugs that make a big difference to our society, but where unexpected side effects cause the kinds of problems she refers to, it is right and proper that that is looked at enormously carefully.

Mr Speaker: I am most anxious that the Minister for Community and Social Care should have the opportunity to regain his breath. He is a very welcome arrival. *[Interruption.]* He has just run the marathon; that might be why he is out of breath.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): May we have a debate on the crazy situation I face in Bexhill and Battle? Our local authority is one of only 17 in which parking enforcement is still the responsibility of the police, who have stated that they can no longer do it because—fairly enough—they are required to look after policing matters. The local authority refuses to take it on. The situation is driving our residents and business people absolutely mad. Would it be possible to have a debate on whether the Government should step in and end this madness?

Chris Grayling: Before I answer my hon. Friend, I pay tribute to the Minister for Community and Social Care, who has just arrived, and to all the Members of this House who ran the marathon last weekend and emerged intact, with medals around their necks—

Chris Bryant: And in the past.

Chris Grayling: And in the past, but I will celebrate this year, if I may. The hon. Gentleman always wants to jump in and have his say, but I want to commend all those who ran this year for the valuable work that they have done to raise funds for charity and raise awareness of charities. They deserve a collective pat on the back from people in this House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) is right. It is an extraordinary position where nobody wants to enforce parking, and I can understand the frustration of local businesses. I urge him simply to redouble the pressure on the local authority. If he has enough people behind him on what he wants to achieve, in the end, the local authority will have to give way.

Mr Speaker: I join the Leader of the House in congratulating the Minister for Community and Social Care on running the marathon again and congratulating all other participants in the marathon. What the Leader of the House has said is both right and greatly appreciated by colleagues.

We now come to the first of our two debates under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee. The precise timings have yet to be determined, but there is a very sharp imbalance in favour of the first debate, as against the second. A lot more people want to take part in this debate, and that will influence the judgment of the Chair as to how long this debate should be allowed to run. In short, there will be an allocation of time for the second debate, but it will, very properly, be a much lesser allocation of time.

Backbench Business

World Autism Awareness Week

12.13 pm

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes that World Autism Awareness Week was held from 2 to 8 April; believes that there is a lack of understanding of the needs of autistic people and their families; and calls on the Government to improve diagnosis waiting time and support a public awareness campaign so that people can make the changes that will help the UK become autism-friendly.

We were on recess during World Autism Awareness Week. I want to put on record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee, which has granted this debate, and to you, Mr Speaker, for indicating that you may be willing to extend the debate because of the demand from people who want to speak in it. I know that there are conflicting Committees going on in other parts of the House, which will cause some problems for people who want to speak in the debate.

I also put on record my thanks, as chairman of the all-party group on autism, for the genuine cross-party view on the subject, and for the help and support I have received from Members of all parties. It is commendable that the House should work in such a way. It is nice to record that the all-party group on autism is, I think, one of the all-party groups that has the largest number of members. That shows the significance of this topic.

In 2015 the National Autistic Society carried out a YouGov poll and found that more than 99.5% of people in the UK had heard of autism. That means that, more or less, we are all aware of autism, which is a jolly good thing. However, just 16% of autistic people and their families whom the National Autistic Society spoke to as part of its recent research said that the public had a meaningful understanding of autism. Despite all the progress that has been made, there remains an enormous gulf between awareness and understanding. The key point here is that although more understanding may seem like a soft issue that everyone across the House can easily get behind without much thought, it is understanding that goes to the core of what people and families who live with autism every day have to deal with.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on all the work that she has done over the years on this crucial subject. She mentioned the National Autistic Society, and I praise it for its wonderful work. Does she agree that stigma around autism among the general public, in educational institutions and among many employers still holds all of society back?

Mrs Gillan: That is true to an extent, but I want to balance that by saying that in some areas, many people who are on the autism spectrum are welcomed into the world of work, by GCHQ and other organisations that can take advantage of their unique capabilities. The hon. Lady is right in many areas, however, hence the debate.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady for the work that she does. I also thank the Minister, who met some constituents of mine

this week; they do not wish to be named in public. The right hon. Lady raised the question of awareness. Does she agree that it is important to have such awareness in our criminal justice system? Adults with autism, in particular, sometimes come into contact with the criminal justice system, and there is an inappropriate level of understanding of issues that may have led to that happening.

Mrs Gillan: That is an astute observation. Later in my speech, I will come to the criminal justice system. I hope to set the scene across a range of areas, because there is not a part of government that autism does not touch. There are a range of implications, particularly in the criminal justice system, in which I believe people with autism are disproportionately represented in many areas.

For people and families who live with autism every day, improving understanding is fundamental to ensuring good levels of health and wellbeing and an ability to participate in society. The implications are all too real. The National Autistic Society survey that I mentioned found that 79% of autistic people feel socially isolated; half of autistic people and families sometimes do not go out because they are worried about how the public will react to them; and 28% of autistic people have been asked to leave a public space because of behaviour associated with their autism.

To help to address the lack of understanding and tackle social isolation, the NAS has, as many Members know, launched a three-year campaign called “Too Much Information”, during this year’s World Autism Awareness Week. I was glad to support the launch of that campaign in Parliament. The cornerstone of the campaign is a short film, shot from the point of view of a child with autism, which tries to give the viewer some sense of what it is like to live in the overwhelming world that someone with autism lives in every day. Many parliamentary colleagues joined me for the event, and I am glad to report—this is almost unbelievable, but it is a very good sign—that, to date, the video has been viewed online more than 50 million times. That film marks only the start of the campaign, however, and there is clearly much more that must be done to help tackle social isolation among the nearly 80% of people on the spectrum who say that they feel isolated.

Over the years, Government have shown huge leadership on the awareness of other issues, with more than £2.3 million spent on dementia awareness and £20 million on mental health awareness. [*Interruption.*] Thank you so much. I wish it was gin.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con) *rose*—

Mrs Gillan: At last—the relief of Mafeking.

Mr Walker: While my right hon. Friend avails herself of a relieving glass of water, may I ask her whether she agrees that organisations, such as ASPIE in my constituency, that help people with Asperger’s and people on the spectrum to socialise play a really important role in helping to build their confidence and ensure they have the support they need to go into what can often be a very threatening world?

Mrs Gillan: I am doubly grateful to my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right that the achievements of such organisations and programmes should be congratulated by all of us in the House.

Action is needed for the 700,000 people in the UK who are on the autism spectrum and their families. I am aware that the Government have invested £325,000 on autism awareness work, but that is a drop in the ocean if our aim is to ensure, as I believe it should be, that this generation of autistic children grows up in a world that understands them.

At this point, I want to pay tribute to the Minister. Quite honestly, he has attended every autism meeting and function that I have asked him to attend. He shows a great deal of understanding of this area, so I am looking forward to a really meaningful response from him when he winds up the debate at the end of the afternoon. More leadership is definitely needed from the Government.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for the work she does on this really important subject. Does she agree that it is extremely worrying that only 15% of adults suffering with autism are in full-time employment? Would it be right and proper for the Government to support the work of organisations, such as Ambitious about Autism, to help them in the transition into work that could be so crucial for so many?

Mrs Gillan: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I will mention some of the organisations involved at the end of my speech. Ambitious about Autism is just one of the many organisations that are trying to help people with autism into employment. I want to mention that later as well, because it is very important.

To build on the intervention on the criminal justice system by the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), I should say that I recently visited Her Majesty's young offenders institution in Feltham to see at first hand how a deeper understanding of the issues and how some adjustments in the physical environment can help people on the spectrum. The prison recently underwent accreditation from the NAS, and the prison staff's enthusiasm in, and dedication to, helping the young people in their charge is absolutely admirable and really wonderful to see. I very much hope that members of the all-party group will go there on a visit to see exactly what Feltham has done. Custody can be a really traumatic experience for anyone, but without specific adjustments for those with autism, it is much harder for them to engage in their own rehabilitation. Familiarising staff with autism, allowing prisoners to use communal areas at quieter times, and reducing posters and notices to prevent over-stimulation are just some of the small things that can make a significant difference to the experience of autistic prisoners in custody.

I now want to pay tribute to the Minister for prisons, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who wrote to every prison in this country asking them to undertake autism accreditation. Currently, over 20 have been in touch with the NAS and its accreditation team and, alongside Feltham, four are going through the process. We want this kind of Government leadership and we want such leadership to

be sustained. When I ask the Government to do more on the awareness and understanding of autism, I expect to get this type of response. Far more could be done in the criminal justice system, particular in the Courts Service.

Following the example of Feltham, the public sector can and should do much more to make sure all its services and buildings are more accessible to autistic people, so that they and their families can feel confident that they can visit public buildings and use public services in the same way as everyone else. For example, I was very pleased at the weekend to read that Asda is piloting a "quiet hour" in one of its stores in Manchester, when it will turn off escalators, screens and music for an hour to create a more comfortable shopping experience for those with autism. That is to be commended.

At this point, it would be remiss of me not to mention that Parliament is itself working, under the leadership of Mr Speaker, towards an autism access award and to make sure that autistic visitors to our place of work feel confident that they will be understood and treated well right across the board. In the light of this positive work on the parliamentary estate, I hope the Minister will meet me and representatives from the all-party group and the NAS to discuss how, together, we can build on the early successes of the "Too Much Information" campaign and ensure that all public buildings become accessible to people on the spectrum.

I want to turn to one of the biggest issues facing people with autism and their families, which is the time it takes to get a diagnosis in the first place. I can see from the nods that that rings a bell with everyone in the Chamber. Recent research suggests that, on average, adults have to wait more than two years for a diagnosis. For children, the figure stands at 3.6 years. An autism diagnosis can be life-changing, explain years of feeling different and help to unlock professional advice and support. Government guidelines say that a diagnosis should not be a barrier to putting in place the right support, but 58% of people on the spectrum have told the NAS that a diagnosis led directly to getting new or more support. How can the right support be identified without the clarity of a diagnosis?

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is fabulous that we are having this debate today. I want to back up my right hon. Friend on her point about the delay in diagnosis. I have spoken to many families in my constituency who have waited for months for a diagnosis for a child, while the child could and should have been receiving help for their enormous difficulties, but months if not years have been wasted. Yet we cannot even get the data about diagnosis from either the county council or the NHS. Not only are there delays, but there is a lack of transparency about waiting times for a diagnosis.

Mrs Gillan: Absolutely. It is clear that, despite the best intentions of the Government, getting such a diagnosis is still crucial, as my hon. Friend says.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Gillan: I will give way for the last time, because I must make some progress.

Norman Lamb: May I join in with the overwhelming tributes that have been made to the right hon. Lady for the work that she has done on this incredibly important subject? I do not know whether she saw the in-depth report in *The Economist* a couple of weeks ago. It reported that a Swedish study has found that the cost of lifelong care for someone with autism could be cut by two thirds with early diagnosis and treatment. Again, the moral case and the economic case for this are overwhelming.

Mrs Gillan: I agree. NHS England should collect, publish and monitor key information on how long people are waiting for diagnosis, and how many people are known by their GP to have autism. It should also ensure that waiting times standards on mental health, which are currently in development, reflect national guidance that no one should wait longer than three months between referral and being seen for diagnosis. The Government must share this commitment and ensure that NHS England meets its aims. Timely access to an autism diagnosis should be written into the Government's mandate to NHS England.

I want to touch on autism and mortality. A recent Autistica report highlighted distressing findings from research in Sweden. The research found that autistic people, taking the population as a whole, have a lower life expectancy than the overall average. The research from Sweden shows that autistic people are at risk of dying younger from almost every cause of death. On average, this is 18 years earlier than the general population. For autistic people with a learning disability, the gap is even larger. The research shows that autistic people with a learning disability in that country die on average 30 years before their time. It also shows that autistic people who also have a learning disability are more likely to die early from epilepsy, and that those without a learning disability are at greater risk of suicide. It is worth remembering that the Swedish healthcare system is different from ours, but given the seriousness of those research findings, it is vital to find out whether they also apply in the UK, and if so, to understand the reasons for that. The Autistica report calls for this to be investigated as a matter of urgency, and I urge the Government to heed that call.

I want to comment briefly about the autism hospital passport, which has been endorsed by the Department of Health. The passport is designed to help people on the autism spectrum to communicate their needs to doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals. It has been developed by Baroness Angela Browning in collaboration with the NAS. The motivations for starting the project were simple: when it comes to healthcare, the passport enables people on the spectrum and their families to have a much better experience of their interaction with the health service and to gain better, more timely and more fitting healthcare at the right time and in the right place.

I want to touch on various areas that I hope other Members will pick up, so I now turn to education. In specialist schools—the NAS is about to open a new one in the Epping forest area, supported by the Anderson Foundation—we have no fears about teachers' ability to understand autism. But the training that teachers receive on autism has to be looked at carefully. Nearly 60% of children who responded to a survey said that the single

factor that would make school better for them was if teachers understood autism. Teachers agree, and they want that training. A 2013 survey by the NASUWT found that 60% of teachers believed that they did not have enough training in autism. I am aware that work is going on to develop a new framework of core content for initial teacher training courses, but we need to make sure that no teacher enters the classroom without the tools they need to support those in their charge.

An intervention touched on employment, so I turn now to what children on the spectrum want after they leave education. They want the same things we all want out of life: stable, secure and fulfilling opportunities that allow them the same opportunities to lead independent lives. However, currently too few people on the spectrum enjoy the opportunity to find a job to help them maintain that independence. The Government have pledged to halve the disability employment gap—that was welcomed by Members on all sides of the House—and we await the Government's White Paper, to be published soon; we also note recent assurances from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that that is a key priority for him. However, research by Scope has shown that the disability employment gap has remained static over the past year. Clearly the Government cannot rely on an improving economy alone to fix the issue. More will need to be done to close the gap.

The autism employment gap is even worse. The latest data indicate that only 15% of autistic adults are in full-time paid work at all and that 26% of graduates on the autism spectrum are unemployed, by far the highest rate of any disability group. The NAS hears from autistic people that the Government's mainstream generic programmes do not feel relevant to them and are not addressing the specific and long-term needs of people with autism.

More autism-specific programmes are needed. Research shows them to be more successful. For example, research into one specialist support scheme found that 70% of adults found work when supported by autism professionals. The all-party parliamentary group on autism plans to return to that work later this year. In the meantime, I have several questions. Will the Government's disability employment White Paper include proposals for ensuring that people on the autism spectrum can access specialist support? Will the Minister report on progress by condition in seeking to halve the disability employment gap, so that low employment rates of people with conditions such as autism can be specifically tackled? Crucially, will he ensure that the new work and health programme records whether someone on the programme is on the autism spectrum?

Autism touches so many areas of Government work that it is difficult to address them all today. For example, I have not discussed social care, mental health issues or benefits. I know many colleagues want to speak and so I do not want to take up too much more time. In summing up, I return to public awareness. Survey after survey of people on the spectrum tells us that better understanding of the condition among both the public and professionals would be the one thing that would help them to feel more secure and allow them to have fulfilling lives. People on the spectrum are reasonable, and do not expect an ordinary member of the public with no knowledge of the condition to be aware of technical

[Mrs Gillan]

details about the diagnostic criteria for autism. However, they feel that just a little more understanding, compassion and awareness would make all the difference to their lives. If we see a child having a meltdown in a supermarket or an adult acting a bit differently on a train, we should stop and think for a moment. They may be autistic, and need our kindness, not our judgment.

I thank all the organisations that have contributed to the knowledge of Members here today, in particular those charities and groups with whom we work closely, including the National Autistic Society, which provides the secretariat for the APPG, Ambitious about Autism, Autistica and the Children's Services Development Group. I also thank the many individuals who have got in touch with me, and with all other Members here, in the past week. I hope that together we can improve the lives of those with autism and make some real progress in this area.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. We will start with a time limit of six minutes and see how we get on.

12.34 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): Last Saturday, anticipating today's debate, and in his customary elegant way, *Guardian* columnist John Harris wrote an excellent summation of some of the issues around autism. He ended his piece with these words:

"Our culture still too often couches autism in terms of pity or fear as an essentially Victorian sensibility lingers on. But we are moving towards a new world in which autistic people and their families advocate for themselves. For them, the current noise about autism perhaps highlights an inevitable phase of any struggle against ignorance: the point at which you know you've come a long way but still have light years to go."

When we consider the debates and the legislation passed in this House regarding autism, we understand that we, too, have come a long way, and a significant reason for that has been the work of the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan). I therefore congratulate her on securing this debate and on all her work over many years in this area, not least as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on autism.

In my short contribution I will focus on a few issues. The first is that of diagnosis delay, something that every Member in this House will have countless examples of. It is the focus of the National Autistic Society's brilliant campaign and is flagged up in the motion. As we have heard, for children the average diagnosis time is now some three and a half years. In my experience, from talking to parents, carers and experts, that is partly down to insufficient training among NHS people and cost pressures within the system. The reality for parents is that if they do not know where to turn and are without a diagnosis, there is not much that they can access.

Secondly, I will focus on what appears to me to be the biggest single problem, which is that people have to deal with a system of immense complexity, which is buckling under the cuts and has no single point of contact marked "autism". For many, the system is simply bewildering and often very scary.

Finally, I want to highlight the campaign work being done by amazing people at local level, including my constituent Fay Hough, who only last week led a large demonstration outside Havering town hall demanding better services and support for autistic people and their families.

I will also make a couple of points about the nature of research into autism in the UK and how it might be developed, to help both our overall awareness and, most importantly, autistic citizens and their families. Recent figures suggest that roughly 1% of the UK population has an autism spectrum condition, a twentyfold increase in the 50 years since the first epidemiological study. Given that, we need more and better research.

We can detect a dramatic expansion in autism research, especially in the US. For example, the 2006 Combating Autism Act authorised some \$950 million for autism research over a five-year period to develop screening, early diagnosis and children's intervention strategies. It has been estimated that in 2010 alone, investment in autism research in the US exceeded \$400 million.

Here in the UK, research from the Centre for Research in Autism and Education at University College London suggests that public and private funding organisations invested some £21 million into autism research between 2007 and 2011, amounting to a significant increase. The question is whether that research is focused on the correct issues and whether it tallies with the needs of autistic people and their families.

I refer to an article in *Autism*, "What should autism research focus upon?", which suggested that

"research activity should be broadened to reflect the priorities of the UK autism community, focusing in particular on research that helps people live with autism."

It would appear obvious that research should maximise its impact on the life experiences of those affected—our constituents—so why might this apparently self-evident objective not be the case?

When we look at the debate about autism research, there appears to be a tension between two types of project. On the one hand, there are projects that focus on what we might call the basic science of autism—on neural and cognitive systems, genetics and other risk factors. On the other hand, there is research focused on the understanding and promotion of how families function and the services those families need. Evidence suggests that that tension has been identified in the US and that as a result there is a growing diversity in research funding, to the direct benefit of autistic citizens and their families.

In contrast, evidence from the Centre for Research in Autism and Education suggests that that diversification of funding has not occurred in the UK, and that projects in the areas of biology, the brain and cognition outstrip all other areas of autism research by a vast margin, in terms of both the numbers of projects and the total research grant. The effect is that very little research funding is directed into identifying effective services for autistic people and their families—that is, research on services, treatments, intervention and education.

Obviously, that is not just an academic issue, but relates directly to all the questions about autism awareness discussed this afternoon. Research by the Centre for Research in Autism and Education suggested that the families of autistic people value research into the underlying

causes of autism, but need a more balanced distribution that redirects attention on to their daily lives, their needs and the services afforded to them.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing this debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) on his powerful speech. Durants school is a secondary school for young people with autism in my constituency. Its governing body has written to me to express concerns that with the Government consultation on changes to the national school funding formula—including that for high needs—there will be a levelling down and funds will be drawn away from those schools, which would be very damaging.

Jon Cruddas: The issues that some of us planned to raise in the debate that was cancelled on Monday evening concerned precisely some of the pressures on the system, especially for special needs children. That takes us back to a point that I wished to raise about problems with diagnosis, entry points into the system, and the cuts that are being experienced. Those things are all linked to the research base around autism and effective public policy making, and to the concrete problems of commissioning services, the decision-making of front-line staff, and the dilemmas facing autistic people and their families—it is basically the existing evidence base for decisions on autism and public service provision.

I look forward to a reorientation of the research priorities for autism to balance out research funding and projects, as appears to have been achieved in the US. We need to balance scientific research with understanding the needs of the most effective support offered to autistic citizens and their families, as well as greater co-ordination with autistic research, which again appears to have been achieved through strategic oversight in the US. Finally, we need the involvement of autistic people and their families in those strategic decisions—basic issues of democracy are involved in this debate.

It is great that we are having this debate today, and another sign of progress. To return to the words of my friend John Harris, whose family have tried to navigate through this system for many years, we appear to be at a point at which we know we have come a long way, but we still have light years to go.

12.41 pm

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing this important debate. I realised the importance of this subject just before the last election when I met a group of parents in my constituency who were talking about the problems that they had experienced. I had previously met people with autism, but I had not understood the pressures that parents and families are put under by the diagnosis, or even by not having a diagnosis of their children's problems.

I met people who had never received a diagnosis and did not think that they would get one because nobody seemed to recognise that their child had autism. However, it was clear from what they said that the children in question were suffering from a form of autism, although it had never been recognised. Those parents were at the

end of their tether and did not know where to turn to next. It is not just mums who have this problem; there were also a lot of dads at that meeting. It is not only about children; it is often adults for whom even less support is available. Whole families are affected, and autism can cause such a big strain that it affects the parents' marriage or partnership. Many of those situations break down when people have one, two or even three children with autism.

I want to focus on local situations in Derby and Derbyshire, where I feel that the system is failing children who need the diagnosis and help in schools. Through an active group in the area—particularly in Spondon—I have met many people who have autism or whose children have autism. Last year and this year the cathedral has been lit up blue to highlight National Autism Week and to show people that there is a problem in that area. I commend it on that.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making interesting and powerful points and has mentioned the problem that people with autism face. In my office I have employed someone on the autistic spectrum. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to change the narrative in some respects, because people on the autistic spectrum have specialist and incredible skills, and it is so important that we are positive about those people and the opportunities that they provide to society?

Pauline Latham: I completely agree. There are some incredible people with autism, but I am talking about the problems that they need to overcome to access proper education and help for themselves and their families. We must focus on the fact that it is the system, not the people, that is the problem.

In Derbyshire, families have to wait far too long between getting a referral for autism spectrum disorder and a diagnosis. Local authorities need better training for local authorities and schools regarding education, health and care plans and dealing with ASD pupils. We need a better transition from special educational needs statements to the new EHCP, and that has been badly managed in my area.

ASD behaviour and management strategies should be a mandatory part of the teaching qualification for teachers and teaching assistants. There also seems to be a lack of knowledge by parents on the legal rights and services available to them as a family dealing with autism, and we as a society need to recognise that and put out more information for those who are dealing with autism. Guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommend a maximum of three months between a referral and first appointment for an autism assessment. It has been estimated that in Derby that takes closer to 12 months, which is far too long when a child is having problems with their behaviour in school and needs help now.

The Children and Families Act 2014 mandated local authorities to move from special educational needs statements, which outlined a child's needs and how help would be given, to an education, health and care plan for each child. It also reduced the amount of time that children with special educational needs had to wait for an education, health and care plan from 26 weeks to 20. However, in Derby city the average wait is 35 weeks, and

[*Pauline Latham*]

that is after people have already waited for 12 months. Derby local authority did not make sufficient plans to prepare itself for that change, and it has been on the back foot ever since. Until February 2016, only 12% of statements had become education, health and care plans, which is really unhelpful for families. That gap causes delays in the child's educational development, and places additional stress on the families caring for them.

I believe that Derby city is now asking schools to complete the education, health and care plans even though they are not meant to, and the training provided to school staff on changes to the law has been labelled by some parents as “diabolical”. Admin staff at schools do not understand the difference between a special educational needs statement and education, health and care plans, because they often copy and paste them. Without an EHCP, children on the autistic spectrum disorder are managed by inexperienced staff with a fundamental lack of understanding of ASD.

Derby city local authority has to employ consultants who know what they are doing to help make changes, but they cost four times as much as usual school administrative staff. When all local authorities claim that they are short of money, that seems to be a complete waste of money, although if it gets the process completed more quickly for families and children with autism, it is obviously better for them. However, that money could be better spent on mental health care for autistic children and their families.

If local authorities consistently ask schools to carry out the care plans, as is happening in Derby, we must ensure that schools are given the necessary funds and training for that. There is no obvious legal accountability if deadlines are not met. We must support the parents and siblings of children with ASD. Early diagnosis is key to avoiding the mental health problems associated with not knowing what is wrong and being able to deal with it, and we must move faster to help those children and families to deal with their problems.

12.49 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I pass on my sincere thanks to the Chair for indulging me by calling me so early in the debate. I have to return home to attend to urgent constituency business this afternoon. I also congratulate the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing this very important debate.

As we have heard, autism is a spectrum condition, meaning that no two autistic people display the same characteristics. Some people with autism live relatively independent lives, while others, at the other end of the spectrum, might need a lifetime of specialist care and support. That demands that every single person living with autism be treated as an individual and that society affords each individual the respect and dignity they deserve. I have no doubt that we, as a society, aim to do that, but the question is: do we actually do it?

I recently met the National Autistic Society at the launch of its “Too Much Information” campaign, designed to help people recognise autistic behaviour and better understand how they should respond to it. It is an excellent report. It sometimes makes for uncomfortable reading, but I commend it to all Members. In it, the

society published figures from a wide-ranging survey it had commissioned to look at public attitudes towards those living with autism. Its findings suggest that we, as a society, have a long way to go in affording people living with autism the respect and dignity they deserve.

Although almost every person in the United Kingdom had heard of, or was aware of, autism, only a fraction actually recognised what it meant. There is a chasm between public awareness and public understanding of autism. It is this lack of public understanding that causes great distress for those living with the condition and their families. The right hon. Lady has given us some of the findings, but they are worth repeating: 87% of parents had experienced people stopping and staring at their children while they were displaying autistic behaviour and 74% had experienced public expressions of disapproval at their children displaying autistic behaviour. Importantly, the NAS also spoke to people living with autism, and what it discovered was pretty depressing: 84% of people living with autism felt they were judged by the rest of society as being “strange”.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Would the hon. Gentleman agree that that reaction to people in our society with autism and their families leads to a fear of going out, as my constituent Maureen said, which, particularly for autistic children transitioning into adulthood, can in turn lead to social isolation for them and often their primary carer, which is not adequately recognised across the piece?

Brendan O'Hara: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct, and it is something I will touch on in a moment.

Nearly 70% of people living with autism believe that the public see them as antisocial and almost one third have been asked to leave a public place for displaying behaviour associated with their condition. As a result, as the hon. Lady just alluded to, four in every five people living with autism in the UK feel isolated from society and half do not go out for fear of how people will react to their condition. As I said, those statistics make for pretty depressing reading and should force us all to look at our behaviour and question what we are doing, as a community, to our fellow citizens that makes them prefer social isolation to the way they are treated by the public, ourselves included.

It is not all bad news, however, as the NAS report also contains some good news. Its research shows that with greater knowledge and better understanding, the general public will behave with much greater empathy towards autistic people.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): One piece of good news is that many areas of Scotland are blessed with specialist speech and language therapists who well understand the condition and give particular support in schools, for example, to those with communication challenges.

Brendan O'Hara: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a specialist in this area, for his intervention, and I commend the great work done throughout Scotland—and, I assume and hope, the UK—in that field.

As I say, there is much to look forward to and to be hopeful about. We have to get the key messages out to the public, and those key messages are: people with

autism might need extra time to process information and respond to people; people with autism can become anxious in social situations; people with autism can become anxious when faced with unexpected changes or unscheduled events; people with autism can often be hyper-sensitive to noise, light, smell or colour; and, you know what, when things get too much, people with autism can have a meltdown. Deal with it!

To conclude, I will quote from the Scottish Government's autism strategy. Their vision is

“that individuals on the autism spectrum are respected, accepted and valued by their communities and have confidence in services to treat them fairly so that they are able to have meaningful and satisfying lives.”

That is something around which the entire House can unite.

12.56 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing the debate and on her tireless work over many years to raise awareness of autism and to start to change Government priorities around those in our country who are not neuro-typical beasts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) and the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) have described movingly some of the experiences of families and those who suffer from autism. As my right hon. Friend's Autism Act 2009 was going through the House, I was battling to find support and a diagnosis for my eldest young son. It was evident to me that my very bright and articulate son was not like other boys of his age. He had an extraordinary level of concentration and extremely good reading skills and could converse at length with adults in a most unusual way, but he was also very anxious, fearful of noise and bright lights and unable to cope with anything unexpected in his day—the slightest change to the time we left the house, and all hell broke loose.

Once my son started his schooling, at the age of three, his young life and day-to-day experience became increasingly more challenging, and school life, which demands conformity, became something he was entirely unable to cope with. We struggled on for several years, because no one seemed to have any ideas; teachers said nothing except, occasionally, “Well, come and pick him up early if it gets too much”, “Is it all right if I call if he's getting difficult in class?” or “Will it be all right if I don't feed him with everyone else because it seems to be a problem in the canteen?”. I was just a mum with a little boy who seemed to have so many talents but could not cope with daily life.

Eventually, my GP, a wonderful man, referred us to a child psychologist in Newcastle, whose failure to correctly diagnose my son as autistic was nothing short of shocking. Not only did he fail to see what was becoming obvious to our family and our friends, who were trying to support us, but he tried to medicate my son with Ritalin, claiming that he suffered from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—two behavioural traits entirely absent from my son's behaviour. The doctor had failed to speak with my son's teachers, having claimed that he had, before making his diagnosis, and it was only because I fought back against the medical profession's failure that my son was not inappropriately drugged.

Thanks to huge financial support from my family, we eventually found a team of paediatric doctors based at Great Ormond Street hospital in London, 350 miles from our home in Northumberland, who quickly diagnosed my boy as an Asperger's syndrome sufferer. We received support, understanding and guidance from these wonderful specialists who empowered us, James's parents, to challenge school rules and regulations in order to get the changes to his learning environment so that he could once again enjoy and thrive in it. We have encountered two or three teachers for whom medals would be inadequate to recognise how they have put themselves out and learned themselves what it means to be an autistic little boy so that they can help other children coming through the system afterwards. As I say, medals will never be enough for them.

Without good friends, good luck and financial support, I know that our son would have fallen out of school by the time he was six or seven. The pressures that normal life put on our autistic children should not be underestimated. No right-thinking person would ask a child with a broken leg to run up the stairs, but the invisibility of autism means that these children are asked to do things that, given their hypersensitivities or gaps in neurological connectivity, simply ask too much of them.

Pauline Latham: My hon. Friend's son was extremely lucky because he had a mum who was prepared to fight and had the ability to fight. There are many parents like her who will fight for their children, as most parents want to do. However, some parents do not have the ability or the confidence to do that, and these are the ones that are really being let down by the system.

Mrs Trevelyan: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. This is part of the reason I am here. I decided that advocacy was needed for those who are unable to access the system, who do not know how to fight back or who are too honest and quiet folk trying to get on with their day, muddling through it with difficult jobs and complex family environments. For such people it is too hard to fight what still today seems to be an implacable system in so many parts of our country.

The legislation of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham—the Autism Act 2009—has begun to change attitudes towards autism, and I am now 10 years on from the battles I had to fight. The general population is becoming aware, slowly, of this invisible disability. The challenge is its invisibility—until it becomes visible through a crisis.

Many of our greatest artists and scientists have been on the spectrum—men and women who see the world differently from those of us who are “neuro-typical”, as my son always refers to me—mostly as an insult, I suspect, but I take it as it is! As a nation, we should value those who offer an understanding of our world that we neuro-typical folk simply do not have. They are vital to our growth as a nation, both culturally and economically.

The genius of the great Alan Turing brought us the computer—possibly the greatest leap since the steam engine—yet he was shunned and misunderstood throughout his life. We can read about his school years, which were truly awful. The damage that society inflicted on him through a lack of understanding and a blatant disregard

[Mrs Trevelyan]

for his difference in character highlights what we must reverse, 70 years on, to ensure that no child on the autistic spectrum is lost to us or our nation.

Small changes to the school environment and support for families that are bringing up autistic children with day-to-day tasks, which can reduce their stresses, can lead to positive and thriving outcomes for these wonderful members of our communities. Most importantly, we need a team of paediatric experts across every part of our country who can diagnose autistic children early on, and we need councils and schools that are trained and flexible in supporting these children to fulfilling lives.

I recently met a family in my constituency with three boys, two of whom have been diagnosed. I also have in Alan Carrick, at Northumberland County Council, a passionate advocate for all our special needs children, and he is particularly interested in supporting those on the autistic spectrum. It is difficult for him to meet the needs of each and every autistic child because there is not enough flexibility for him to provide preventive and creative solutions for individual families, which would provide practical support.

If we can reduce the day-to-day pressures on parents through low-cost early interventions, we will increase the chances of these families staying together. There are obvious long-term, value-for-money arguments for investing in these families early on to stop long-term costs to the state of family breakdown if we fail these children and their families at the early stage. I call on our Government to encourage our councils to be creative and forward thinking in their support for our autistic children—most urgently of all by getting speedy diagnosis so that support can hopefully follow.

1.4 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow that speech by the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing this debate and on her contribution over the years.

We have touched on autism awareness and autism understanding, but I would like to focus on something not explicitly mentioned so far—autism acceptance. As hon. Members have noted, public awareness of autism has grown dramatically in recent years, aided by a proliferation of books, media articles and not always accurate portrayals of people with autism on television and in film. This explosion of information on autistic spectrum disorders and the incorporation of individuals with autism into everyday culture has helped to familiarise people with the condition, and it is right that we celebrate that achievement.

Essential as it is, however, awareness alone has not necessarily led to greater understanding of ASDs, and it has not prevented the perpetuation of stereotypes and clichés, as even a cursory Google search would attest. Awareness alone has not kept people with autism from being abused, has not helped them find jobs and has not supported them to live independently. In short, we will not overcome ignorance and help those with autism—young and old—to live independent and fulfilling lives simply by increasing awareness alone.

I am lucky enough to have in my constituency a fantastic organisation called Greenwich Parent Voice. It is a group of exceptional parents, some of whom are in the Public Gallery today, who came together to support each other and to fight for a better deal for their children, all of whom have special educational needs or disabilities ranging from the mild to the most profound and complex. They have not only helped to deepen my understanding of ASDs and the challenges faced by those with autism and their parents, but have made it clear to me, over the course of many meetings, that what is really required is acceptance of autism.

