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10 May 2016

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Tuesday 10 May 2016**

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## House of Commons

*Tuesday 10 May 2016*

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

### PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

### BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

NEW WRIT

*Ordered,*

That the Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the Borough constituency of Tooting in the room of Sadiq Aman Khan, who since his election for the said Borough constituency has been appointed to the Office of Steward and Bailiff of Her Majesty's Three Chiltern Hundreds of Stoke, Desborough and Burnham, in the County of Buckingham.—(*Dame Rosie Winterton.*)

## Oral Answers to Questions

### HEALTH

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### NHS Bursary

1. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of his proposals to reform the NHS bursary on future levels of recruitment into the medical professions. [904937]

7. **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of his proposals to reform the NHS bursary on future levels of recruitment into the medical professions. [904943]

10. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of his proposals to reform the NHS bursary on future levels of recruitment into the medical professions. [904946]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer):** The reform to the NHS bursary will lift the cap currently placed on university places for nurses, midwives and allied health professions. Universities will be able to train up to 10,000 extra students by the end of this Parliament. This increase in UK graduates will reduce NHS reliance on expensive agency staff and staff from overseas.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** I am certain that the Minister will want to congratulate the SNP on sweeping spectacularly to a historic third successive term, all on a manifesto pledge to protect rather than abolish the nursing bursary in Scotland. The serious question is this: how does the

Secretary of State plan to monitor the impact that the removal of the bursary might have on students from poorer backgrounds who are training as nurses in England?

**Ben Gummer:** I would like to congratulate my friend the leader of the Scottish Conservative party, who has led the extraordinary resurgence of Conservatism and Unionism north of the border.

I regret very much that the SNP is not endorsing our plan to give opportunity to thousands more people who want to become nurses, especially those from under-privileged backgrounds. We will of course monitor the reform, not only as we continue our process towards making a decision, taking account of all the equalities analysis that will be done in the interim, but after the final decision has been made.

**Carol Monaghan:** It is recognised that there is a high proportion of mature students of nursing and other health professions. How does the Secretary of State plan to mitigate the effects of the removal of the bursary and provide support to students who have family commitments or who already have a student loan from a previous degree?

**Ben Gummer:** The NHS benefits enormously from mature students entering the service, and that is why we have already said that we will be looking at offering second-degree bursaries in the scheme. The consultation is clear: it asks a number of open questions, inviting responses from nurses and nurse trainees about how best to support mature students. We will be looking at those carefully as we formulate our conclusions.

**Martyn Day:** With the increased cost of training as a nurse and a 1% pay freeze throughout this Parliament, how does the Secretary of State plan to recruit and retain sufficient nurses in permanent posts in the short term, so that patient care and staff wellbeing are not negatively affected?

**Ben Gummer:** South of the border we have been able over the past six years to increase the number of nurses, both in training and in the service, which has been made possible by the stronger economy and the stewardship of the NHS, in such contrast to the developing picture in Scotland. We are able to expand the numbers in training by up to 10,000 between now and 2020 as a result of that innovative policy, and that is why it should also be adopted in Scotland.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What lessons has the Minister learned from the experience in higher education, where bursaries or grants were removed and replaced with student loans, and we have seen an increased number of students from all backgrounds?

**Ben Gummer:** We have indeed, and it is remarkable that south of the border we have seen a university that would equate to the fourth largest in the country filled every year as a result of the reforms to higher education funding, and a university the size of the University of Leicester filled with those who would not previously have gone to university as a result of the reforms that we introduced in 2011. I want to see those benefits extended across the range including to those who have not so far had them—namely, student nurses.

**Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): Considering the importance and the central role of nurses in the medical profession and in helping people when they are ill, how long does the Minister expect it will take on average for a nurse working in the NHS to pay back the total debt that would be accrued under the Government's proposed replacement for the bursary scheme?

**Ben Gummer:** It depends of course on the career progression of that particular nurse, but the repayment terms will be precisely those for students of other degrees. Newly qualified nurses will not pay any more than they do currently, and the exact rates at which they will pay back—9% above £21,000—are outlined carefully in the consultation document. I recommend that the hon. Lady looks at it and sees the benefits that will come from the reform that, were it to be adopted in Scotland, would provide an enormous benefit to the service north of the border.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I start by congratulating the Secretary of State on becoming the longest serving Health Secretary in history. It is an important landmark, not least because it is the first target that he has managed to hit.

On NHS bursaries, last week the Minister said that "more mature students are applying now than in 2010."—[*Official Report*, 4 May 2016; Vol. 609, c. 197.]

However, a written answer given to me yesterday by the Minister for Universities and Science appears to contradict this. Indeed, it shows that numbers of mature students have fallen in the past five years by almost 200,000. Given that the average age of a student nurse is 28, and in the light of the clear evidence from his own Government, will the Minister correct the record and commit to looking again at the impact of these proposals on mature students, who form a significant part of the student nurse intake?

**Ben Gummer:** I, too, as I know will all my ministerial colleagues, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on a remarkable tenure in his post.

It is clear that mature student numbers dropped immediately after the higher education reforms, but they then started rising and have now exceeded the rate before the reforms. I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman the details of that. We are also clear that we need to nurture mature students, which is why the consultation asked the specific question that it did. We want to invite answers from the service about how best we can do that because we are clear that the current system is not working as well as it should.

### Specialist Nurses: Disabled People

2. **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of specialist nurses in supporting disabled people. [904938]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer):** Specialist nurses make a valuable contribution to the care of disabled people. They have specialist post-registration qualifications, which are attained through additional training. There are now 3,000 more

nurses working in the NHS than in May 2010, ensuring that disabled people continue to receive the highest possible quality care.

**Debbie Abrahams:** In May 2010 there were 5,360 learning disability nurses. In January 2016 there were 3,619. The Government promised to protect the NHS frontline. Why does this protection not extend to people with learning disabilities?

**Ben Gummer:** It is true that the skills mix and the way in which specialist nurses have changed over the past six years may well account for the variation that the hon. Lady has noticed—I am willing to write to her with the detail—but the total number of nurses has increased, and we are giving better and more varied training to nurses across the board so that they can deal with the specialist problems that are increasingly the core part of their work.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response. Specialist nurses are vital for the care and support that they provide for patients and families, not just for the elderly but for the disabled. What is his Department doing to ensure that funding for specialist nurses is maintained and that we do not end up in the situation that we have in Northern Ireland with Four Seasons, which is responsible for 62 homes in Northern Ireland and 450 across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

**Ben Gummer:** Funding for nurses has increased over the past six years. It is because of the sixth largest increase in the NHS budget that we can guarantee that nursing numbers will remain in that strong position for the remainder of this Parliament. That will include specialist nurses. My role is to make sure that as many nurses as possible get additional training so that we have a wider and richer skills mix, specifically so that nurses can develop their careers—something that I am afraid was often made more difficult rather than easier under the previous career structure.

### Biosimilar Medicines

3. **Dr Tania Mathias** (Twickenham) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage the use of biosimilar medicines in NHS treatment. [904939]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman):** The biosimilars—the generic versions of biologic products—represent part of the extraordinary range of new drugs that are becoming available for the benefit of our patients. The Government are committed to ensuring access to drugs for UK patients at the highest level of quality and safety, and to ensuring that effective biosimilar medicines are available. That is why we are leading, not just here but in Europe, the regulatory regime through the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency as the lead assessor and rapporteur. In the NHS, the chief pharmaceutical officer, Keith Ridge, and the commercial medicines unit in my directorate have put together a framework agreement for biosimilars, and through the medicines optimisation programme we are looking specifically at biosimilars, and we have set up a national biosimilars medicines group.

**Dr Mathias:** I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. May I ask also that where NHS pharmacists are involved in oncology clinics, there is a higher prescribing of biosimilars? What steps are in place to encourage more oncology clinics to involve NHS pharmacists at the start of the patient's treatment journey?