Anyone who has sat and listened to parents or carers of children with autism or adults with autism for even a short time will know that the system in place at the moment, despite some improvements, still does not work. Whether it be through the problems in transferring from a statement to education, health and care plans, the difficulties trying to secure specialist support in the care system, or the strain of supporting children with autism into adulthood, the system causes families unimaginable levels of stress and exhaustion.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): In common with other speakers, my hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech about awareness and understanding. Does he agree—I thought his remarks were leading towards this—that we also need to translate such awareness into some hard practical action on service delivery, and that this applies whether it be about education or housing? My hon. Friend, like others, has been dealing with parents of autistic children who are forced to share rooms or to live in 10th or higher storeys in tower blocks because housing policy does not reflect the needs of autistic children. We need to build on greater awareness, but also to resource it and turn it into some practical action that will really assist people.

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I have dealt with allocation cases myself, and I agree that detailed policies need to be put in place that are based on recognition of the particular needs of autistic children and their families. As I have said, having to navigate the system as it stands can cause those families unimaginable stress and anxiety.

Those who can grow the sharp elbows necessary to navigate the system often do so at great personal cost, and, as the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) said, not everyone has the ability to do that. The range of challenges faced by those with autism and their families is vast, and this is not the debate for delving into any particular one in great detail.

My sense is, however, that our collective will and readiness to do something to help people on the spectrum would be stronger if more of us were not only aware of autism and understood it, but were more accepting of it as a society. If we were, I suspect we would be compelled more urgently to address the lack of suitable childcare provision for autistic children and the fact that too many schools are still not autism-friendly and too many children are not getting the support they require. We would be compelled more urgently to address the prevalence of mental health conditions in those with autism, and the isolation that young people with autism too frequently face in school. We would be compelled to address the cliff edge in support—that is what it is—that still faces

autistic people in too many parts of the country as they transition to adulthood. We would also be compelled to address the huge challenges that still face autistic adults in terms of diagnosis, employment and housing.

I have no doubt that these challenges will be overcome in time, not least because more and more people with autism and their families, such as those who helped establish Greenwich Parent Voice in my constituency, are advocating more strongly for themselves. I believe that each of us here in this Chamber and in the wider country can hasten the process by working towards a society in which more of us are not only aware of autism and understand it, but accept those with it and indeed celebrate them and their contribution—not only as family members and friends, but as classmates, colleagues and members of our communities.

1.9 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), not only on securing the debate and not only on the excellent work she does as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group, but on her wonderful work in piloting the Autism Act 2009 through the House. It was ground-breaking legislation, and it has done a tremendous amount to improve the lot of adults with autism in England. I must say in passing that it is a matter of concern to me that it has not been followed by similar legislation in Wales, but the good news is that all the parties involved in the current Welsh Assembly elections except, sadly, the Labour party have committed themselves to the introduction of a Welsh autism Bill, and I hope very much that Labour Assembly Members will work with their colleagues to bring that about.

Notwithstanding the passing of the 2009 Act, however, there is still much work to be done to ensure that people with autism and their families receive the support that they need, and, crucially, that understanding of the condition continues to develop. We must bear it in mind that autism was not formally recognised as a condition until the late 1940s, and that serious research on the condition did not begin in earnest until the 1960s. In 1970, an American study concluded that one child in 14,000 was autistic, but more recent US studies have shown that one child in 68 has some form of autism. A very recent study in Korea—the first study of an entire tranche of the school population—concluded that one child in 38 between the ages of seven and 12 had some degree of autism. It is therefore becoming increasingly clear that the condition is far more prevalent than any of us had thought.

As my right hon. Friend mentioned, it is estimated that between 600,000 and 700,000 people in the United Kingdom—approximately 1% of the population—are affected by autism. That has an economic as well as a human cost. A study by the London School of Economics in 2014 estimated that the cost of autism to the British economy was approximately £32.1 billion a year. Let me put that into perspective: the economic cost of cancer is estimated to be about £12 billion a year, while the figures for heart disease and strokes are £8 billion and £5 billion respectively.

As other Members have observed, if we had greater awareness and more understanding of the condition, more of us might recognise that people with autism are

a very under-utilised resource. The recent article in *The Economist* that was mentioned by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) pointed out that high-functioning people with autism often have a high degree of focus that enables them to spot patterns or errors in data that are not readily recognised by other people and that makes them attractive employees for software firms. Even people who are more significantly affected by autism can hold down jobs successfully. They often benefit from working in highly structured environments, sometimes thriving on jobs of a repetitive nature.

Employers need to realise that that resource can be tapped, which will often mean creating conditions in which people with autism can work. For example, they must understand the need for people with autism to require clear instruction. My right hon. Friend mentioned the excellent video produced by the National Autistic Society, “Too Much Information”, which shows a boy with autism being overcome by the general sounds that are experienced in a shopping centre. Employers should start to understand that people with autism may benefit from quieter working conditions: the sound of a telephone or chatter can prove distracting to the extent of being unendurable.

It is clear that more needs to be done to improve understanding of this condition. Since 2014, the Government have spent some £325,000 on limited awareness work, but that is a very small sum. A lack of understanding on the part of employers and potential colleagues presents autistic adults with a major barrier to finding and staying in work. It is therefore encouraging that the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health have set up a joint unit to help people with autism to find and stay in work while also improving their health. Those are important initiatives, but, as I have said, more needs to be done.

More work is needed to try to identify the causes of autism, which are still not well understood. Research on twins suggests that genetic factors may be a cause, but it has also been suggested that there may be environmental causes, such as pre-natal exposure to viruses or air pollution. Continued research is essential. The United Kingdom currently spends just £4 million a year on autism research, compared with £590 million on cancer, £169 million on heart disease, and £32 million on strokes. World Autism Awareness Week gives us an opportunity to reflect on what is clearly a far more widespread condition than was previously thought, and to do more in our power to address it.

1.15 pm

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): Let me add my voice to those who have already congratulated the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on initiating the debate, and on the work she has done over the years to raise awareness of autism. Let me also say that it is a pleasure to follow the powerful and informative speeches that have been made by Members on both sides of the House, and, in particular, by the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan).

Autism is a spectrum disorder, which means that there is a wide degree of variation in the way in which it affects people. Every child or adult on the autistic

[Natalie McGarry]

spectrum has unique abilities and symptoms, and experiences various challenges. Some of the many challenges that they may face include difficulty in understanding other people's feelings and reactions and interpreting non-verbal clues, difficulty in recognising people's faces, and difficulty in understanding facial expressions. Children and adults with autism spectrum disorders may find it difficult to regulate their emotions or express them appropriately. For instance, they may start to shout, cry or laugh hysterically for no apparent reason. When stressed, they may exhibit disruptive or even aggressive behaviour, breaking things, hitting others or harming themselves.

The condition itself can be isolating enough without society's reinforcing it through "othering" and stigmatisation. Society itself can disable more fully than any condition. The behaviour of people on the autistic spectrum makes it very difficult for them and their families to take part in social events, or to perform everyday tasks such as shopping or using public transport. The pressure of dealing with such situations—which were described so vividly by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara)—can be overwhelming for autistic-spectrum people and their families, and, as we have already heard, families often choose to exclude themselves from everyday life in their communities rather than put up with stares and whispered comments.

Autism is so poorly understood—even, in some cases, by health professionals—that children on the spectrum are often seen as being "naughty" or poorly parented. It is widely acknowledged that early diagnosis and therapy are critical to improving autistic-spectrum people's chances of overcoming developmental delays, but the road to diagnosis is, all too often, very difficult and time consuming. Parents must fight for diagnosis in order to gain access to appropriate services. That places an added burden on stressed, sleep-deprived, struggling families who are already coping with extraordinary pressures and challenges to family life. On average, adults must wait two years for diagnosis and children more than three and a half years after being referred by their GPs. Although guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence say that the wait for a diagnosis should be about three months, some children and their families are having to wait for more than 10 times the recommended period. We are failing those children and families.

A rarely mentioned consequence of families' struggles with challenging and unusual behaviour is the impact that that can have on siblings and family life. The mother of a young autistic-spectrum child in my constituency explained to me recently that if her son was struggling to deal with a birthday party, a noisy branch of McDonald's or a busy shopping mall, the whole family had to leave.

We must aim to improve the structure, process and outcomes of care for these children and their families. Autism teams conducting assessments of children, young people or adults should be specialist, integrated teams with access to speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, and clinical and educational psychologists. Systematic assessments for conditions that co-exist alongside autism should be part of the diagnostic pathway as required by the Autism Act 2009. This is particularly important because people with autism might have

co-existing physical health conditions and/or mental health problems which, if they go unrecognised or untreated, could further impair their psychosocial functioning and place additional pressure on families or carers.

Because of their social communication difficulties, some people with autism may find it particularly difficult to communicate their needs and to access mainstream health and social care services. People with autism should have a personalised plan that is developed and implemented in a partnership between them—and their family and carers, if appropriate—and the autism team. People on the autistic spectrum are unique, sensitive and often highly intelligent individuals who desperately want to be part of their local and wider community. With more support and understanding, that is achievable. We can and must do better to secure better outcomes for adults and children with autism.

1.20 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It has become de rigueur in this debate to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), and I am absolutely delighted to congratulate her on initiating this debate and on her excellent work on the Autism Act 2009, which was also mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones). I also congratulate her on all the work she has done with the all-party parliamentary group on autism.

I became aware of autism through a lot of activity in my constituency. Towards the north of the constituency, there is a big autism unit in the village of Chinnor. We also have facilities at Thomley Hall in the very north of the constituency, and it is a marvellous place to go to. The organised chaos there is wonderful to see, and it is a great privilege to be part of that and to see the enormous efforts being made by the staff to look after people with autism. In the south of my constituency, around Henley itself, we can see the work of Dame Stephanie Shirley and others.

I would like to pay tribute to a charity in my constituency called Music for Autism, which has spotted a link between music and autism. It is organised by the Orchestra of St John's, many of whose members spend hours of their time, freely given, going into schools and other places and working with children with autism in order to show the calming effect of music on them and the enormous ability of music to take them forward to the next stage of their development. I pay tribute to them for doing that.

I want to make two points in the debate. They have already been made by other speakers, but I think it is worth reflecting on them and making them again. The first relates to diagnosis. The difficulty with late diagnosis is that people do not know what their situation is. The advantage of early diagnosis is that they are better able to understand the behaviour involved and how the role of partners can influence the way in which we look at people who have had the diagnosis. That is the view of people I have met in my constituency, including a couple I met in a café in Henley who told me about the difficulties they had had with a late diagnosis.

As we have heard, some people are able to lead pretty ordinary lives and manage their condition extremely well. I have met several such people over the years,

including a young man I met at the last Conservative party conference who was able to demonstrate that. I agree with the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) that public recognition of the condition is not the be all and end all in relation to people's needs, but it is certainly a good starting point. In order to help people to live a fulfilled life, we need public recognition of the illness. The need for early diagnosis is absolutely crucial, and I urge clinical commissioning groups and NHS England to bring down waiting times in line with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines and to work with many different stakeholders to create a more responsive environment of diagnosis and support. Those words were used to describe the situation to me, and I think they do it extremely well.

A significant element is the involvement of health and social care in the care and management of adults with autism. I know that this is a broader point, but it provides a good example of an area in which we need the rapid integration of health and social care within the NHS. It will be much better when all these facilities are together under one roof.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, in Northern Ireland, health and social services form a single body, making it much easier to have an integrated approach? However, we still need integration and co-operation with other groups and organisations, and with statutory agencies such as the Department of Education.

John Howell: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. It is absolutely essential that we achieve that level of integration. We need to start by integrating the medical activities of the NHS with social care in the community, because until they are under one roof we will not have the ability to deal with these problems in the way that will be most effective for people who suffer from this condition.

My second point relates to education. I have a wife who, for many years, taught a young man with autism and struggled to provide him with the assistance he needed. She was remarkably successful in doing that. That was done on a private basis, but the vast majority of children with autism—over 70%—are in mainstream education, and it is there that we have to focus our attention. The teacher training programme needs to include enough information on autism to enable teachers to feel empowered to recognise it and deal with it effectively. If we can do that, we will have a much better chance of purposefully dealing with people with autism.

1.27 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I have done it already, but I will do it again because everyone is doing it: I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on her leadership on this matter. What she has been involved with, and what we are all involved with as a society, is learning how to understand autism much better and recognising that we fail people badly through our ignorance of the potential and capacity of people with autism to lead fulfilling lives and to contribute massively to society. The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) made the

point strongly that there is much that people with autism can do in the employment sphere. They can be fantastic employees, contributing a great deal and leading fulfilling lives, but we often fail them. Also, it costs the Government and the economy a great deal when people with autism end up depending on the state because we have failed to provide them with the necessary support early on. That is the big challenge.

Mrs Gillan: I notice that we have just been joined on the Front Bench by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), who was my predecessor as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on autism. I want to pay tribute to the work that he did. I also want to stress that in bringing in the Autism Act 2009 and in securing this debate today, I was supported by many other Members across the House. It was not just me on my own; it was a real team effort.

Norman Lamb: That brings me nicely on to my next point, because I was going to say that this is not one Government's responsibility; we all have to learn and understand more. The article in *The Economist* made clear the strong economic case that if we invest in diagnosis and early intervention, we will save a fortune in lifetime care. As we learn, the Government have to respond. That is the challenge. This Government, because they are here now and because new learning can lead to improvements, have a responsibility to respond.

Hannah Bardell: The Library briefing paper states that

"the Government does not collect data specifically on employment rates for people with Autistic Spectrum Conditions".

We should campaign, cross-party, to change that and work with business to get interviews that are friendly to those on the autistic spectrum.

Norman Lamb: I totally agree with that. As a former Minister, I recognised during my time in the Department of Health that, whether it be mental health, autism or learning disabilities, we operate in a fog. There is an absence of data that have been analysed and understood. If we are to make the improvements of which we are capable, we have to understand the evidence, which involves the collection of data.

I want to highlight the failures of society and the extent to which we treat people with autism as second-class citizens by referring to two cases. The case of Connor Sparrowhawk, who tragically lost his life through drowning in July 2013, has been much documented recently, and his mother, Sara Ryan, has been an amazing campaigner, fighting for justice. The *Oxford Mail* reported this morning about a recently leaked report, produced for the NHS trust some 11 months before Connor lost his life, that demonstrated failures of care in his unit. The article states:

"The report found Slade House was particularly poor, flagging up issues with a 'lack of clarity of care plans', 'no clear understanding of a 'locked door policy'

and so on. What is the point of commissioning reports at enormous expense if their conclusions and recommendations are ignored?

There has been great focus this week on the importance of the accountability of public bodies following the

[Norman Lamb]

shocking conclusion of the inquest into the Hillsborough tragedy, but that importance stretches across all public bodies and into healthcare. It is important that organisations recognise their responsibility to involve the families of those who lose their lives in investigations and to have an open and learning culture, rather than a closed culture that excludes families. The trust's treatment of Sara Ryan in the investigation of Connor's death has been truly shocking. There must be accountability and a willingness to learn from mistakes and to take account of any recommendations.

As we try to get people out of assessment and treatment units, where they are often left for too long, the Health & Social Care Information Centre has found that 15% of the transforming care cohort, of which the Minister will be aware, have autism and no learning disability and that 23% have autism and a learning disability. When looking at the transforming care partnership plans and the outcomes for individuals, it is important that the Department ensures that the specific needs of autistic people are included and addressed.

Finally, I want to refer to the case of an extraordinary constituent of mine. A nine-year-old boy wrote a letter for his parents to take to a meeting that I had on his behalf with the authorities at Norfolk County Council, and he ended up being interviewed—at the age of nine—on the “Today” programme, and it was a remarkable interview. He movingly wrote in his letter:

“I normally say to myself you have to keep on going. I normally also say ‘is it worth it’. I could just kill myself. I wouldn't have to face today.”

That comes from a nine-year-old boy. His family has been left waiting some two years for a diagnosis without any real support. They have been told that he does not meet the threshold for care from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. Other hon. Members have highlighted similar cases, with the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) talking movingly about her experience, for example. The family, by borrowing from relatives, have managed to pay for some support for their little boy, but what about all those families who cannot afford it? It is intolerable. We cannot justify a society in which children get help if they have articulate parents or parents with money, but where those without go without.

As we seek to implement maximum waiting time standards in mental health, something which I have made my mission, my plea to the Minister is that we include autism and follow the NICE guidelines that the first diagnostic assessment should start no later than three months after GP referral—not 36 months, as I am told is sometimes the case in Norfolk, or 24 months, as in many other parts of the country. The result will be that society and the Government will save money in the long run if we make the investment in diagnosis and treatment at an early stage.

1.36 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who made the point about the need for earlier diagnosis more powerfully than I possibly could; it is certainly one that I support in today's

motion. I also want to join in the many congratulations to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) and all those from both sides of the House who were involved in securing the Autism Act 2009. It was the beginning of a journey that continues with today's debate.

I echo the concerns that were powerfully raised by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) about the risks of social isolation for people with autism, and I want to pay tribute to a couple of organisations in my constituency that have made great strides in reducing that isolation. The inspirational Monday Night Club was founded by Laura Gill, a constituent of mine with learning difficulties, and provides a forum for people with all sorts of learning difficulties, including a large number of people with autism, to come together, to socialise and to feel normal in a social setting.

Another organisation is ASPIE, the charity that I mentioned earlier, which was set up by Sarah Micklewright, an inspirational constituent who was on the autism spectrum. Tragically, and illustrating the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham made about the lower life expectancy of people on the spectrum, she died two years ago next week aged only 38, but she has left a remarkable legacy in Worcester. A house was bought by her parents for people on the spectrum to come together, socialise and share ideas. I have been privileged to visit on several occasions and have been teased for my neurotypical behaviour and for my inaccurate birthday cake-cutting, among other things. It is a fantastic organisation that has played a part in not only helping to reduce the risk of social isolation, but inspiring people to come together and believe in themselves and in their capacity to work and to create businesses for people on the spectrum.

Many hon. Members have made powerful points about the talents of people on the spectrum and the need to unleash them, and we heard about the evidence in the article in *The Economist*. I pay tribute to the founders of an organisation called Wits End Wizardry, a web design company that was launched out of ASPIE in Worcester and entirely staffed by people on the autism spectrum. It discovered that the software programming skills of people on the spectrum are incredibly powerful and that with the right guidance and support and with the right people working with them to provide front-end customer service, they can deliver fantastic websites for all types of businesses and charities. I believe that it has done some important work for various organisations, including Ambitious about Autism, which shows the contribution that people on the spectrum can make.

Mrs Trevelyan: Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to use these great talents—this concentration and extraordinary ability to see the world in different ways? In the north-east, a business called Autism Works is taking on mathematical PhD autistic young men—they are all men—to challenge the big boys in the provision of that scientific and tech support. I think this is the future for our country.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that, and I pay tribute to her for her fantastic speech

earlier. She is on to something here; we are seeing this happening in the north-east and in the midlands, as our increasing cyber-security cluster is looking to take on more people with autism. We heard earlier about the incredible contribution of Bletchley Park, and many of the people who contributed to that work were probably on the spectrum. In cyber-security, businesses such as Titania in Worcester are actively going out to recruit people with autism. I want to see more businesses making that effort and creating opportunities for people. As Ambitious about Autism has shown, we need to do things differently. People cannot just be invited in for interview, because the whole process of interview is set up to work with neurotypical people. We need to create an autism-friendly job application process in order to make sure we are making the most of the talents of these people. I pay tribute to the businesses that are making the effort to do that.

I recently held a Disability Confident jobs fair in Worcester and I was very impressed to see Malvern Instruments, another major employer in our area, recruiting. One of the people representing it in its recruitment was somebody whom I had previously met at ASPIE and who is on the autism spectrum. I wish to pay tribute to Justin McKeon who will be running the Worcester 10k to raise funds for ASPIE, and if anyone in the Chamber wants to join me in supporting him after this debate, I would be delighted.

The Government have many programmes to help people to work. We are talking about halving the disability employment gap, and autism is a big area we should be hitting on to try to make sure that that happens. We also have the apprenticeships programme, many aspects of which can be tailored to support people with autism. I have spoken to my hon. Friend the Minister for Skills about this, and I know he answered a question about this during Education questions this week. I am delighted to hear that he is engaging in round-table meetings with the autism charities and organisations to make sure that we can tailor programmes within the apprenticeships programme to suit more people on the spectrum. There is much more work to be done on this and I would like this “A” badge I am wearing, with the “A” standing for apprenticeships, also to stand for ambition, aspiration and achievement for people with autism.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. A great many people still wish to speak, so I am afraid I have to reduce the time limit to five minutes.

1.42 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I will try to reduce my speech to below five minutes to give others a chance to speak in this excellent debate, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Thank you.

John Woodcock: You are welcome.

We have heard erudite contributions in the debate so far, and I just wish to make two main points. The first is on understanding the scale of the problem. People have talked at length about this, giving some excellent examples,

but I want to go further on the fact that we are still far from seeing the true scale of the autism problem in our country. This is partly because although recognition is growing, it remains insufficient among members of the community. It is also because of the number of worrying ways in which the true extent of the lack of capacity in local services is being hidden, and I hope the Minister will take up that point; the extent to which people are being denied is also being masked. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) talked about the long referral times, way beyond the recommended limits. In Cumbria, the time taken is even longer than the average, which shows the problems.

I wish to relate some of the concerns that parents of autistic children consistently raise in their local support group, and when talking with charities and directly to me. They suggest that even the acknowledged level of deficiency of the service does not reflect the true picture. They tell of their repeated frustration at contact just being ignored and how difficult it can be to get service practitioners even to pick up the phone. That is not properly documented. If people cannot even get on the waiting list to be seen, or they cannot get their request to be acknowledged because their contact is not being acknowledged, the problem is even bigger than is stated. Particularly worryingly, parents have a strong sense that people will tell them orally that the service is not sufficient for them but will refuse to put it in writing in a way that could allow them then to escalate it through the system. I would like the Minister to reflect on that and say whether he believes that that is a genuine problem and whether it is a wider problem.

My second point is about my pride in what my constituency has been able to contribute to the wider awareness debate. First, I should mention “The A Word”, which many hon. Members doubtless watch, as it is filmed in Broughton-in-Furness, in the north of my constituency. As Members will see from the programme, it is a fabulous place to go. I commend all involved in that programme for doing important work in a mainstream, prime-time BBC programme that is getting the message out in a really effective way.

I have delayed my congratulations to the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), but I thank her for the way in which she has engaged with my constituent Deborah Brownson, who has produced an excellent book. It is a children’s guide to autism called “He’s Not Naughty”, which she is trying to get into every school she can. I want to thank the Mayor of Barrow, who has financially facilitated, just yesterday, getting it to all the schools in the borough. Ministers on the Front Bench are asking for personal copies, and I would be delighted to help in doing that. I ask anybody listening to this debate who can contribute to her financial drive to get this illustrated book to other schools to do so—all we need is the postage and some of the printing costs covered. It is an excellent illustrated guide that will explain to children just what is going on in the minds of autistic—*[Interruption.]* I am afraid that I have completely failed in my task and I am on my last five seconds.

1.47 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) and all the team that she talked about earlier.

[Maggie Throup]

In the short time I have been in this place, numerous families have come to my surgery despairing about the time it is taking to get an autism diagnosis for their child. The diagnosis is obvious to those individual parents, and to many of their friends and family, but without the clinical diagnosis these children are trapped. One very moving case recently involved a seven-year-old boy. Almost two years ago now, he was referred to the community paediatrician. His first appointment took nine months to materialise, when he was diagnosed with ADHD. In January this year, he was referred for a communication assessment, and in March his parents received a letter saying there will be a further seven-month delay in accessing this assessment. This little boy's behaviour means he is excluded from school for more time than he is at school, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) can relate to the story I am telling. The school has tried to support him—it has done its best—but of course it has a duty of care to other children. He is about to move from infant school to junior school, and that in itself is causing a problem. The school he should naturally be going to has refused to take him, as it just cannot cope with his behaviour, yet until he has received that autism diagnosis he is unable to access a special needs school—so this is a Catch-22 situation. This is just one of a number of cases I could highlight, and I am sure it mirrors cases that people from across the Chamber have encountered.

To help another child stuck in the system, I wrote to the Health Minister last July to highlight the unacceptable delays. I got a comprehensive response, but, sadly, nine months on, nothing seems to have changed in Derbyshire. I get the same message from officials time and again that they are still recruiting a community paediatrician and are looking to implement new pathways. I know that the pathways and the services are determined locally, but I ask the Minister to do whatever he can to ensure that the children of Erewash, and indeed of the whole of Derbyshire—my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) has also highlighted the issue—get a timely diagnosis for their autism spectrum disorder.

In advance of this debate, I was contacted by a number of constituents. One parent carer of a young man with autism asked me to relay her story. She movingly described how repeatedly being requested to prove that he is autistic and to fill out form after form makes her son's behaviour “go through the roof”. She says:

“My son's autism is very complex and I have to speak to him in a certain way, explaining the meaning of words. This is very important because it can lead to violence if you use the wrong words.”

That is violence against her. She says that the tone of her voice and her body language are of the “utmost importance”. She says:

“Please, stop and think, not everyone can be the same. We need understanding as well as policies that help.”

At the moment, they feel that the policies are devastating their lives.

I think that I have managed to reduce the length of my speech quite well. The National Autistic Society's report “Too Much Information” is aimed at improving the understanding of autism. From the experiences that

I have highlighted, we can see that it is not just members of the public who need to have a better understanding of autism, but those who are supporting these vulnerable children and vulnerable young adults. There needs to be a greater awareness of the consequences of not providing the right support at the right time.

1.51 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I wish to touch on three areas today: diagnosis waiting times, employment and public awareness.

We have already heard this afternoon that the time that people have to wait for a diagnosis is unacceptable. That view is certainly reflected in the correspondence that I have received from my constituents on this matter. Janeen Shears from Preesall had to wait almost five years for her son's diagnosis. She said:

“I was told my son was very complex and while professionals recognised many traits he didn't ‘fit neatly into one diagnosis box’.”

That is because every autistic person is unique and different. Another constituent, Saffron Warde-Jones, who lives in Lancaster, said this to me:

“I have autism and was only diagnosed aged 44 after a lifetime of struggling.”

Diagnosis opens up a support network, so will the Minister ensure that NHS England's new autism care pathway includes and reduces diagnosis waiting times?

I have been privileged to work very closely with the local National Autistic Society group, which is chaired by Gill Mann. It was clear early on that one of the big issues facing the group was access to employment, which was reflected in the fact that only 15% of adults on the spectrum are in full-time paid work. That is why, locally, I am working with the NAS to put on a jobs fair to implore employers to take on autistic people. I am also looking forward to the Government publishing their White Paper on disability and employment, which will

“set out reforms to improve support for people with health conditions and disabilities, including exploring the roles of employers to further reduce the disability employment gap and promote integration across health and employment.”

Can the Minister give us any indication of when to expect that White Paper, as I am aware that the date has been moving around?

We know anecdotally that autistic people feel that the current employment support services do not meet their needs, but the current system does not record their participation in or their outcomes from the Work programme. Going forward, I want to see more robust data on autistic people to understand how provision is working for them. Furthermore, what are we doing to support young people with autism in making the transition from education to the world of work? My constituent, Brian Simpson, said that his son gets a lot of support from school, but he is really worried about what will happen when his son finishes his education.

The Government have committed to replacing the current Work programme and Work Choice with a new Work and Health Programme for people with health conditions and disabilities. That presents us with an important opportunity to do more to support autistic people to find and to stay in work.

In relation to the new Work and Health Programme, can the Minister tell me on what date the tender document will be published, and from what date the programme will be operational? Will the specification for the programme require that the conditions of the claimants, including autism, be recorded by both providers and Jobcentre Plus, and what discussions has he had about the conditions that will be recorded?

On awareness funding, my constituent Janeen told me that people often think that people with autism have a “genius talent”. She said that they do not really understand the “meltdown” in someone’s behaviour. It is just used to describe any kind of naughty behaviour. The Government should take a lead in tackling this lack of understanding.

Half of all people on the autistic spectrum tell the NAS that they do not go out because they are worried about people’s reactions to their autism. A quarter of them have been asked to leave a public place because of the behaviour associated with their autism. How do parents cope with that? They respond by not taking their children to places where they do not feel they will be accepted, which makes their children’s world a little bit small. They cannot enjoy the public space that we all take for granted—the parks, the museums and the shopping centres.

The NAS video, which has had 50 million views online, has a fantastic way of describing just how difficult it is for parents of an autistic child. The Government can do a lot more. Around 800,000 people in this country are affected by dementia, and the Government have shown great bravery in trying to change public attitudes by spending more than £2 million on awareness campaigns. The same work needs to be done for people on the autistic spectrum. I am aware of the Government’s £340,000 programme in this area, and I am looking forward to hearing the Minister’s remarks, telling us more about the scope of this project. With programmes such as “The A Word” on the BBC and the books and articles that are out there, now is the time for the Government to turn this awareness of autism into a true understanding.

1.56 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Although I am aware that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) is not in her place, I start by thanking her for her work in this area. I am aware from my constituents that she has bestowed so many rights on them through legislation and that she has started this whole chain. I pay tribute to her and give her my thanks on behalf of my constituents.

I was elected only 12 months ago. Before the election, I had no direct experience of autism. On being elected, a group of mothers who had autistic children or children with Asperger’s reached out to me and explained how difficult their lives were, what they needed and how hard it was to navigate through the system. I made a pledge to do all I could to help people with very special children.

On election, I was faced with one of my first cases. A mother told me how she had applied to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency for a blue badge because her child, who was six, had such a difficult condition. Whenever he saw anybody in the street, he just collapsed

on to the floor. As a result, she had to carry her child everywhere. She applied for a blue badge, but because the DVLA’s tick-box system did not register any physical disability her application was turned down. We had to fight on her behalf. We were fortunate to be able to go in at a higher level and get somebody to understand the complex needs of her child. That taught me that those with autism, who have such unique and differing needs, do not fit into the tick-box system. I ask the Minister whether he can find some way of ensuring that anybody who works in a tick-box employment system—or a Q and A system—has autism training. It is often impossible for the families of autistic children to navigate the system.

Since then, I have dealt with more cases, and I have been involved in some very special groups dealing with autism in my constituency of Bexhill and Battle. I have two points on which I wish to focus: education and the workplace.

I am fortunate that in Bexhill we have two very special schools that cater for those with autism, as well as those with other conditions. The first is Glyn Gap School, a day school which is rated “outstanding” in all areas. The Ofsted report in 2015 referred to

“the inspirational leadership of the headteacher and assistant headteachers”,

with the result that

“all staff have an uncompromising focus on the quality of learning for all pupils.”

Surely that must be the goal of every school that looks after children with autism.

The second school is St Mary’s, also in Bexhill, where young people do not just learn, but live. The school has had a difficult time owing to a crisis of confidence in the chief executive. I visited the school the day the chief executive left and I was amazed at how caring, supportive and dedicated those teachers were to children with incredibly difficult and challenging conditions. I take my hat off to all who work in that environment. The school still requires improvement, but I believe that better times are ahead.

Constituents have raised with me a number of points in respect of schools. I have two very good schools but, as I mentioned, autistic children have individual and different needs and often need a different school to cater for them, but my council, East Sussex County Council, tends to favour just one school. As a result, it is very difficult for parents to get their choice of school. I would like to see more freedom. I welcome the fact that we have trained 90,000 teachers in autism, but another comment that I have had is that a child was felt by their parents to have been isolated and restrained, rather than experiencing positive handling strategies, which Team Teach and other strategies provide. As has been mentioned, my constituents struggle because of the long time it takes to get a diagnosis.

I have only 30 seconds left, but I want to mention employment. Tomorrow I have a jobs and apprenticeships fair, and I am delighted that St Mary’s in Bexhill will be bringing its young people down so that we can try and get them apprenticeships. I am fortunate to have in my constituency an organisation called Little Gate Farm, which helps people find employment opportunities. It tries to bridge the gap between school and employment

[*Huw Merriman*]

in rural communities. I salute what that organisation does, and I salute what everybody does in my constituency for those very special and gifted people.

2.2 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Two weeks ago I would not have been able to speak in this debate, but because of a pressing constituency issue I have found myself suddenly having to read up and listen, and I have learned so much today about autism. My only previous experience was teaching some autistic young men who passed through my hands when I was a further education lecturer.

I have become more and more aware of the crying need to raise awareness of autism at all levels—in the general public as well as in public authorities. My hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) mentioned the Scottish Government’s plans for autism and their strategy. As part of that strategy, they opened six centres across Scotland to provide a one-stop shop experience for parents and people with autism. The one-stop shop in Motherwell will probably close in June this year. Since that has been announced, I have had innumerable emails from people in my constituency and outwith it, because the shop covers the whole of Lanarkshire. There are two local authorities involved—North Lanarkshire Council and South Lanarkshire Council—which will no longer fund those services. As hon. Members can imagine, that is a devastating blow to my constituents and people across Lanarkshire.

The one-stop shop provides workshops, training for parents and professionals, and support services for those who have autism. Those services are available even before diagnosis: anyone who thinks there may be an issue can go there and get advice. The shop was planning to run further courses for girls with autism, which is a very important area, and it was hoping also to run other specific and technical courses for parents and professionals.

My local authority, North Lanarkshire Council, has indicated that it will continue to fund an organisation called HOPE for Autism, which does good work with families in North Lanarkshire. However, the organisation’s services can be accessed only after diagnosis and its work focuses mainly on socialising and is for children only. There is also an annual fee per child for parents who join.

The reduction in services is devastating news. I do not want to stand in this place and denigrate anything that HOPE for Autism in North Lanarkshire has done and will continue to do, but it does not provide a range of services that parents can access at present. That is causing great distress.

I was unable to attend a meeting at the one-stop shop on Monday, but my office manager went and came back almost in tears at some of the stories that she heard. She said she found it most moving when parents said that they almost wished that their children had a visible disability, or they wished their children had something else, because then they would get more help and more hope and people would understand what was happening with their children. That heartfelt wish brought home to my office manager how little she knew about autism.

I do not think for one moment that North Lanarkshire Council’s motives are bad. I know that there are funding difficulties all over the UK, but I do not think the council understands what the one-stop shop provided. I have a list of some of the wonderful work that it has done. It ran workshops on visual issues and autism, workshops on sleep strategies by Sleep Scotland, workshops on support for young carers, on autism and diet by NHS Lanarkshire, and on autism and play by a Scottish Autism support team, a workshop on demand avoidant behaviour by the paediatric autism consultancy team, and a safe talk autism awareness training workshop by the Richmond Fellowship. All that will be lost in my area.

Mrs Gillan: I hope I am buying the hon. Lady an extra minute. What she is saying is very important. Does she think there is any possibility of that decision being reversed, as she is making such a powerful case for keeping the one-stop shop open for her constituents and people beyond her constituency?

Marion Fellows: I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention and the time it may buy me. As she can imagine, the parents are fighting hard to retain the shop and to convince both North and South Lanarkshire Councils that the service must be funded, because of the great work that it does and the benefit that it brings to anyone in North or South Lanarkshire who is affected by autism. Some of the emails that I have had are heart-wrenching, telling of social isolation and nine-year-old children trying to kill themselves. Those emails are full of praise for the help that has been received, the work that has been done and the staff in the one-stop shop, two of whom are seconded from Scottish Autism and two of whom will lose their jobs. I will go on and fight for that very valuable shop in Motherwell.

2.8 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I am proud to be a governor at Halesbury School, which has become a specialist autism school where more than a third of pupils have autism, many undiagnosed when they join the school. I am grateful to the deputy head, Amanda Appleby-Payne, for the insight she offered ahead of this debate.

Two special schools in my constituency are doing excellent work for children with autism. The Brier School has been rated “outstanding” in every category in its two most recent Ofsted inspections, and Pens Meadow provides an incredible level of education, care and support for children with very severe and complex special needs. I was pleased to open its new post-16 facility last autumn, which means that more young people with autism will be able to access further and vocational education.

Autism is a lifelong condition that affects people very differently. It affects how they communicate and how they make sense of the world around them. While many people live largely independent lives, others need more specialist support. Unfortunately, many people live a life full of anxiety, depression, mental health issues and sensory sensitivities that make it extremely difficult for them to function or to access the normal situations and public services we take for granted.

A 2012 study found that about 1.1% of adults were on the autistic spectrum, and a later study found a similar prevalence among children. If this House is representative of the population at large, therefore, we would expect at least seven Members to be on the autistic spectrum.

Unfortunately, the excellent support and education provided to children with autism at Halesbury, The Brier and Pens Meadow are not always reflected in the education system as a whole. There are 120,000 school-age children in England on the autistic spectrum, more than 70% of whom are in mainstream education. The implication is that many teachers in mainstream schools are likely to have children with autism in their classes—if they do not at the moment, they almost certainly will at some stage during their careers.

I pay tribute to the NASUWT for the valuable work it has done on this issue and particularly for the report my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) referred to, which showed that 60% of teachers do not believe they have enough training to meet the needs of pupils with ASD.

Mrs Gillan: My hon. Friend is making some powerful points about the education of young people with autism. Is he aware of the work being done by Ambitious about Autism, which shows that the number of special educational needs appeals at tribunals went up from over 1,000 in 1995 to over 4,000 in 2014? Among the most common types of appeal are those involving autism.

Mike Wood: Having met Ambitious about Autism and discussed that very point, I certainly recognise the challenge to which my right hon. Friend refers.

Difficulties in the classroom and for families of children with autism often arise because of a lack of knowledge and understanding about the condition. Children on the autistic spectrum often get chastised for not behaving in exactly the same way as other children. Their exclusion rates are extremely high, and figures from the Department for Education show that autistic pupils are four times more likely to be excluded than pupils with no special educational needs.

Teacher training must equip teachers with the knowledge and tools they need to provide all pupils with the best possible support throughout their time in education. That is why I support the call by Ambitious about Autism and the National Autistic Society for autism to be included in the new teacher training framework.

If I may, I will conclude with the words of Mr and Mrs Whitmore, the parents of a pupil at Halesbury:

“We want our son to be accepted—and for him to be accepted equally as a citizen of this country, as his peers are...Autism is only a small fraction of our son; it is not everything he is. Will is so much more than the label society has given him.”

It is for people such as Will and the families who are working to make sure their children and everybody affected by autism can have the best possible chance to fulfil their full potential, whether that is in the workplace or in society as a whole, that we are having this debate. This debate is a huge and positive step forward, and we have seen the quality of the contributions that have been made. I therefore look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

2.14 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I too pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) for securing it and for her long-standing commitment and hard work on this issue.

Over the past year, I have been contacted by several parents of children with autism—parents who are proud of their children's abilities and who, like any parent, simply want their children to receive the support they need to live the best life possible.

I have been contacted by enough parents to be able to see what some of the problems and challenges are—they are many, and they cut across different areas of public sector responsibility. I have represented parents of autistic children who are struggling to get a diagnosis for their son or daughter, which is a significant problem. Just as worrying, however, are the families whose child has a diagnosis but who are still struggling to secure the additional resources and support they need, whether that is support in the classroom, transport to get to and from school, help to access housing that is appropriate to their needs, or help with the welfare system or healthcare.

Across the public sector, there is a lack of understanding of autism and its impact on families. Families face stigma and stereotyping. The complexity of autism is not understood, and that results in parents facing weekly and sometimes daily battles on behalf of their children, just to secure the basics.

Earlier this year, I was privileged to meet Isabelle and Robin Garnett, whose 15-year-old son Matthew has autism. Isabelle came to see me at my surgery to tell me about the terrible experiences Matthew was having because of his mental health needs. I would like to focus today on the particular problems of people with autism who also have mental health needs.

Last summer, Matthew Garnett's behaviour and level of distress deteriorated, and his family were finding it more and more difficult to cope. Eventually, Matthew assaulted his father, resulting in his parents calling the police—an absolutely heart-breaking situation for any family. Matthew was sectioned under the Mental Health Act and taken to a psychiatric intensive care unit in Woking, many miles from his south London home.

Psychiatric intensive care units are for short-term assessment; they are designed to diagnose a patient and to determine the treatment and support they need, and then to make an onward referral within six to eight weeks. Matthew's doctors quickly identified that the most appropriate place for him was a unit at St Andrew's, Northampton. St Andrew's accepted the referral, but to Isabelle and Robin's great distress, Matthew remained in Woking for a further six months, moving to Northampton only after a persistent campaign by his family, and after I had repeatedly raised the case in Parliament and with the Minister.

I am grateful to the Minister for meeting me and Matthew's family, for recognising the extent of their suffering and the many serious issues with Matthew's care, and for initiating a review of his case. I look forward to seeing the results of the review and to discussing it with the Minister.

[Helen Hayes]

One of the most troubling aspects of Matthew Garnett's situation was the absolute absence of autism awareness or specialism from the care he received while he was in Woking for six months. There was no recognition of his need for routine and structure, of the impact of his diet on his condition or of the detrimental impact of too much screen time on his mood and level of anxiety. As a consequence, his physical and mental condition deteriorated while he was in Woking. He gained weight, became more withdrawn and broke his wrist; his social skills and reading ability regressed; and he became more anxious and frightened.

Matthew's parents launched a brave campaign to get him the treatment he needed. In doing so, they engaged with many other parents of children with autism and mental health needs. Working with the National Autistic Society, they launched a questionnaire for parents of children with autism and mental health needs. Within a few days, more than 800 parents had filled out the questionnaire, and the results are very troubling. Almost half the respondents said that, prior to their child being admitted to hospital, they had received no support in the community for autism or mental health needs. Some 85% of those whose child had been admitted to hospital said they had received no autism-specific support. Almost half said they did not feel consulted about, or involved in, decisions about their child's care when they were in hospital. Finally, 61% said that, after their child was discharged, no arrangements at all were made for suitable support back in the community.

Children with autism, and their parents and carers, deserve better than this. While I am grateful to the Minister for his engagement with Matthew Garnett's family to date, I urge him to pick up the wider set of issues and challenges in the mental health care system and across other areas of the public sector and to ensure we have a fairer deal for families who face these daily, heart-breaking struggles and appropriate resourcing of the support they need.

2.19 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is said that a society is judged by the way it treats its most vulnerable. Among our most vulnerable are children with special educational needs, including those on the autism spectrum. I therefore want to give a voice to just a few of the many parents who have come to me over the past six years, including the Middlewich parents and carers support group, to describe their challenges in trying to get appropriate support for their autistic children. The situation is described by far too many with these words: "every day feels like a fight."

Time prevents me from quoting all the material I have available to describe their struggles of seeking often inadequate, slow or no diagnoses; of insufficient teacher training; of a feeling as parents that they have little voice or are inadequate, or worse, not believed; of struggles with bureaucracy, with too many different organisations; of, as one said, being pushed from pillar to post; of funding and resource frustrations; and of being, as another said,

"at a loss as to what to do."

We need to do better for them.

One says:

"We have two children who have autism and face huge challenges getting the understanding and support they need."

Another says,

"teachers in my child's school in charge of special educational needs do not have sufficiently specialised training."

Another says:

"Teachers are given...very little training. Many teachers have had only half a day's training to cover all SEN."

One said that more training is needed so teachers can help older children in secondary school to understand themselves when there may be an onset of distress and how to get help early. Another said:

"my son has had difficulties in school, and what hasn't helped is that...the educational psychologist and the school, I am being told I should not say he is autistic spectrum...rather...he is a 'complex child with complex needs'. The letter from the community paediatrician does say he has a diagnosis of ASD".

One mother, like a number of parents, says:

"all the experts in the field of ASD would tell you that children can hold in their anxieties and control their behaviour at school, in order to 'fit in'; but when they come home to an environment where they can be themselves, they act completely differently."

Another said:

"I had three uniforms for him. These were all ripped when he returned home due to what had gone on during the day."

Yet doctors often listen more to the opinion of teachers than parents. Another parent said that parents are made to feel that they are not believed—that they are

"bad parents and trouble makers. Yet what parents would want to go to so much effort to 'pretend' that their child has a disability?"

Another said that, as we have heard:

"The diagnosis process is not working...waiting times for diagnosis are too long...some children are being deliberated over for too long or even discharged, when there is clearly an issue which requires diagnosis."

Another said that too much attention is paid to the opinion of teachers and not enough to parents. One mother told me she has spent three years trying to get her son statemented, but because they did not have a statement they could not get any support at primary school because money comes with the statement. He is now 12, at senior school, and has ASD as diagnosed by a paediatrician but is still not statemented.

Tom Elliott: One line from one of the parents the hon. Lady has mentioned has captured what this debate is about:

"every day feels like a fight."

We have talked about this for so long. Surely there should be more progress to try to get more co-operation between the statutory agencies and Government Departments to ensure that every day is not a fight for parents and for those affected.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman is correct. As long ago as 2009, following the Autism Act 2009, the Department for Health published an autism strategy that focused on five core areas of activity, one of which was the importance of

"developing a clear, consistent pathway for diagnosis in every area, which is followed by the offer of a personalised needs assessment."

That was for adults. How much more important is it that this happens for children, and at the earliest possible

age and stage? Waiting times for assessment should follow the NICE guidelines of three months. That is a long time in a childhood; three years is an eternity.

One parent wrote that when diagnosis occurs there needs to be a greater understanding of the different ways in which autism presents itself between girls and boys. She said that

“there is not enough knowledge about girls on the spectrum...It is now recognised there are far more girls with ASD than previously thought. Girls develop the ability to mask their condition much more effectively. However, this knowledge is not being passed through the system. Far more training is needed for...professionals in the field, to ensure that our girls get equal access to assessment and diagnosis...my son was diagnosed locally by the paediatrician, yet the same doctor had quite evidently decided my daughter was not on the spectrum, without really investigating the possibility...So I had to take my daughter privately to a psychologist who was much more well informed...this needs to be addressed...we are doing our girls a disservice at present.”

Another said that autism is a spectrum of conditions and every one requires an individual solution, particularly as autism can be accompanied by another condition. As we have heard, a further problem arises when, as parents tell me, their child reaches late teens and falls between child and adult care. One mother told me that children with autism have an adolescence lasting 10 years longer than anyone else, but at 16 to 18 schools and colleges stop talking to you, but your child still needs support for a very long time. Another said:

“there are so many stumbling blocks on the way”

that it is no wonder that some of the children end up in the juvenile justice system, or self-harm.

Then there is the problem of employment. A mother told me of the struggles she is having trying to find employment for her son with mild Asperger’s syndrome. There is no support available and there are huge levels of ignorance among potential employers.

Given the right help, appropriate support can be really effective. Surely, we want for every child, including those with autism, the best start in life, and it can be achieved.

2.26 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I speak as a mother currently on the long waiting list for diagnosis. I thank everybody for their comments today.

I am delighted to speak in this debate. Like everybody else, I commend the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), who is a tireless campaigner on this issue—a subject incredibly close to my heart. So many misconceptions about autistic people get thrown around, such as “Everyone is somewhere on the spectrum”, which I am sure we hear a lot in this place, or my favourite, which is that people with people with autism have some sort of superpower or special gift. I can tell everyone now that they do not.

Last Friday, I watched the newly released DVD of “Star Wars: the Force Awakens” with my sons and their lovely autistic friend. Between us we decided that what appeared as the teenage tantrums of the new Dark Lord, Kylo Ren, was perhaps just him needing a bit of a “time out”. We concluded that perhaps he was autistic and just could not fit into the world he found himself in. Perhaps the new Death Star was just too noisy and made him feel stressed out. We thought he might wear

the mask because he did not like eye contact. I am not sure that this was the film-maker’s intention, but it softened us to him. The group of people I was with “get” autism and ASD—they live with it every day—so they can see how a person’s behaviour might alter if things start to kick off. To all of us, it is not the person with autism who has the problem—it is the rest of the world. We have to think differently about people who think differently.

On every street I visit in Yardley, I meet families struggling with autism in adulthood or in their children. My postbag is full of heart-breaking cases of how much autistic people are struggling. In my constituency there is an amazing autism support group called Spectrum, where every meeting is packed with parents who want a break. This is not a minority issue—it is a growing issue, and we are not keeping pace with our provision, our awareness or our attitudes.

Today I want to focus on how the world needs to think differently about employment for people with autism. Only 15% of working-age people with autism are currently in work, according to the National Autistic Society. For any parent with a child with autism, this presents a heart-breaking and bleak future—but it does not need to be. Ambitious about Autism has identified that in fact 99% of young people with autism want to work.

So what can we do? The Department for Work and Pensions has made some impressive commitments over the past few years in saying that Jobcentre Plus will implement autism awareness and autism networks. I welcome all this, but in reality it is not what people in my constituency are experiencing. One constituent told me: “I do not blame the staff, but it comes down to a lack of understanding of autism. The support the jobcentre claim to be providing is not there. I was treated as though I had no disability and left to my own devices. That is the problem of having an invisible disability.”

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): At a meeting last week, somebody raised the issue of jobcentres specifically regarding the personal independence payment and self-assessment of people with autism or Asperger’s as being incredibly difficult. Why does that continue to be part of the process?

Jess Phillips: I could not agree more. Another of my constituents told me just this week how the jobcentre had failed to recognise the need for his mother to be able to attend meetings about his PIP arrangements and to change his benefits. That has resulted in frequent incidents of faltering benefits, which has made him incredibly vulnerable and left him with totally insecure finances.

On another occasion I heard of a mother who wanted to access a bus pass from the local authority for a home-to-school scheme, in order to get her son travel-ready for when he leaves school in a few years’ time so that he will be able to go on the bus on his own. She was given a “computer says no” answer and told to come back in the few years when it would actually matter. However, because she is a mum with an autistic child, she knows it is going to take time and training.

We have got to be bold and flexible. We have got to think differently about how we make our services and the world’s jobs available to people on the autistic

[Jess Phillips]

spectrum. Although things are not perfect, we have come a long way from the days when a person in a wheelchair could not have a job because they could not access the building. Autistic people may not face a physical barrier like a staircase, but the barrier effect is exactly the same.

Not providing fair and equal access to these people is not only wrong; it is also illegal, and we have got to make sure that employers know that. We need employers to understand how an interview might feel to somebody with autism. It is terrifying enough for somebody who is neuro-typical, so I ask Members to imagine for a second that they do not want to look someone in the eye, find talking in front of strangers impossible, or find it impossible if two people speak over each other.

Ambitious about Autism has just launched its “Employ Autism” campaign to transform the employability of young people with autism. I ask everyone in this place to do as I have done and offer to provide work experience to young people with autism. I imagine that I will learn as much as my placement, possibly more. I also encourage Members to ask our local business improvement districts, chambers, local enterprise partnerships and businesses to offer tailored work placements and apprenticeships. That will help us all to think differently.

I want to stand here and say with confidence to every young person with autism and every parent with a child on the autistic spectrum: you can do anything. I want to say: your future is bright. I want to say it to myself, for my son. I want to say it to my son’s “Star Wars” fan friend. But I can’t. I don’t know what the future will be like for them. So let’s try to change it. Let’s think differently.

2.32 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) for bringing forward this debate. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in it and to put my full support behind the motion.

As I prepared my speaking notes, it became obvious that, while Members in this Chamber have an important role to play in raising awareness of autism, the most valuable insights will always come from those with direct experience of the condition. They are the ones who know whether services are working effectively and they know through experience what changes we should make to create a more autism-friendly society. It is, therefore, appropriate to make sure that their voices are heard in the House of Commons today. There are two people in particular that I will highlight. The first is a constituent of mine whose son has autism, and the second is Vicki McCarthy, the founder of Reach for Autism, a non-profit organisation operating in my constituency of Inverclyde.

I have a constituent who moved to Inverclyde with her six-year-old son in 2003, and her experiences raise a number of concerns. She raised a concern with me regarding an inconsistency among school staff: some worked very well with autistic children, while others lacked a basic understanding of situations that could make an autistic child uncomfortable. She also highlighted a lack of age-appropriate activities for teenagers with

autism. Teenage years can be a difficult time for anyone, let alone those with autism. My constituent believes that greater co-ordination between social services and parents could lead to activities that better reflect the needs of their teenage children.

My constituent also raised concerns about the bureaucracy and poor communication of local social services. She felt that, while access to information was easily obtained through schools, contacting social services was a laborious process, with no guarantee of assistance at the end of it. My constituent summarised the situation best when she said:

“I would describe our life as one big battle for every tiny scrap of help and as someone who is naturally quite a shy person this has brought its own difficulties.”

Many parents with an autistic child will undoubtedly relate to those concerns, and we must recognise their commitment in continuing to campaign tirelessly for greater support to be made available.

One such organisation offering that support is Reach for Autism, which was established in Inverclyde by Vicki McCarthy. Reach for Autism offers a wide range of support, from teacher training to mentoring programmes. It currently supports more than 60 autistic people, including 44 children, eight young adults, four volunteers and a member of staff. It is difficult to overstate the importance of those services, not only for autistic people, but for their families. Lifeline services such as those established by Vicki can transform people’s lives.

If we invest in people with autism from a young age, we can decrease the chances of autistic people suffering from mental health problems as a result of social isolation or low self-esteem. That investment ensures that people with autism feel valued and respected, are prepared for employment and can live more independent lives.

Yet establishing and maintaining that support has been difficult. Reach for Autism has no core funding, and running costs are met entirely through donations and its own fundraising. The organisation and its vital services simply would not exist without the energetic support of volunteers and the determined efforts of Vicki. Whether it is individuals and their families or organisations themselves, those touched by autism are faced with the same obstacles: a lack of funding; a lack of certainty over future support; and a lack of public understanding of the condition.

I hope that other Members will join me in declaring that people with autism, their families and the organisations that support them deserve better than this never-ending uphill struggle. All people, including those with autism, deserve the chance to realise their full potential, and by increasing awareness we can take important steps towards becoming a more autism-friendly society. I know that I am better for my increased knowledge and would like to thank Vicki and all those who have raised my awareness and understanding.

2.36 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I, too, would like to add my voice to the clamour—the chorus—of appreciation to the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) not just for securing this debate, but for all the work she has done in this area over the years.

This subject is very close to my heart. I speak as a former teacher of English for more than 20 years who witnessed at first hand some of the challenges and obstacles that young people living with autism face. This debate is important not just because of the challenges that those living with autism have to cope with, but because of the isolation and the sometimes bullying and judgmental attitudes they face from a society that too often simply does not comprehend the condition. That is why we all—there is consensus on this—need to work hard to raise not just awareness of the condition, but understanding of it. In the long term, society's lack of understanding can leave an individual with autism emotionally scarred, and in the longer term it can lead to difficulties accessing employment and the means to a fulfilling life.

The scale of those affected by the condition is significant. It is thought that more than one person in every 100 may be autistic, and behind each individual case, as we have heard, are families, loved ones and friends who also live with the condition. A study in 2008 revealed that as many as 71% of children with autism also live with a mental health condition, such as anxiety, depression or obsessive compulsive disorder. The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services found that 26% of graduates on the autism spectrum are unemployed. That is by far the highest rate of any disability group and more than double the average unemployment rate for disabled adults. Although figures are hard to establish, it is thought that only 15% of autistic adults in the UK are in full-time work. A large-scale study in *The British Journal of Psychiatry* in November 2015 found that people with autism are more than twice as likely as their peers in the wider population to die prematurely.

It is important to recognise, as we have heard today, that no two people with autism are the same. There is a whole spectrum within the condition, which may explain the gaps in the understanding of it among the wider population, but we know that it can be quite debilitating for the individual involved, as well as his or her family, if they suffer from it with any severity. Progress has been made, but it is important that as much work as possible continues to be undertaken to promote, as I have said, not only awareness but understanding. Recent work undertaken by the National Autistic Society found that only 16% of autistic people and their families felt that the general public had a meaningful understanding of the condition.

I believe that folk, on the whole, at heart are decent. If we can help to raise awareness and understanding of the condition—this debate is a small part of that—the wider public will display more sensitivity, more kindness and more compassion towards those living with this condition.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I welcome the hon. Lady's speech, and she speaks with great passion and eloquence. Does she also welcome the fact that schools do so much not only to improve the understanding in the local community, but to help their children who are on the autism spectrum to interact with the world as it is? Much is being done by schools such as Grange Park School in my constituency and, I am sure, by schools in the hon. Lady's constituency.

Patricia Gibson: I take on board the hon. Gentleman's important point. We have heard today that in some schools, there is a deficit of understanding and a deficit

of support, but there are also excellent examples of teachers who have had thorough training in autism, who can support children in a specialised way and help them to access the curriculum in a meaningful way that would not otherwise be possible. We must recognise that and share such good practice, wherever it exists, around the UK.

When we raise understanding of autism, we will help to remove the shadow of loneliness and isolation that, far too often, those living with autism and their families experience. Loneliness and isolation have a negative impact on the general health and wellbeing of those affected by them, and loneliness is considered to be as damaging to health as smoking. That brings into sharp focus the importance of such work.

Before I finish, I want to pay tribute to the work that is being done in my constituency. During the Easter recess, I attended an event in Ardrossan library—I attended a similar event last year—where people with autism and their families come together to share stories about the challenges that they face and the coping strategies that they use. I pay tribute to Suzanne Fernando, who organises those events and does so much to promote understanding of autism. I am quite proud of the work that is going on in Scotland. The Scottish Government have launched the Scottish strategy for autism, through which they have put the issue on the agenda, raised awareness of it and put resources into it. When children, young people and adults with autism lose out, they are a loss to our society, and we need to be more inclusive and mindful of that.

2.42 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I join in the congratulations to the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing the debate and on all her work on this issue. Last week, I was invited to Grimsby autism forum, which was held at Open Door. It is a fantastic group that helps to give people with autism and their families a voice in the many different systems that they find themselves thrust into.

I would like to raise some of the issues that were shared with me at the forum. There seem to be two main areas of concern: problems with diagnosing autism and Asperger's, and a lack of post-diagnosis support and subsequent pathways. From speaking to the parents, I got the impression that diagnosis was seen as something of a golden ticket to the support and help that they are desperate for, but they really have to work for it. It sounds as though there is a hurdle every step of the way.

There is the fundamental problem, at least in Grimsby, that no one knows who is responsible for diagnosis. There is no clear division of responsibility between the clinical commissioning group and the child and adolescent mental health services. The issue is particularly acute for 16 to 18-year-olds. As a support worker put it to me, "If you are 16 to 18, you can forget about being diagnosed". I would be grateful to the Minister if he clarified which body has the legal responsibility for diagnosis for people between those ages, and if he explained why they are not currently being diagnosed.

Many parents feel that schools, the local authority and the clinical commissioning group are reluctant to statement children, which prevents them from accessing

[Melanie Onn]

the additional services they need. Does the Minister believe that there may be an issue in that councils and schools are not as proactive as they could be in diagnosing children? Some people have complained about assessments being done out of area. If long journeys are likely to exacerbate the worst symptoms of the condition, some people simply will not take their children, who will therefore miss out on the help they so desperately need.

Autism and Asperger's on their own can be difficult conditions for people and their carers to cope with, but as was said by the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is no longer in her place, comorbidity is very common and can make diagnosis even less likely. It is a real frustration for carers when people receive help for ADHD or anxiety depression, for example, before they even receive a diagnosis for what they feel is the core problem. Obviously, help for co-existing conditions is welcome and necessary, but when it supersedes autism or Asperger's support, it is simply seen as messing around at the edges.

Whether or not children have been successfully diagnosed with autism or Asperger's, they are still held back in their education and find it difficult to break into the jobs market. Too often autistic children are put in the naughty box at school. NASUWT research shows that most teachers do not feel they have had adequate training to teach children with autism, which is worrying given that 70% of autistic children are educated in mainstream schools. I believe that children with autism can absolutely succeed at school, but if teachers are not properly equipped to help them, they are too often simply written off. I find it shocking that, as the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) mentioned, the majority of school exclusions are for children with special educational needs, yet they account for only 15% of all students. How can that be compatible with section 85 of the Equality Act 2010, which specifically prohibits discrimination against a pupil

“by excluding the pupil from the school”?

On leaving school, young people with Asperger's and autism often struggle to maintain long-term employment, or even to get a job in the first place. Navigo, a charity in Grimsby, runs shops and garden centres that provide opportunities for work and training for people with mental health conditions. It is a really valuable scheme, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) mentioned, I would like more employers from outside the charity sector to do the same. I am sure there is plenty that the Government could do to promote employment for people with mental health conditions in the public sector, as well as to incentivise private sector firms to do so.

Of course, some employers already do a lot to encourage disabled people to apply for jobs with them—for instance, by including the “Positive about Disabled People” symbol in their job adverts. Although disabled people are advised to look for that symbol in adverts, I do not understand why jobcentres do not hold lists of employers in the local area that are so certified. Surely that would be a relatively simple and helpful step for jobseekers with autism and Asperger's. I hope the Minister will join me in calling on my local jobcentre to collect such information and start sharing it with autistic jobseekers.

Overall, there needs to be a better understanding of autism and Asperger's across society, diagnosis needs to be much more common and the process for parents who are seeking a diagnosis needs to be made much easier.

2.47 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, thank the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) for securing this vital and much-needed debate. Like her, I thank the Solicitor General, the hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), who I am sure would be speaking today if he was able to do so.

I speak not just as the vice-chair of the all-party group on autism and as an MP who has dealt with many pieces of casework involving families touched by autism, but as the father of an autistic child with learning difficulties. I wanted to share some personal insights into living with a family member with autism, but I realised that, unfortunately, the speech I brought with me would probably have lasted for the full duration of the debate, so I am not able to give it. However, I want to pay tribute to some of the excellent national and local organisations that help to support children and adults with autism, and to say a little about how I want services in my area of Greater Manchester to develop in the future.

I am extremely blessed to be the father of four beautiful children. My eldest child, Jack, was born when I was a new graduate in my early 20s. I remember listening to the radio while driving home from the hospital, the day after his birth, when Elton John's “Circle of Life” came on, and feeling tremendous excitement, as all new parents do, as well as a healthy dose of nervousness about life never being quite the same again.

As we were young parents—in particular, we were the first in our peer group to have children by several years—I suppose that, in hindsight, we missed the early signs that something was not quite right. Jack's mother and I unfortunately separated just a year after his birth, and many of the things we saw we understandably attributed to the difficulties of having two homes and two different families. But slowly we came to see that everything was not quite as it should be, particularly when taking him to things like football and swimming, where he could not follow the rules and societal norms of the situation he was in.

Receiving the news of that diagnosis is a very hard moment. There is no denying that there is a sense of anger and of guilt, and sometimes a sense of shame. But there is also a sense of relief, and many parents—some are perhaps watching this—who are struggling for that diagnosis themselves will be looking for the sense of relief it brings.

Of course, there are big consequences for family life. We have heard about families feeling difficulty in going out because of the reaction that they get. Members can imagine that that is particularly hard when you are the local MP in attendance at large noisy civic occasions that are really mandatory for the job. As well as everything that has been said on diagnosis, on provision of healthcare and on mental healthcare provision in particular, the challenge we face is to make our society more autism-friendly.

There are some brilliant people who are doing that in this country. I commend the work of the National Autistic Society and its recent campaign, “Too Much Information”, which I believe is its most powerful yet. I was touched by the film shot entirely from the perspective of a child with autism walking through a shopping centre, which gives in about a minute an insight into the discomfort, sensory overload and claustrophobia that are normal for many people with autism. When the child ultimately has a meltdown the viewer understands why. There are many other organisations I would like to have had the time to talk about, including Ambitious about Autism, and Autistica and the work it funds in medical research into the causes, diagnosis and treatment of autism.

I see tremendous work in this country not just from the third sector but from companies. The example of Asda has been given. Many cinema chains are now embracing autism-friendly screenings, which I find absolutely fantastic. My own beloved football club, Sunderland, has built a new sensory room in the stadium for autistic fans, so something may now available to me that never had been before, that feeling of taking my son to a football match. I will probably wait until next season before I take advantage of that.

Another company leading the way is Manchester Airports Group. It now fast-tracks families with autistic children through the stressful environment of airport security. It has created videos and booklets that help prepare people for what to expect from their airport experience. Its thoughtfulness is literally helping to open up access to a much wider world for people with autism in Greater Manchester and beyond.

That brings me to my final point, which I will not quite have the time to go into. Greater Manchester is already performing well in the national NHS strategy for autism. My hope is that, with the devolution of health provision, we can make Greater Manchester the world’s first autism-friendly city region. I want to see more of our public spaces accessible to people with autism, more of our public servants empowered as autism champions and an ambitious strategy for education and employability. I want Greater Manchester to be a beacon of best practice for autism across the world. I hope that the Minister will share that ambition.

2.53 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on granting this debate, and the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing it and on being an autism champion. As a clinical psychologist I have worked with many people who have autistic spectrum disorder. I put on the record that it is a privilege to be a member of the all-party parliamentary group on autism and to be a co-sponsor of the debate.

Autistic spectrum disorder is a pervasive lifelong developmental disorder that affects people’s social interactions. It impacts on how people communicate with others, how they relate to people and how they experience the world around them. Being a professional is one thing, but the key lesson we must learn is that the greatest insights come from those who have autistic spectrum disorder and their families. We must listen very carefully to what they tell us.

We know that how we interact with individuals with ASD and their families can have a huge impact on their quality of life. Negative public reactions can encourage people and their families to avoid situations and social contact, leading to their becoming socially isolated and experiencing mental health difficulties.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The debate has covered a lot of the structural and supportive things that need to be done, but does it not also throw down the gauntlet to us about the need to change our view? We think of people with autism as finding it difficult to see the world as we see it. We actually need to see the world as they see it.

Dr Cameron: As usual, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We must focus not on the difficulties faced by those with autistic spectrum disorders but on their full potential, and we should have greater awareness of the world as they view it.

Research indicates that 66% of autistic people, and 68% of their families, have reported feeling socially isolated, and 70% of autistic individuals are reported to have mental health disorders such as anxiety or depression. Autistic adults have been reported to be nine times more likely to die from suicide. There is a clear need to address comorbidity, and particularly mental health difficulties.

One constituent who contacted me advised that the “Too Much Information” video and campaign, which must be commended, had resonated with her. Her eight-year-old daughter has autism, and she shared with me some of her personal experiences. Her daughter is extremely vulnerable and sensitive to everyday sights, sounds, touches and smells, which cause her anxiety, panic or obsessive worries and despair. She cannot cope with changes to her environment, and she is prone to becoming distressed in public. As a result, she has experienced negative community responses, including from school peers. Her reaction has been reluctance to go back to school, and withdrawal from her extracurricular activities. Sadly, that means that she is at risk of becoming further isolated, and it is clear from this story—such stories were common among those who contacted me—that we all need to do more in many areas.

I recently attended Milton Primary School in my constituency, where the lack of understanding about pupils with autism among peers and their parents was highlighted to me. The headteacher is now engaged in good work to increase understanding through planned awareness sessions, and I commend her on that fantastic local development. Again, that highlights how teacher training and awareness in schools is key.

As has been mentioned, we must raise awareness and understanding among employers to help support people with autism into employment. Having a job is about earning a living, but it also contributes to psychological wellbeing. It can provide people with a sense of belonging and purpose, and build confidence and self-esteem. The autism employment gap is even bigger than the general disability employment gap, and only 15% of autistic adults in the UK are in full-time work. The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services has reported that 26% of graduates on the autistic spectrum are unemployed. Mainstream employment programmes currently on offer are failing to capitalise on the potential

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

of those with autism. I urge the Minister to ensure appropriate support for people with autism, and for that to be covered by proposals in the disability and employment White Paper.

In 2011 the SNP Scottish Government launched the Scottish strategy for autism, and declared that autism is a national priority. That strategy attempts to improve diagnosis and assessment, and to create consistent service standards. It also helped to establish one-stop shops. We must continue to support that issue, and I offer my full co-operation and involvement with my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) to save our local one-stop shop.

We must all be champions of autism, and I ask the Minister to support an awareness campaign, promote training for teachers and local authority staff, tackle issues raised in the White Paper, ensure that more clinicians are trained, and consider waiting time guidelines. Society must not continue to fail people with autistic spectrum disorder, so let us do all that we can together to ensure that we succeed.

2.59 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be the final Back-Bench speaker in this fantastic debate. I have been here for the whole of it, and I particularly thank my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) for their amazingly personal speeches, which brought home to everybody what it is like being the parent of an autistic child. It would be remiss of me not to thank also the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) for securing the debate and for all her brilliant work. [Interruption.] She is indicating she wants me to get on, so I will.

I could not help but compare the incidence of autism to that of dementia. The figures are very similar: an estimated 800,000 people live with dementia in the UK, compared to an estimated 700,000 on the autistic spectrum. While I would not wish to play one off against the other, it is significant that the Government spend on autism awareness is £325,000, whereas the spend on dementia awareness, at £2.3 million, is significantly more—although campaigners would probably say it is not enough. I pay tribute to the National Autistic Society, which has done fantastic work to raise awareness of autism, and, like many hon. Members, I welcome the “Too Much Information” campaign.

Many Members have mentioned waiting times for diagnosis, which is a really important part of dealing with autism as it helps people to take control of their lives and to unlock barriers to essential support and services, and it enables families to better understand their child and to explain to them their many years of feeling different. We have talked about how long adults and children have to wait for a diagnosis. The NICE quality standard on autism is clear that, once referred, people should wait no longer than three months for their first diagnostic appointment, but that is clearly not being consistently met across the country. The NAS calls on the Government and NHS England to prioritise reducing waiting times for autism diagnoses, which

would also help the NHS to reach its own goals of preventing mental illness. Will the Minister task NHS England with monitoring diagnosis waiting times for each clinical commissioning group, in order to reduce health inequalities for autistic people in line with NHS England’s mandate?