**George Freeman:** Not surprisingly, my hon. and, in this field, learned Friend makes a very important point. We have set up a number of initiatives to that very end: to make sure that our pharmacologists and pharmacists in the system are alert and have all the information they need to increase the prescription of biologics and the generic versions, biosimilars. I will happily write to her, describing a range of initiatives that are in place which we are pursuing to that end.

**Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): One of the issues around the adoption of biosimilars and, indeed, driving down the NHS drugs budget generally is the lack of local analysis of patterns of prescribing against efficacy and cost. I wonder whether the Minister would consider encouraging clinical commissioning groups to appoint analytical pharmacists, who could look at this equation and recommend different prescribing decisions on a local basis.

**George Freeman:** My hon. Friend makes a really interesting point. It goes to the heart of the work that we are doing at the moment with CCGs, in terms of use of data to map and track prescribing practice across the system. I will happily pick up the point about ensuring that biosimilars are incorporated in that.

### Lyme Disease

4. **Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): What progress has been made on improving diagnosis and treatment of Lyme disease. [904940]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison):** Lyme disease is a complex infection, so we recognise that there are real challenges in diagnosis and treatment. In the light of this, I am pleased to say that the Department plans to commission three reviews on the diagnosis, treatment and transmission of Lyme disease to inform future decision making.

**Andrew Stephenson:** A constituent in Earby was struck down with a debilitating illness several years ago, which has totally destroyed her quality of life. Since then, I have been visiting her regularly at home every few months, as she has fought to get a diagnosis. Over recent months, all the evidence has started to point towards Lyme disease, but there seems to be precious little support out there for people with this condition. What more can my hon. Friend do to support constituents like mine?

**Jane Ellison:** In addition to the reviews that the chief scientific adviser is overseeing, we have commissioned the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to develop a new evidence-based guideline for care, specifically to respond to the sort of situation that my hon. Friend describes with his constituent. That is for publication in 2018 and it is being prioritised because of the interest in this area.

### Agency Staffing Expenditure

5. **John Pugh** (Southport) (LD): What plans he has to reduce agency staffing expenditure in the NHS. [904941]

**The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):** We have taken tough measures to control unsustainable spending on agency staff, which cost the NHS more than £3 billion last year. Overall agency spend is now falling and we expect to save the NHS at least £1 billion this year as a result.

**John Pugh:** I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. I do not share his optimism. Is not the real problem the shortage of permanent staff and the budgetary constraints on the acute sector? Most of them are now below establishment.

**Mr Hunt:** I think the hon. Gentleman is right that we have historically not trained enough staff to work in the NHS and been over-optimistic about the staff needs. That is why, in this Parliament, we will be training over 11,000 more doctors as a result of the spending review, and 40,000 more nurses.

**Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): In the Public Accounts Committee, which I sit on with the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh), we have repeatedly come to this question about agency staffing. The key thing is, as he says, that the establishment level for acute hospitals is always under par, because the budget set from the centre is never enough to meet it. Will the Secretary of State go and take a serious look at this issue, and stop this myth that it is just down to the rates paid? That is part of the problem, but it is not the main problem.

**Mr Hunt:** Perhaps I can give the hon. Lady some comfort. I recognise that there is a big mountain to move, but the changes we made last year were not just about changing the rates paid to agencies. They were also about capping the amounts agencies can pay their own staff, because we think it is incredibly divisive inside hospitals to have two nurses doing exactly the same work, but one being paid dramatically more than the other. We are also capping the total amount hospitals can spend on agency staff. The result is that the monthly spend on agency staff is now falling and we are on track to reduce the agency bill by about £1 billion in this Parliament.

**Heidi Alexander** (Lewisham East) (Lab): Spending on agency staff has gone through the roof under this Health Secretary, and the Secretary of State's attempt to deal with the symptoms of the problem but not the cause has left hospitals struggling to get staff at rates they are allowed to pay. In the past few weeks we have seen reports of emergency surgery suspended in Doncaster, an A&E department downgraded in Chorley and two critical care units closed in Leeds, all because of staff shortages. The Health Secretary has admitted that this will be his last big job in politics. May I urge him before he goes to get a grip on the cause of the staffing crisis? Otherwise, it will be patients who will be facing the consequences long after he has gone.

**Mr Hunt:** May I start by thanking the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for his generous congratulations earlier, and indeed for making history himself by being the first Opposition Member I can remember to congratulate the Government on hitting a target?

I say to the hon. Lady that, as a result of the measures we have taken to deal with the agency staff issue, we think we have saved £290 million compared with what we would have spent since last October, two thirds of trusts are reporting savings and the price paid for agency nurses is 10% lower than it was in October. The root cause of the problem is, as the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) said, our failure in the past to recruit enough staff. One of the reasons for that is that successive Governments failed to understand the needs of nursing in wards, which is why we had the problem at Mid Staffs. Because we are addressing that, we are now able to make sure that we do not pay excessive rates for agency staff.

**Heidi Alexander:** If I may turn to another part of the staffing crisis, all Opposition Members welcome the resumption of talks on the junior doctors contract. It is in no one's interest—not the Government's, not junior doctors' and certainly not patients'—for this dispute to drag on any longer. May I implore the Health Secretary to do all he can to find a reasonable compromise this week that will keep doctors in the NHS and ensure that we have a motivated, well trained and fairly rewarded workforce to continue to deliver the excellent care we all want?

**Mr Hunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for her reasonable tone and absolutely give her that assurance. We have always wanted a negotiated outcome to this dispute. That is why we paused the introduction of the new contracts last November to give talks a chance to succeed, and it is why this week I have said we will further pause the introduction of the new contracts to see whether we can get a negotiated outcome. We want a motivated workforce and we are highly cognisant of the fact that hospitals that offer seven-day care and higher standards of care for patients are the very hospitals that have some of the highest levels of morale in the NHS. It takes two to tango, and I very much hope that the British Medical Association will play ball and its part this week in helping us to deliver a safer seven-day NHS.

### Rarer Cancers

6. **Mark Durkan** (Foyle) (SDLP): What steps he is taking to improve the outcomes of people with rarer cancers. [904942]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman):** The extraordinary pace of progress in biomedical science, not least in genomics and data, is transforming our understanding of cancer. It is leading to greater identification of more rare cancers, and indeed to more diseases becoming rare diseases. That is why we have invested so heavily in Genomics England and set up the 13 genomic medicine centres around the UK, leading in cancer and rare disease diagnosis. I am delighted that we are now setting up a Northern Ireland General Medical Council, which will collect 17,000 samples. We will implement the

recommendations of the independent cancer taskforce on diagnosis and we are setting up a series of regional genetic laboratories and infrastructure. I believe the hon. Gentleman will be able to see that we are investing heavily in making sure we lead not only in the science but in the adoption of genomic medicine in the NHS.

**Mark Durkan:** I thank the Minister for all that, but remind him that there is concern about the implications of the cancer drugs fund details, as they will affect people with rare cancers. Is he prepared to promote progress on rare and less-common cancers as part of the new work programme for the British-Irish Council? The challenges of small patient numbers, thinner investment in research, and symptoms being less well known are not confined to his jurisdiction.

**George Freeman:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. In both Northern Ireland and the Republic, I have seen some great leadership in this field, and as the UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences, I would be delighted to pick this up through that council, and suggest that our nations, working together, can collaborate better, not least in implementing the accelerated access reforms that I am putting in place. Those reforms, aligned with the cancer drugs fund in its revised format, should see us able to accelerate the adoption of drugs for rarer cancers for patients' benefit.

**Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): In part because they are the hidden majority, people with rarer cancers are often diagnosed later, often through an emergency presentation. That can make for more aggressive treatments, which can have a longer-term impact on health. Will the Minister update the House on tailored recovery packages, and the plan to roll those out that was outlined by the Government back in September last year—a Government who have, I must say, been a great friend to the cancer community?

**George Freeman:** I am very grateful for that acknowledgment. We have put £1 billion into the cancer drugs fund, and we are completely committed to increasing the pace at which we bring cancer drugs through. It is true that cancer outcomes have improved quickly since 2010; in 2014-15, over 645,000 more patients with suspected cancers were seen. That is an increase of 71%. Almost 40,000 more patients were treated for cancer—an increase of 17%. We have announced funding of up to £300 million a year by 2020 to increase diagnostic capacity, so that we can meet the new target, which is that patients will be given a definitive cancer diagnosis or the all-clear within 28 days of being referred by a GP.

**Danny Kinahan** (South Antrim) (UUP): We are very grateful for all the work that is going on, and for how we are pulling together and working as a United Kingdom, but is there any way of helping those people who cannot afford to travel to the specialists to get the treatment? That is a huge chunk out of a devolved budget, and it is something that we should be working on together.

**George Freeman:** I will happily look at that as part of the discussions with the council that I just touched on. We are determined to make sure that this life science revolution is not just in the Oxford-Cambridge-London triangle, but goes out across all the devolved areas,

which of course are leading on much of the science. That is why we are committed, through the National Institute for Health Research and the NHS, to creating hubs across the country, so that everybody can benefit.

**David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con):** Is my hon. Friend aware that about a third of people, including those with rare cancers, will, on their cancer journey, use some form of complementary or alternative medicine? Is he further aware that there is a range of new treatments out there that are being used in the private sector, including virotherapy and hyperbaric oxygen therapy? The second particularly can help people who have serious effects from chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Will he look at some of these treatments and write to me about them?

**George Freeman:** I am not against people taking whatever they feel helps, but my hon. Friend will understand that in this field, in allocating every pound, we need to be guided by the very best science and evidence. Internationally, we are applauded for the quality of our assessment, and I intend to do everything to make sure that that continues.

**Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con):** Outcomes in cancer are not just about survival. Does the Minister agree that nowhere is the case for a seven-day NHS stronger than in palliative medicine, and will he say what can be done, in rolling out the 7/7 NHS, to address the scandal whereby only one in five hospitals has specialist palliative care cover on a Saturday and Sunday?

**George Freeman:** My hon. Friend makes a really important and specific point. He is absolutely right, and that is one reason why we are committed to our seven-day NHS. It is improving—I can share the data with him—but he makes a good point, and that is one reason why we need to continue.

### Social Care Budgets

8. **Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the effect of changes to local authority social care budgets on demand for health services. [904944]

**The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt):** Good morning, Mr Speaker—[*Interruption*—and everyone.

There is a link between adult social care funding and demand for NHS services. More recent analysis shows no definitive relationship, but Forder's 2009 study showed a £1 reduction in social care spend increasing NHS demand by 35p. That is why Government have driven the integration of health and social care, and given councils up to £3.5 billion of new support by 2019-20.

**Chi Onwurah:** The Royal College of Surgeons has said that

“the new council tax precept will not raise enough funds for the areas of the country”

with the greatest need. In Newcastle, it will raise £1.7 million this year, but the funding gap is £15 million. Why is the Minister's Government making my constituents pay more for worse social care, increasing the pressure on the NHS and causing misery for millions?

**Alistair Burt:** The better care fund has been adjusted to recognise that not all councils can raise a similar amount of money through the social care precept, so the issue that the hon. Lady raises has been noted and recognised. The only way in which the NHS can achieve better outcomes and meet the challenges of rising demand is through an increased focus on preventive community health and social care, and closer working with local authorities. That is what the pooled budget is designed to deliver, and that is what it will do.

**Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab):** Indeed, good morning, Mr Speaker.

A big challenge for local authorities and adult social care is how to fund the increases in the minimum wage that care providers have to pay. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) just detailed, the 2% social care precept does not cover all the increased costs and, indeed, in some areas, it is not even being passed on to care providers. The Local Government Association asked Ministers for £700 million from the better care fund to help with that increased cost this year and next year—not in 2019. When will Ministers listen to local councils and agree to bring forward that much needed funding to support what is effectively their own policy in the care sector?

**Alistair Burt:** I do not think that anyone fails to recognise that the next couple of years in social care will be very tight, but that is why the better care fund is there. Work has been done to increase the amount of money available to meet the challenges that the hon. Lady raises. I have to repeat that to fund this properly there has to be a sufficiently strong economy. There has to be the commitment to funding that the Government have been able to make almost uniquely in the House. I sometimes think it would help if she recognised the strength of the economy that has been able to do that by assisting local authorities, rather than complain about the amount of money available.

### Accident and Emergency Services

9. **Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to ensure provision of good quality A&E services. [904945]

**The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):** Although we are not currently hitting the national A&E target, hospital A&E departments continue to perform well under great pressure. Overall they are coping with 1.9 million more attendances annually compared with 2009-10, and the average wait to see a doctor remains just 38 minutes.

**Chris Green:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Many of my constituents are concerned about the temporary closure of the Chorley A&E department, which now only operates as an urgent care service. What assurance can he give my constituents on A&E cover in and around the Bolton West constituency?

**Mr Hunt:** May I reassure my hon. Friend that I am very aware of this issue, and I have had a number of meetings with hon. Members to discuss it? Patient safety has to be the utmost priority. We are working with the local trust, and we have been given an assurance

that neighbouring hospitals will be able to absorb any extra activity, and that it is working hard to try to reopen the A&E department.

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The temporary closure of A&E services at Chorley hospital has had a knock-on effect on hospitals across Lancashire, and anecdotally I hear of many more people turning up at Preston Royal. What reassurances can the right hon. Gentleman give my constituents and residents across Lancashire that he is doing everything he can to make sure that the staffing issues at Chorley are fixed and that Chorley A&E is open again?

**Mr Hunt:** I can reassure the hon. Lady that we have been monitoring the situation closely and have provided extra capacity at the Royal Preston hospital. Her own Royal Lancaster infirmary has recently come out of special measures and done a really good job in turning round the quality of care after protracted difficulties. We continue to monitor the situation, and patient safety is our No. 1 priority.

**Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): Following centralisation and specialisation processes to drive up the quality of clinical care, we now have patients presenting at minor injuries units and urgent care centres with conditions that need to be treated elsewhere. Will my right hon. Friend take steps to ensure that those centres own the patients' experience once they have presented, so that we never again have a patient with a serious illness being sent out to make their own way to A&E?

**Mr Hunt:** As ever on health matters, my hon. Friend speaks wisely. The fundamental issue is a high level of confusion about what happens to patients when they are faced with a bewildering choice about what to do when they have an urgent health need that needs resolving. They can call 111, try to get an urgent GP appointment, go to a walk-in centre, go to A&E and many other alternatives. We need to resolve that and make it simpler for patients so that they go to the right place first time. Urgent work is happening to ensure that we do that.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): The closure of the A&E unit at Chorley and South Ribble district general hospital has ramifications across the north-west. I am informed that North West Ambulance Service has taken on three private ambulances at a cost of £70,000 each a month to provide the extra cover that is required. Does the Secretary of State accept that it is a false economy when he allows A&E units to close on his watch? He simply passes on the costs to other parts of the fractured NHS over which he presides.

**Mr Hunt:** I recognise that we have a difficult situation in Chorley and that people in that trust are working very closely together. The chief executive of the trust pointed out that the reason for the closure was that neighbouring trusts were not respecting the caps on agency staff that she was respecting. It is incredibly important that, across the NHS, we have a concerted effort to bring down the prices paid for agency staff, which I think is the root problem here. However, we are monitoring the situation closely.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): But how will my right hon. Friend's powers to ensure good quality accident and emergency provision in hospitals across

Greater Manchester be affected by the devolution of health and social care responsibilities to Greater Manchester councils?