I will touch on teacher training, although much of what I wanted to say has been said. The vast majority of autistic children—over 70%—are in mainstream education, meaning that every teacher is likely to have children with autism in their classes during their career. A constituent of mine, Julie Atkins, got in touch when she heard I was taking part in the debate. She said:

“My son attends mainstream secondary school...and although he has a certain level of good support, there are a number of teachers who do not ‘get him’. Every child on the spectrum is different and an hour’s ASD training does not give people the understanding they need. There is no rule book and more empathy and understanding of sensory issues would help teachers to understand why my son may be fine one day and not the next.”

I support the call for autism awareness training to be included in the new teacher training framework. The words of my constituent explain why it is necessary.

I was pleased to see the initiative at the Asda store in my neighbouring constituency of Blackley and Broughton. The store manager, Simon Lea, said he wanted to help, having seen a boy with autism struggling to cope in the shop. On Saturday 7 May, therefore, in order to help autistic and disabled shoppers, the store will open an hour early, with no electronic distractions, such as escalators, music and televisions, and the public address system will not be used for announcements. I might well go there myself.

3.4 pm

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing this debate. Like the hon. Members for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), I want to add the perspective of a parent of a child with autism.

My younger daughter, now in her 20s, is autistic, with associated learning and communication difficulties. I, too, went to the launch of the booklet, “Too Much Information”; it is excellent and I recognise much of what appears in it. There are two telling statistics on page 2: 87% of families living with autism say that people stare at their child’s autistic behaviour; and 74% say people tut and make disapproving noises. Over the years, I have experienced both of these. Like many parents, I developed a very thick skin. I know one parent who said that the worst thing for her was that people who she knew and spoke to regularly would ignore her when they met her and she was accompanied by her autistic son. How hurtful can that be?

One of my constituents, Karen, contacted me ahead of this debate and asked me to say something about her experience. This is what she said:

“I have two children with autism who find going out overwhelming. I have one that will try and hide while the other will shout, become aggressive or laugh hysterically. We are stared at by the public and comments are made regarding my ability to parent or that my children are spoiled. My eldest is becoming aware of these comments and this causes her psychological distress.”

Many parents will recognise that.

As parents we find different strategies to deal with our children's behaviour. It is often the unexpected that hits us. Our daughter was, and still is, fascinated by Disney cartoons. When she was younger, her favourite was "Cinderella", especially the mice that were Cinderella's friends, Jaq, Gus and Suzy. She has soft toys from the Disney store, and she carries them everywhere. We took her on holiday to Disneyland Paris. On the first day there, Cinderella was out and about, and we took her to meet her and her friends—but, of course, the mice she met were not the small characters she expected. They were bigger than her, and she simply could not cope with that—it was not what she expected. Like other families, we spent the rest of the holidays checking where the characters would be on each day—but they to go and meet them, us to discover ways and routes to avoid meeting them.

We face a similar problem every year with summer fairs, coffee mornings and similar events, now that so many have face painting for children. Our daughter simply cannot comprehend what is happening when children have their faces painted to look like a tiger, a cat or some other animal, and she will freak out if she sees it. We have to carefully avoid taking her to such events.

My daughter still loves her cartoons, particularly "Thomas the Tank Engine", which she watches on video so she can pause, rewind and watch repeatedly small sections that appeal to her. Frankly, after 20 years of this, I could cheerfully strangle the Fat Controller, but I also live in fear of the day when the video machine finally gives up the ghost, because such machines are not so easy to get hold of these days.

In many ways we are lucky: we live in a small town and most people know us; our daughter is well known in the local shops and particularly in the charity shops throughout Angus where she hunts for videos. She is accepted, and no one really bats an eyelid at her sometimes seemingly odd behaviour. In common with many autistic people, my daughter needs the comfort of routine. When we go shopping, we go round the shops in a specific order. It may not be a logical order to anyone else, but that is the order in which it must be done. If it is not, there will be trouble.

If we are going to do something different from our usual routine, we need to lay the groundwork well in advance, explain what we are doing, when we are doing it and why, and let our daughter think through it and mull it over for some time, discussing the implications with her. Sometimes we can manage to do that.

I am conscious of the fact that this may all sound a little depressing, but as with any child, there are joys as well as challenges. One of the things my daughter's school did was to take her to Riding for the Disabled—and she took to it like a duck to water. Neither I nor my wife had any background with horses, but our daughter was captivated and formed a real bond with the horse. It is quite incredible and joyful to see her on a horse, concentrating on what she is doing and on the direction of the instructor as she guides a horse around the course, making it trot and being very much in charge. I remember going up to the stable on one occasion to find her being given a frightening-looking instrument to hoick stones out of the hooves of a horse. My daughter was cheerfully doing that—something I would never have attempted.

I was a practising solicitor at the time, and my wife—rather ironically, perhaps—had been a teacher of children with special educational needs, yet we had difficulty in negotiating the system and securing education that was suitable for our daughter. We first had to obtain a record of needs, which, at that time, was a passport to the provision of the educational resources required. It sounds easy, but we faced the apparent reluctance of professionals to give a clear diagnosis of what was wrong with our daughter. That is an experience that many other Members have described. The education department involved said that a child should not be labelled; the cynic in me wonders whether that was because once a record of needs had been granted, the facilities would have to be put in place and costs incurred.

After that, we needed to find a suitable school. We looked at many before we found one that we felt understood the difficulties and offered a way forward. It was not within our local authority area, although it was close to our home, and we had to negotiate around that to ensure that funding was available. A deal was done, which required us to arrange transport to the school ourselves. That school made a great difference to our daughter. It was a small school attended by other children with special needs, and it had an excellent speech therapist. Our daughter flourished, and, as I said earlier, it was there that she got into horse-riding.

Are things better today? Yes, I think they are. Are they perfect? No, of course they are not: there is a huge amount still to be done. As some of my hon. Friends have pointed out, the Scottish Government have a strategy for autism, which is a real attempt to bring services together and ensure that autistic people are given the assistance that they need. That does not apply only in the public sector, but I should mention that in Arbroath we now have a fantastic community dentist. We had great difficulty in persuading anyone to look at our daughter's teeth, although not because it was thought that she might bite them if they tried! The community dentist, however, had been trained in providing dental care for autistic people. Our daughter was introduced to the dentist's surgery gradually: she was taken into the waiting room first, and was taken gradually onwards. The dentist managed to look at her teeth, and they were fine, which is just as well.

As I have said, however, the Scottish Government's strategy does not involve just the public sector. A few years ago Aberdeen airport introduced a similar scheme, allowing autistic people to visit the airport and become used to it before their first flight. Cinemas and theatres are now putting on special shows for autistic people: the sound is lowered and the lighting increased to make the experience easier. However, difficulties remain, and many other Members have spoken of them.

In my experience, the transition from education to life after education is very difficult. In many instances, there are not many facilities for autistic people. It can be very difficult, especially in rural areas, to find somewhere to move on to after school, and the future is uncertain when it comes to such matters as housing. At our age, our thoughts begin to turn to what will happen when we are gone. What housing and other help are available to people like my daughter, who will never be able to lead an independent life? All authorities must consider that growing problem.

[Mike Weir]

If there is one thing that I would ask of those who are watching the debate, or who will read the report of it, I would ask them to get hold of the National Autistic Society's excellent booklet. The next time they see a child being loud or inappropriate, or a parent having difficulty controlling a child, they should not assume that it is a case of bad parenting or bad behaviour, as my constituent Karen said. Something else may be going on, and it could well be autism.

3.13 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), and the other sponsors of the debate, on enabling the House to discuss the important issue of autism. Let me echo a remark that was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). We have heard many excellent speeches, but I am particularly grateful for the contributions of Members who have shared their experiences as parents of children with autism. That added greatly to our discussion.

I welcome one of the central calls in the motion, the call for an enhanced national awareness campaign. Raising the profile and public understanding of autism would break down some of the stigma, tackle the prejudices, and make it easier to explain autism to those who remain unaware of the realities of the condition. I pay tribute to the charities working in this field, including the National Autistic Society, Autistica, and Ambitious about Autism, which are fighting for people with autism and their families. They are campaigning for proper diagnosis, decent treatment, social acceptance and full, productive and dignified lives for people with autism. I also commend the many organisations, campaigns, towns and cities that are doing so much to raise awareness. There have been many contributors to the debate, but I have only eight minutes so I hope that hon. Members will forgive me if I do not mention them all.

The National Autistic Society has brought some important survey evidence to our attention. It has already been mentioned in the debate, but it is worth reiterating that although almost the entire population of this country has heard of autism, only 16% have any real understanding of the condition. That reveals a huge gulf between awareness and understanding, which is why a national campaign to develop better awareness of the realities of autism would be a welcome development. It should be led by, and involve fully, people with autism and their families, so that the campaign can be authentic and focus on the issues that really matter. Research by Ambitious about Autism has highlighted two specific audiences for such a campaign: teachers—40% of whom say that they lack the knowledge they need—and employers and jobcentres. While 99% of young people with autism say that they want to work, only 15% of adults with autism are in employment.

It is clear that people with autism and their families face terrible prejudice and stigma. The figures in the National Autistic Society survey show that too many people with autism and their families feel socially isolated or do not go out because they are worried about how the public will react to their autism. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) shared

the fact that people do not understand what a meltdown is. People are sometimes asked to leave a public space because of behaviour associated with their autism. This paints a picture of social isolation and daily humiliation. Autism is a condition in which people have difficulty interpreting the world around them, and that is compounded by the reactions and hostility of other people.

It is obvious that we are a long way from having public spaces that are safe for all people with autism. I welcome the fact that my own city, Liverpool, has started a bid to become one of the first autism-friendly cities, but we need to become an autism-friendly nation. [Interruption.] The Minister for Community and Social Care, mentions Manchester from a sedentary position, and I note the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) in that context. I hope that the Minister will address the issues of awareness, stigma and prejudice. I hope that he will also commit to supporting the Autism Access Award, to ensure that our public buildings and spaces are autism friendly. I am pleased that the House of Commons started work on this earlier in the year, and I hope that we can make progress to ensure that our workplace also becomes autism friendly.

Many hon. Members have mentioned the challenges relating to the Department of Health. Will the Minister tell us what efforts individual Departments and agencies beyond the Department of Health are making to support people with autism and which Departments and agencies have an up-to-date strategy for dealing with autism? What commitment will he make today to ensure that any that do not have such a strategy will adopt one?

The second substantive part of the motion relates to the length of time it takes to diagnose someone with autism. Many Members on both sides of the House have talked about this today. Autism requires an early diagnosis to enable individuals with autism and their families to be properly supported. As we have heard, however, adults are having to wait more than two years for a diagnosis, and for children, the figure now stands at 3.6 years. On my weekly visits across the country, I hear many of the stories that have been echoed in the Chamber today. In my own city, Liverpool, there are no fewer than 700 families waiting for an assessment. That is totally unacceptable; it is far too long. The long wait compounds the condition and makes a bad situation worse.

I have heard at first hand from the Liverpool Autistic Children's Alliance, a parent support group that meets in my constituency, the difficulties experienced while waiting for a diagnosis, particularly in relation to education. The parents talk about not getting an education, health and care plan and therefore having no access to training to help them to support their children. They also speak of challenges in accessing appropriate education. We have heard that the NICE quality standard on autism makes it clear that people should wait no longer than three months, once referred, for their first diagnostic appointment. That standard is clearly not being met across the country, meaning that thousands of people are being let down. Given the importance of prompt, accurate diagnosis, I hope that the Minister will commit to asking NHS England to report on autism diagnosis waiting times for every clinical commissioning group in

the country and then to hold them to account when the waits are too long. I hope that he will also ensure that NHS England's new autism care pathway includes and reduces those diagnostic waiting times.

Research presented by Autistica and drawn up by the London School of Economics shows that the costs associated with autism are more than those of cancer, heart disease and stroke combined. They are at least £32 billion a year and include expenditure on hospital services, home healthcare, special educational facilities and respite care and lost earnings for both people with autism and their parents. Despite the costs, the outcomes for people with autism remain so poor. We heard during the debate about co-morbidities, extremely high rates of mental illness, poor physical health, social exclusion, lack of opportunities for employment and education, and, tragically, early deaths. Several contributions discussed the amount spent on awareness, but research also has the power to improve all those poor outcomes. Research spending on autism remains incredibly low at just £3 million a year, which is paltry given the scale of the challenge.

As shadow mental health Minister, I am aware that mental illness is also a huge challenge for people with autism, who are far more likely to have at least one mental health condition. The burden of anxiety and depression on people with autism is vast, about which we heard many personal accounts during today's debate and which I hope the Minister will address in his remarks.

I will conclude on an important point about the fact that too many people with autism in our country are dying too young. The figures are startling. If we look at the research that was in the press only a few months ago, we see that people on the autistic spectrum die on average 18 years earlier than the general population. For autistic people with a learning disability, that figure rises to 30 years. That cannot be acceptable in this country in 2016. People with learning disabilities are at greater risk of suicide, and the most disturbing statistic is that the risk of people with autism committing suicide is nine times higher than that for the typical population, which is a scandal. I raise it during this debate because, as we have heard in some contributions, it is a particularly specific and pertinent issue that needs addressing, particularly in the light of the fact that suicide prevention organisations are not providing autism-appropriate services. From representations from many autism organisations, I know that phone lines for those who might be having suicidal thoughts are not appropriate for someone with autism. I hope that the Minister will address suicide prevention strategies and ensure that they are appropriate for people with autism.

I welcome today's debate and its many superb, thoughtful speeches. I hope that the families listening to our discussions will feel that we are addressing their many concerns. I look forward to the Minister's reply.

3.23 pm

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): It is just about 24 years since I first walked into Richmond House as Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the then Department of Social Security. In that time, I have had the privilege of being involved in many debates that belie the common view outside this place that we either know nothing about a subject or are not personally

involved and do not care. I would put this debate right up there with the very best that demonstrate that neither of those things is true.

We have heard remarkable speeches, including 25 Back-Bench contributions, which is a tribute both to colleagues and to the Chair. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) mentioned, it is impossible to cover everything, or even everyone's speech, as we normally do, but the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) and the hon. Members for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) and for Angus (Mike Weir) were particularly noteworthy in giving a sense of what things must be like. We are indebted to all of them for being able to say what they said in the way that they did.

I want to mention a couple of other speeches, such as that of the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). I am trying to do something about the fog, and I will mention that a little later, and many of us heard the moving and difficult story of the nine-year-old boy. The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) talked about the media response, and both the programme and the book he mentioned will make a significant contribution. I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for the way in which she brought the young man's case to me, and I assure her that it is not all done and dusted yet. Some very difficult aspects of that case worried me hugely, and we will be talking about it further. I made absolutely certain that the parents were involved in the case review, because, as she and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk said, all too often people are not involved and are somehow excluded, and that has got to stop. It is vital that people will be thoroughly engaged.

I wish to start by commending the Member who moved the motion—I cannot remember who that was now. [*Laughter.*] Let me add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing the debate and on the extraordinary work she has done over the years in this area. We really are all indebted to her. In a recent Adjournment debate, I recognised the need for a fuller discussion and mentioned that we could do with this debate, and I am grateful that we have had that opportunity today.

A number of hon. Members have highlighted the importance of recognising that autism is not a person's defining characteristic. Many colleagues, particularly those with children, made moving points about the qualities that autistic people have, and that is very important. In a couple of weeks' time, I am going to the Hitchin LEGO club, which was started by parents of a child whose particular skills related to detail and the bits and pieces the club does. I am looking forward to going to see that. It is important that we do not just define people in this way, and the changes we make every day to attitudes, services and facilities can mean the difference between ambition thwarted and opportunity fulfilled. The best campaigns, at least those intended for the benefit of the common good, are led not from the top or from some central point of government, but by people on the ground.

Autism awareness is being addressed directly by the National Autistic Society in its excellent new campaign, which was launched during world autism awareness

[Alistair Burt]

week and to which I gave my support. I went to see not only the little boy who is the subject of the film, but his family, because there are often siblings of those who have autism and they need to be cared for and valued as well. Sometimes issues can arise in that regard. It was nice to see the whole family and it is a remarkable piece of film. I also wish to highlight the work the Department of Health has taken forward with the Autism Alliance UK, a large network of autism charities, on the “Connect to Autism” project, which encourages local organisations, services and companies to become autism champions by training staff in autism awareness—there is a lot more to do.

I have no time to deal with all the subjects that have been raised, but in accordance with what has become my usual practice, because I seem to speak in vastly oversubscribed debates, I will pick out the questions that colleagues have raised and answer them by letter. If colleagues do not mind, I will answer them in the same letter and then put a copy in the Library, so that everybody will get a chance to see all the answers to the various questions that have been raised, which my hard-working team have noted. Let me just say a couple of things in answer on the key issues of what the Government are doing, and of diagnosis and data.

First, although it is easy sometimes to be overwhelmed by what there is still to do, it is important to recognise where we have come from—many Members made that point—and to realise what we are doing on a day-to-day basis. I commend to the House the “Progress Report on Think Autism: the updated strategy for adults with autism in England” which was published in January. I put that together along with the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), the Minister for Children and Families, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson) and the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who deals with prisons, probation, rehabilitation and sentencing. It sets out progress against 33 of the “Think Autism” actions and describes some of the work going on across government, because it absolutely involves education, employment and all sorts of other things. The report details case studies and it demonstrates what is being done in different places around the country.

Let me come straight to the challenge of diagnosis, which is so important to many Members. There is no doubt that, in some parts of the country, the demand placed on services—it is often the sheer weight of numbers—means that the NHS and its partners can struggle to meet the standards set out by NICE. The Department of Health’s mandate to NHS England for 2016-17 calls on the NHS to reduce health inequality for people with autism. Waiting too long for a diagnosis can be one of the health inequalities that autistic people face. The mandate has already got that, and it is very important that it relates to autism.

Clinical commissioning groups and NHS England are working to bring down the waits in line with NICE guidelines. What is happening right at this moment is that the Department of Health and NHS England, supported by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, have initiated a series of visits to CCGs

and local authorities. The visits aim to develop a better strategic oversight of the challenges in securing timely diagnosis across all ages and to share good practice. In essence, that means that we should look at the variability in diagnosis times and do something about it. Sometimes there is an issue of capacity. It is not a question of just pulling a lever and the waiting times will come down. For waiting times to make any sense, we must recognise the capacity to deal with them. NHS England is trying to understand the difference in variation in order to do something about it.

NHS England will complete its work this month and then report to the cross-Government Adult Autism Programme Board in June. That report and the discussion at the board will be made public. The Department of Health is also funding the University of York to report on the type of support that is available after a diagnosis.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) asked that NHS England should collect, publish and monitor key information on how long people are waiting for diagnosis and how many people are known to their GP to have autism. She said that waiting times standards on mental health, which are currently in development, should reflect national guidance that no one waits longer than three months between referral and being seen for diagnosis. I can assure Members that I am keen to ensure that we collect more data and that the data are made public. I am keen that the NHS collects what is known locally and finds a way in which we can use that nationally. New datasets have been put in place—I will say something about them in a minute—but it is important that we acquire more data. I have been made aware of that matter and I am trying to do something about it.

Norman Lamb *rose—*

Alistair Burt: I will take just this one intervention, because I am on a tight timetable.

Norman Lamb: Will the Minister consider setting a maximum waiting time standard of three months to enter diagnosis? We all know that once we set a standard, the system responds to it, and we need that for anything to change.

Alistair Burt: I do understand that, but, equally, the capacity has to be there to do the job. It is a fine balance. To set a waiting time limit as some sort of token, knowing that it cannot be reached, would not work. Equally, the pressure on the system through collecting data, asking for data, and seeking transparency has its effect as well. There is a real sense in the Department that we have to meet that challenge, and I am looking at what data can best be collected, what data need not be collected centrally, but can be handled locally, and how we make the difference and how that is transparent and made known.

The Department of Health does not set out how NHS England should monitor waiting times. How NHS England holds commissioners to account is for it to determine, though it will need to demonstrate effectiveness in meeting the mandate requirement through which we expect NHS England to strive to reduce the health gap between people with mental health problems, learning disabilities and autism and the population as a whole.

Even now, in the configuration of the NHS, the NHS does not directly report to me on this particular issue. I am really interested in how the NHS ensures that CCGs are doing their job, and I suspect that Members of the House are very interested, too. I can use that concern and interest and make sure that that monitoring job is done and that it is transparent.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned GPs. GPs already maintain a register of people with learning disabilities, which may include patients on their lists who also have autism where this has been diagnosed. As a number of Members mentioned, autism may not be the only condition that an individual may have.

The Royal College of General Practitioners' autism initiative, part-funded by my Department, is looking at the idea of an autism indicator in general practice. That work is at an early stage. I hope that is helpful to my right hon. Friend. As recommended by the independent Mental Health Taskforce, the Department of Health is developing a five-year plan for the development of mental health data, to be published by the end of this year. The plan will set out future data requirements and timings for developing data to inform pathways of care, which will include data requirements for autism. This will be of great interest to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree, and I will make sure that she keeps up to date with data, as she keeps me up to date with data requests.

This has been a terrific debate which has covered many different aspects. To sum up, autism should never be a barrier to enjoying the access and opportunity afforded to others. The National Autistic Society, the Autism Alliance, the all-party parliamentary group on autism and many other charities are doing great work, helping more of us realise that sometimes we are the barrier, beyond legislation. It is only through empathy and understanding that true progress can be made and sustained.

Finally, there are two quotes that everyone should take from this debate—first, “Everybody feels like it’s a fight.” I have heard that too often, as too many of us have. Everything the Department does must make that sense of fight a little easier, until no one needs to fight

because their needs are taken for granted. Secondly, “Think differently about thinking differently”—absolutely. That is what we should all do. I hope that that is a message from a very consensual House of Commons this afternoon.

3.36 pm

Mrs Gillan: The debate has had an instant effect. A green card was brought to me with the message, “Thank you so much, but please don’t let it just be kids, kids, kids. Don’t forget the older adults.”

This debate has brought out the best in Parliament and in parliamentarians across the board. There have been important contributions and some amazing personal testimony from Members who are clearly concerned about the subject and about what is happening to their constituents. There is no doubt that progress has been made, but the theme of the debate has been that there is not enough support and understanding. That has come across only too clearly.

I thank all the colleagues who have participated in the debate. I know that the Government are listening. I raised with a Cabinet Minister the lack of people on the autistic spectrum being put forward for public appointments. Yesterday I received a letter saying that he had asked the Centre for Public Appointments to work with Departments across Whitehall to improve diversity and the representation of autistic candidates. That means that people on the autism spectrum can achieve right to the top of our system.

I thank the Minister particularly for his assurances on data collection. I look forward to reading his letter, which he is placing in the Library for all of us. I thank him for the work that he has done but, more importantly, I thank him for the work that is yet to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that World Autism Awareness Week was held from 2 to 8 April; believes that there is a lack of understanding of the needs of autistic people and their families; and calls on the Government to improve diagnosis waiting time and support a public awareness campaign so that people can make the changes that will help the UK become autism-friendly.

HMRC: Building our Future Plan

3.38 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered HM Revenue and Customs' (HMRC) plan Building our Future which will close most of its offices and make substantial staffing reductions; is concerned that this could seriously compromise the ability of HMRC to collect tax, enforce compliance and close the tax gap; believes the plan should have been subjected to parliamentary scrutiny; and calls on the Government to ensure that Building our Future is suspended until a comprehensive consultation and review has been undertaken.

I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and to my position as chair of the PCS—Public and Commercial Services Union—parliamentary group and as an active trade unionist. I thank fellow Members from all parties represented in this House for their support in securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Before I move on to the substance of the debate, I hope I may be allowed to wish Calvin Thomas well on his last day of work in this place. Calvin arrived in the House in 1989, becoming a Doorkeeper in 2000, with nine years in the Members Lobby and seven years in the Special Lobby. I know that many of my colleagues are grateful for all the help that he has given us and our family members and guests over the years, and we wish him well as he returns to his beloved island of St Helena. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

On 12 November 2015 Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs published departmental plans for the future structure of HMRC, entitled "Building our Future". It is important to note that the plans were issued by the Department, rather than via a ministerial statement. That is unsatisfactory, given their impact, which includes the closure of 90% of the office network and thousands of staffing reductions.

In 2005, HMRC employed approximately 105,000 staff; in 2016, the figure stands at approximately 58,000—an almost 50% reduction. The Building our Future plan seeks to close almost all the 160-plus HMRC offices and to move to 13 regional hubs and four specialist sites. It seeks to make further job cuts to bring the headcount down by 8,000, to 50,000, although some information suggests the intention is to reduce staffing levels to 41,000.

The timeline for the proposals is in two phases: in the first phase, HMRC proposes that 21 offices are to be vacated up to March 2017; in the second phase, 27 office closures are to take place between June 2017 and March 2018. HMRC will in future be based at 13 large offices and four specialist sites, where 95% of the staff who remain after the cuts will work.

On 16 February, HMRC issued compulsory redundancy notices to 152 members of staff, 70% of whom are members of the Public and Commercial Services Union. That is the biggest number of compulsory notices issued in a single instance by any UK civil service department.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): My hon. Friend will be aware that 11 of the compulsory redundancy notices have been imposed on constituents of mine who work

at the Glenrothes HMRC office, which is scheduled to close in June. When the closure was announced, staff got the same assurances that are being given to current members of staff, but the PCS told me that, in practice, their members—many of whom had given 30 or 40 years of dedicated service to the public—were made to feel they just did not matter. Part-time workers were asked to accept relocations that would have meant they spent longer commuting than at work. Employees with care commitments were expected to work more than two hours away from their home, where they might be called to an emergency. It was even claimed that the distance they were told they would have to travel between Glenrothes and Edinburgh was based on a straight line, but it was impossible for them to take that route unless they swam across the firth of Forth. Has my hon. Friend any reason to believe that employees who are currently being threatened with redeployment or redundancy will be treated any better than my constituents have been?

Chris Stephens: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention—[*Interruption.*] Well, we will call it an intervention. He is right to be concerned about some of the practices we are hearing about from trade union members and staff members based in HMRC. People are being called into one-to-one meetings where they are denied trade union representation. If an employee is having a meeting with a manager to discuss their job prospects, I would expect the trade unions to have access to that meeting, but they do not. Perhaps the Minister can deal with that. I will come later to the issue of travel times.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is my understanding from my experience as a trade union rep that it is compulsory to consult the trade unions when redundancies are announced, and that members of staff are entitled to have representation.

Chris Stephens: That is also my experience from when I was a trade union rep. We need to clarify that point, and I hope the Minister will do that.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that some people are receiving redundancy notices by email—not even face to face?

Chris Stephens: That is an interesting point, given that we had a debate yesterday about e-balloting and trade unions' right to access email for a ballot. It seems it is okay to issue a compulsory redundancy notice by electronic means. Perhaps the Government will take that into account when they discuss the Trade Union Bill.

We believe that HMRC and the Government want to send a signal using the 152 staff facing compulsory redundancy to demonstrate exactly how they will go about the mass office closure arising from the Building our Future plan. We find this to be unacceptable and not acting in good faith.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend and others on securing this debate. Does he share my concern that a number of the arguments we were given in 2014 for Scotland remaining in the Union are beginning to unravel? We were told that

separation shuts shipyards; that our heavy industry, such as the steel industry, would be at risk; and that a major benefit of the Union was having the civil service employees in the United Kingdom and Scotland. Now it seems that the case is unravelling on all those points.

Chris Stephens: My hon. Friend raises a fair point in that some workforces were told that offices would close if they voted for independence. To be fair, in my experience, workers in the shipyards and at HMRC came to an individual choice on the referendum. I do not think those scare stories were necessarily accepted by many parts of the workforce. However, again we hear the use of rhetoric around the constitution to say that places will close. We will find that it is not an independent Scotland that is closing those offices but a Tory Government.

In preparing for this debate, I came across a debate on the then Inland Revenue from over 30 years ago in the other place. A contribution by Baron Houghton of Sowerby, a former Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee and chair of the Inland Revenue Staff Association, stood out:

“the human factor is the ultimate right...and there is no substitute for it. No computers will deal with taxpayers who require consideration and attention, and to whom some measure of discretion or of consideration may be due.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 July 1983; Vol. 443, c. 1199.]

Those words are as appropriate today as they were in 1983. They seem to me to be part of an ethos that all of us, across parties, should endorse as a cornerstone of public services. Sadly, those behind HMRC’s Building our Future plan are taking the wrecking ball to those foundations and not just demolishing the future of HMRC’s buildings but hammering the staff, the taxpayer, and the public. If they are allowed to proceed, towns and cities across these isles will be at the forefront of yet more ideological austerity. Hard-working and conscientious staff will once again be expected to clean up the mess, and taxpayers will foot the bill for the short-sightedness and short-termism of successive governments and Treasury Ministers. HMRC is not building a future—it is destroying it.

Fifteen years ago, the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise combined had 701 offices across the country. Today we are being asked to accept that the 13 centres proposed by HMRC can possibly replicate that kind of coverage. Is there anyone who believes that the citizens of Penrith can better be served by a “super-centre” in Manchester, compared with Carlisle; those in Portlethen served better from Edinburgh than Aberdeen; or the people of Penzance served better from Bristol than Redruth? We are asked to believe that the best interests of the taxpayer and of society are met in a system that has staff in Glasgow travel halfway to Golspie to meet clients who have travelled halfway from Golspie to Glasgow, sitting down at some “neutral location” to discuss an individual’s sensitive and confidential tax affairs. I am told that one of these neutral locations is what can only be described as a hut in a public park. I am told—if I had not heard this with my own ears, I would not have believed it—that HMRC staff are advised to take a warm jumper and a bag of grit to these meetings during winter.

In truth, a look at the latest staff satisfaction survey from HMRC unfortunately makes this all too easy to believe. It would make some informative bedtime reading for those behind this closure programme. Fully 2% of staff strongly agree with the statements “I feel change is managed well in HMRC” and “When changes are made in HMRC they are usually for the better”, while 6% strongly agree that “I would recommend HMRC as a great place to work”, and 3% strongly agree that “HMRC as a whole is managed well”. On measure after measure, time after time, staff at HMRC are shown to be demoralised, demotivated, and depressed.

What other outcome in staff morale could result from the shuttering of office after office around the country? How enthused would anyone be knowing that, in a matter of months, their workplace is to be closed and that they and their friends and colleagues are to be relocated miles away? I suspect that if those behind this scheme were to be told tomorrow that their palatial offices were to be shuffled off from London to Norwich, Peterborough or Harwich—a journey that staff in these offices will be expected to do in reverse from next year—a murmur or two of discontent may well escape from their lips. Staff are entitled to ask exactly why a Government who invent catchphrase after catchphrase on regional policy—from the northern powerhouse to the midlands engine—are intent on such a centralising agenda. They may well ask why they are being shunted into sidings, rather than providing an express service to their communities.

I am sure that colleagues will touch later on the impact the closures will have on their constituencies, so I will not dwell too long on the specific towns and cities that will be hit, or on how hard they will be hit.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the loss of service will not only be geographic? Specific services are being abandoned. For example, HMRC has recently announced the abandonment of its valuation check service for small and medium-sized enterprises, thus completely compromising employee share ownership schemes.

Chris Stephens: I am aware of that and I hope to touch on it later. I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention.

Middlesbrough has the third highest unemployment rate in England, and nearly 3,000 people are already on the dole in Bootle, while Derry has the highest unemployment rate of any constituency. To see those places on a list guaranteed to create job losses at HMRC and in the wider community is to see a plan that will, in the words of the Public and Commercial Services Union, “consciously increase unemployment in areas which are already employment blackspots.”

I suspect that the word “Mapeley” will come up in the course of this debate, so let me touch on it. I referred earlier to the more than 700 offices formerly used by HMRC. Mapeley Estates snapped up more than 130 of them for its offshore property portfolio after loading itself up with debt in order to front up its side of this rotten charade with the then Government: 84% of the funding that Mapeley obtained to acquire that lucrative contract came in the form of loans. That shabby deal with a shabby company comes to an end in 2021. For the privilege of renting publicly built offices sold off for a song, HMRC will have the

“right to occupy buildings, with leases based on market terms” after that date. That is very generous of Mapeley.

[Chris Stephens]

I commend the National Audit Office on its 2009 report on the deal. It is redolent with phrases such as, “the Department has not achieved value for money... The Department did not fully appreciate the risks... The Department has not had strong processes to monitor the overall cost of the contract and whether it is achieving value for money”.

The Exchequer Secretary admitted to this House last year that the end life of the Mapeley contracts represented a

“one-off opportunity to make this change to the estate footprint.”—*[Official Report, 24 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1300.]*

That is part of the truth behind the closures—a private finance initiative deal worth billions from the public purse, used to enrich a Bermuda-domiciled corporate entity, with the public left with nothing at the end of 20 years, except the right to sign a commercial lease.

I will end with the words of a PCS member and HMRC employee, my constituent Bobby Young, who is chair of the PCS Revenue and Customs branch:

“Whilst my branch welcomes the news of a slight increase of jobs in Glasgow, we absolutely oppose it if it comes at the cost of jobs elsewhere. Communities from Bathgate to Bootle will be devastated by these closures—that is not a price worth paying for the sake of a few extra jobs in Glasgow.”

If anyone should know about prices, it is an employee of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. Sadly, it seems that their superiors know very little about value.

3.54 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Could I just suggest that we try to aim for between five and six minutes, in order to give everybody the same amount of time?

Valerie Vaz: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I assume that that was an intervention, so I will get an extra minute! I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this Backbench Business debate, and, of course, the Backbench Business Committee.

This is an important debate. The Government can raise money in three ways: create it, borrow it or raise taxes. The main purpose of HMRC, the subject of the debate, is to collect taxes. That enables the Government to take back what they have spent on public services. I want to focus on whether HMRC works, where it is going and what can be done to change it to make it more accountable.

The governance arrangements are quite bizarre, for a democracy. Given HMRC’s importance in collecting taxes, the fact that it is a non-ministerial Department is incongruous. There is no Minister to hold to account on behalf of the people for whom it ostensibly works. It is governed by a board, on which four out of five non-execs are from big business. There is no representation from pay-as-you-earn taxpayers, of which there are 31 million, or even from small businesses. There appears to be no accountability and no acting in the public interest. That needs to change.

From the Occupy movement at St Paul’s in 2011 to the Panama papers, the public are becoming more aware of what happens to the tax people pay—or, in

fact, do not pay. They are becoming more aware of the fact that after a few lunches, large corporations can get the light-touch treatment. Google paid the equivalent of 3% in corporation tax. In 2011, Starbucks paid no corporation tax. Mr Deputy Speaker, I do not know whether you know the joke about people who wanted to raise awareness about the fact that Starbucks was not paying tax. They would go in, ask for a coffee and say that their name was “no tax”, so that the barista who came back with their coffee would call out, “Coffee for no tax!” That has had a huge effect on making people aware that Starbucks was not paying any money.

It has been pointed out by the *International Business Times* that Shell, British American Tobacco, Lloyds banking group and Vodafone all paid nothing in corporation tax. You will remember, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the former head, David Hartnett, had 10 lunches with KPMG, and it had its tax liability reduced. It even has a non-executive representative on the board.

Where is HMRC going now? As the hon. Member for Glasgow South West suggested, the document is called “Building our Future”, but its subtitle should be “Tearing it down”. I concur with him. The future of the country really depends on the amount of tax that is put back into the economy in Britain. Instead of investing in people who have skills, expertise, a commitment to public service and institutional memory, HMRC is reducing that capacity. In 2005, it had 105,000 members of staff, but in 2016 it has only 58,000. That is a reduction of nearly 50%.

HMRC is closing 170 offices, presumably to sell off the public estate to developers, and replacing them with 13 regional tax centres; actually, they are call centres. It plans to save £100 million, but it could recoup that if it closed the tax gap. I do not know whether you know this, Mr Deputy Speaker, but the tax gap is the difference between the tax owed and the tax collected. In 2013-14, it amounted to about £34 billion, and I think the current figure is about £25 billion. That is a lot of money.

Since 2010, only 11 people have been prosecuted by HMRC, despite the fact that it was given a list of 3,600 British people who hid their money in Switzerland. Revenue and Customs has not quite worked out that if it has more staff, it can collect more tax; and that the more people it employs, the more tax they pay and contribute to the economy. No wonder the wealthy—the 1%—are laughing all the way to the Cayman Islands.

The closure of the offices is having a direct impact on my constituency. Walsall faces the closure of its HMRC office, with the loss of 60 staff. My constituent Sahin Kathawala has said that she may not even qualify for one of the relocated jobs. If they are lucky, staff will have to go to Birmingham, where rents are higher so it will be more expensive to live there. It will be more expensive for staff to travel to Birmingham, so they will incur certain costs. My local people in Walsall South will have to telephone a call centre, rather than being lucky enough to have face-to-face contact like that between Dave Hartnett and KPMG. The Public Accounts Committee said in 2013 that the telephone services were absolutely abysmal, and *The Telegraph* reported that half of all calls to HMRC were not answered. The impact of that could be millions of people paying the wrong amount of tax.

This week in Walsall, we have had the news that BHS might close, and who knows what will happen to our local BHS. With the closure of the HMRC office, nearly £1 million will be lost from the local economy, which Walsall cannot afford to lose.

PCS says that the plan is designed not to maximise tax collection, but to reduce spending, which is the opposite of what HMRC's main objective should be. What can be done? I do not know if you have read "The Joy of Tax" by Richard Murphy, Mr Deputy Speaker, but it is very much worth reading. I think it should be required reading for everyone, including sixth-formers. In his books on making economics easy, which we should all read, Ha-Joon Chang says that people do not need to be economists to understand economics. Richard Murphy has said that HMRC should become a Government Department in its own right, subject to proper parliamentary scrutiny and to independent review.

We need to retain our local tax offices with local staff who have information about the local economy; stop the relocation until an equality impact assessment has been done; and invest in more staff. HMRC must reduce the tax gap, not the workforce. In that way, we can stop the outflow of capital and give back to the public purse all it is owed. After all, it is the Government who put in the investment in education, skills and infrastructure that enable communities, companies and the workforce to thrive.

4.1 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for bringing forward this debate. The issue of tax avoidance has obviously been highlighted in the House by the recent publicity over the Panama papers. It is beyond doubt that powerful individuals in the UK have been shamefully implicated in those documents. These people want to keep their offshore tax affairs a secret. Let us be quite clear: both rich individuals and organisations are using trusts and shell companies in places such as Panama and the British Virgin Islands for one purpose and one purpose only—they hide their financial assets from the tax authorities of the countries where they actually live and do business. It then becomes extremely difficult or, indeed, even impossible for tax collection agencies such as HMRC to collect accurate levels of tax on their wealth.

To be effective, HMRC requires the recruitment, training and retention of skilled and experienced tax professionals. They are the very people who make sure that the Government have enough money to pay for schools, hospitals and pensions. It is in this context that the current misguided reorganisation of HMRC needs to be understood.

Since the Government came to power in 2010, they have invested vastly greater resources in pursuing benefit fraud than in going after the real villains—those who funnel billions of pounds out of our country. Figures show that 10 times more Government inspectors are employed to investigate benefit misuse by the poorest in society than to deal with tax evasion by the wealthiest. The Public Accounts Committee report on tax fraud stated that a meagre 35 wealthy individuals are investigated for tax fraud each year. To put that in perspective, it is only slightly more than the number of Government

Members who could be bothered to turn up in the Chamber today. HMRC does not even know how many of these individuals are actually prosecuted. We need to put that in the context of the fact that this country still presides over a tax gap of £34 billion, which we should move urgently to close.

I recently discovered that the ownership of the leases of HMRC offices—this has already been mentioned by my hon. Friend—was transferred to a company called Mapeley in 2001. You could not make this up, Mr Deputy Speaker. Where is Mapeley based? In the Bahamas. That is right: HMRC pays rent to a company registered in a tax haven. To quote the chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, this Government have scored a "massive own goal". Who stands to profit from the sales of HMRC local offices? You guessed it: Mapeley again. Why not use local council offices that may be available, and then any profits from the rents would go straight to the Treasury?

The UK Government intend to close 137 local HMRC offices across the UK. Two of them, Sidlaw House and Caledonian House, are in my Dundee constituency, where almost 800 staff are employed. This is of course driven by the Government's austerity obsession, which means that the budgets for Departments and public bodies have suffered swingeing cuts. The Chancellor boasts of having increased the funding for HMRC, but it does not even come close to restoring the cuts he made in 2010. At this moment, about half as many people work for HMRC as did in 2005.

I have spoken in this Chamber before about HMRC and have tabled a number of questions, only to receive evasive and unhelpful answers. Employees, some of whom have more than 30 years' skill and experience—decades of loyal service—are being abandoned by an organisation to which they dedicated their whole careers. At Caledonian House in Dundee alone, there are 10 couples working under the same roof. Those 10 couples could see their entire income disappear overnight. The proposals are set to destroy families' lives.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Offices in my constituency are going to be moved to Edinburgh, as are many others in West Lothian. I am sure he will share my concern that the number of redundancies in February was the biggest ever across the civil service, and that carers and people with disabilities are being disproportionately affected by those compulsory redundancies. We should be doing all we can to support them and stand up for their jobs.

Chris Law: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. At a time when this is still in consultation, the forced redundancies coming through are an absolute shame and embarrassment for all of us in this House.

Relocating HMRC to regional centres in Glasgow and Edinburgh will mean not only job losses in Dundee, but a loss of boots on the ground, and will diminish the capacity for public contact anywhere north. For example, Aberdeen has paid more than £300 billion from its oil resources into this Government, yet there is not going to be an HMRC office there, and the largest growing city in Europe, Inverness, will not have any representation—not to mention the rural areas in between. It is essential for HMRC to offer its clients access to skilled,

[Chris Law]

trained staff based in the local area. Speaking from previous business experience, I know what a struggle it can be getting through to HMRC on the phone; what sort of business will we come to expect? I have to share a story I have heard just in the past 10 minutes: one of my colleagues has tried eight times to pay a bill that is due and still cannot get through.

No one in their right mind would argue that it would make sense to have just two huge hospitals in Scotland, one in Edinburgh and one in Glasgow. If the NHS can maintain internationally recognised standards of service in thousands of clinics and hospitals around the country, surely it is possible for HMRC to do the same in a network of fewer than 200 local offices.

To return to my earlier point, the Panama papers have dramatically drawn attention to a fact that has been emphasised over and over again in this House, by colleagues from all parties, namely that sufficient resources need to be dedicated to HMRC so that it can scrutinise sources of income to ensure that the tax due is paid. It is clear that to do this we need HMRC offices all over the UK, staffed by experienced tax officers with local knowledge. No one would ridicule the Government for making a U-turn on HMRC's Building our Future plan.

HMRC has the potential to become a paradigm of self-sufficiency, a public service that pays for itself. That idea is certainly less far-fetched and counter-intuitive than the measures currently set to be put in place, which are designed to boost, yet again, the income of companies based in offshore tax havens.

4.8 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for bringing this issue before us today.

For my constituency of Bootle these proposals are little short of disastrous—although I do not think they are proposals, as I fear that the Government have already made up their mind. At the same time, they have simply washed their hands of the matter, on the grounds that the reorganisation of HMRC has nothing to do with them. They want us to believe that HMRC is a sort of offshore haven, outside the Government's control. I know that HMRC collects taxes on their behalf, but that is stretching the notion of a tax haven just a bit too far even for this Government.

Not only are the Government completely uninterested in what they cannot control, but they now seem to be in the business of being uninterested in what they can. They have put up a firewall between themselves and any decisions about the reorganisation, on the grounds that it is not a matter for them to interfere with. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) alluded to that. The Government believe that the HMRC board should be allowed to get on with things, unbridled by any political considerations that it might fall foul of. To put it another way, the Government have reached for the Treasury's bargepole and are pushing this issue away from themselves.

Peter Grant: Does the hon. Gentleman agree it is extremely ironic that at the same time as the Government want to maintain an arm's-length relationship between

the client and HMRC, the relationship between HMRC and big businesses—including big, tax-dodging advisory businesses—is at a very short arm's length?

Peter Dowd: The hon. Gentleman's point is spot on, and in future we must try forensically to consider those connections.

I previously used the word "pusillanimous" to describe the Government's past actions, and given the circumstances I thought that was a reasonable way of describing their approach to this issue. This issue affects the lives of thousands of dedicated civil servants up and down the country, but the Government's claim that it has nothing to do with them rings hollow. On one hand the Government feel that the operation and reorganisation of HMRC is its business, and that they should not interfere as a matter of principle—in other words, senior civil servants and the board can just get on and do what they want, and the Government will remain silent. That is disingenuous at the very least. In short, the Government are ducking their responsibilities again.

On the other hand, like a medieval baron, the Government want to interfere in all sorts of matters that take their fancy. Only yesterday they decided that their attempts to interfere in the running of trade unions was a mistake, which led to a retreat to save the Prime Minister's bacon and get trade union support in the referendum. The Government also feel able to interfere in the organisation of schools, how they are run, and who will or will not run them at a very local level—almost school by school. However, on a major issue to do with tax raising revenue in this country, they are silent because that is for someone else to deal with. That is not acceptable. The "nothing to do with us" old chestnut will not wash.

These proposals directly affect my constituency. HMRC has been sited in Bootle since the 1960s. There are a number of offices, with other Departments in situ employing more than 3,000 staff. That number is falling day by day. In 2005, HMRC employed 105,000 members of staff, but that number continues to fall. The so-called Building Our Future programme—a misnomer if ever there was one—seeks to close almost 160 HMRC offices and relocate them. A more accurate description would be "Demolishing our Future".

Apparently, HMRC has criteria by which it chooses which offices are to close, but no account is taken of the impact of those closures on local communities like mine, which have thousands of jobs dependent on the service, the wider impact on the community's social cohesion, or the effect on the many local businesses that serve those offices. I had a meeting with senior HMRC staff, for which I thank them. However, the criteria that they indicated had been used to inform the closure decisions did not on the whole stand up to much scrutiny for the offices in my constituency.

Let me give some examples. The HMRC staff talked about transport links needing to be available and robust. The Bootle office is three miles from Liverpool city centre where the new office is to be sited—I am not sure whether that site is even available yet. Bootle has excellent bus links across the city region. Indeed, there is a main bus interchange literally 200 yards from one of the main offices, and just a few hundred yards from another one. Both main sites are similarly close to five stations on the Northern and Ormskirk lines. Those stations have excellent

cross-city region links, and are no more than 10 to 15 minutes ride from Lime Street station in the city centre, where apparently the office is to go. We are close to the city centre, yet the Government are saying that transport links are essential and therefore the office must be in the city centre.

No discussions have been held with the passenger transport authority in Merseyside, or with the Cheshire or Welsh transport authorities. I mention the Cheshire and Welsh authorities simply because if a substantial part of the decision is based on transport links—among other things that I do not have time to touch on now—the fact that we have not even discussed those links with the area's transport authorities throws into doubt the robustness of the plan. Consultants were paid a huge amount for this plan, and we should get our money back from them because they pinched it from the taxpayer.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. With three speakers left, if Members stick to exactly five minutes each, we will get everybody in.

4.15 pm

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I will certainly stick to five minutes, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this debate. I heard the intervention from his colleague, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), about Scottish independence. He will forgive me if I do not agree with him, but that is a debate for another day.

It is difficult to follow the logic of the Government's decision to close HMRC offices. In Northern Ireland, six offices are to close and everything is to be centralised in one office in Belfast. The office in my constituency is in Enniskillen. To anyone who thinks that people could easily relocate to Belfast from Enniskillen or surrounding areas, I point out that it is at least an 80-mile journey—in some cases, a 100-mile journey—to the office in Belfast. It is impractical, even impossible, for relocation.

I cannot follow the logic, particularly given that Northern Ireland is the one area of the UK with a land border with another EU state. HMRC is vital, especially in places such as Northern Ireland, where the smuggling of illegal fuel is a huge business. That major issue cannot be dealt with from just one office. We have to look at this in a more practical and sensible way. The end result of the closures will be a loss of jobs and services to the community. HMRC, not the Police Service of Northern Ireland, has the lead in dealing with smuggled and laundered fuel in Northern Ireland. How will it do that away from the border areas it is supposed to work in?

Another significant impact will be the loss of help desks—some offices have already lost them. It is a major blow to communities. I will cite one example, around foster and kinship carers, who now must register as self-employed. These people, providing a vital service to our community, do not want to be tied up with form filling and filling in tax returns every year. They might have to pay an accountant. Apologies to any accountants here but I do not have to tell Members the prices they charge. These people do not need that. Yes, the service is available online, but not everyone can use it online.

We hear about the telephone help desk. The Minister tells me that HMRC's telephone communication service is an increasing choice for inquiries. Well, why would it not be, if it is the only choice? He also tells me that HMRC is improving the telephone service and that it now answers 80% of calls. What happened to the other 20%? He also tells me that the average queue time is 12 minutes, so I guess that some people wait 20 minutes, and probably some of them hang up. If that is the best we can do, for a front-line service, it is extremely poor and makes the argument, which I and my colleagues are making, that we should keep the offices and the front-line desks to help and support the community.

4.19 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and others on securing this debate. I am proud to have added my name to the motion.

HMRC has been dismantling its services in Wales for over 15 years. Where there were previously 21 tax offices in towns and cities across the country, it is now proposed there only be one, in south-east Wales.

HMRC's Porthmadog office in my constituency is one of those threatened by the latest round of closures. This is the home of the Tax Office's Welsh language unit and of needs enhanced service staff. It is well placed to attract and retain fluent Welsh-speaking staff, and offers a naturally Welsh-speaking workplace. Needs enhanced service staff, by the nature of their work, have to be close to the clients whom they need to visit in their own homes. This service and, of course, the Welsh language unit serves the region of Wales where demand for Welsh language services is at its highest.

As one of the users, I would urge every Welsh speaker, even those who lack confidence to use the language to discuss financial matters, to take advantage of these services, because English words can always be dropped in as well. This is good not only for the good of the language, but particularly because the Porthmadog staff are excellent at their job.

Beyond Porthmadog's limited Welsh language remit, HMRC's commitment falls far short of the statutory requirement to treat the Welsh and English languages as equal when providing public services in Wales, particularly as regards the opportunity for businesses and charities such as chapels to have access to services in Welsh, as is their right. To be honest, the proposal that the service can be maintained just as well in Cardiff needs to be questioned. The county of Gwynedd is home to 77,000 Welsh speakers, 65.4% of the county's population. Cardiff has fewer than half that number of Welsh speakers and, of course, is a capital city where those speakers are not so concentrated. HMRC is intent on moving the service from a rural region where Welsh is the language of everyday life and civic administration, to an urban centre, 150 miles and over four hours' drive away—about as far from the great majority of its Welsh-speaking users as it would be physically possible to go and still be in Wales.

If the Porthmadog office building itself—Mapeley's Ty Moelwyn, I might add—is the problem, I would strongly urge the Government to look at alternative sites in that area and to urge HMRC to do the same.

[Liz Saville Roberts]

I have corresponded with the Financial Secretary on a number of occasions, requesting that this be done. Porthmadog county councillor Selwyn Griffiths and Town Councillor Alwyn Gruffydd have met the Under-Secretary for Wales, following a public meeting and petition earlier this year. Discussions have been held with HMRC's regional implementation lead officer, and I am—I hope—right to be quietly optimistic.

The DWP office in the same town is perfectly suitable to house the Porthmadog HMRC staff, as is the Gwynedd Council-owned canolfan galw Gwynedd, nearby in Minffordd. Both these offices are excellent Welsh-language workplaces, ideally placed to attract and retain experienced Welsh-speakers in the area where Welsh is both a community and professional language. This is an important point. Although Cardiff might look like an ideal centre for Wales, if we want to keep good staff, who are used to working in the Welsh medium and want to work in Welsh-speaking workplaces, this is the ideal place to locate and keep them. Simply closing these offices will also be a body blow to plans to devolve tax powers to Wales.

On the one hand, the Tory Government extol the virtue of Wales taking more control over our taxes—something that Plaid Cymru, of course, warmly welcomes, as we have done for years—yet on the other hand, the means of administering these powers is being systematically reduced. The level of reorganisation proposed should be subject to proper public and parliamentary scrutiny at the UK level, and I welcome today's debate, but there are specific issues unique to Wales that must be addressed before any final decisions are reached.

First, we must recognise that increasing Wales's fiscal powers will require increasing staff capacity, as opposed to moving jobs across the border and centralising down in south-east Wales. Secondly, an independent economic assessment of the impact of moving HMRC's Welsh language unit and needs enhanced service jobs from Porthmadog to Cardiff must be undertaken. Thirdly, HMRC must work with the Welsh Language Commissioner to undertake a language assessment of the impact of moving these jobs from a Welsh-speaking community in terms of their effect on the rights of Welsh-speaking taxpayers and Welsh-speaking staff. Finally and most importantly, HMRC officers must consider alternative locations in the Porthmadog area, including co-location with Gwynedd Council or the Department for Work and Pensions, in order to agree a cost-effective solution to retain jobs in the area.

I urge the Government to commit to reconsidering the impact of HMRC proposals on their services in Wales, their services to Welsh speakers, their services to the nation as a whole in the light of the devolution agenda and the significance of well-paid public sector jobs to a low-wage economy such as Dwyfor Meirionnydd.

4.24 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing the debate, and to the Backbench Business Committee for making him such a success.

My constituency is home to one of Scotland's best-known tax offices, Centre 1. My home town of East Kilbride is synonymous with personal tax affairs, which, indeed, are part of its identity. My own grandmother worked for the tax office there 30 years ago. HMRC is a major employer, and the movement of thousands of jobs from my town would be a massive blow to the local economy. The announcement of the planned closures of three sites has created anxiety and uncertainty. Only last month it was announced that the archive site at Hawbank Road would close by 2017; the Plaza Tower is to close by 2021, and Centre 1 by 2026.

The closure of the Hawbank Road site is particularly distressing given the timing of the announcement, and there are also real fears that the process of closures may be speeded up if lease terms cannot be agreed at what will be the last remaining site in East Kilbride in 2026. Despite reassurances from the Government, I have not been kept up to date on the status of the lease negotiations, and, again, I ask the Minister for that information.

Staff members to whom I have spoken have voiced their concern about the closures. They worry about the impact of a further staffing reductions on their ability to do their jobs well. They worry about having to travel to a new, unknown site, and about the difficulty of finding suitable childcare, given increased time away from home. They are significantly concerned about the lack of consultation, and about the effect of the proposed changes in the civil service compensation scheme if they lose their jobs. Thousands of those people both live and work in East Kilbride. They are integral to our economy—they spend money in local shops during their lunch breaks and after work—and their families are part of our community. If we are to promote economic growth in my constituency, we need to encourage companies and services to move to East Kilbride, not to leave it. "East Kilbride, here for business" is one of my main mottos. The Government must understand that if the site is closed, our local economy will be at real risk.

A few weeks ago, I asked the Secretary of State for Scotland to conduct an impact assessment of the closures. He assured me that no action would be taken without full consultation of all those involved, but that does little to allay the fears of those who will be affected, or to give any hope that the areas that will lose such vast work forces will be supported. What we require is a full impact assessment.

The staff at HMRC are specialists in their field and take pride in their roles, but decisions such as these have a detrimental impact on morale. They create staff stress and anxiety. HMRC staff should be supported so that they can do the vital work of ensuring that tax income is maximised to pay for our essential public services, rather than being left to worry about their jobs and their future while plans are put together that jeopardise their ability to do their jobs well.

HMRC's Building our Future plan seeks to uproot staff from their established bases and communities, and to centralise them in the already well-equipped population centres around the country. The plan has been subjected to no robust parliamentary scrutiny or comprehensive consultation. My constituency can ill afford such a blow. I urge the Minister and HMRC to suspend the plan, to work with the dedicated staff at HMRC sites across the country to ensure that any proposals that are

presented in the future address the revenue collection needs of the country, to conduct impact assessments, and to engage in comprehensive consultation and scrutiny.

Let me paraphrase the words of Oscar Wilde. To lose one site would be unfortunate, but, under this Conservative Government, to lose two or three sites in my constituency is nothing but extreme carelessness.

4.29 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I should like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this debate. There have been plenty of thoughtful and, indeed, robust contributions so far, with Members—notably all on this side of the House—doing their best to scrutinise the general principles behind HMRC's proposals as well as individual local proposals. I shall add my tuppence-worth in a moment. What shines through in this debate is the frustration, which I share, at not having enough information or attempts at justification to enable us to do our job of scrutinising the proposals thoroughly at a strategic and local level.

Whatever view people might take of these proposals, they are certainly radical. As we have heard, thousands of jobs could be lost and a 93% cut in the number of HMRC offices could be implemented. This is not tinkering around the edges in any way, shape or form. It is therefore not only right but imperative to ask questions about how such cuts and closures will impact on HMRC's ability to collect taxes and tackle tax dodging, particularly at a time of huge public concern over that issue in the light of the Panama papers. It is right that we should ask about the consequences for the towns and cities in which tax offices are marked for closure. It is also absolutely right that we should pose some of the many questions that the hard-working, dedicated and expert staff in our constituencies have raised.

Perhaps the Minister will be able to answer some of our questions today, but I must emphasise that debates alone will not be enough. We need the people behind these proposals to come here to explain them directly to Parliament. That would allow Members to get stuck into the nuts and bolts and to get behind the management-speak and buzzwords that are too often passed off as answers. If that does not happen, staff and taxpayers will be left questioning whether HMRC is really "building our future", as the glossy brochure states, or whether this is in fact a question of buildings forcing our future. It has already been pointed out that this is taking place in the context of the expiry of the extraordinary contracts that were entered into in 2001, when 600 or so properties were sold to the offshore company, Mapeley Steps, and then leased back, PFI-style, to HMRC. Those contracts expire in the years leading up to 2021. In the absence of answers to our questions, many will conclude that this is more about digging HMRC out of the hole that it jumped into in 2001, rather than being about any kind of strategy. That is the only conclusion open to us.

The remaining questions are many and varied, but I shall get down to the basics of the issue. Why is 13 the magic number? Why are 13 offices preferable to 30 or 530? Why is the sensible range of hub sizes calculated at 1,200 to 6,000 staff? And if that size of office is perfectly efficient, why should offices such as Cumbernauld, which are within that range, have to close? Does the proposed

configuration take suitable account of the expertise and local knowledge that can be built up by having a presence across the country? For example, the offices in Aberdeen and Inverness have experts in oil and fishing. And does it take into account the expertise that will be lost through employees being unable to travel to new locations?

The brochures and press releases tell us that saving £100 million a year by 2025 is apparently the goal. We are told:

"Moving more of HMRC's work out of central London, which has some of the world's most expensive office space, will enable HMRC to make substantial savings".

How has that figure been calculated, particularly when HMRC does not know exactly where the new hubs will be? And how is the idea of moving out of expensive city centre locations consistent with closing offices in Cumbernauld, East Kilbride and Bathgate, for example, and centralising them in big prime city centre sites in Glasgow and Edinburgh? Can we see the sums?

Hannah Bardell: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. On the specific issue of centralisation, virtually no work has been done in my constituency of Livingston to assess the impact of the proposals in relation to transport and travel. The distance between Livingston and Edinburgh is relatively short, but what about the people in Dundee who will be expected to travel? Is it not clear that this is an ill-conceived and ill-thought-out proposal?

Stuart C. McDonald: Absolutely.

We want to see the sums and the justifications for the proposals. Will each of these local decisions be revisited if the sums do not add up? Has the effect on local communities been factored into HMRC's considerations? Does it feature at all? I have had a similar experience to that of my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), in that when I asked the Minister about this, his written answer stated simply that HMRC

"will undertake all necessary consultations and impact assessment work to inform"

its plans. No one is suggesting that any town or city where a public sector office is based can assume that the office will be there forever, but it is far from unreasonable to say that the local economic impact of office closures will be a significant factor in decision making, so what weight has been attached to that?

Most important to me and many MPs here are the questions of our constituents—the dedicated, skilled staff in the tax offices. They want to know whether jobs are moving with them or whether they are moving to new roles in a new location. HMRC claims that people will be better able to develop careers up to senior level, but my constituents fear that their good-quality roles will be replaced with poorer-quality work. How did HMRC calculate that 90% of employees will be within reasonable daily travel? Not only does it not know where offices will be, but reasonableness of travel does not just depend on distance but transport links, parking spaces, and accessibility. Will those issues be assessed on an individual basis?

For other staff, including a good number in my constituency, challenges arise through disabilities and care commitments. Why has HMRC not undertaken a

[Stuart C. McDonald]

proper equality impact assessment of its proposals? Why did HMRC change its HR policy in February 2016, particularly when redundancies were on the horizon, so that union members, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West mentioned, were no longer entitled to take a trade union rep to one-to-one discussions?

Most concerning are the questions around the 152 compulsory redundancy notices that have been served. How can they be genuine redundancies given that the work that the employees are doing is continuing, that there are no immediate plans to close the offices, and that the Department has recruited over 1,000 new staff in other locations at the same grades? What is the explanation for that? Why will HMRC's chief executive not meet the Public and Commercial Services Union about alternatives to compulsory redundancy? How can all that be happening while HMRC is apparently spending £1 million a month on overtime to mask staffing shortfalls?

Mark Durkan: At Foyle House in my constituency, staff are being made compulsorily redundant while other staff are being moved in from other locations, with it supposedly being used as a stepping-stone office. Those who have been told that they are being made redundant are being told that redundancies will happen on a workstream, rather than whole-office, basis. People are getting word week by week. HMRC calls that a plan, but it cannot tell people where they stand from week to week.

Stuart C. McDonald: I agree. That emphasises that the sums do not appear to add up and the plan is not any sort of plan, but a desperate attempt to get out of the hole that HMRC got itself in back in 2001.

The debate has been helpful and provided another opportunity to raise questions, but it also highlighted that much more scrutiny and consultation are required if we are to understand properly what the plan means for HMRC, for taxpayers, for towns and cities where offices are situated and for hard-working employees. The case for cuts and closures has not been made. We no longer need glossy brochures and buzzwords, but hard facts, detailed scrutiny and genuine consultation.

4.37 pm

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Well, Minister, it's all a bit of mess, isn't it? I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing the debate. He touched on staff morale, the workforce figures and the fact that there has been no ministerial statement. Along with several other hon. Members, he also mentioned the shameful Mapeley contract, signed—I am sad to say—by a Labour Government who did not realise at the time that it was an overseas company.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) touched on a point dear to my heart when she mentioned HMRC's curious governance arrangements. She also referred to the strange fact that people in her constituency, which is close to my constituency, will have to travel to an HMRC centre in Birmingham, where rents are much higher than in Walsall or Wolverhampton, where, I am disappointed to say, the

Government propose to close Crown House. The hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) quite rightly mentioned the imbalance of resources devoted to benefit fraud versus tax evasion. To sum up what my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) said movingly about his constituency: the Government are indeed uninterested.

The hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott) mentioned geography and spoke about foster carers as an example of people trying to help their community who need face-to-face access. The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) mentioned the difficulty that Welsh speakers are likely to have with the relocation to Cardiff. Finally, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) quite properly pointed out the lack of an impact assessment.

The context of this is that HMRC is embarked on something called "Making tax digital". The Chartered Institute of Taxation says that that promises significant potential benefits but that HMRC's resources should not be cut further

"before the full cost-savings that digitisation promises are being delivered."

There is the rub. We see that under "Making tax digital" businesses will be required to update HMRC quarterly, via digital tax accounts. As the right hon. Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie), the Chair of the Treasury Committee, said in a letter to the Financial Secretary this week:

"I understand that HMRC has recently clarified, for the first time, that businesses would be required not just to submit information to HMRC online once a quarter, but that they would also be required to do all their record keeping in a prescribed digital format."

The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales—I suspect a similar situations pertains in Scotland and in Northern Ireland—found in its survey that 75% of all businesses and 82% of sole traders would need to change their record-keeping systems to comply with the Government's new proposals for making tax digital.

As far as I can tell, HMRC is a mixed blessing on this—there is a mixed picture on digitisation. In a written answer to me on 1 February, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury said:

"HMRC's Business Plan for 2016-17 is currently being finalised and will be published by the end of March 2016 on GOV.UK."

That is an online publication, but unfortunately neither I, nor my excellent researcher, nor indeed the House of Commons Library, can find that document online. So if it is there, it is buried—not very good on digitisation there.

The office closures have been spoken about movingly today. They are happening all over the country and will make access for individuals much worse. We know that access by telephone has been appalling, although, to be fair to the Minister, with extra resources and extra staff, because of pressure from Opposition Members, that has improved somewhat. Again, the context of this is that we are trying to tackle tax avoidance, which we see in the Panama papers. HMRC staff are rushed off their feet now, so how are they going to deal with the fallout from the Panama papers? They are just not going to be able to do that. I would like the Minister to refer to that when he replies, because a similar situation applies in respect of the general anti-abuse rule that we hope we

are going to have and to implement. I laud the Government on that, but staff will be required to enforce it; we do not have the enforcement if we do not have the staff.

The Office for Budget Responsibility made the following comments about the tax yield loss from Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man:

“HMRC is also now less optimistic about how much of the lost yield can be recouped through additional compliance activity, on the basis that they are unlikely to be able to work the higher number of additional cases on top of existing workloads.”

The OBR estimates that HMRC will now recoup £530 million, which is down from a previous estimate of £1.05 billion. Talk about cutting off your nose to spite your face: cutting the number of staff and not being able to work the extra cases to get in the revenue. The staff would pay for themselves, and there are many, many studies to that effect.

All this comes coupled with a Government who have increased the size of the tax code by 50%. I understand that, as all Oppositions talk about simplifying taxation—it is the holy grail—but I am not aware of it happening in the 15 years since I first entered this Parliament. “Tolley’s Tax Guide” now runs to 1,500 odd pages, whereas it had 1,000 in 2010, so it is 50% longer. I am not saying to the Minister that we therefore need 50% more staff, but I think that most people would say, “If we are having more complexity rather than more simplification in tax, we probably need at least the same number of staff, with their expertise.” As it is, the number of staff in HMRC has plummeted in the past six years—some of this is a result of efficiency and some is because of digitisation.

Like all hon. Members, I suspect, I received a very helpful briefing from the Public and Commercial Services Union—PCS. I declare an interest, in that I am a member of the Unite trade union, and I am proud to be one. PCS represents more than 35,000 workers in HMRC, which is well over half the workforce, so I think PCS has some idea of what it is talking about. One thing it highlights is the lack of an equality impact assessment, which should have been done. There is anecdotal evidence—I stress that it is anecdotal—from London and the south-east of England that 40% of those being targeted who will not be able to transfer under this centralisation have disabilities. That may or may not be the case, but without that equality impact assessment we just do not know. Many staff with disabilities or with childcare or care for the elderly responsibilities will be disproportionately affected because the additional travel occasioned by centralisation—even if it is geographically possible which it is not in some parts of the country—will not be possible for them.

According to the PCS briefing, HMRC is not prepared to discuss the planned office closures with a recognised trade union, but it will discuss how those closures will be implemented. If that is the case, it is unacceptable. If that is really the Government’s view, they should put their money where their mouth is—I do not advise them to do this because it will be a lot more expensive in the long run—and de-recognise the trade union that represents more than half their staff, or they should comply with the spirit of the law and engage properly with a recognised trade union. They should have the one-to-one discussions, which were initially promised, but which are now being withdrawn in terms of having a union representative present. That is part of what union recognition is about—a

person can have their union rep there when they have difficulties at work. The Government should be telling HMRC to do that.

HMRC is broadly going in the wrong direction. It is putting the cart before the horse. It is cutting staff—or proposing to cut staff—before there is any demonstration that digitisation is working smoothly. It should get it to work smoothly before it cuts staff.

Furthermore, making tax digital will increase costs for businesses, as they will have to put in information four times a year on new software and that will have a disproportionate effect on small businesses. With fewer staff, there is a reduced likelihood of success on tax avoidance and tax evasion, which, to be fair, the Government have done a lot about in the past six years, but they do need to do a lot more. These cuts will further restrict access to HMRC services for individuals and they will be further demoralising for a highly skilled workforce.

I say to the Government that there is a contradiction in what they are trying to do. Quite rightly, they are trying to make HMRC and its operations more efficient by using computers more. At the same time, they are saying that they need to centralise their offices. If computerisation works smoothly, they do not need to centralise geographically; they can do it in a dispersed manner, as is the case with the offices that we currently have, which the Government are proposing to close. I urge the Minister to think again.

4.48 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): Back in November, HMRC announced important changes to how it would operate. Its aim was simple: to create a modern, efficient organisation that would continue to protect this country’s tax revenues, while, at the same time, providing better value to the taxpayer. HMRC is determined to make sure that it is better able to focus on its core priority—to bring in more revenue by tackling tax evasion and avoidance.

Since 2010, it has made real progress. For example, it has driven down the tax gap—the difference between what HMRC should theoretically bring in, and what it actually collects—from 7.3% in 2009-10 to 6.4% in 2013-14. That is one of the lowest rates in the world. To make the importance of that quite clear, let me put it this way: if the Government and HMRC had not taken action to achieve that, we would have collected £14.5 billion less in tax.

We are determined to transform HMRC into a more efficient, more highly skilled organisation, which offers the digital services people expect in the 21st century. That is why, in the spending review of 2015, we made the commitment to invest £1.3 billion in transforming the digital capabilities of HMRC. In this year’s Budget we allocated a further £71 million to help HMRC improve its customer services. By the end of this Parliament that will bring the change we need to make it quicker and easier for taxpayers to report and pay their taxes online. It will deliver a seven-day-a-week service, improved telephone services and reduced call waiting times, as well as dedicated phone lines for new businesses. This investment will pay off. By 2020, we expect HMRC to be saving £700 million a year, as well as delivering an additional £1 billion in revenue in 2020-21.