**Mr Hunt:** I can reassure my hon. Friend that, although we are happy to put the local authorities in Greater Manchester in the driving seat for some major changes, including what I hope will be the first full-scale integration of health and social care across the NHS, we are monitoring the performance against national standards. We will be able to see exactly how well they do on patient safety, waiting times and so on, and whether they live up to the big promises that have been made.

#### **Junior Doctors: Industrial Dispute**

11. **John Nicolson** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What steps he is taking to resolve the industrial dispute with junior doctors. [904947]

**The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):** Talks are now taking place between NHS employers and the British Medical Association to try to resolve outstanding issues around the junior doctors' contract.

**John Nicolson:** In his recent letter to the head of the BMA, the Secretary of State offered to discuss improving work-life balance, especially for people with family responsibilities. How exactly does he plan to do that with a contract that the Government's own quality impact assessment has identified as especially disadvantaging women?

**Mr Hunt:** That is not correct. It is worth saying that the reason for the dispute is a manifesto commitment to a seven-day NHS that the Government made to the people of England and that the Scottish National party has not made to the people of Scotland. The weekend effect does not happen just in England. There are studies in Scotland, including the Handel study, which states:

"The excess of admissions ending in deaths at weekends compared with those during weekdays seen elsewhere were also found in Scotland."

I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that yes, we want to improve the quality of life for junior doctors so that they can live and work in the same city as their partners, and we are looking at the solution to that problem, but that he might think about doing the same thing in Scotland.

**Sir Simon Burns** (Chelmsford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend bear it in mind that Secretary of State Dean Rusk always said that jaw-jaw was better than war-war, and that it is welcome that the negotiations have resumed with the BMA on this difficult problem? Does he also accept that everyone wishes the talks well so that we can get a meaningful agreement that ensures a seven-day NHS for the benefit of patients and their safety?

**Mr Hunt:** My right hon. Friend speaks very wisely. Indeed, I was thinking about the talks as I spoke on my mobile phone and he was having a cigarette just outside the House yesterday morning. He is absolutely right about jaw-jaw. That is why I think that across the whole House we wish the talks well. However, for them to succeed all sides need to recognise their objective, which is a safer seven-day service for patients. I hope that, on that basis, we will be able to make progress.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I too am glad that the Secretary of State has reopened talks with the junior doctors, but I am a little concerned by the claim that the only issue is Saturday pay, whereas the doctors tell me that they fear the danger of exhaustion. Has he seen the analysis by Cass Business School suggesting that it is impossible to avoid high levels of fatigue under the new contract?

**Mr Hunt:** What I have done in the new contract is precisely to try to address those issues by reducing the maximum number of hours that junior doctors can be asked to work every week from 91 to 72 and by stopping junior doctors being asked to work six nights in a row or seven long days in a row. These are important steps forward, and the hon Lady may want to look at Channel 4 FactCheck and other independent analysis of the safety aspects of the new contract which say that this contract is a safer contract.

**Dr Whitford:** I would just say that stating it does not make it happen. Junior doctors have looked at the rotas that have been put out as exemplars, and they will not be able to avoid high levels of fatigue. Does the Secretary of State not recognise that, now that we have more data suggesting that the weekend effect may just be statistical, we actually require clinical research because he does not know exactly what the problem is that he is trying to fix?

**Mr Hunt:** The new data that the hon. Lady has talked about have been heavily contested this week by some of the most distinguished experts on mortality rates in the country. Academics do sometimes disagree, but Ministers have to decide. The fact is that the overwhelming evidence—whether it is on cancer, cardiac arrests, maternity or emergency surgery, and whether it is in big studies, small studies, UK studies or international studies—is that there is a weekend effect. This Government are determined to do something about it, and I gently say to the hon. Lady that she might consider whether something similar should be done in Scotland.

18. [904954] **Mr Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): I am fully signed up to the national health service, and that is why I want to see the reopening of Chorley A&E as soon as possible. Many of my constituents use it.

In his compromising mood, will my right hon. Friend ensure that, as he talks to the junior doctors, whom I value greatly, the one thing that he will not compromise on is delivering a full service seven days a week?

**Mr Hunt:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In the end, the British people's passion for, and commitment to, the NHS is based upon its offering the highest standard of care for patients. It is sometimes difficult to take these decisions and sometimes we have arguments around them. I want to reassure him that my compromising mood is not a temporary thing. We have always wanted a negotiated solution, but there is one bit that we will not compromise on: the moment that the Government start doing things that mean that we are not delivering safe care for patients is the moment that we will fundamentally shake confidence in the NHS. This Government will not allow that to happen.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We are very time constrained, but I am very keen to get through a few more questions.

## Healthcare Costs (EU and UK Citizens)

12. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): How much was (a) collected in payment for NHS care received in the UK by EU citizens and (b) paid for healthcare received by UK citizens in other EU countries in the last 12 months. [904948]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison):** For 2014-15, it is estimated that the UK owes other European economic area countries and Switzerland £674 million and is owed £49.5 million by other EEA countries and Switzerland for healthcare activity received in that year.

**Mr Hollobone:** My constituents in Kettering are increasingly fed up with our national health service paying for the healthcare of foreigners who come to this country to freeload on our system. What more can be done to make sure that hospitals and other healthcare providers bill foreign citizens for the NHS services that they use in this country?

**Jane Ellison:** The Government take extremely seriously the issue of making sure that only those who should have access to NHS services do access them. Let me make an important point about the figures that I have just given. Some 80% of that imbalanced statistic represents our pensioners who choose to retire to Europe, typically for sunnier weather. The figure is 80% because many more UK pensioners retire to Europe than European pensioners retire here, and there will always be an imbalance. I am sure that even the keenest Brexiteer would not claim that Britain would be sunnier outside the EU.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): Will the Minister encourage her Back Benchers to study the expert evidence that was given recently to the Select Committee on Health on the issue that the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) has just raised, our access to free healthcare in Europe, and the economic shock that our leaving the European Union would cause to the NHS finances and to major public health measures such as clean air and clean water that benefit us immensely? Every single one of them told our Committee that leaving the European Union would be disastrous for the NHS, disastrous for health and disastrous for public health.

**Jane Ellison:** On this, I am happy to say that I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I encourage all colleagues to look at the evidence deposited with the Committee. Just last year, UK European health insurance card holders—5.5 million people—were able to travel to any other EEA country or Switzerland safe in the knowledge that they would be able to receive free healthcare or reduced costs arising from healthcare if they needed it. That offers great peace of mind and shows that Britain is safer in a reformed EU.

## Health and Social Care Integration

13. **Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): What support his Department is providing for meeting additional costs incurred by NHS providers in the integration of health and social care. [904949]

**The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt):** I concur with the remarks that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), just made.

The Government recognise that the NHS and adult social care face significant demand pressures, and established the better care fund to join up health and care. In 2016-17, the BCF will be increased to a mandated minimum of £3.9 billion, with additional social care funding of £1.5 billion by 2019-20.

**Derek Thomas:** NHS Cornwall has a significant overspend in 2015-16 because of the cost of keeping people in acute hospitals rather than their being cared for in the community. Despite the commitment and enthusiasm in Cornwall to achieve meaningful integration of health and social care, the pressure on NHS Cornwall finances threatens this badly needed integration. Does the Minister agree that investment in this today will lead to significant savings for the future and better outcomes for patients?

**Alistair Burt:** I am aware of significant problems in Cornwall that a number of Members have brought to me, and they are very complex. The clinical commissioning group is building on existing work with NHS England to address the financial challenges facing NHS Kernow and the wider local health and care system. Statutory directions were put in place late last year to support the CCG's work with local partners in ensuring that services are affordable as well as good. An independently led capability and capacity review is being completed and an action plan is being implemented. I encourage the CCG to continue to work closely with NHS England to help to put its finances on a firmer foundation to achieve its integration plans. There is a further meeting planned locally tomorrow.

**Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab):** We recently had a Westminster Hall debate on care workers not even being paid the national minimum wage, and now we have private social care providers saying that they will not be able to afford the new national living wage. How does the Department intend to address this impending crisis?

**Alistair Burt:** It is absolutely essential that workers are paid the national minimum wage, and for care workers that includes travel. The Department has been very clear in that regard. Extra money is being provided to local authorities to pay for social care, as we know, but matters are tight—I am well aware of that. We are looking to providers and local authority providers to meet their statutory obligations to ensure that hard-pressed care workers have the financial support they need to do their vital job.

#### Five Year Forward View

14. **Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con):** What progress his Department has made on delivery of the NHS five year forward view. [904950]

**The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):** We are making good progress in implementing the five year forward view, including £133 million invested in new models of care and 18 million people benefiting from extended GP access.

**Helen Whately:** It is estimated that a third of patients in acute hospitals could be better treated elsewhere, for instance at home, and in east Kent our vanguard aims to address this with new models of care, but it is early days. Will my right hon. Friend advise us of what he is doing to drive progress on new models of care, bringing together health and social care so that more people are cared for in the right place?

**Mr Hunt:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to what is, in a way, the most fundamental point of the five year forward view, which is getting care to people earlier to help them live healthily and happily at home. Perhaps the most significant announcement we have had in the past few weeks has been the extra £2.6 billion a year that will be invested by the end of the Parliament in general practice. That is a 14% increase that will allow us to recruit many more GPs and, I hope, dramatically improve care for her constituents and others.

**Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab):** Yesterday the Health Secretary admitted to the Health Committee that “we didn't protect the entire health budget” in the last comprehensive spending review. I am pleased that he appears to have adopted a bit of straight-talking, honest politics, so in that spirit will he now admit that the very real cuts to public health budgets over the next few years will make it harder to deliver the “radical upgrade” in public health that his five year forward view called for?

**Mr Hunt:** In the spirit of straight talking and honesty, which I think is an excellent thing, perhaps the hon. Gentleman might concede that those cuts and efficiencies that he is talking about would have been a great deal more if we had followed Labour's spending plans—that is, £5.5 billion less for the NHS than this Government promised, on the back of a strong economy.

#### Topical Questions

T1. [904927] **Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):** Last week I agreed to pause the introduction of the new junior doctors contract for five days and return to talks with the junior doctors committee. I commend the junior doctors for their decision to return to talks. They have agreed to suspend the threat of further industrial action and those talks are now in their second day. We have always been clear that we want to see a negotiated solution to this dispute, and the resumption of these talks shows that the Government's door is and always has been open to meaningful talks.

**Chris Davies:** Last Friday I met my constituent Lisa Cass whose son Ben was recently diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. Ben had been showing signs of the four T's of type 1 diabetes—toilet, thirst, tired and thinner—and Lisa took him to her local GP for an appointment. No test was done on the day at the surgery and a blood test was booked for the following week. The following day Ben was back at his GP's surgery after a rapid decline which could have been fatal, and the air ambulance was called. Thankfully—credit is due to the excellent medical

professionals who treated Ben—he is now doing well and is managing his condition. However, this case shows the need for awareness of type 1 diabetes to be improved right across the country. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and my constituent to see what more we can do to raise awareness of type 1 diabetes and its symptoms among health professionals and the wider public?

**Mr Hunt:** Of course I am happy to meet my hon. Friend and his constituents. A close friend of mine who wanted to take a place in this House ended up dying tragically early because he had type 1 diabetes and was not able to get the care that he needed, so I am very aware of those issues. What we are doing in England, which is different from Wales, is publishing transparent indicators of the quality of diabetes care CCG by CCG. Those data will be published before the summer recess and will enable us to look at the disparities in care. I am sure there is more we can do.

**Luciana Berger** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Research published yesterday by NHS Providers and the Healthcare Financial Management Association showed that half of mental health trusts had not had an increase in their budget in 2015-16 and just a quarter of providers are confident that they will receive a funding increase for this financial year, 2016-17. Will the Secretary of State finally admit that the supposed additional investment in mental health that he talks about so often has not materialised for the patients and services that need it most? What is he going to do about it?

**The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt):** I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for her support for me in the recent London marathon. With reference to her question, it is precisely for the reasons she gives that it is so important for us to make sure that CCGs do transfer the extra money that is available for mental health into mental health services. That is why there will be more transparency and a scorecard for CCGs. She is absolutely correct—it is essential that that money flows through and we are determined to ensure that. Yesterday's report only shows how right our current actions are to make sure that that happens.

T3. [904930] **Mr Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): The Havant Men's Shed movement has created community workspaces across my constituency, helping to boost mental health and wellbeing, especially for older residents. Will the Minister join me in congratulating the movement on its work and come to Havant to open its new building?

**Alistair Burt:** Yes. My family know I am a keen supporter of the shed movement, just as I am a keen supporter of the 5 Live Saturday afternoon movement and the beer in the shed movement. I can assure my hon. Friend that an opportunity to visit the Havant Men's Shed movement will be an important part of the ministerial diary in the very near future.

**Mr Speaker:** The Minister is an endlessly noble fellow—I think we are very clear about that.

T2. [904928] **Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): During March, at one of my local trusts the A&E ambulance target was missed for 937 patients, and more than

4,000 patients waited for more than four hours in A&E. Staff and management agree that this is a trust in crisis, with many wards staffed to less than half the minimum safe staffing levels. Patient safety is being compromised every day. Will the Secretary of State please stop passing the buck and act to stop the downgrade of Dewsbury and Huddersfield hospitals, because it is clear that our local healthcare is in absolute crisis?

**Mr Jeremy Hunt:** The hon. Lady mentioned to me yesterday that she would raise this issue today. We are absolutely not passing the buck; the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), had a very productive meeting with her and local representatives to address these issues. She is right to have concerns about some of the safety indicators, but it is also true that summary hospital-level mortality for the trust has improved, and there are encouraging improvements in morale, as recorded through the NHS staff survey. However, there are worrying things, and we will continue to monitor them closely.

T4. [904931] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): Last month, Coperforma took on the patient transport contract for Sussex. Unfortunately, since then there have been unacceptable and serious delays for some very sick and elderly patients. May I have assurances that the Department of Health will follow up this issue?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison):** Sussex CCGs are responsible for monitoring Coperforma's performance, and High Weald Lewes Havens CCG acknowledges that, as my hon. Friend said, the early performance of the new non-emergency patient transport service has not been acceptable. For that reason, the CCG, on behalf of all Sussex CCGs, has begun an inquiry, with the aim of making a report available by June, and with interim progress reports. We will of course monitor the issue carefully.

T5. [904933] **Mr Douglas Carswell** (Clacton) (UKIP): In my corner of Essex, there is a primary care crisis: demand for GP services is rising, the supply of GPs is falling and many surgeries are simply no longer accepting new patients. What assurance can the Minister give me that we will definitely get more GPs, and when will we get them?

**Alistair Burt:** The concerns the hon. Gentleman raises are very real, and they are shared by GPs around the country, which is why we put so much work into analysing them. The recently published "GP Five Year Forward View" addresses a number of concerns brought to us by GPs, but the determination to have 5,000 more doctors working in general practice by 2020 is a reflection of the fact that making sure there are enough doctors physically to work in general practice is an important aim of the Government's.

T8. [904936] **Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): My constituent Archie Hill and his parents, Louisa and Gary, were really excited when, on 15 April, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommended that the drug Translarna—a breakthrough drug for children with Duchenne muscular dystrophy—should be funded by NHS England. Hon. Members can imagine what happened when, on 4 May, NICE

unexpectedly announced that it required extra time to come to an agreement with NHS England. What is going on? We thought this drug had been cleared. Time is of the essence, because the boys affected are eligible for this drug only if they are still walking. Can we please look into this issue, and can we please go back to the original timetable? After all, these boys have had to wait several years to get to this stage.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman):** I commend my right hon. Friend, and we have had numerous discussions over the last year on this subject. She can rest assured that I am actively doing everything I can to make sure we expedite this. She will understand that there are important negotiations with NHS England, NICE and the company at the moment, which are key to making sure we can get this drug accelerated quickly.