[Mr David Gauke]

The next stage of the plan to bolster HMRC and help it deliver more for less is to transform the estate through which it works. In 2010 we challenged HMRC to make savings. We asked it to reduce costs by a quarter and reinvest £917 million of those savings in making sure that more businesses and people paid the tax that they should, bringing in an additional £7 billion a year in 2014-15. HMRC delivered, making savings of £991 million, including reducing the cost of the estate. At the same time, it kept up progress in cutting the tax gap and improving customer service. So far from endangering our plans to clamp down on tax avoidance and improve customer service, as some have suggested today, these plans are crucial to those aims.

Let me remind the House that HMRC's plans will generate estate savings of £100 million a year by 2025.

Patrick Grady: Will the Financial Secretary give way?

Mr Gauke: I have many points to get through, but if I have time I will give way.

When HMRC was formed in 2005, it had around 570 offices spread out all over the country—an inefficient way of doing business in the 21st century. Reorganising this network of offices was a priority even then, which is why, following a number of reorganisations, that number was reduced to around 390 in 2010. It now stands at around 170 offices, ranging in size from 5,700 people to fewer than 10. That is a start, but it is not efficient enough. The changes that we announced in November represent the next stage of HMRC's estate transformation programme.

Over the next 10 years, the department will bring its employees together in large, modern offices in 13 locations equipped with the digital infrastructure and training facilities they need to work effectively. These new high-quality regional centres will serve each and every region and nation in the United Kingdom, creating high-quality, skilled jobs and promotion opportunities in Birmingham, Belfast, Bristol, Cardiff, Croydon, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Stratford.

There are significant advantages to such a system: the new offices will have the capacity to encourage people working in different roles, at different levels, to work more closely together, as well as providing more opportunities for them to develop their careers. The offices will be in locations with strong transport links and with colleges and universities nearby, to ensure a ready talent pool close by. In short, they represent the way business is done in the 21st century. HMRC expects the first centre to open by 2017, with the others opening over the following four years.

On the point about consulting HMRC staff, HMRC fully recognises that its most valuable asset is its people. HMRC can only do what it does thanks to its dedicated members of staff who bring in the money that funds our essential public services, as well as helping hard-working families with the benefits they need. That is why HMRC has kept its workforce fully abreast of all its plans to change how it operates, which were first announced internally two years ago. Since then, HMRC has held around 2,000 events across the United Kingdom, talking

to colleagues about these changes. Everyone working for HMRC will have the opportunity to discuss their personal circumstances with their manager ahead of any office closures or moves.

I should remind the House that this is about changing the locations, not cutting staff. Indeed, the department's policy is to keep any redundancies to an absolute minimum. HMRC's analysis indicates most employees are within reasonable daily travel of a new centre, although that is subject to the one-to-one discussions which every member of staff will have about a year before any planned closure.

Let me pick up the point about trade union representation. One-to-one meetings are an opportunity for managers and staff to discuss how the proposals will affect staff, and HMRC will consult every one of its staff. Once decisions are taken, staff will of course have the opportunity to have representation. This is not a change of approach; these are fact-finding discussions with all members of staff to understand their personal circumstances. Trade union reps have never been in such meetings, but they will be involved, as they would normally, at a later stage.

Chris Stephens: My understanding is that, once there is an outcome at the one-to-one meetings, there is an appeal mechanism, but the trade union will not have access to that either. Will the Minister clarify that?

Mr Gauke: The purpose of the one-to-one meetings is to ascertain the particular circumstances of each individual likely to be affected by the proposals. From that, further proposals will come forward, and the usual trade union representation will be available to members of staff.

Since announcing its decision on the locations of its new offices in November, HMRC has been busy negotiating with suppliers, designing the look and feel of buildings, and planning how it will move its existing workforce. That has included one-to-one meetings with almost 2,500 members of staff who are most immediately affected, to look at their individual needs.

I stress that those are operational changes, decided at an operational, rather than a political level. Making changes to how HMRC offices are organised is an integral part of the Government hubs programme. It is essential to make the organisation fit to deliver better customer service, as well as to make it harder for the dishonest minority to cheat the system—and all at a lower cost to the taxpayer. That has the Government's full support.

On staff engagement, HMRC staff are currently spread across about 170 offices across the country, many of which are a legacy of the 1960s and 1970s, lack modern facilities and technology support, and do not reflect new ways of working. The current state of the estate is undoubtedly a factor in the levels of engagement from staff, many of whom look forward to working in new, modern, fit-for-purpose offices—the type of workplaces that will also help HMRC to attract and retain the skilled workforce it will require in the future.

There has been much comment about the Mapeley contract entered into by the previous Government, and I for one am certainly not going to defend it. It is not a

good contract for the taxpayer, which is precisely why HMRC wants to get out of it. If we do not get out of it now, HMRC will be fixed in it for years to come.

On customer service standards, call handling last week was at 90%, and the average wait was six minutes, but we invested more money at the Budget to improve that.

On Welsh-speaking services, HMRC is committed to maintaining services in Welsh for its Welsh-speaking customers. The quality of those services must continue to be high, and HMRC is actively exploring the ways it can best achieve that.

If we want HMRC to do its job effectively, we must ensure that it is fit for the challenges it faces. We have to be willing to modernise, find efficiencies, target resources, and make long-term strategic decisions. That is precisely what HMRC is doing: transforming itself into a smaller, more highly skilled organisation with modern, digital services and a data-driven compliance operation that will deliver more for the taxpayer at lower cost. That is the policy it has embarked on, and I hope it will have the support of the House.

4.58 pm

Chris Stephens: I thank all those who contributed to the debate. They represented all the nations of the United Kingdom, because this issue affects all the nations of the United Kingdom. We heard some excellent points, particularly on HMRC offices being the largest employer in an area in many instances.

Let me say to the Minister that it is cavalier to suggest that employees dragged into one-to-one meetings are denied trade union representation, and he really should look at that. I would also say to him that the lack of parliamentary scrutiny on this issue has been shocking, and many of us in the House will continue to hold the Government to account on it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered HM Revenue and Customs' (HMRC) plan Building our Future which will close most of its offices and make substantial staffing reductions; is concerned that this could seriously compromise the ability of HMRC to collect tax, enforce compliance and close the tax gap; believes the plan should have been subjected to parliamentary scrutiny; and calls on the Government to ensure that Building our Future is suspended until a comprehensive consultation and review has been undertaken.

Mental Health Services: Haringey

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*George Hollingbery.*)

4.59 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am grateful to have the opportunity of this debate on this very serious subject. I am pleased to be joined by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), who stands with me on this debate and also wants to speak about our mental health services in Haringey.

Let me state from the outset that I have the utmost respect for and gratitude towards all the staff working within Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust, who tirelessly care for some of the most vulnerable members of our community. Not least among those is the trust's chief executive, Maria Kane, who has been recognised by the *Health Service Journal* as a top NHS chief executive who was shown to be doing a stellar job in the recent BBC "Panorama" film, "Britain's Mental Health Crisis". They have all been asked to do, frankly, an impossible job in the constituency and in the London borough of Haringey, which has 12 of the most deprived wards in the country where 2,284 people are receiving personal independence payments, over 270 different languages are spoken, 1,334 people have had their benefits sanctioned, and 826 households have found themselves homeless in the past year. Social tensions are high, funds are tight, and there is an ever-increasing need for urgent help, from mental health services for children and young people to dementia services for the old.

I bring this debate to the House today because it is unacceptable that, despite the fact that mental health problems cost the economy £100 billion per year, three out of every four people with mental health problems in England receive little or no help for their condition. I suspect that that figure is far higher in my constituency, given the high level of need. Today in this country mental health problems are not just some form of rare disease. The truth is that one in every four people will suffer from mental health problems during the course of this year.

For the most greatly affected, mental health problems are fatal. It simply cannot be right that in our country in 2016 those who suffer from the most severe mental illnesses die, on average, 15 to 20 years earlier than the general population. I have already brought to the attention of this House the fact that, on average, an adult male in my constituency can expect to live to just under 75 years of age. It is a sobering picture, then, that the average age of a male suffering from a severe mental health problem in my constituency may be under 55. But premature death is not the only complication for my constituents suffering from mental health problems. The Mental Health Taskforce commissioned by NHS England in February this year found that men of African and Caribbean heritage are up to 6.6 times more likely to be admitted as in-patients or detained under the Mental Health Act 1983, indicating a systemic failure to provide effective crisis care for these groups. The taskforce's draft report also revealed that men from these groups are, on average, detained for five times longer.

[Mr David Lammy]

As mental health problems affect so many lives, 23% of the UK's burden of disease is mental health. That figure is higher than the burden of disease in cancer or in cardiovascular disease, which stands at 16.2%. Why then do mental health services receive only 11% of the NHS's budget? It is clear that institutional bias against providing proper care for people suffering from mental health problems persists in 2016.

It was as far back as February 2011 that the coalition Government published their strategy for improving the nation's mental health, which stated the now much-trumpeted concept of parity of esteem—an idea that began with a Lords amendment from Labour peers in the other place. Then, the very first section of the coalition Government's infamous Health and Social Care Act 2012, which contained the central duty imposed on the Secretary of State in relation to our treasured national health service, was amended to put these services on an apparently equal footing. However, the reality already facing mental health patients across the country in 2014 was something different: mental health funding was cut for the first time in 10 years, and there were fewer services for children and young people, fewer beds, and more people on acute psychiatric wards.

Many other strategies and documents were published, promising an improvement in services and repeating the mantra of parity of esteem, until the Prime Minister himself returned to the issue at the beginning of the year and finally announced some funding. However, given that the budget had previously been cut, I find it difficult to see how it was a net increase, not least given the pressures of an ageing population. The Prime Minister announced that those particular funds would be targeted towards helping new and expectant mothers with poor mental health and towards liaison between mental health services, A&E departments and crisis teams, but that is not what I am seeing on the ground.

As demonstrated so vividly in BBC's "Panorama", the truth on the ground could not be more different. Far from the level of funding being equal between physical and mental health services, or the gap decreasing, mental health hospitals have had far deeper cuts imposed on them. The reality is that 3,000 mental health beds have been cut across the country in the past five to six years.

However bleak the national picture, it does not get anywhere close to the gaping holes in funding for mental health services that face the patients of Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust. Despite the obvious and ever-increasing need, that trust, on top of the vast inequality between physical and mental health services, receives a lower share of income proportionately than any other mental health provider in London. It is hard to understand how an area that includes Tottenham gets the lowest level of funding in London.

The trust has already done so much cost-cutting over the years that it is the most efficient NHS mental health provider in London. It already has the lowest number of acute mental health in-patient beds in London and higher productivity than other providers. It has also been proven to be underfunded over the course of not one or two, but three independent reports. The first of those reports was back in early 2014, the second in late 2014, and the third in October 2015. The independent evidence is that the trust needs £4 million a year, but it

has not received a penny extra in funds, and no firm plan has been established to address the funding gap, which means that the trust now anticipates a deficit of £12.9 million in 2016-17.

The reality locally is that St Ann's hospital in my constituency has lost a third of its beds in the past eight years alone, and this is a hospital that is obliged under section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983 to find a bed for every patient detained under that section because they pose a risk to their own life or to the lives of others. We are not talking about varicose veins or wisdom teeth; losing beds in these circumstances has a dire impact.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green will be aware of a recent case in the constituency. A young man whom I have known all his life attempted suicide and it has had a life-changing physical effect on his body. My hon. Friend might say a little more about that case, but it happened directly because there was no bed for him.

St Ann's hospital is constantly running at over 100% capacity, while other mental health providers in London run at 85% to 90%. With each new admission, St Ann's wards each have to nominate their "least ill patients" for discharge back into the community. Despite the efforts of staff, does that really present a safe outcome for those vulnerable patients and their families? Is that really a safe outcome for the community that requires the trust to serve it as best it can?

The shortfall in income is not the only problem the trust faces. Far from the Government's rhetoric of parity of esteem, the truth in Haringey is that patients are condemned to treatment in a hospital that was designed to meet the needs of 19th-century fever patients, long before the discovery of antibiotics, rather than the delivery of therapeutic interventions appropriate to current patients' needs.

Indeed, the most recent Care Quality Commission inspection found that

"the physical environment of the three inpatient...wards" on the St Ann's site was

"not fit for purpose due to its age and layout. This impacts on the trusts ability to deliver safe services within this environment."

That is a problem that the site has tried to resolve on the 28-acre St Ann's site over the last decade.

Finally, the trust submitted plans to develop the site last year. It hopes to fund a new hospital and other health services on one third of the site by building homes on the remaining land. I have to say that I oppose those proposals, because they include only 14% affordable housing, even though London has a housing crisis. Despite my objections, the trust was granted planning permission in March last year.

There is an alternative proposal—it is a great proposal, which needs support—to build a community land trust. That is exactly what successive Mayors of London have said they want to see. It would result in affordable homes being built on the site, it would be holistic and it would fit with the mental health plan. I hope that the Minister might take an interest in it and that the next Mayor of London, whoever that is, will also take an interest.

The trust's plan would not require any capital from NHS England. I have to ask why, on this site and in this constituency, and given the circumstances in which the

trust finds itself, no capital is forthcoming from NHS England. It seems that the decision about whether to build a new hospital has, once again, been pushed by the Government into the long grass, and we have been given no date at all.

This debate about mental health comes on the back of a debate that I secured about the situation of primary care in the borough. I have raised both those subjects because I am seriously worried about health in the London borough of Haringey and in my constituency. Despite myriad problems, only 16 months ago the independent Carnell Farrar review of the affordability of mental health services provided by the trust found that there was no compelling evidence to support merging the trust with any other organisation; that the trust is relatively efficient; and that there is a clear case for clinical commissioning groups to invest in it.

I had hoped that that would mark the end of the speculation about the trust's future, but the CQC report, published in March this year, of the routine inspection conducted in December 2015 gave the trust an overall rating of "requires improvement". It is no surprise to me that that is the case, despite the efforts of staff and leadership, when funding is so tight and the level of need is so high. The CQC report stated that out of 11 areas, five required improvement, five were good and one was outstanding.

The report concluded that mental health admission wards for adults required improvement, community-based mental health services required improvement, child and adolescent mental health required improvement, specialist community health services for children and young people required improvement and crisis mental health, including home treatment teams, required improvement. Many detailed recommendations have been made by the CQC to improve services, but no extra money has been put on the table to enable the trust to comply.

I am grateful to the Minister for last week agreeing to my November request for a cross-party delegation of local MPs to come and discuss our concerns about the trust. Let me put on record what I call on him to do to help the trust, to ensure that the services that it provides are safe and that work begins to ensure true equality between physical and mental health services in Haringey. The context is important, not just because of the suicide rate in England—the number of suicides recently soared to 4,881 in 2014—but, most disturbingly, because the draft version of that report stated that had just £10 million extra been spent on services for people who were suicidal, 400 extra lives would have been saved. For the sake of £25,000, which is less than the national average salary, each of those lives could have been saved.

I call on the Minister urgently to look at the plans for the redevelopment of the St Ann's site. I understand that the north London estates plan will be finalised by the end of June, and I seek an assurance that a decision, including consideration of the community land trust's proposal, will now be made. I ask the Minister to visit the St Ann's site to see the problems for himself, and I ask him to earmark appropriate funding for the crisis team and children's mental health services.

I must warn the Minister that we have seen some terrible cases in my constituency. A young boy was injured and died outside his secondary school as he left with three friends. Police officers were assaulted with a machete. We have seen suicide and attempted suicide,

with catastrophic consequences, in the recent past. I trust the Minister will ensure that the trust receives the funding it needs, and that he will recognise the CQC recommendations. By having this debate, I am putting him on notice of the real concerns about the development of the St Ann's site and the real need to bear down on the pressures that the trust is under, in this pretty tough part of north London.

5.14 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I want to thank the Minister, who has had a busy afternoon, for his excellent winding-up speech on autism. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on the long-term interest he has had in mental health and on the way in which he has championed the issue.

Since I was elected nearly 12 months ago—it will be 12 months next week—my office has seen more than 40 individuals whose mental health problems are so serious that I would say that they, and indeed others around them, are at serious risk. Since last May, the number of mental health cases coming in to my surgery has increased, which is a real concern of mine.

I have three questions for the Minister. First, are the Government monitoring the suicide risk of those facing homelessness? Secondly, is the number of housing related suicides being recorded and documented during the inquest process? Thirdly, what support are the Government giving to local councils to ensure that vulnerable adults with complex mental health difficulties do not face street homelessness?

I just want to mention two cases. The first is that of a soldier in the Army—he was in the light infantry—who did five tours in Northern Ireland and served in Bosnia. He suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, but on the same day that he was issued with a section 21 notice he attempted to take his own life. Luckily, he was unsuccessful. He wrote to me that

"facing homelessness was the catalyst to me taking the action that I did".

The second case concerns a young woman constituent who was victim of child sexual abuse. She suffers from a dissociative disorder, and has spent three years battling the CCG to get the therapy that she needs to handle her complex mental health problems. Her battle continues, and she is still without the support that she desperately needs to deal with the trauma of her past.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be very impressed to know that the community is working very hard on this problem. That involves not only me, my right hon. Friend and local councillors, but Mind in Haringey and an individual by the name of David Mosse, who leads on the suicide prevention plan for Haringey. As I am sure the Minister knows, not one borough in London yet has a comprehensive suicide prevention plan that challenges all the agencies to take responsibility for trying to prevent suicide. As we speak, David, as a concerned resident, is leading a session to try to secure best practice in Haringey by bringing all the agencies together to prevent suicide. That is a very exciting development. I just wish we could match at the statutory level what the community, Mind, the suicide prevention team, parents and carers are doing.

[Catherine West]

A charter for better mental health services has been developed locally with some wonderful family carers and service users. Their demands are very clear, and I will send the Minister a copy of their charter. They want community mental health teams to be less overstretched, and they want effective early intervention. They recognise the desperate shortage of acute psychiatric beds—capacity is frequently 128%, which is overcapacity—and they basically want enough hospital beds to be available locally. As my right hon. Friend has said, we believe in community approaches to sorting out mental health problems, but we all accept that there are times when, even with the best will in the world, people need to be hospitalised for certain treatments. The idea of switching things into the community is laudable, but we need beds for the moments when acute care is necessary.

Another demand is for the crisis response service to be more fit for purpose, with an effective and accountable emergency crisis response. In the case mentioned by my right hon. Friend, the young man attempted to take his own life because of the domino effect: it was the emergency crisis response not being adequate, the ambulance service not being adequate and the fact that no bed was available that led to his attempt on his life.

Finally, the last three issues on the charter are that the route into admissions needs to be clearer for patients and carers, that there is a lack of suitable housing for vulnerable people after they have been in hospital and that carers feel that they are not listened to.

Will the Minister touch on preventing suicide through better homelessness options? Unfortunately, the moment when certain individuals receive their section 21 notice from a housing provider, meaning that they are going to be made homeless, often coincides with an attempt at suicide. I have quoted the cases of a man and a woman from my constituency who have each been affected, but we know that, sadly, suicide is the biggest killer of men under the age of 45, across the country. That is a very sad note to end on, but I look forward to the Minister's response.

5.20 pm

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): I begin by congratulating the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this debate on an issue that I know is important to him and his constituents. I thank him for his courtesy in letting us see a copy of his speech; that was much appreciated. I also thank the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for raising the issues that she did.

I have to say that I have a soft spot for Haringey. Shortly before I first came to Parliament, 33 years ago, I was in the Hornsey and Wood Green Young Conservatives, and was a councillor in the London borough of Haringey, which taught me a great deal about the issues faced by an outer London borough with inner London problems. I still very much remember that time and the work that was done by very good councillors who were trying to do their best in that area.

My speech will necessarily be short, but I say right at the beginning that I share the concerns expressed by both colleagues. I will ensure that the meeting that the

right hon. Gentleman was looking for takes place. He raised a number of detailed current issues in Haringey, which really need the specialist advice of those involved in the NHS and the clinical commissioning group. Unfortunately, it has not been possible for them to find time to speak to me in the last couple of days before this debate—I appreciate that it has been a very busy time in the NHS—but I know that they will find time, at the senior level, to meet him, me and others at Richmond House, at a time that we will put together as soon as we can. That will enable us to go into rather more detail on some of the issues that I simply will not be able to touch on today.

I share the right hon. Gentleman's passion, which he illustrated very well in his speech, about these important issues. Some raise national issues; I will touch on those briefly, as they are important. I can understand his frustration about hearing comments made from a Dispatch Box about national amounts of money and then seeing what happens locally. I have got used to going round the country, talking about what successive Governments—in particular, the coalition Government and ourselves—have done and how there has been an increase in investment, and hearing people say, "Well, not round here, there hasn't." That is a very real issue: we must make sure that what we commit to flows through to the local NHS and CCGs. We are on to that in terms of monitoring and transparency, and can discuss it further when we meet.

I am very proud of what we are currently doing on mental health. We are investing unprecedented amounts, with spending expected to increase to £11.7 billion. CCGs are required to continue increasing their spend on mental health each year, and we are watching them. We have committed to investing £1.4 billion on children and young people's mental health, and eating disorders. That will be spent by the end of this Parliament. The Prime Minister has said that an additional £1 billion will be spent to improve perinatal health, mental health liaison and 24/7 crisis care; I am grateful for the welcome that the right hon. Gentleman gave to that. Mental health really is a priority for all of us.

We have had the conclusions of the Mental Health Taskforce. The Department has accepted the recommendations directed at ourselves, as has the NHS. I am making sure that there is transparent delivery, and there will be constant reference back to the recommendations, so that people will be able to see what is actually being done, in order to counter the scepticism.

As for what the hon. Lady said, first, the issue of suicide is extremely important. I have asked for local suicide prevention plans to be revamped. We have a national suicide prevention strategy, but we do not have local suicide prevention plans in every area. That will change. She is right to talk about the link with homelessness. We need to do much more, and I am grateful to Samaritans, Cruse and all those in our national health service and other agencies who work hard on this issue. Crisis care concordats are in place everywhere—that was one success from the time of the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb)—and they have placed a renewed focus on crisis and suicide prevention. I am glad that the hon. Lady mentioned carers because they are also important. Indeed, she could hold an entirely separate debate on those three issues, and I urge her to secure one so that we can discuss them.

In Haringey we introduced the first waiting time standards for mental health, starting with psychological therapies this year. Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust exceeded the standards for improving access to psychological therapies, with 90% of patients treated within six weeks of referral, and 99% within 18 weeks. In February 57% of patients referred for early intervention psychosis received treatment within two weeks, which exceeded the minimum standard set at 50%. This is not as simple as pulling a lever because capacity must be built up over time—that is something we should discuss. I, too, watched the “Panorama” programme, and the Haringey example well illustrated the national pressures.

One of the three priorities in Haringey clinical commissioning group’s health and wellbeing strategy 2015 to 2018 is improving mental health and wellbeing. In Haringey an estimated 3,000 children and young people have some kind of mental health problem at any time, and more than 34,500 adults have a common mental disorder such as anxiety or depression. About 4,000 adults with a severe mental illness live in Haringey.

Over the next three years the CCG aims to ensure that people living with mental illness experience a more seamless service from hospital to GP. It intends to strengthen support for people to manage their mental ill health in primary and community care settings. Just over £34 million funding has been awarded to mental health services in Haringey—an increase of 9% since 2013-14. Of that, £31 million is for Barnet Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust. In 2013 to 2014, compared with 11 other CCGs in north and central London, Haringey spent the fifth highest proportion of its budget on mental health.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned St Ann’s and in-patient mental health beds have reduced there, as they have over the whole country in line with national policy. That has taken place as more appropriate alternatives have been developed in the community, and the trust has used a number of private bed placements owing to capacity constraints. The trust is also operating at extremely high levels of bed occupancy, and it is working with the CCG to reduce that. There will be a new development at St Ann’s hospital, for which an outline planning application was given in March 2015. NHS Improvement

is working with the trust and its partners to develop a strategy for mental health estates across the sector, and we can discuss that in more detail.

I do not wish to conclude without mentioning equality and diversity. We know that different ethnic groups have different rates and experiences of mental health problems. Black people across Barnet, Enfield and Haringey were the subject of four times as many applications to be detained under section 2 of the Mental Health Act in 2014-15 as they constituted a proportion of the population at the 2011 census. The trust’s rate is broadly in line with national data and reflects a wider challenge that is the subject of extensive national research and action.

Our commitment to tackling inequalities in access to mental health services is set out in the mental health action plan “Closing the Gap”, published in January 2014, and the mental health taskforce made that a central issue in its recommendations. This week I met a group to discuss issues of equality and diversity in mental health. It was the first meeting that I have had on the back of the mental health taskforce, illustrating the priority that I attach to the issue, and we are working up some proposals for that. Along with our commitment to the other recommendations, the right hon. Gentleman will not find us lacking in commitment to deal with this issue, and I know how important it is. We also want to ensure that BME communities have access to more important psychological therapies, and we are working with the sector to find out why they have had less access to them, and what we can do to change that.

We have heard about the challenges facing mental health services in Haringey. The Government are committed to transforming mental health, and ensuring that patients receive the best treatment. I mentioned our initiatives at local level, and it is clear that Haringey is working hard to address those challenges, but there are many. Therefore, when we get together with a group of MPs and senior representatives of the NHS and trusts, we will discuss this matter with a little more time and detail. I look forward to that meeting, and will do my best to help the right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Lady in their quest to support their constituents still further.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 28 April 2016

[PHIL WILSON *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Digital Records in the NHS

1.33 pm

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered use of digital records in the NHS.

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson, and grateful to you and Mr Speaker for the opportunity to debate this matter. I am delighted to see my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) in his place.

The issue of data is of transformative significance for the NHS. The health service has so many interactions with patients on a daily basis that it creates an enormous amount of health data that have a huge number of practical applications for those who know how to analyse the data correctly. With more patients being treated, more work being done on access to drugs, and massive breakthroughs in genomics and the study of rare diseases, the NHS must use IT effectively to digitise patient records and allow clinicians to harness the power of such valuable data. That is the essence of this debate.

My involvement in this subject area began through my late constituent, Les Halpin, who was diagnosed with the dreadful motor neurone disease in 2011. Les was one of the country's foremost statisticians by profession, and a gifted mathematician with an inquisitive brain. He quickly realised that the numbers were stacked against him—when I first met him, he was absolutely clear that he had between a couple of months and a couple of years to live, about which he was absolutely stoical—and furthermore that the money spent on new drugs was widely out of kilter with the output.

Rather than take on the treatment of and research into MND directly, as that was already catered for by a number of non-governmental organisations, Les set his sights on tackling the system more widely. Understanding that the system he wanted to change was governed by the regulatory and political world, he began the Empower: Access to Medicine campaign. As a statistician, he knew better than anyone that it is information that furthers medical research. Empower taking on this debate is therefore the logical extension of his original work. Les died while on the waiting list for new treatments, for there had been no new treatment for MND for more than 20 years.

Through comprehensive engagement across Government, industry and the academic world, Empower helped to secure a major positive change for patients, known as the early access to medicine scheme. Working with a number of patient and medical campaign groups—Joining Jack, the Duchenne Children's Trust and the Genetic Alliance UK, to name just a few—Empower hosted a summit in the House of Commons, at which the Department of Health launched its new early access scheme, with Empower's support.

On 23 February, I hosted the parliamentary launch of Empower: Data4Health—my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) was present; perhaps other Members were as well—which is the next stage of this work and falls under the subject of this debate. The new campaign brings together politicians, clinicians and patients and calls for an NHS that uses state-of-the-art IT to collate and analyse health data to improve outcomes for patients. The campaign is a natural continuation of Les's work, because it seeks to create an NHS that uses anonymised patient data to identify new treatments, effective new drugs and even repurposed drugs that can have major benefits for sufferers of rare or life-limiting diseases.

To my mind, there are three ways of deploying this IT effectively in the NHS—this is part of a wider debate, but it is worth mentioning here. First, with the right technology, data can be analysed for particular cohorts of disease sufferers to look for trends, monitor the effects of new drugs treatments and therapies and, ultimately, improve patients' information about their own conditions, patient outcomes, and access to medicines or other treatments that are right for them.

Incidentally, we are seeing growing evidence of repurposed drugs being used to treat a variety of diseases that they were not originally intended for, with some success. For example, recent research suggests that some statins—drugs generally used to control cholesterol—can affect the treatment of brain tumours. Before such research can be turned into real treatment options for patients, we need to be able to use modern technology and digital records to flag where patients are receiving that treatment and look at the effects across a much larger cohort.

The potential offered by using IT to identify new treatments and trends could fundamentally change how the NHS operates. Indeed, the Science and Technology Committee recently reported that the value of big data to the health sector will equate to £14.4 billion by 2017. In fact, some consultants have found that efficiency savings between £16 billion and £66 billion could be generated in the NHS were the data deployed properly.

Once we start to use data, we can leverage the value of the intellectual property, which is created in a number of ways, by using it to incentivise GPs or clinicians to pursue certain treatment paths; by funding patient interest groups and other bodies; and, ultimately, by selling the IP to drug companies to speed up the development of new drugs. The whole thing then becomes a virtuous circle.

The second key benefit of IT and digital records is that they enable us to address the lack of co-ordination in the NHS. Clinicians will be able to monitor what is happening to a patient cohort for a particular disease across the country, rather than re-invent the wheel when approving treatment. Digital records will enable different teams to co-ordinate across one or a number of hospitals, synchronise appointments and ensure that all clinicians are fully informed of how their treatment is interacting with a patient. That should lead to the best possible outcomes for patients, and enable co-ordination across the health service.

Thirdly, patients will have more control over their own health information. In an age in which the use of medical self-diagnostic tools is on the rise, patients will be able to control—possibly remotely or at home—the

[*Geoffrey Clifton-Brown*]

data produced by the diagnostic machines; view them in whatever form they like; use them to inform their self-care; and feed them remotely, through IT, back to clinicians, who if necessary can modify the patient's treatment. Treating people remotely will prevent unnecessary hospital visits and visits to clinicians.

Fourthly, once we start collecting data on patient outcomes, we will be able to drive processes within the NHS, identify things that are taking too long and work that is being duplicated, and ultimately save the NHS money on its day-to-day processes and tests. For example, we will be able to transfer huge amounts of data across different systems in the NHS. New patient tests are emerging almost weekly, which produce data that can be transferred across different parts of the NHS more efficiently. In those four ways, IT can transform the NHS.

Members from all parties, members of the public and clinicians have concerns about data privacy, and I would like to tackle that point head-on. I thought that some Members might be here to speak about their concerns about privacy and data protection. Some of those concerns are serious and legitimate; it is no use pretending that they are not. We all hear horror stories from our constituents about NHS trusts mishandling data, losing records and sharing inappropriate information. When this debate was granted, a member of the public contacted me to bring to my attention his experience of massive data breaches by one NHS trust, which is alleged to have consistently failed to adhere to data protection principles and to have hidden its failings from NHS England. Make no mistake: concerns about the handling of patient data are very real.

That member of the public highlighted that data protection breaches are regrettably already taking place. One of the purposes of this debate is to highlight the need for a national framework for digital records with built-in safeguards to protect patient privacy, and for genuine national accountability for trusts. We need to generate a debate on that subject. No patient record system is absolutely secure. Even the old-fashioned paper system is not absolutely secure, because it can leak: people can get into files, access the data and pass them on in an unauthorised way. With modern technology, we ought to be able to protect patient records.

Digital records may ring alarm bells with some patients, such as that member of the public, so it is imperative that the Government develop a comprehensive public information campaign on the enormous treatment benefits, which I have outlined, that health data can provide. We must convince the public that the benefits of the effective use of IT in the NHS far outweigh the potential obstacles and pitfalls that there may be along the way. We have the technology to keep patient data safe. A fear of errors should not paralyse progress on this issue.

There are some great examples of things happening across the country. For example, the Cystic Fibrosis Trust has done incredible work in putting together a patient registry of more than 99% of all cystic fibrosis sufferers. As I am sure all Members realise, cystic fibrosis is a horrible disease. Babies born with it cannot breathe properly and need continuous treatment for the whole of their often only too short lives. The first new-generation genotypic drugs are beginning to be introduced, and by

using patient data to measure their effectiveness and possible side effects we can begin to make real progress on rare diseases such as cystic fibrosis.

The Cystic Fibrosis Trust operates a strict evaluation process, overseen by a committee of experts, to ensure that its registry data are used in line with patients' consent. It is interesting that those with that debilitating disease realise the effect that IT can have and have willingly given permission for their data to be used in that way. That is an example of the importance of patient buy-in to IT patient records. Thanks to the Cystic Fibrosis Trust's determination to promote and maintain its registry, we are seeing new treatments for particular strains of CF, which completely alleviate the dreadful symptoms that I outlined in young babies, who would otherwise die prematurely, and enable them to live a relatively normal life. Proper deployment of IT in a digital NHS would enable us to develop similar drugs for sufferers of all sorts of rare and debilitating illnesses.

A shining example of what I am outlining is happening in Birmingham, where clinicians are trailblazing in this area. They are an example of what we hope will happen nationally. The University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust uses electronic patient records. Since 2011, all records have been electronic. Its commitment to innovation has allowed for some remarkable projects, such as Cure Leukaemia, which was established in 2003 to enable patients with blood cancer to access effective new treatments. In 2005, it helped to secure a £2.2 million grant to build the Centre for Clinical Haematology at the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Birmingham. It resulted in the development of the second-largest adult stem cell transplant programme in the United Kingdom. The impact of Cure Leukaemia and the Centre for Clinical Haematology in Birmingham is closely linked to the distinct make-up of the west midlands and the fact that they use IT in the way that we propose. With a population of 5.5 million and the most ethnically diverse catchment area in Europe, the west midlands offers access to the broadest possible data pool for drugs trials.

Over the past decade, Cure Leukaemia has funded a network of 15 specialist nurses, who work across the west midlands and administer pioneering drug treatments to leukaemia-suffering patients. The combination of the west midlands' unique demographic and the network of well-supported nurses has enabled us to leverage millions of pounds-worth of pioneering drugs and give patients access to clinical trials for drugs not readily available in the rest of the NHS. Cure Leukaemia's founder, Graham Silk, is also a member of the Empower: Data4Health campaign. Graham's hope is that, one day, everyone will be able to benefit as he has from the amazing work being done with digital records in the west midlands.

The medical community see the advantages that digital records can bring to the NHS. The Royal College of Physicians believes:

"Fully digital patient records will bring benefits to the NHS, but to do so they need to be based on standards for the structure and content. Common standards are essential to enable interoperability between digital records in different care settings."

The RCP goes on to list the benefits that digital records can bring, and I will take them in turn.

First, digital records have the potential to improve the quality of patient care. The people at the RCP believe that, with fully digital records, it will be

“easier for care professionals to bring together a person-centred view of the patient from all the disparate records held in different settings and over time. They believe digital records will improve communication between professionals in different care settings and that it will be easier to drive timely, relevant automatic clinical alerts. They believe that digital records can improve safety by reducing errors in transcription of paper documents and they are of the opinion that it will be easier for patients to access their records for self-care purposes”—

something I have already outlined.

The second major benefit comes in NHS quality improvement and research activities. That is very much the key theme of my speech today. The RCP states that digital records could provide:

“Much improved ability to carry out records-based research (with appropriate protection of confidential data and respect for those who wish to opt out)”—

my buy-in point—

“and support for the development of stratified medicine which enables doctors to provide patients with specific treatments according to individual needs. It requires the collection of genotype (information on an individual’s genetics) and phenotype (lifestyle and environmental information) from patients.”

The final benefit that the RCP highlights is the potential cost saving. With the NHS under increasing pressure, because of a variety of factors, the importance of opportunities to do more for less, while protecting patient outcomes, should not be dismissed. The RCP believes that the potential cost savings could come from reduced duplication of test orders and unsuccessful treatment, fewer errors and reduced time spent on searching for missing paper records.

I want to give a powerful example that really sums up what this is all about. Using IT and patient data to improve access to breakthrough treatments and personalised medicine is, fundamentally, about patients who are looking for answers and for some hope, not only for themselves, but for everyone in a similar situation. At this point, I want to mention a remarkable woman from my constituency, Christina Knudsen. Christina can explain her situation and her journey far more effectively than I ever could. If you will permit me, Mr Wilson, I will read the words she sent to me:

“The unusual aspect of my situation is that I am relatively young, midforties, and otherwise very healthy, sporty, have a positive mindset and have no cancer in my DNA. Where the illness originates from is a mystery (I personally believe it is from emotional stress from an unusually challenging childhood) and like many cancers, it seems to have been unprovoked. Unfortunately, we do not yet have a nationwide dataset of patients with ampullary cancer that could be used to cross-reference symptoms and treatments. This would, in my case, be a vital resource. It would not only allow doctors to help pinpoint the cause, but also make an informed decision on my treatment according to what has worked well with other patients who have suffered from the disease and who have similar attributes to me.

Ultimately, I am getting a feeling that I can turn this into something different. Perhaps I can use the situation in a positive way and be an inspiration to others. There’s no point in just going downhill with it, so I am slowly thinking that I could create a new reality around my predicament. One that would depend on my surviving this as best as possible, and showing the rest of the world that you can go through this and remain strong and positive, perhaps even overcome it. Apparently no one has beaten the particular cancer that I have, so why not try to reverse the statistics and make this into a first?”

Extraordinary! We can all agree that the drive to turn the experience of such a terrible illness into something positive for others, as Christina and Les have done, is the hallmark of someone truly heroic. When we think about the obstacles that we face in getting a fully digital NHS, and the potential pitfalls along the way, we need only think of Christina and Les, and the many patients like them who will benefit.

To conclude, effective use of digitisation in the NHS heralds the possibility of a complete transformation in how health services are delivered. This is one of those rare moments in human innovation when we could make a step change and deliver much more, for significantly less, on a permanent basis. We should, therefore, seize the opportunity with both hands, without delay.

1.55 pm

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson.

I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) for securing this debate on an incredibly important topic. He has covered all the points that should be covered, and I just want to make a few comments from a personal point of a view, as a doctor and as an MP with a constituent who has dealt with this matter.

I was very struck by the story of Les Halpin, and I have always firmly believed that the NHS’s greatest resource is the patients. I believe in the patient expert, and that the patient expert should be top of the medical team. I agree that we need state-of-the-art IT in the NHS, although I will come to some practical concerns later. Synchronicity of appointments would be a dream—I believe that dreams can come true, so I am not saying that it is not possible. Co-ordination among services would be another, and I believe that, too, is possible to achieve in the NHS soon. Primarily, I support the idea of the patient controlling the data. I wish that more of that was in place right now, even before we have the required level of IT.

There are practical concerns for a clinician. Even as a medical student, when I was dealing with paper records, far too often I had to say to a patient—I think I have said it in every clinic I have ever worked in—“I’m sorry, I haven’t got your notes.” That is a waste of the clinician’s time and a family’s time. Whenever I gave patients a physical record of an appointment, they always produced that copy at the next appointment, even if it was a few months later or an annual check. That is why we have to take the lead from the patients.

We now have some digital records. In my field, ophthalmology, computerised records are great, but the IT can be a problem. The software is fine, but many units and hospitals do not have the hardware they need for the size of the graphic information on digital records. That is why state-of-the-art IT is a little bit of a dream at the moment.

My hon. Friend mentioned Les Halpin. I have a constituent who is the father of a little girl called Eleanor. She is part of a great charity, Eleanor’s Voice—google it, and see the tweets—and is a wonderful little girl. She is undergoing treatment for cancer, which requires many appointments at many different places. Her father is good with IT and realised that people often did not have the notes they needed and were not

[Dr Tania Mathias]

co-ordinated. As a patient expert—or rather, as a patient’s family member expert—he produced a Dropbox folder. If he goes to an appointment at a clinic with Eleanor now, taking her out of her little primary school, he can say, “Don’t worry, I’ve got everything on my Dropbox. I can give you my password.” Eleanor has therefore never had a clinical meeting in the NHS that has not been useful.

We must not underestimate the practical problems with this great goal. The NHS can lead, because having one health system that so many people can access is an amazing resource—nowhere else in the world has that. Let us put the patient first and learn from the patients.

1.59 pm

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) on bringing this debate to the Chamber.

For me, data hold the key. As we move into new medical landscapes, comprehensive data sets hold vast possibilities for research and care, and we should harness and optimise their potential benefits, as my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) alluded to. I have been working with individuals, charities, researchers and clinicians to try to understand how to put patients at the centre of everything that is done with and for them.

Recent research by charities into patient responses shows that patients are keen for their data to be used. As my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds mentioned, Data4Health was launched earlier this year. At its launch, we heard from a patient, Graham, whom my hon. Friend also mentioned. Graham was backed by a clinician, a researcher and a charity, and he spoke about his journey with leukaemia and how research had helped him get the most effective treatment. We also heard from the mother of the youngest patient to be diagnosed using cutting-edge genomics about how we are moving forward. What got those patients to a diagnosis and the correct care was a true understanding of their diseases. Data are a precious gift and we must take care to ensure that everything we do with them is in the patient’s best interest.

If we can speed up data sharing in something as simple as immunisation programmes, for example, it will be more effective. Vaccination coverage is necessary to ensure success, and at the moment data collection is, as a doctor described it to me, clunky in many areas. We still have paper records. Only recently we saw how integrated patient data might have saved a young child’s life. Patient safety and good data are therefore real and ever-present issues.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend is extremely knowledgeable in this area. Is she aware of the campaign for the new-generation Bexsero meningitis B vaccine, which was developed by genomics? The NHS was the first health service in the world to allow two-month-old babies to receive that vaccine. The collection of data and the effectiveness of vaccines and drugs can put the NHS at the forefront of what is happening in the world.

Jo Churchill: Indeed, and there is a larger point than that: we also lead the world in life sciences, innovation and technology. The NHS is a critical resource; with patients’ permission, we have the ability not only to create great health for our nation, but to save money for our NHS and produce wealth for our economy. There is nothing not to like in that virtuous circle.

How much better would things be for people who go into hospital if the ambulance staff and paramedics who took them there could view their medication and understand their personal situation more fully, and therefore respond more appropriately and not waste precious time? As a doctor said to me, that is particularly important in caring for patients out of hours. Ringing other hospitals is sometimes not an option. Side effects can be worse for some patients than others, and we need to know why in order to target effective treatment. That would avoid waste and reduce the cost for individuals, their families and the system. My hon. Friend alluded to health economics studies that show potential savings ranging from as little as £16 billion to as much as £66 billion if data were deployed properly. We must grab this opportunity. The NHS needs to find cost savings, and we have an opportunity to drive the innovation that would deliver such savings.

That applies across the piece. I have just come from a debate on autism in the main Chamber, and one of the key points that was raised there was that health data are not adequate to link things up so that young children can have effective and timely diagnosis. As my hon. Friend mentioned, we had a powerful debate on meningitis in the House a few days ago, and we would benefit from data on that disease too. We also had a powerful and moving debate on brain tumours recently. Data on such issues should be linked, because the patient is an individual and how they respond to a drug or combinations of drugs is important.

Only this morning I spoke to Mike Burrows of the wonderful Salford lung study, in which a drug is put into a real-world environment and connected with databases so that all of a patient’s health needs can be tracked. The study looks at real life and can cope with all the different variables to see the effects that a drug might have on people. As we move into an environment in which co-morbidities are ever present in our ageing population, we can immediately see how someone who takes a drug for one condition and thereby receives a benefit for another will have their health enhanced.

GlaxoSmithKline is about to produce the results of that study, which will be interesting, but Mike said to me that it has been a winner for the local health service, and that is what is important. The GPs who have been involved have seen the benefits. The hardware alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham, which is so often lacking in the system, has been invested in and now, with the integration of the NHS and social care, we have the ability to optimise care for the patient, which is important. The Salford study covers a quarter of a million people, and the learning from it will be rolled out across the broader Manchester landscape as devolution takes place.

The Minister is in a unique position to see data as a solution. On many challenging issues in this data-rich system, we are information-poor. Variations lead to inconsistencies. He can implement the recommendations of the accelerated access review, spearheading how we

can best put to use the lessons from large-scale studies such as the Salford study, the Birmingham study mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds and studies from right across London.

There is also much to be learned from some of the devolved areas. I have spoken at length about that with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who is the Scottish National party's lead on health. We have a lot of medical expertise to harness in my party and right across the House, so that we can concentrate minds and ensure that we take the right direction of travel.

Work is going on across the Richmond group and in the pharmaceutical industry. In this place, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett), who chairs the all-party group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who chairs the all-party group on life sciences, and I, as chair of the all-party group on personalised medicine, are discussing how we can best develop a combined piece of work in this area, because collaborative approaches always give us the best results. There is a plethora of data in the system, but, as Chris Carrigan of the National Cancer Intelligence Network says, we must harness data effectively.

In this country we have some of the best science in the world. The areas of informatics and genomics will be game changers, allowing us to develop drugs in as little as five months instead of years. We need responsive systems. It is unlikely, if not impossible, that our clinicians will be able to keep up with cutting-edge research without the use of electronics. Last year, a multidisciplinary group looked at data sharing in genetics and concluded that the current arrangements are unsatisfactory.

If we understand why drugs work better on certain groups or in distinct geographical areas, they can be targeted effectively. That is particularly the case in the area of rare diseases. A young constituent of mine who has a condition called tuberous sclerosis and those who suffer from other conditions such as Duchenne muscular dystrophy, lupus or rare cancers are in cohorts that are too small to prove efficacy. If there are only a few sufferers of such conditions throughout the country, the transferral of knowledge is difficult unless information is held centrally, but the data provide the key.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I would not have intervened on my hon. Friend if we did not have plenty of time. She has developed the interesting theme of the benefit of the life sciences to our economy. She then explained how the better use of data can speed up the development of drugs. By doing that effectively at a time when global drugs companies are looking at where it is best to locate themselves, the NHS could encourage more of them to come to the United Kingdom to develop drugs. Would that not be a huge benefit?

Jo Churchill: It would. That is also part of the complex environment covered by the accelerated access review, the early access scheme that my hon. Friend mentioned and so on.

We now know what the landscape for the cancer drugs fund looks like going forward. I started my journey to this place on a personal note, speaking about personalised medicine as a campaigner back in 2010 after my second bout of cancer. My dream is that

anybody will be able to have my data to learn what will prevent any of my four daughters from developing any of the cancers that I unfortunately have had in my lifetime. We need to take hold of patients' ability to gift such data. Alongside that gift, we must drive an industry where we have the ability, the innovation, the technology and—quite frankly—the brains we need. Everybody comes here for our life sciences, to lead the world in that area, and we should grab that opportunity.

As I said, the cohorts are too small to prove efficacy. Unless we hold information in a central place, that creates a problem. As has been said, confidentiality is crucial. Strict safeguards and strong governance are a given, as my hon. Friend said. Confidentiality for participants involved in clinical research is well established, but most data are either aggregated or pseudonymised.

Speaking personally, if my data, particularly on cancer, can make one other person's journey better than mine, it is a gift. I have spoken to Graham Silk about that, and he agrees, as do the many people I have campaigned with. As Christina and Les say, being the first to gift data makes someone feel that they have done something really special. Even if it gives someone with a complex disease to a small amount of additional time, we have given someone else a very special gift.

It is important that the risks are moderated, but we must also consider the benefits and what we can win. Many patient groups show involvement rates of getting on for 100% when people know that their information will go to others. My hon. Friend mentioned the cystic fibrosis group, which has an involvement rate of 98%. We need strong leadership to draw the strands together, a common understanding and a national agreement to optimise sharing in a safe, transparent and trustworthy way.

The risks and benefits of sharing data have to be explored, but those who talk only of the risks will miss the benefits. I would like to see a chief clinical informatics officer. I look to the Minister to lay out his vision for standardising, resourcing and futureproofing the system; drawing together the ongoing work; and achieving the momentum needed for greater data sharing to improve both the health and the wealth of our nation.

2.12 pm

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, despite not thinking I would. I am actually a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department for Education, but I was asked to stand in this afternoon for the Minister, whose PPS could not be here. Suddenly I find myself for the first time ever keeping a holding pattern in advance of a Minister getting here. I suspect the confusion has arisen because the debate that was supposed to take place at 1.30 pm was cancelled, and this one was moved forward. I only discovered that this morning by spotting on the Order Paper that there was no debate other than this one. I suspect the Minister suffered the same problem.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Given the way that my hon. Friend is handling his situation, I am sure it can only be a matter of time before he is elevated to ministerial status.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend is very kind and generous, as always. I congratulate him on securing this important debate.

As I said, I am just sitting in for someone in the hope that at some point I might need to be released into the wild and they will cover for me. However, one thing I have found in my time in Parliament is that there is a huge crossover. One area in which I am very interested and actively involved in Parliament is science and technology. In the previous Parliament, I sat on the Select Committee on Science and Technology. In this Parliament, I chair the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, which, for those who do not know—this is a bit of a plug for it—is the oldest all-party parliamentary group, established in 1939 to help with the war effort, to bring Parliament and science together and to look at things such as how we can improve the public's health and food security and what we can do to improve our defences. It strikes me that we are talking about things I looked at when I was a member of the Science and Technology Committee, particularly the use of big data and the use of stratified and individual, personalised medicines. This has been quite an eye-opener for me, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

My hon. Friend is entirely right that huge amounts of data are now being generated across all services, especially the health service, with more and more advances in what we can test for and how data are stored. The effective use of IT is important not only in storing data—obviously, we must store data accurately and associate them with the correct patient records—but in making them accessible to others in future and in ensuring that their integrity is maintained. It will also allow clinicians who are perhaps viewing those data from a different angle and not fully understanding where they were collected to understand their use.

My hon. Friend spoke of his constituent, Les, who is an inspiration—I am sure that is why my hon. Friend used him as an example—and of the Empower: Data4Health campaign to promote the better use of data, which would have wide benefits. The use of state-of-the-art IT and the analysis of data can be of huge benefit to the wider patient body. Data can be used to spot trends, patterns or crossover between certain circumstances, particularly in those with rare conditions. My hon. Friend brought that up in the case of Christina, who suffers from a rare cancer. She does not know why she is especially prone to that, but feels that by finding other sufferers, clinicians may be able to spot patterns and therefore be able to develop appropriate treatments or preventive measures.

It is only by examining huge databases for the smallest anomalies that we can start to have a real impact on people with such rare conditions. Where there is only a small sample of people, it is very difficult to put them together and analyse them as a whole, particularly with the barriers and the silo mentality that exist across many of our public health services. People are fearful of sharing data or do not even know that the data exist. Anything we can do to break that down, so that we can take a helicopter view—I think that is the current phrase—to see patterns must be good. The example that my hon. Friend gave showed what could be achieved through better use and analysis of data. On my behalf and the Minister's—I have no authority to speak for the Minister; I am speaking entirely as a Back Bencher—I wish Christina well for the future.

As I have said, the future for individualised and stratified medicine is very bright, but it is only one part. That is why the data aspect is very important. Some think that the changes we will experience as a society in the next 30 years will be equal to those we have experienced as a society over the past 300 years, whether in transport, education, or the way we interact as nations. The greatest changes will probably be experienced in the healthcare system. I truly believe we are on the cusp of a major breakthrough, and the collection, analysis and use of data from a much wider base than has ever previously been available will play a huge part in that.

Jo Churchill: I would like to say what a sterling job my hon. Friend is doing; I agree with everything I have heard so far. Does he agree that there is a big opportunity to drill down and understand more about health inequalities, which are so important in our society? When the average life expectancy in certain areas is so much more than in other areas, the use of collective data to drill down on health equalities and understand why things happen and the concomitant effect on certain diseases is really important.

Stephen Metcalfe: I thank my hon. Friend for those remarks; she is absolutely right. We have been talking about people suffering with rare conditions and about putting them together and spotting patterns, but tackling health inequality by comparing data from different parts of the country and by comparing, perhaps, people's longer term histories is equally important. It may also help policy makers to find a way of developing a geographically stratified approach to tackling some of these health inequalities. Just moving on slightly, I think that part of why clinical commissioning groups were established was that they would allow doctors and clinicians locally to identify what was in the interests of the people they represented. Of course, using data to do that is vital, so I could not agree with my hon. Friend more.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Before my hon. Friend moves away from the subject of healthcare, does he agree that we need to concentrate much more on preventive healthcare, rather than on the palliative treatment of health issues? Often early interventions, or even action taken to prevent a condition from occurring in the first place, can be far more effective for patients and more cost-effective for the NHS than treating symptoms once they have arisen.

Stephen Metcalfe: I agree completely. Prevention is always better. Sometimes we find that we have discovered the way of preventing something after it has been contracted—that may sound a bit confused. I am trying to say that if we have enough information in advance, we might be able to tell the right people how they might prevent themselves from getting a certain condition. We could identify them, identify the risk, inform them and hope that they do not then fall into the trap, as opposed to having found them with the condition and then saying, "If you had done this, you would have been able to prevent that particular condition." My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

The wider benefits to the economy are the second, very important part of this. We have talked about the huge benefits and about making the United Kingdom—England—particularly with the fantastic NHS, the best

place to develop, research, test and trial drugs, which has to be for the benefit of our constituents. If we have earlier access to new treatments, that can only be to the good. My hon. Friend used the excellent example of Cure Leukaemia in Birmingham and it sounds as though having that model rolled out across the country would be beneficial to many. I will certainly bring that particular aspect of my hon. Friend's remarks to the Minister's attention.

I shall start to wind up. We have to address a number of challenges to bring the ideas to fruition. When we talk about data, people get a little jittery. They think that we, as the authorities, are starting to collect information on them that they would not necessarily want collected, so the anonymising of data will be vital, as will ensuring that people understand how their data are used and how they can have access to their data and protect themselves.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I emphasise to my hon. Friend that the most important thing that should come out of this debate is not the fact that data are a good thing—we all admit that—but that we need, from the Government, a way to push this forward. I and my hon. Friends have made a number of suggestions: there should be a public information campaign, common standards and perhaps a commissioner for data—or some such post—so that on a national basis we can really give this whole thing a push. Up till now, progress has been far too slow. We need to push things forward, so that we can really gain the benefits from it.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend is completely correct; that is the key. It is about making sure that the Government put in place the correct mechanism not only to protect data but to give people confidence, and that is one of the biggest challenges that we face. I will make sure that is heard loud and clear.

The other big challenge is having the correct personnel to analyse the data. A major challenge for big data as a whole—not just in the clinical setting—is to have people who understand how the data work. Big data will be worth many billions of pounds to the UK economy over the next few years, and not just in the health sector, so we need to make sure that we have the right stream of well-trained, informed people coming through.

Dr Mathias: On the point about the problems with big data, I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown). Our problem is that if we are not first in this, we will be the losers.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we have to be at the front of that race. One way to do that is by making sure that those who are currently in schools and colleges understand what big data are, what the benefits will be in the future and how they can have a productive, valuable and rewarding career, not just for themselves financially, but that makes a significant difference to us as a nation. The phrase “big data” slips off the tongue very easily but does not actually encompass everything that it means.

I have laid out some of the challenges and benefits. In summary—again, I am grateful for you allowing me to speak in this debate, Mr Wilson—it is obvious that the full digitisation of records will potentially solve some of

the biggest problems and challenges we face in spotting patterns and helping to develop new treatments and therapies. It will help to improve patient safety and, as my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) said, patient-focused care by putting the patient right at the centre again.

Of course, cost savings are available, and they are always required in these difficult times. Good IT can lead to good cost savings. The right way forward has to be accuracy and the accurate keeping of records, stopping doubling-up and making sure that records are in the right place at the right time for the right patient. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) gave an excellent example of a patient who had taken control of their records via—I think—Dropbox, which meant that for every appointment the patient had access to everything that was needed to make it a productive and valuable experience. That is very positive and I am sure that, as Members, we have all had reports from constituents who say that they had a wasted experience at their local doctor's because the right records were not there. If that one small aspect is dealt with, that has to be welcome.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds made the point that with this move we will—and should—be able to achieve more for less, and that is always welcome. I congratulate him on securing this debate and thank my hon. Friends the Members for Twickenham and for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) for their contributions. I very much look forward to hearing what the Opposition spokesman has to say and, in due course, the Minister.

2.29 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) on securing this important debate and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. It has been interesting. I am a new Member of this House and it is true, and a great pleasure, that every day brings new insight into the working of the House and its rules and procedures. I am grateful to have seen some of that today.

We have heard some valuable contributions. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) used her practical experience as a clinician to talk about patient control data and her dream, which I share, of co-ordination on behalf of her constituents. The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) emphasised the value of research and the role of charities and other non-NHS bodies in driving this agenda forward and having the time to understand diseases. I was particularly glad to hear her mention health economics in this sort of work.

The hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) heroically used his experience of large data in another Department and I look forward to his accelerated political career through the Government ranks. The perspectives of all hon. Members have enriched this debate not just today, but previously. Let us hope that we can move the discussion on digital health records forward for the benefit of patients across the country.

This subject is dear to the heart of the hon. Member for The Cotswolds. He talked about his constituent's experience and referred to four ways in which the digitisation

[Karin Smyth]

of data can be transformational for the health service by speeding up new developments, improving co-ordination of care, giving patients control over information about their health and driving whole processes forward. He has been a powerful advocate for his constituents. I often say that patients are assets to be utilised for their knowledge and experience, not nuisances to be ignored. The potential for people to look for hope, not just for themselves but using their experience for others, is an inspiration and at the heart of much of this debate.

I want to talk about the benefits of the data. This debate is important because the NHS, which provides a large population with universal coverage that is free at the point of use, is uniquely placed to be a world leader in innovation.

I started my career as an NHS manager in 1988 without access to a computer and finished as a manager of a patient referral service, so I know how far we have come but also how far we need to go. The NHS must be one of the last remaining organisations that still communicate with people via letter. Extending the use of technology to patient records is not just about using taxpayers' money more effectively, important though that is. The effective use of the right data has huge benefits as yet unseen and unknown, such as how such data can be used to help tackle inequalities, particularly health inequalities?

With a growing and ageing population, more and more people are living with different combinations of illnesses and conditions. None of us here knows the huge potential healthcare benefits that the wise use of data could bring to the population we serve in years to come. The principles of the Government's proposals are worthy of our support. As members of the party that founded and nurtured the NHS, we want to find ways of delivering high-quality, personalised and cost-effective care. I assure the Minister that we will support in principle the Government's plans to roll the agenda forward, as long as there is scrutiny and challenge in a number of areas.

As with everything, there is a vital balance to be struck, particularly on privacy, protection and penalties for the misuse of data, which the hon. Member for The Cotswolds highlighted. I hope the Minister will agree that public confidence in the integrity of the programme is pivotal to its success. I also hope he will assure us today that the Government will take on board important lessons from the shambles surrounding the roll-out of care.data. At the heart of that was lack of public trust about possible misuse of data and a perception that the Government were trying to make changes on the quiet. This must not happen again. I agree with the hon. Member for The Cotswolds that we need a public information campaign that brings patients with us on this journey.

The efficient and effective use of data and technology plays an increasing role in many areas of our lives. The public, perhaps rightly, expect the NHS to catch up and to make for an easier and better-quality patient experience. It can be hard to convince a sceptical public and worried patients that sharing data about their health conditions and treatment will benefit them and their families.

Examples from years past can help and we have heard some powerful examples today. Data played a vital role in tracking and establishing a link between

smoking and lung cancer. As a result, earlier diagnosis and swifter treatments were made possible. I am sure that people who have felt the frustration of putting themselves under the care of healthcare professionals who, for whatever reason, have not had access to their health records and so are not always best placed to move treatment forward can be readily convinced of the programme's benefits.

In my city of Bristol, GPs collaborate on a web-based platform with well-established sharing agreements for data that includes community providers. There is good practice across the country. Bristol is a high-tech, savvy digital city, but I have learned during my time in this place that many hon. Members have constituencies that do not even have good broadband coverage. If this project helps to bring the benefits of shared platforms to people nationwide, it will be a good thing, but it will require a lot of work. If patients can be helped to understand the interoperability of patient data, that promises to improve the quality of experience for the patient, and the programme will receive widespread public support.

I hope the Minister will be able to explain what plans the Government have to educate the public at large about the benefits of this important project, to ensure that concerns that are bound to be expressed by some about privacy and security are tackled before they can multiply. There will be concern that such a major programme of digitisation with an ambitious timeline could run into glitches of the type that many governmental IT projects across different types of government have suffered in the past. What degree of confidence does the Minister have in the deliverability of the timeline and the budget overview? What guarantee can he give that it will be met and who can the taxpayer hold to account if it is not? What confidence does the Minister have in the safeguards that will be put in place to ensure the credibility of confidential data? Is he confident that the requirements of the National Data Guardian will be met?

I now want to turn to a few other concerns that I hope the Minister will address this afternoon, first about money. I have mentioned taxpayer value, as have other hon. Members, so let me turn to some elements of the financial side of this project. Like other hon. Members, I have seen the headlines proclaiming the additional money that is supposedly being allocated to these projects as part of the "General Practice Forward View", but with the Department of Health struggling to remain within its expenditure limit, 80% of trusts in deficit and the well-documented pressures on primary care, will the Minister be crystal clear, not just about the money allocation he will want to tell us about but, crucially, what pot or pots it will come from and how it will be allocated to support this work?

The Secretary of State has referred to the so-called extra investment of £45 million being dependent on uptake. Will he outline how he sees this dependency shaping up over the coming years? If digitisation of medical records is about improving patient health and genuinely bringing healthcare into the 21st century and speeding up patient care, it will be worthy of support, but we do need to know how it will be implemented.

There are serious questions about capacity and ability to deliver, not just the capacity of the Department of Health and NHS England but, crucially, the capacity of GP surgeries and other providers to deliver a credible

digitised service. How will GP practices, which are already hard-pressed by soaring patient demand, be supported to implement this project? What level of engagement in the process to shape the roll-out can GP practices expect? If the Government are keen to limit piling additional pressure on busy GPs, how will they ensure that digitisation processes do not simply add to the burdens? I look forward to reassurance from the Minister to take back to GPs in my constituency, and for colleagues to take back to theirs, because I know that the latest announcements will, with other pressures, bear heavily on their current and projected workload.

Finally, I turn to accountability, which was of concern in my professional experience during the structural changes of 2010-2015. The source of responsibility for change and delivery remains a concern to me and others and is a problem that permeates many aspects of our healthcare system. Throughout the digitisation programme, who will be accountable for its delivery? In the realigned structures of the NHS, we are well used to having difficulty navigating a complex web of accountability for various elements of various programmes. When it comes to patient data, Governments of all persuasions do not have a glowing track record. I suspect that if this project goes to plan, the Minister will claim credit, but if it goes wrong, who will carry the can?

I again thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate. I hope this will be the start of many more discussions with hon. Members on both sides of the House about this very important issue.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, let me say that I am really disappointed that he could not be here from the start of the debate. I know that the agenda for this afternoon was changed, but that was on the Order Paper; it was known. I am sure that the change would also have been communicated to the Department, in ample time for this afternoon's debate. Bearing that in mind, I call the Minister to respond to the debate.

2.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman): Thank you very much for making that point, Mr Wilson. It is a great pleasure to be here, and I am extremely disappointed not to have had notice that the debate had been brought forward. I am assiduous in attending these excellent debates in Westminster Hall, and on this subject more than any other. I will be having strong words with my office to ensure that I understand why the information was not communicated to me that the debate had been brought forward. I can only offer my apologies to hon. Members, all of whom know my passion for this subject. If there is any debate I would most want to have been at, it is this one, so please accept my apologies. I was alerted about six minutes ago that the debate had started, and I ran here. I cannot understand why this has happened, but I will happily look into it.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the debate, Mr Wilson. I start by congratulating the Backbench Business Committee on granting it and my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and the others who have spoken. I will say more in a minute about the points that they made, but it is incredibly timely to be having the debate now. I am grateful to the

hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) for her long list of questions, which I will do my best to plough through. If I miss anything, I will happily write to her to deal with it, particularly on one or two of the more detailed questions.

I genuinely thank my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds for bringing this subject to the House. Although it perhaps is not a topic that is discussed down the Dog and Duck, many of the issues that it speaks to are discussed down the Dog and Duck—modern healthcare, research and the NHS's role in helping to find new cures. My hon. Friend has been a doughty advocate of this subject in the House, not least in his advocacy of the Empower: Access to Medicine campaign on behalf of his late constituent, Les Halpin, who has been an inspirational figure to him and to many of us.

I also thank and pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who has made a reputation very quickly in the House on the subject of medical research as a double cancer survivor herself and as a passionate advocate of how we can accelerate innovation in the NHS and harness the NHS as a catalyst for innovation and accelerated access to new treatments and drugs. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) brings to the debate considerable professional expertise, as well as the passion with which she has spoken here this afternoon and elsewhere in the House.

The hon. Member for Bristol South gave a genuine signal of bipartisan, cross-party support for this broad agenda, which is extremely welcome. There are issues in the House on which it is entirely appropriate for the Government and the Opposition to knock seven bells out of each other. It is the Opposition's job to oppose and ours to govern, and democracy would be ill served if we did not, but there are topics on which it is in the public interest that we seek agreement, and medical research is one of them. Indeed, in this Chamber on Monday of last week—it seems like a month ago—we had an incredibly packed debate, perhaps the most packed debate in Westminster Hall ever, on brain tumour research. The House was speaking with one voice, and I was delighted to be able to respond, surprise some and launch a working party to take forward the points that were made.

I thank the hon. Member for Bristol South for her signal of support in principle. That is heartfelt because this agenda—the use of data in a 21st-century health service to accelerate the search for cures and to prevent unnecessary suffering from tomorrow's diseases and those that we do not have treatments for today—is precariously at risk from badly communicated policy and a media, public and political discourse that sometimes misses the detail of how data are actually being used. It is all too easy to jump on a bandwagon and launch a campaign to say, "No data to be used". That would profoundly betray those who are suffering from disease today who want their experience to help to prevent disease tomorrow, and the pioneering clinicians, doctors, academics, researchers, charities and patients who have done so much to demonstrate the important role that data have to play in research. I therefore genuinely welcome the hon. Lady's support in principle. I respect that that means she wants specific questions answered, and I will do my best to answer them.

[George Freeman]

I want to set the scene as to how and why the debate has come to a head, why the digitalisation of the health service and the use of data in health have become so topical, and why we have reflected that through the creation of this new ministerial role in the Department of Health. As the first Minister for Life Sciences, with responsibility for all of digital health and health data within the Department, I want to say something about the Government's fundamental commitment to securing and safeguarding public trust and confidence as the bedrock of the digitalisation of the NHS. I will then say something about the commitments that we have made to that programme and the timetable and funding for it. I particularly want to pick up on the question of electronic health records, on which my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds has rightly focused today's debate, and how we see the electronic health record revolution in this Parliament and beyond transforming the three key pillars of the debate: individual care, system safety and performance, and research. When people ask why we need data, those three pillars are my first three answers.

I came to this agenda from the research end, after a 15-year career in biomedical research. In the past 15 years, the power of informatics—the power of applied computing—has come to transform how drugs are discovered. I am talking about individual data on the deep history of a patient's journey through disease—their genomic predisposition, their clinical records and the way they react to different drugs—but also, on the other axis, about large-scale, anonymised cohort studies of patient experience. We can look, for example, at diabetes patients; why do 80% of UK diabetes patients respond in this way and not that way? A combination of large-scale, anonymised cohort studies and individual, in-depth personal patient histories can change, and indeed is changing, the way drugs are discovered.

I have seen with my own eyes in the industry how, in the last 10 years and even in the last five, work has very quickly come back to clinical assets and to starting the process of discovery with patients—with tissue, with data, with the clinical, human experience of disease. Understanding how different patients live with disease and respond to drugs is the starting point for research. The way the industry worked when I first joined it was that one would start with a theoretical, academic target for a possible drug and then go through an expensive 15-year process—it would now cost \$2 billion—of long-term academic work followed by the pre-clinical stage and phase 1, 2, 3 and 4 trials, only to discover in about 80% of cases that the drug did not work in people. The industry is rapidly changing, to start with the experience of real people with real disease and to understand how disease takes hold in real people in real time.

One of the many benefits of this revolution is that we will reduce our dependence on animal tests. There will always be a need to involve animals in research, but we can reduce that need to an absolute minimum. The more we can start with data and an understanding of how particular patients respond, the more we can dramatically accelerate our search for both diagnostics and treatments.

As I said, I came to this agenda from the research end. Research has been significantly accelerated in this country over the past 20 or 30 years, for instance by the

creation of the National Institute for Health Research and by the work of Professor Dame Sally Davies, the chief medical officer, in funding and setting up our clinical academic research centres. It is my great privilege to be the Minister responsible for that £1 billion-a-year infrastructure, and for the comprehensive biomedical centres that we have set up. For the past 15 to 20 years, there has been phenomenal use of data in tertiary research hospitals to drive research and improve care.

In many ways, the aim of the programme that I will discuss in a moment is to spread out the benefits of that advanced modern healthcare, and the embedding of research in clinical practice, to the rest of the national health service. For research purposes, the use of data is not an optional extra; it is an absolute fundamental. No researcher in the world would dream of trying to run a research programme without access to up-to-date data.

The programme is also about system safety and performance, and about individual care. If hon. Members have been to a GP clinic or a hospital recently, they will have quickly noticed that all the diagnostic devices and most pieces of treatment equipment are digital. Health is going digital. Conferences refer to digital health as if there were still analogue health, but health is going digital very fast, just like every other aspect of life. If the system is to give patients individual care, we have to digitalise it.