T6. [904934] **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Other EU countries charge us £650 million a year more for the health treatment of our citizens abroad than we do for the treatment of their citizens here. Is that because we cannot charge them, or because we have not got our act together?

**Mr Jeremy Hunt:** The answer, regrettably, is that for many years we have not got our act together. That is why I have changed the system of incentives for trusts to make sure that they get a premium for identifying EU nationals they treat and that we can then recharge the treatment to their home countries. We are, as a result, now seeing significant increases in the amount we are reclaiming from other countries.

**Dr Sarah Wollaston** (Totnes) (Con): Community hospitals are immensely valued by the communities they serve. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the proposals for south Devon, which will particularly affect my constituents living in Dartmouth and in Paignton?

**Mr Hunt:** Yes, I am happy to do that. I have a number of community hospitals in my own area. It is really important that even as the functions and jobs that community hospitals do inevitably change, we recognise that they have a very important long-term future in the NHS.

T7. [904935] **Yvonne Fovargue** (Makerfield) (Lab): Wigan A&E is expected to take a third of the patients turned away from Chorley A&E owing to Chorley's unplanned closure, yet it has a similar ratio of staffing vacancies. What extra resources are being given to Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh NHS Foundation Trust to help it to cope with this crisis?

**Mr Hunt:** We are making sure that neighbouring hospitals have the resources to deal with the temporary closure of Chorley A&E. The more patients that any hospital sees, the more resources it gets. This is none the less a very worrying situation that we are monitoring very closely.

**Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): The success regime review in Devon is causing real concern about the future of acute services at North Devon District Hospital. Does the Minister recognise that the unique

geographical circumstances of Barnstaple mean that the reduction of any of those services will, for some of my constituents, mean a round journey of more than 120 miles to access them?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer):** I do recognise the unique geographical circumstances in my hon. Friend's constituency. That is precisely why the success regime is being led by local clinicians. I hope and expect that in formulating plans they take account of all the views and all the clinical needs of his constituents and his own views.

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): There is growing concern that the additional investment in children's mental health services committed last year is not getting through to where it is intended. What will the Secretary of State do to guarantee that that money gets through to help children with mental health needs? It would be scandalous if it did not get through. Transparency is not enough.

**Alistair Burt:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for all the work he did in relation to this. I can assure him that the £1.25 billion committed in the 2015 Budget will be available during the course of this Parliament. As I said to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), it is absolutely essential to me and to us that we make sure that that money does get through to CCGs. The regime will be more transparent, but there will be a determination to expose it to make sure that the money is spent on child and adolescent mental health services, as it needs to be.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be well aware that the business case for the rebuilding of the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital has been dragging on within the NHS for more than six years. We now seem to have a decision for the Trust Development Authority to make. Will he put pressure on the TDA to approve this business case so that work can begin this summer?

**Mr Jeremy Hunt:** As my hon. Friend knows, I have done a shift as a porter in that hospital and seen for myself just how much it needs the extra investment to transform its facilities. I will happily look into the matter for him, and I am keen to see it progress as fast as possible.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): The Minister will be aware that mortality rates in England and Wales have increased by 5.4% in 2015—the biggest increase in the death rate for decades. She will also be aware that mortality rates have been rising since 2011. Has she done any analysis of what has been behind those trends? Specifically, with the Cridland review starting, what will her Department do to negotiate with Cridland on the increase in the pensionable age to take account of the recent changes taking place?

**Jane Ellison:** We welcome the overall trend towards longer life expectancy. There are annual fluctuations, but overall the trend remains positive. The key thing is helping people to live longer, healthier lives. Therefore, tackling health inequalities among people of all ages and in all communities is embedded in policy right

across the Department—for example, the investment in nearly doubling the health visitor workforce over the previous Parliament—so that we can really bear down on the things that drive those health inequalities, particularly among poorer communities and poorer children.

**Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for working so tirelessly to get the BMA back to the negotiating table. Will he confirm that Saturday pay for junior doctors will be at a 30% premium, which is above that for any of the hard-working midwives, nurses, firefighters, paramedics and so on in my constituency?

**Mr Jeremy Hunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She makes the important point that the proposals on the table in the new contract are incredibly generous compared with the terms of the other people working in hospitals. That is why it is very important that we have some flexibility from the BMA on Saturday pay so that we can deliver the seven-day service that we all want. It is a very good deal for junior doctors, and I think that if they look at it objectively, we should be able to come to an agreement this week, but it will take flexibility on both sides.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I shall call the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Graham Allen) if he guarantees that his grey cells will produce a one-sentence, pithy question.

**Mr Graham Allen** (Nottingham North) (Lab): Will the Minister responsible for dental matters meet me and the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) to discuss dental ill health in children and how we can change the dentist contract to make it more prevention-friendly? I have got a lot more to say, but I will sit down.

**Mr Speaker:** That was possibly the hon. Gentleman's greatest inquiry in his membership of the House.

**Alistair Burt:** Yes.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Marvellous. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but we must move on. I am most grateful to colleagues for their good humour.

## Child Refugee Resettlement

10.36 am

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary if she will make a statement on the resettlement of child refugees and the implementation of the Dubs amendment.

**The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire):** As I said last night, the Government are at the forefront of assisting and protecting vulnerable children wherever they are. As the House is aware, last week the Prime Minister said that we would work with local authorities on plans to resettle unaccompanied children from France, Greece and Italy. We have said that we expect the first children to arrive before the end of the year; we have not said that it will take until the end of the year for them to arrive. As I made clear to the House, we are working hard to ensure that isolated children are reunited with family and that children at risk of exploitation and abuse come to the UK as quickly as possible, but we have to be satisfied that they will receive appropriate care and support when they arrive.

The revised Dubs amendment to the Immigration Bill obliges us to consult local authorities. We must ensure that we fulfil our obligations to children who are already in the UK, as well ensuring that we have the right support for those who may be brought to the UK from Europe. The provisions in the Bill, by their nature, mean that we have to consult others before finalising our plans, but that does not imply that we will delay getting on with this. We will be contacting council leaders in the coming days, and I have already spoken to the Local Government Association about the matter.

We have always been clear that we must do nothing that inadvertently creates a situation in which families see an advantage in sending children ahead and putting their lives at risk by attempting perilous journeys to Europe. That is why only those who were present in the EU before 20 March will be eligible for resettlement, and only when it is in their best interests to come to the UK. That will avoid creating a perverse incentive for families to entrust their children to people traffickers.

We have already started to consult relevant non-governmental organisations, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF and member states on how best to implement the legislation. Last Friday, I met the Greek Government in Athens to discuss how we can make progress quickly. We are already working to identify those whom we can help. We have an ongoing plan with France to improve our joint response to children in Calais. We have accepted more than 30 transfer requests since February, and more than 20 have already arrived. We will work with France over the coming days and weeks to increase the identification of children in France who have family here so that we can bring them over.

In addition, the UK has played its full part in supporting European neighbours to provide support to those who have arrived. We have provided nearly £46 million of funding to the Europe-wide response to help the most vulnerable, including children and infants. In addition, the £10 million Department for International Development fund that was announced on 28 January will support the UNHCR, Save the Children and the International

Rescue Committee to work with host authorities to care for and assist unaccompanied or separated children. That is on top of our Syrian resettlement programme and the children at risk resettlement scheme, which is designed to resettle up to 3,000 children at risk from the middle east and north Africa where that is deemed to be in their best interests. The Government remain committed to making a full contribution to the global refugee crisis.