Any of us could, God forbid, clutch our chest, go down and need an ambulance. When the ambulance comes for me, I want the staff to have not a biro and a pad but an iPad. I want them to know my blood group, my allergies and my history when they get to me and when I go to A&E. Hon. Members might be amused that when I first gave a speech on this topic, I referred to a photograph outside my office in the Department of Health. It is an inspiring photograph of the NHS, there for us 24/7: a picture of a paramedic leaning out of an air ambulance over some remote island, probably in the Shetlands. A wave is breaking on the lighthouse, the poor patient lies in the heather waiting for the ambulance, and out of the air ambulance leans a paramedic holding a pad of paper and a biro. I said that when they come for me I want them to have an iPad, and the photograph was taken down within days of my speech, which was the first small sign of progress.

The important point is that we have set a target to ensure that electronic health records are used first in A&E, because that is where rapid response—getting the right drug to the patient—has the most dramatic effects. That is true across the care pathway. Most constituents say to me, “Mr Freeman, when I go from the GP to the hospital to the care home and back to the hospital, why do I have to repeat my diagnosis and my treatment history to the clinicians? Surely my patient record should follow, or even go ahead of me, through the system.” That point is very well made.

Most of my constituents desperately want individual care, so that the system knows who they or their loved ones are when they arrive. When somebody arrives at hospital after being referred by a GP, they want the hospital to know who they are, why they are there, what the referral was for and what the treatment is.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The Minister has a huge knowledge of the subject, and I respect enormously what he is trying to do. One thing that has come out of

the debate is that there is still a significant amount of public resistance to digitalising patient medical records. However, it is clearly in the interest of all of us. Those of us speaking in this debate are converted to the benefits of digital records. Will the Minister consider running a Government public information campaign showing the distinct benefits of digitalising patient medical records and how it can help the NHS? Will he also consider creating some form of post within Government to oversee the process—something like a health information commissioner—so that there is consistency right across the NHS as to how the digitalisation will be rolled out?

George Freeman: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I will come to our plans, and to the process and timetable for setting out the national data guardian's recommendations on how we should proceed. I would expect that one of her recommendations will be about the importance of communicating to the public and patients why data are so important. As part of the annual National Institute for Health Research Parliament day that I launched, we might have a themed event focused on the power of data and why they are so key to a 21st century NHS.

Dr Mathias: We have been talking about the speed with which the Government should be digitalising records, hence the idea of a chief of information for the NHS. I believe that the public are already ahead of the Government. That is the problem—I fear that the Government may already be too late. There are too many apps out there, too many different clinicians are doing different things and too many patients are devising their own systems. We are behind everybody else.

George Freeman: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. She knows my frustrations with the situation, and the truth is that healthcare is digitalising very fast. That is not just driven by commercial app manufacturers. As she says, many doctors are developing apps for their own benefit and that of their patients. Many patients are also developing apps. The revolution is coming. Part of our strategy is to ensure the digitalisation of the NHS, which is no mean undertaking. In fact, I would liken it to Crossrail and HS2 as a global project. It is the digitalisation of the world's fifth biggest employer—a vast undertaking. There are a number of lessons to be learned from previous Government initiatives.

In many ways, we are catching up. The challenge is to catch up in a way that understands the pace at which healthcare is digitalising and seeks not to monopolise, but to provide an aircraft carrier—a mother ship—on which the exploding range of various digital healthcare products can land. I have mixed my metaphors in an ugly way there, but the challenge is to turn the NHS into a catalyst for leading and unlocking NHS leadership in digitalisation.

I totally accept the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham that, in many ways, we are catching up and trying to provide a platform for leadership in a rapidly emerging space. In response to the point that she and my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds made about the need for leadership in the NHS, I can confirm that NHS England is about to appoint a chief information technology officer. A major part of that function will be to be lead champion, to explain and to be a point of patient information in the NHS.

Through the creation of my role, we have for the first time created a single ministerial portfolio with responsibility for this area. Until the post was created, every Minister in the Department had a little bit of information and digitalisation in their portfolio, which in many ways was appropriate but also meant that there was no single point of leadership. Part of my mission is to ensure that the Department brings that together.

The three great pillars that require the quiet revolution of digitalisation include research and individual care. However, I want to touch on the third pillar, which is system safety and performance. The NHS is the fifth biggest employer in the world. It is an incredible public service and an incredibly complex set of organisations. We talk of it as if it were one, but under the national health service's magnificent initials are a whole range of GPs, hospitals and care providers, which all operate independently within a healthcare system. We are building the railway tracks for patients' records to move along, so that we integrate them. A fundamental part of that, in addition to research and individual care, is ensuring that the NHS can deliver an essential contract with patients in a 21st century health system. We have a duty to know where best practice is and where worst practice is. We should not have to rely on whistleblowers to put themselves at huge personal risk by sighting and highlighting worst practice. The computer will do it for us.

The other day, I looked at a piece of software that was developed—for a very small amount of money, by the way—by an Oxford academic. It shows prescribing data for one important class of drugs across the whole of NHS England. There is one outlier, and it happens to be in Norfolk, which is why I took a particular interest. It is clear that there is a very small group of GPs that somebody has not got the guidance to or rung up. I am sure that as soon as those GPs have the information, their prescribing practice will fall into line with the rest of the country.

That is computing power being used to promote patient safety and efficiency. The third pillar—system safety and performance—is important, and one of the lessons from the Francis report is that we need to use data much better to identify best and worst practice. When people ask why we are doing this, I suggest that it is for those three noble purposes, which support each other. The digitisation of the system should drive patient care, system safety and research, and the same datasets run between them.

Crucially, the Secretary of State and I understand that the whole digitisation programme has to be rooted and covenanted in deep and profound respect for public and patient trust and confidence. I am not revealing a state secret by saying that I am not sure that that has necessarily been the case until now, for a whole range of reasons, but partly because Government have seen digitisation as inevitable and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham suggests, slightly overdue, and therefore not something that needs to be announced. Of course, the Government are always coy about admitting problems, but I am not coy about saying to people that we are still running the NHS, in large part, on paper and cardboard, which is a problem that needs to be solved.

Unless we describe the problem clearly, we will not carry the public with us in solving it. My magnificent local hospital, the Norfolk and Norwich, has a data

[George Freeman]

repository with 10 miles of shelving on which patient records are kept, held together by treasury tags and paperclips. I do not know about other Members, but I am not prepared to say to my constituents that that is an appropriate way to store their information, and indeed, my information, my mother's information and my children's information. Each hospital separately stores records of which patients came to it and when, which does not speak to a properly joined-up system. It is a national health service—the clue is in the name—and when someone clutches their chest in an unfamiliar bit of the country, they expect the national health service to know who they are. That is one of the benefits of a national health service. From the point of view of properly integrating, we need to explain to people where the current system is not able to deliver.

It is for that reason, and because we want to carry public trust and confidence, that the Secretary of State and I are shifting from what I crudely characterise as an agenda that, to the extent that it has been discussed publicly, has been called long overdue, essential for the running of the system, and something that patients do not need to worry too much about. Well, we only have to say the words “big data” and “big government” to most people in this country for them to be alert to the risks of what might be happening behind their back. I am trying to do it differently by saying to people “This is an urgent, overdue, phenomenally exciting and complex project that we are doing in the interests of patients,” for the reasons I have just set out. Public trust and confidence are essential to the project, and I am not revealing any state secrets by saying that NHS England's care.data consultation last year did not demonstrate global best practice in consulting patients. It was a well-intentioned leaflet that was sent to every house, which of course does not mean that every person in the country read it, and for many people the wording was as confusing as it was enlightening. That is one of the reasons why the Secretary of State and I have gone to such lengths.

We have appointed the first ever national data guardian in Dame Fiona Caldicott, a widely respected expert in the field, to advise us on the right protocols and safeguards for ensuring that public and patients can have trust and confidence in the system. Dame Fiona has carried out an extraordinarily detailed piece of work, and her recommendations will be landing on our desks imminently. She has considered the whole range of issues, including consent; how many data should naturally flow in the system for it to function; which data transactions should be subject to additional patient consent; what the standards should be; and what the relationship between the various bodies should be in terms of accountability. That work is very important.

We have gone further and asked the Care Quality Commission to carry out a major piece of work on best practice in the system today and to set a benchmark so that we can hold the system to account. We have set up the digital maturity index, and this spring each clinical commissioning group has had to report, for the first time, on the level of digitisation in its local health economy, and we are building that into the CCG annual assessment framework so that people will be able to click on My NHS and see heat maps of the extent of

digitisation across the country, which will help us to identify best and worst practice and to accelerate the roll-out.

We have also appointed Professor Bob Wachter, the American digital health expert, to come over and help us consider the cultural issues of ensuring that the NHS is properly training and supporting practitioners. It is about the human element, because we can have as many systems and technologies as we want, but it ultimately comes down to culture, practice and patients' records being respected and treated appropriately by the system. I hope Members can see that we are taking seriously the need to put in place a series of measures that carry public trust and confidence.

Dr Mathias: Will the Minister ensure that there is a two-way exchange of information and transparency so that, if the NHS has my medical data, I am always offered, in a secure form such as a personal Dropbox, or whatever form I wish, everything that the NHS has on me? Every patient must be offered all the data that the NHS has on him or her.

George Freeman: Unsurprisingly, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. She will know that my first parliamentary foray into this space was by championing a ten-minute rule Bill on patients' rights to patient data. Like her, I believe that, in addition to the three noble pillars I set out, there is a fourth pillar. Not only does the digitisation of health have benefits for the system in delivering healthcare in a safer, higher quality and better way but, almost more importantly, it helps the transition of healthcare from something that, in the 20th century, was essentially done to patients by a largely benign health state—an essentially passive model of “Come to us when you are sick, and we will treat you as best we can. You can then return to normality”—to a model of healthcare for the 21st century that is all about empowering active healthcare citizenship by modern citizens. We give them the information, and we allow them to understand and take control of their health and life choices, not in a punitive way or in a way that says, “If you don't, or if you are irresponsible, you will be ineligible,” but in a way that tries to inspire and promote a culture of active healthcare citizenship.

Putting information in the power of patients and their loved ones, in the same way as in banking and in all other important aspects of our lives, will pay huge public health benefits, with people using information and data to drive lifestyle choices. Indeed, Members are already seeing that. One of the ironies of this space is that some of the most rapid digitisation driven by patients is by the so-called “worried well”—those who take their healthcare seriously and are using Fitbits and other devices to monitor calorie intake, exercise and sleeping patterns to keep themselves out of hospital. The system should use those technologies to try to deliver better care, and we want to integrate the two so that more and more patients are able to harness such technologies to empower themselves. Ultimately, the Secretary of State and I want to get to a point where that transparency and empowerment drives the relationship with healthcare recipients, as healthcare citizens, choosing where to have their surgery and holding the system to account. Intelligent digital transparency is the greatest driver of a modern healthcare system so that every day, every hour and every week the massive diagnostic and

treatment footprint of the NHS is mapped digitally, allowing patients to know that they are actually controlling the system, which is there for them.

Some clinicians, particularly GPs, take a different view—that the sovereignty of their relationship with their patient means that their patient's data belong to the clinician, which is an interesting point. Most patients feel that their data belong to them and that they should have access to their data. There are ethical issues, as well as the question of the appropriate relationship between clinician and patient, and in no way do I want technology to get in the way of, or to undermine, that sovereignty. Indeed, the clinicians to whom I speak say that the digitisation revolution allows them to focus their professionalism and judgment on what really brought them into clinical practice, which is dealing with their patients, while the computer does what they no longer have to do—recording and accessing in a split-second all the information the clinician needs to make their judgments. Technology can support that relationship, rather than undermining it.

Dr Mathias: In defence of the clinicians out there, I am sure the majority believe that the patients they serve are sovereign.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Minister, before you respond, may I say that you have been on your feet now for 30 minutes and the Minister's response is usually about 10 minutes? I just want you to bear that in mind.

George Freeman: Thank you, Mr Wilson. Having arrived a little late, I was taking the opportunity to deal with the points that my hon. Friends and the hon. Member for Bristol South have made. I will do my best to expedite matters for you.

I want to make the point that the covenanting of public trust and confidence is completely central for the Secretary of State and me. We want to make sure that the public have faith and confidence that we are not in any way playing fast and loose, and I hope that the measures I have announced will go some way to underpinning that.

We have also gone further. People have been concerned about the selling of their data for purposes beyond healthcare—commercial purposes—particularly those that may prejudice their eligibility for healthcare. We have not only made it clear that that is unacceptable; we have made it illegal and imposed a substantial fine and penalty on it. We need to use data but we need to use them appropriately, and we need patients and the public to know that that is our commitment.

On the commitments that we have made, we have secured funding from the Treasury for the completion of the paperless NHS 2020 project, which the Secretary of State has set out in other speeches in some detail. It is a £4.2 billion funding commitment, and in the past few months, since the completion of the comprehensive spending review, officials in the Department of Health, in NHS England and in the Health and Social Care Information Centre—which I recently announced is to be renamed NHS Digital—have been working on a complex work plan for seeing this through. It comprises 26 workstreams in six domains, and we are very committed to making sure that this is properly managed with clear milestones and clear accountability procedures. The project is complex and some things will not go according

to plan. We need to make sure that we are on top of that and bringing the very best levels of management to that project.

I want to cite one or two examples of where we are profoundly leading in this space. One is a project for which I have ministerial responsibility—the 100,000 Genomes Project, in which we are sequencing the entire genomes of 100,000 volunteer NHS patients, and combining those with hospital data to form the world's first reference library for genomic medicine. All the information is consented, and the project represents a pioneering showcase of the use of data in 21st-century health research. We have also launched a genomic medicine service in the NHS through the 13 genomic medicine centres. We want the NHS to pioneer genomic diagnosis and treatment, particularly in cancer and rare diseases. It is a shining informatic and digital data programme as well as a genetic science programme.

I also want to highlight a project that I recently saw, which goes to the other end of the spectrum: the day-to-day management of disease. It is a diabetes service pioneered, to my great joy, by Litcham surgery in my constituency. It involves patients self-monitoring their blood sugar levels, and barcode and digital transmission of that information back to the GP practice. I went to see it in use. Patients go to the consultation and the nurse comes with their data, which is used to monitor their precise condition. That leads to the use of the very latest drugs in ever-more accurate precision dosing and comparative data across all participating GP clinics, which drives up standards. It is a brilliant example of data being used to improve care and the use of novel and precision medicines in the NHS.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I alluded to that in my speech. The next stage on from that is for the individual patient to be able to access the data themselves, which I do not think they can in the example that the Minister cited. I think there have been cases where patients have hacked into the data to get the information for themselves so that they can then see what is happening to their own body and adjust the amount of a particular drug—insulin or sugar or whatever it happens to be—without having to have recourse to a nurse or even a hospital.

George Freeman: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham. As part of this quiet revolution of patient empowerment, the clinicians I speak to actively want their patients to have the data and are encouraging them to have it. This is where the apps revolution comes into play, because that is one of the ways in which we are putting this information in the hands, laptops and phones of patients. He is absolutely right that care is improved, but we want to improve patients' understanding of their condition and improve patient empowerment.

The other example I want to cite is an inspiring example set up at King's College London by Professor Simon Lovestone: the case register information system in mental health and psychiatry, which is a difficult area of research, as colleagues know. It puts together patient records from across the 250,000-patient catchment area of South London and Maudsley and combines them with MRI brain scans, the digitisation of patient medical records and very complex drug histories in mental health, to build the world's first reference database for trying to understand the causal mechanisms for complex

[George Freeman]

psychiatric disorders. It has attracted phenomenal industry co-investment alongside the NIHR centre of excellence and is a shining example of how we can use information and data to drive both research and improved care.

On electronic health records, which are important and which this debate was focused on, the ultimate goal is to have a system in which our individual health records flow seamlessly across the system in advance of patients. That is the goal of the paperless NHS. We have set out a series of specific commitments—I can write to the hon. Members here about them—for this year, next year, 2018, 2019 and 2020. They set out clear targets for how the electronic health record will be used and brought to bear—percentages of penetration in A&E, in the ambulance service and then mainstream across the service.

My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds makes an important point. We need to identify some early uses of electronic health records, which may not be comprehensive and universal, and put this benefit in the hands of patients as quickly as possible. One of my missions is to ensure that we get some basic but powerful uses of electronic health records in iPads, phones and devices, so that patients can see their experience beginning to improve today.

Karin Smyth: I appreciate the Minister's enthusiasm and his great knowledge of this sphere. He is probably one of the people who has benefited in his career from the Labour Government's reversal of the brain drain in the 1980s and 1990s, when they invested heavily in research and technology in the great institutions that he has talked about, which has led us to this point. I look forward to the timeline. He has highlighted how we have Dame Fiona Caldicott, the CQC and—forgive me; I missed the name of the gentleman from America—the practitioner who is coming to talk to us about the culture of patient data. We have CCGs reporting into NHS England and NHS England's capability on the ground to deliver and support providers to make this deliverable. I do not wish to make a party political point on that, but the frustration shared by those of us who understand how those systems work on the ground will not be helped by having a plurality of people. Who will be in charge of the work plan with its 26 workstreams to make this happen?

George Freeman: The hon. Lady makes an important point. It is being driven by the National Information Board, which is NHS-led and involves all the key stakeholders within the service. It is a shining example. I recently spoke at its annual conference, and NHS clinicians will tell you that they are setting the protocols and programmes through the NIB. I genuinely do not believe that the establishment of Dame Fiona Caldicott and the CQC and Wachter reviews are distractions. They are intended to try to support clinical pioneers in the service.

I understand the point that the hon. Lady makes about the service being under pressure, which it is. The demand for healthcare is exploding, and NHS England has set out in the "Five Year Forward View" that digitisation and the greater use of technology is essential to reducing unnecessary pressure on the system. It has forecast that in 2020 we will be looking at £22 billion of

avoidable costs from hospital admissions, from bureaucracy, and from paperwork. How many of us have had a diagnosis and received three or four, sometimes five, letters all saying slightly different things? That is incredibly wasteful and expensive.

NHS England itself has identified the fact that if that technology is properly implemented it can play a part in driving efficiency. However, I do not underestimate the extent to which that requires investment—which is why we have front-loaded it—as well as capacity and the ability to integrate. That is a challenge. When those systems are put in place in the private sector, huge numbers of people and huge amounts of resources are devoted to driving the integration properly. I would expect Dame Fiona's review to touch on that, particularly in relation to training, and organisations' culture and capacity.

However, things are happening. I want to share the data. More than 55 million people in England now have a summary care record. That is 96% of the population. As to how many are aware of that, it is an excellent question. How many of us have obtained access to our summary care record? That is important. Eighty-five per cent. of NHS 111 services, 73% of ambulance trusts and 63% of A&E departments now use the summary care record, and by April next year more than 95% of pharmacies will have access to it. By 2018 clinicians in primary care, urgent and emergency care, and other key transitions of care context will operate without paper, using the summary care record.

Several colleagues have touched on the question of apps today. We have clearly set out, through the National Information Board, a commitment to ensure that there are high-quality appointment-booking apps, with access to full medical records, from this year. NHS England and NHS Digital are working with GP system suppliers and third-party app developers.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Order. May I just respectfully say to the Minister, you have now spoken longer than the Member who moved the motion for the debate. You turned up an hour late and have now spoken for 40 minutes. I just want you to bear that in mind. The debate does go on to 4.30, but I respectfully point out that Ministers who have been present for the full debate usually speak for just 10 minutes. Hopefully you will bear that in mind, and are reaching the end of the speech.

George Freeman: I was trying to signal my respect for the questions that have been raised by giving comprehensive answers, but I will try to wrap up.

There is a major programme of work on apps, led by the NIB. That is to create a framework in which approved apps can be launched on the NHS Digital system. They need to be approved, so that patients have trust and confidence that they are verifiable and appropriate and can fulfil the claims they make. Ultimately we see NHS Digital as a major platform for sponsoring and developing those apps. We are not alone in that. There are stunning international examples. Estonia launched its electronic health record in 2009 and it is worth having a look at what it is doing. The US Veterans Association provides an integrated in-patient and out-patient electronic health record for VA patients. I will be in Washington in 10 days to look at that system again. Denmark is doing

some extraordinary work, with more than 45% of patients now contacting their GPs digitally and using digital technology.

In accordance with your strictures, Mr Wilson, I will cease to set out the Government's programme. I shall happily write to all those who attended the debate—particularly in response to the questions raised just now by the hon. Member for Bristol South about GP funding and what streams funding is coming through, as well as any other questions that I have not had the chance to answer. Once again I apologise for being late; I had no idea that the timing of the debate had changed. I hope that I have addressed the points that were made.

3.23 pm

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am very grateful for the opportunity to discuss what has, as I anticipated, turned out to be an incredibly important subject. Clearly, digital records will be transformational in the NHS and will hugely benefit patients; they could enable the NHS to do much more for less and make possible the quicker development of more drugs, particularly for terminal and rare diseases. The effect could be that drug companies would want to remain here to develop and research their drugs—they would have an environment in which they could do that.

I believe—this is where I started in the debate—that some of what the Minister has told the House this afternoon reveals amazing progress in the NHS, which a public information campaign could show. I bet that very few people know that their local pharmacy could have full electronic access to their patient records, so that they could go in and say, "I've got this problem," and the pharmacist could answer, "I am able to access your patient records if you give me your NHS number." I assume that is how it works. The pharmacist could

then look at the data and say, "You have been on a particular drug, and for your condition you should go and see your GP," or, "There is another drug that would suit you better." That sort of decision making would keep more patients out of their GP surgery and A&E and would have a distinct impact on the NHS, because it would reduce costs. The whole tenor of the debate has been to show that the NHS can be transformed by better data use—as the Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe), said—by being able to store data properly and get access to them at a later date.

The Minister will know that I have come to this issue from Empower's access to information campaign, and the idea of its being possible to use the data across a particular cohort of patients. I used the example of the Cystic Fibrosis Trust, 98% of whose patients are on a data record base. It can use the data to begin development of the drug for the next strain of cystic fibrosis. That is the ideal way in which the system should work.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. The debate will go on. Perhaps once the Caldicott report is published, and when the Government have set out how they may go about the public information campaign and the new Information Commissioner is in place, it would be appropriate for the House to have another, similar debate. That could perhaps be on a more mainstream day, when more Members could participate. The subject is so important that we should not leave it here.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered use of digital records in the NHS.

3.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 28 April 2016

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council (Defence)

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and I attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 18 April and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence attended the Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) on 19 April. The Foreign Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) were both chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meetings were held in Luxembourg.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL

A provisional report of the meeting and conclusions adopted can be found at: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2016/04/18-19/>

Iran

Ms Mogherini briefed the Council on her recent visit to Iran. The context for this visit was the lifting of EU nuclear-related economic and financial sanctions against Iran in the wake of Iran's implementation of measures set out in the joint comprehensive plan of action. Ms Mogherini and a number of EU Commissioners who also participated in the visit explored the possibilities for future co-operation between the EU and Iran in a number of areas. In addition to areas for economic co-operation they also announced the intention to establish EU-Iran political and human rights dialogues. A joint statement by Ms Mogherini and the Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, can be found at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-16-1441_en.htm

Colombia

The Colombian Government's High Commissioner for Peace, Sergio Jaramillo Caro, briefed Ministers on the Colombian peace process, prompting a discussion on transitional justice. The risk of organised crime groups stepping into any power vacuum and the importance of a joined-up approach within the Colombian system was highlighted. The EU Commission confirmed continued support to the process through initiatives on local justice, education and demining. I offered strong support for the peace process, and underlined that we would be happy to share the UK experience of peace building. Mr Jaramillo confirmed that the Government of Colombia remained committed to a popular referendum on the agreement.

EU external migration

Ministers discussed the external aspects of the migration crisis, and the need for the European Union to maintain focus on both the Aegean and the central Mediterranean migration routes. The importance of full implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement on migration, concluded

at the European Council on 17-18 March 2016, was noted; as was the ongoing work to tackle irregular migration from Africa to Europe, including through the action plan agreed at the Valletta summit on migration on 11-12 November 2015.

Lunch with UN High Commissioner for Refugees

Over lunch, Ministers exchanged views with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr Filippo Grandi, on global challenges posed by mass migration, and on implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement on migration.

Eastern Partnership

Ministers exchanged views on recent developments in the six Eastern Partnership countries and on preparations for the forthcoming EU-Eastern Partnership ministerial meeting on 23 May.

Topics discussed included reform programmes in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, and the work of the Minsk Group Co-Chairs and the OSCE Chair-in-Office to de-escalate the recent violent clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh.

EU Iraq/Syria/Daesh strategy

Ministers agreed to Ms Mogherini's proposal to discuss counter-Daesh at the May Foreign Affairs Council and to agree Council conclusions. This would complement a planned discussion on Syria. In response to my call for a detailed assessment of progress, Ms Mogherini also agreed to task the EEAS and Commission to produce an assessment of implementation of the EU's Syria/Iraq/Daesh strategy to help prepare for next month's discussion.

Libya

The EU welcomed the arrival of the presidency Council in Tripoli on 30 March, and expressed its support for the Libyan political agreement which considers the Government of National Accord (GNA) as the sole legitimate Government in Libya. The EU reiterated that it has a package of immediate support totalling €100 million to the GNA, making clear that areas of support will be defined and prioritised in close co-ordination with the GNA and the UN. Council conclusions on Libya made reference to a possible civilian CSDP mission to support the Libyan security sector, and consideration of enhanced support that could be provided through EU Operation Sophia, for example through potential capacity building for the Libyan coastguard.

Ministers agreed without discussion a number of measures:

The Council approved the agenda of the 41st session of the African, Caribbean and Pacific group of states (ACP)—EU Council of Ministers, which will take place in Dakar (Senegal) on 28-29 April 2016.

The Council adopted a decision extending the mandate of Fernando Gentilini as the European Union special representative for the middle east peace process until 28 February 2017.

The Council adopted a decision extending the mandate of Peter Burian as the European Union special representative for Eastern Asia until 28 February 2017.

The Council adopted a decision extending by 24 months, as of 31 January 2016, the validity of national permits for entry and stay granted by member states for the temporary reception of certain Palestinians.

The Council adopted a decision supplementing the statement of reasons for its restrictive measures against Bank Saderat Iran.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL (DEFENCE)

Countering hybrid threats

The Council adopted conclusions, welcoming the publication of the joint communication on countering hybrid threats, underlining the need to mobilise EU instruments to prevent and counter hybrid threats to the EU, its member states and partners, such as NATO. EU-NATO co-operation was highlighted as essential, with EU tools well placed to complement those of NATO to support member states and allies. Member states will reflect on the document further before considering next steps, including implementation.

Central African Republic

The Council adopted conclusions that approved the establishment of a new military training mission in the Central African Republic (EUTM RCA), to contribute to the country's defence sector reform as led by the UN. The mission, based in Bangui has a mandate of two years. EUTM RCA will build on the work of the EU military advisory mission (EUMAM RCA), working towards a modernised, effective and democratically accountable Central African armed forces.

Capacity building in support of security and development

The Council discussed the EU's efforts to find options for funding instruments for capacity building in support of security and development in order to enable partner countries and regional organisations to prevent and manage crises themselves. Defence Ministers noted that a public consultation was currently underway on the wider initiative. The European Commission also detailed progress towards a security sector reform framework, the adoption of which was anticipated in mid-2016.

EDA steering board

Defence Ministers also met in EDA steering board format. Ministers were updated on the implementation of key taskings and next steps, which included: the policy framework for defence co-operation; hybrid threats; preparatory action for common security and defence policy-related research; and the European Commission's upcoming European defence action plan.

[HCWS706]

HOME DEPARTMENT**Justice and Home Affairs: post-Council Statement**

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): A meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council was held on 21 April. My right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister and I attended on behalf of the UK.

The Council began with an adoption of the A items, including the formal adoption of the passenger name records (PNR) directive, which the Government welcome. I have always been clear of the importance of PNR and strongly believe that this directive will enable all members of the European Union to work even closer together to tackle terrorist threats.

The Commission then presented its smart borders proposals and communication on "stronger and smarter information systems for borders and security". On smart

borders, the Council agreed to work towards achieving political agreement by the end of the year. Given that the UK does not participate in the borders aspects of Schengen, we will not take part in these measures.

On the information systems communication, the focus was on improving interoperability of data systems. The majority of member states agreed with the position I set out, prioritising improving data quality in existing systems and ensuring that appropriate data sets could be easily "washed" against each other. I also emphasised the need to further strengthen co-operation between member states on two important areas: first, non-Schengen states, including the UK, need to be able fully to share important removal and entry ban data with Schengen states; second, the need for more proactive and systematic sharing of criminal records data of people convicted of offences relating to terrorism and serious organised crime.

Member states also agreed on the need to ensure the right quantity and quality of information is provided to EU systems, such as the second generation Schengen information system—SISII. I supported these calls, while noting that provision of this information remained a matter for member states.

The presidency reiterated the importance of the political commitment to data sharing and concluded that the next step would be the development of a "roadmap" on improving information sharing, which it intended to present for adoption to the June JHA Council.

The Commission then introduced its communication on security. The Commission stressed that this would not in any way affect member states competence for security matters and highlighted the need for effective implementation of existing initiatives, including on tackling firearms, and for better data sharing and threat analysis. I welcomed the focus on making better progress on practical initiatives and underlined that responsibility for national security lies solely with member states.

Over lunch, Ministers discussed the Commission communication on the reform of the Common European asylum system, in particular options for changes to the Dublin system.

There was considerable opposition to any radical change to the Dublin system and no consensus on the preferred option for change. Views among member states were diverse and several opposed relocation being a part of any new system. The Immigration Minister set out the UK's clear view that the existing principles of the Dublin system should be retained and shared the concerns of many others about relocation: any crisis relocation mechanism must be kept separate from the existing Dublin system. The Government do not support relocation as it is the wrong response to the migratory pressures the EU faces. It undermines the important principle that asylum should be claimed in the first safe country and does not address the causes of illegal migration.

After lunch, there was a progress report on the proposed European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Given the UK's position in relation to Schengen we will not participate in this measure. However, we support the efforts by member states to improve management of the external border of the EU. The presidency would now open "trilogue" negotiations with the European Parliament and reaffirmed its intention to reach agreement with the Parliament by June, in line with the deadline set by the European Council.

Discussion then turned to EU-Turkey migration. The presidency reaffirmed the need to speed up the implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement of 18 March. The Commission stressed that they were working on securing guarantees for non-Syrians returned to Turkey.

A number of members states stressed the need for strong security checks on individuals coming to the EU. Frontex highlighted its role in returning 325 irregular migrants from Greece to Turkey on 4 and 8 April. The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) reiterated the request for longer deployments and stated that they needed 50 or 60 people to facilitate relocation from Greece and Italy.

The Immigration Minister announced a new package of support for Greece, in particular 75 personnel ready to be deployed. The UK would also launch a new scheme to resettle children at risk from the middle east and North Africa. Several hundred would be resettled in the first year with a view to resettling up to 3,000 by the end of the Parliament.

The Immigration Minister set out that making the EU-Turkey deal work was vital and the inadmissibility procedures needed to be applied appropriately to avoid undermining the agreed approach. The EU needed to ensure that it was possible to return all nationalities to Turkey. Helping to develop the Turkish asylum system was also a top priority.

The presidency concluded that there was agreement to increase the quantity and quality of pledges to EASO and Frontex, and that attention would need to be given to the possibility that migratory routes may shift, especially towards the central Mediterranean.

[HCWS708]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Tackling Violence against Women and Girls Overseas

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Mr Desmond Swayne): My noble Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Baroness Verma), has today made the following statement:

I would like to take this opportunity to update the House on my work as ministerial champion for tackling violence against women and girls overseas, following my appointment in December.

It has been an extremely busy period and the UK Government have continued to do a significant amount of work to protect and extend women and girls' rights globally, including on violence against women and girls.

Following my appointment I have conducted a consultation on the activities for the ministerial champion role, to ensure that my approach within my high-level objectives is the most effective, and is informed by what people here in the UK would like me to be

doing. I have consulted with civil society organisations and academics, youth activists and grassroots women's rights organisations (both in the UK and overseas), and the previous ministerial champion. I also conducted a live chat via *The Guardian* website. I had my final roundtable yesterday—co-hosted with my ministerial colleague from the Home Office, the Minister for Preventing Abuse, Exploitation and Crime (Karen Bradley)—hearing from organisations working on violence in the UK. I will share the consultation findings and my next steps soon.

Last month I represented the UK on violence against women and girls at the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the largest global policymaking mechanism on women and girls' rights. I came away feeling extremely proud of the UK's leadership on violence against women and girls, including our ongoing and significant investments in programming to reach the most marginalised girls and women. We can all be proud of the contribution we are making to preventing and responding to violence in some of the most difficult places to be a girl or a woman—be they living in extreme poverty, conflict or protracted crisis.

At CSW, the Secretary of State for International Development's leadership on the UN high-level panel on women's economic empowerment was warmly welcomed on the international stage, and the UK was vocal on how violence acts as a critical barrier to women's economic empowerment. I co-hosted a side event with Brazil and Mozambique where I was particularly vocal on the need for new forms of partnerships to tackle violence. I also gave keynote speeches on the importance of tackling violence against older women and disabled women and girls. Leaving no one behind, including by ensuring we reach the most vulnerable and marginalised, remains a top priority for DFID's ministerial team.

Crucially, the UK negotiated hard for good language on women and girls' rights, including living free from violence, in the international agreed conclusions. These act as soft law and civil society representatives from across the world spoke passionately about the importance of the language for setting global norms on what member states need to do to protect and progress women and girls' rights.

We also had a large range of activities across Government on International Women's Day earlier in March. In my capacity as ministerial champion on violence against women and girls, I spoke alongside Ministers at the FCO and MOD on the importance of addressing violence as part of our work on women, peace and security. I also spoke at the Women of the World festival on how violence and gender-based discrimination drive poverty, and how collectively we can work together, engaging women and girls and men and boys, to provide platforms for the most vulnerable. The Cross-Government strategy on violence against women and girls was also published, demonstrating the ongoing leadership of ministerial colleagues at the Home Office, and the links between efforts domestically and internationally to end violence.

The priorities for me now include acting upon the series of important recommendations coming out of the consultation that I have just completed. I will be undertaking a series of visits to developing countries working to address this issue, looking to support efforts—particularly where rates of violence are extremely high—and to learn where innovative approaches are seeing dramatic reductions in violence. The UK has some way to go before we see our international goal of eradicating violence fully achieved too, and I see a critical part of my role as drawing together the best evidence from experts tackling this. Thank you to all of the ministerial colleagues and parliamentarians working alongside me on this critical agenda.

[HCWS707]

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