We are already acting to implement the amendment. We have started discussions with local government. We have begun work with European partners and NGOs to support effective implementation, and we will bring refugee children to the UK as quickly as is safe. I am proud that the commitment of this country and this Government to help those in need, both within and outside Europe, withstands comparison with that of any other country in the world.

**Yvette Cooper:** I have asked this urgent question because, at the end of the debate last night, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) raised the evidence that No. 10 had briefed that we would not see the first children arrive in Britain until the end of the year, which is in seven months' time. That is in contrast with the urgency we heard from the Minister in yesterday's debate. It is so frustrating to hear warm words and commitment, while at the same time No. 10 seems to be dragging its feet. To take the first children only by the end of the year is simply not good enough.

Let us look at the processes that should already be in place. For those who have family in the UK, the Government are processing only three to four cases a week at the moment, but more than 100 cases are pending. We need proper transparency and targets in relation to those who have family in the UK. Why will the Minister still not answer my parliamentary questions on how many applications have been made to the Home Office? Why is he still refusing to answer my freedom of information requests on how many Dublin III applications have been made? Why, if they are acting with such urgency, are the Government refusing to provide us with such information? We know that Help Refugees, Citizens UK and the Red Cross already have details of children in Europe who have family in this country who we could bring over now. UNICEF said yesterday:

"With the political will, these children could have their cases processed and be here in time to be packing their pencil cases for the new school year in September."

Why will the Government not make a commitment at least to clear all the family cases already in the system by the time we get to the summer holidays?

As for the wider scheme, I still do not see why it will take seven months. Under pressure, the Government managed to bring in 1,000 refugees under the original Syrian refugee scheme—all tribute to them for doing so—in three months. The Canadian Government managed to take in 25,000 refugees in the space of three months. Children are at risk right now, so why will the Minister not make a commitment to accelerate the wider scheme as well? Has he even spoken to the independent schools, given that we know that 11-year-olds are still sleeping in tents in Calais on their own and 14-year-olds who want to be surgeons have been out of school for two years? Teenage boys who have been abused are at risk of being

abused again, and teenage girls cannot escape from forced marriages because there is no support for them to do so. Greece and Italy do not tell the children, “Stay on the boats until we have sorted it out.” Seven months may be very fast for a bureaucrat, but it is a very long time for a child. I urge the Minister to accept the bishops’ target of taking 300 children by the beginning of the next school year. I urge him to do so.

**James Brokenshire:** I again underline what I said in my response to the right hon. Lady’s urgent question: we intend to make progress during the course of this year and the first children will therefore arrive before the end of this year, but that does not mean it will take seven months. As I think she will recognise from everything I have said last night and today, we are making quick progress in implementing the provisions in the Dubs amendment to the Immigration Bill. What the Prime Minister’s spokesperson has said is entirely consistent with what the Prime Minister said in accepting the Dubs amendment at Prime Minister’s questions last Wednesday. I want to be absolutely explicit and crystal clear in relation to that.

The right hon. Lady refers to what is happening in Calais in France. As I have already said, we are continuing to work quickly with the French Government to speed up the processes. We have already taken steps to do so in terms of the existing arrangements. Clearly, there is a renewed focus given our acceptance of the Dubs amendment to the Immigration Bill. I absolutely want to use that as a means of speeding up and making more effective the processing of those with links to family in the UK. Vulnerable children can then be reunited with their extended family in the UK, which is in their best interests, and will no longer be isolated in France, Italy or Greece.

The right hon. Lady should look at how we have approached the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme—we have got on with it. I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees. Once we have stated our commitments, we get on with the practical implementation. We are doing that already, even though the Bill has not received Royal Assent.

We will continue in the days ahead to have those discussions within Government and with all the parties involved, so that we can make progress quickly and see that children who have family here and who are in need of support because of their vulnerability to exploitation come to the UK. I need to consult properly with local authorities in the spirit and the letter of the legislation. That is what we are doing and we will get on with it.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I remind the House of what should be clear from what has already been said: namely, that this urgent question is not about whether to take child refugees from Europe—that matter has been decided by the House—but about when and how. It is about the implementation, the logistics and the timing, so let us focus our exchanges on that basis.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Britain is being generous in its support for refugees in the region and for vulnerable people coming to this country, but because human traffickers are evil people who will

exploit any opportunity for their vile trade there is a big danger that the message will go out from them: “Britain is open now to child refugees. Send us your children. We will take them to Britain.” What can Her Majesty’s Government do to ensure that we provide the support that is needed, but do not send the signal that more child refugees should start to make their way to Europe?

**James Brokenshire:** In implementing this policy, we are very conscious of the way in which people traffickers and smugglers can twist and interpret the statements that we make. I know that no one in this House would want to see more children lose their lives in the Mediterranean sea or in the Aegean, which has, sadly, been a consequence of these people trading in human misery. I assure my hon. Friend that we take this issue seriously. The best interests of the child are at the forefront of our activity. We will continue to underline the message that this scheme is for children who were in Europe prior to 20 March, so that it cannot be open to that misinterpretation.

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Yesterday’s debate was very much about how the Government came to accept the final Dubs amendment. Today is clearly about the what and where we go from here. I am glad that this urgent question was granted, because there was an apparent discrepancy between the approach the Minister outlined yesterday and what *The Daily Telegraph* reported this morning had been briefed from No. 10. The Minister has dealt with that.

The resettlement scheme has expanded over time. It started as a scheme to support, rather than take, refugees. It was expanded to include victims of sexual violence, then 20,000 people over five years, and then 3,000 children and families from the region. It has now been expanded by the final Dubs amendment. In fairness, where the Government have accepted the spirit of the expansion, the scheme works well. I have seen the resettlement of families in Glasgow and Colchester, where the scheme works very well. This next iteration is a challenge, but there is a huge prize if we get it right, particularly as it involves very vulnerable children who are here in Europe right here, right now.

I have some questions for the Minister. If the discussions have started, as he suggests, there must be an idea of the numbers, because there cannot be meaningful discussions unless there is some idea of how many children are involved. What is the broad number that the Government are looking at? The original Dubs amendment included a figure of 3,000. What figure are the Government at least discussing at the moment?

The second question is when. I absolutely agree that seven months is too long for children. There is an urgency here. We are all focused on the 10,000 children who according to Europol have gone missing. Those children are very vulnerable and in great danger. Seven months is a very long time in the life of a child, especially one who has gone through such circumstances.

Finally, what are the funding arrangements? It strikes me that the current scheme is working well because resources are being provided to local authorities and others to make sure that it beds in and that families are supported and welcomed and have the resources and facilities that they need.

[Keir Starmer]

What are the numbers, when will the children arrive and what are the funding arrangements?

**James Brokenshire:** I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for his comments on how we have sought to implement the scheme. As I have already indicated, we intend to follow the same approach in taking these measures forward and effecting them appropriately, with the best interests of the child in place. We are not looking to delay, and I hope we will make positive progress in the months ahead.

On numbers, the hon. and learned Gentleman will be aware that the amendment, which is now part of the Immigration Bill, says that we need to consult local authorities to establish what is termed the “specified number”. Although I recognise the desire for clarity, it is important to have that consultation first, to meet the requirements of the legislation. I do not want to prejudice the consultation but to get the numbers from it.

As for when, that will clearly be informed by the consultation, but, as I have indicated, we are not looking to delay. We want to make progress quickly in the weeks and months ahead. We are discussing funding across Government. The hon. and learned Gentleman will be aware that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are already funded when they arrive in the UK, and there are clear funding arrangements for local authorities. We need to be cognisant of that. We will look closely at implementing the scheme in a manner consistent with a number of existing arrangements.

**Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): This morning we are being challenged on the speed of the scheme. We have asked an awful lot of the Government and they have delivered; I am very proud that they have listened to us. I understand that turning passion and heart into practical steps takes time and co-ordination with other bodies. I would much rather encourage Ministers than berate them, and ask, for example, what can I do? What can we do as MPs to speed things up so that Ministers are not on their own in delivering this scheme?

**James Brokenshire:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the contribution that can be made. An example could be to have discussions with local authorities about capacity issues within the system, the availability of fostering and other support that may be provided. Indeed—as we have sought to do in implementing the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme—we should harness and channel offers of goodwill and support positive implementation, so that when children arrive they have the care, support and assistance that all Members of this House would want to see.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Scottish National party welcomes the Government’s change of position on this issue, as we did last night. We very much support the idea that efforts should be made to get these children here as quickly as possible. We are concerned, however, about the funding arrangements for local authorities. I asked the Minister about that in the debate last night, and the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has asked him, but we have not had a clear answer. Rather than

simply describing the current arrangements, will the Minister give us more detail? Local authorities in Scotland are considering how to respond to the particular challenge of dealing with vulnerable unaccompanied children. They have already responded admirably to the Syrian resettlement scheme, and as a result have received 700 refugees since October—more are arriving each month—but there is particular concern about how the children are to be supported.

Along with the Local Government Association, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has been encouraging the UK Government to ensure that the resettlement of unaccompanied children is adequately resourced, in the same way as the Syrian resettlement scheme, but taking into account the particular demands of vulnerable unaccompanied children. Will the Minister give a commitment that the scheme will be properly funded, and will he give us some idea of what he is going to do about funding it rather than simply describing existing arrangements?

**James Brokenshire:** It is important to recognise that we are likely to be dealing with two distinct groups. First, there are those with extended family within the UK. As they already have family here, the pressures that might otherwise be felt—on fostering, for example—will be different from those that relate to children who are being resettled on the basis of their risk of exploitation or abuse. We need to discuss those details with local government, as well as with the different Governments with whom we are engaging. Funding is linked to that, which is why we need to hold those conversations. The Home Office already provides funding for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and I assure the hon. and learned Lady that we will be talking to the Scottish Government, and to local authorities in Scotland as well as in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, so that this is seen as a contribution that we are making as the United Kingdom.

**Mr Stewart Jackson** (Peterborough) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his clear enunciation of Government policy, and this must be seen within the context of the wider refugee crisis. He will know that in September last year, the Prime Minister gave an undertaking that cognisance would be taken of religious persecution in the middle east, and the systematic slaughter of Coptic Christians, Yazidis and the wider Christian community. Will he reassure the House that a methodology will be put in place to take those issues on board when considering the settlement of child refugees?

**James Brokenshire:** My hon. Friend takes me to the implementation of the “children at risk” resettlement scheme, and the new arrangement under which 3,000 people from the region around Syria will be resettled over the next four years. That is not focused specifically on Syrian nationals; all nationals will fall within its scope, which I hope reassures my hon. Friend of the Government’s continuing commitment.

**Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough) (Lab): On 14 April I asked the Minister how many children in France who had applied for asylum or family reunion had been admitted to the UK, and he told me that the data are not held in a way that allows them to be reported on automatically. I am certain that in preparation for last

night's debate and today's urgent question, he is aware of those data. Will he tell the House how many children with family have already been admitted, how many have applied, and whether those children with family who have leave to remain in the UK can be admitted before the school term starts in September?

**James Brokenshire:** As I said in my opening statement, we have accepted more than 30 transfer requests since February, and more than 20 children have already arrived. We will continue to work closely with the French Government over further transfer requests, and to support them with the identification of children who are not already in the system. On transparency, I will be looking carefully at how we can update the public and the House on our progress, just as we have done for the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme.

**Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con):** I am grateful to the Minister for coming to the Chamber today and for all his work. I am also grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) and those in the Department for International Development who have helped to deal with this crisis, which keeps going on and on. It is important to ensure that the right support is in place for these children when they come to this country, but does the Minister agree that we must also ensure that we do not play any part in encouraging people trafficking, or in encouraging children to make that perilous journey across the Mediterranean?

**James Brokenshire:** I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, which is why the programme will apply only to children who were registered in the EU prior to 20 March when the EU-Turkey deal came into effect. We must be careful not to add to an already difficult problem, and ensure that we send out that clear message to confront people traffickers and those who seek to exploit children.

**Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD):** How quickly does the Minister think that the authorities should be able to turn around a case involving a vulnerable child in the European Union who has links to the UK, so that they can be provided with sanctuary? Should they be granted five-year humanitarian protection when they arrive? We do not need placatory words from the Minister; we need a decisive action plan with a clear timetable. [*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. There would be no discourtesy if the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) felt the need to leave the Chamber to put her device in order. She mentioned that she thought her phone was switched off, but in my experience, the right hon. Lady is never switched off.

**James Brokenshire:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. As I said last night, we are carefully analysing the nature of the grant of leave that should be given, and there is a distinction between those who are joining family, and those who are being resettled because of vulnerability. We are holding conversations with the UNHCR to

ensure that we strike the right balance, and reflect on what we have done for other schemes, such as the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme where a five-year grant is given.

**Will Quince (Colchester) (Con):** I very much welcome the Minister's statement. I pay tribute to him for all his hard work on this matter and for the work he continues to do. Colchester stands ready to play its part, as we have done in the past and look forward to doing in the future. I urge him to do all he can to speed up the process and ensure we help as many of the vulnerable, unaccompanied children as possible, as soon as possible.

**James Brokenshire:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the commitment he gives on behalf of Colchester. We will follow up on all offers of support from local authorities. As I indicated, we have already contacted the Local Government Association, and we will be making contacts through strategic migration partnerships and with local authorities directly. We will be getting on with this.

**Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab):** The Government seem to give the impression that for people coming to Britain there is a very fast track and a very slow track, which is exemplified today with vulnerable children. People in my constituency believe the fast track is when Mike Ashley of Sports Direct sends for 500 agency workers to work on zero-hours contracts and they are here in the flash of an eye. My right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) has been at the forefront of the campaign to try to get these vulnerable children in. Let us have a little bit more energy on the slow track!

**James Brokenshire:** I fear the hon. Gentleman may have strayed into the wrong debate. We have shown our commitment clearly through our work on the vulnerable person resettlement scheme and by taking firm action so that children and vulnerable adults come to this country quickly, while dealing with safeguarding and the best interests of the child. I will take no lectures from the hon. Gentleman.

**Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con):** I commend the Minister for the huge effort he and his team at the Home Office have put in. I have a specific question from the many people in Northumberland who are keen to help. They have shown a real willingness to be a part of the scheme to bring in the most vulnerable children who need protection. How can they become foster carers and ensure that they are able to take all children in need, as well as the many children in Northumberland who already need a home?

**James Brokenshire:** The Children's Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson) is sitting alongside me on the Government Front Bench. He and I recognise that there is a further opportunity to encourage people to come forward to become foster parents. It takes about nine months to train as a foster parent. On teenagers and issues of specific vulnerability, if people can come forward to their local councils and say that they want to become a foster parent, that would do an awful lot to assist not

[James Brokenshire]

just with the implementation of this scheme but with ensuring vulnerable children in this country receive the love, care and assistance we all want them to receive.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Wales is waiting to welcome refugee children. Will the Minister commit to working with the Children's Commissioner for Wales to ensure that she is properly empowered to support refugee children and Welsh local authorities without delay?

**James Brokenshire:** As I have indicated, we want our response to reflect the whole of the United Kingdom, including Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. I will certainly commit to contacting all relevant agencies in all the countries of the UK to give effect to that.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is clearly important that we treat as a matter of urgency the arrangements for these children. However, as the recent bombing of the Syrian refugee camp has shown, we must not lose sight of the main thrust of Government policy, which is to bring people from those dangerous camps. Will the Minister reassure the House that that remains the thrust of Government policy?

**James Brokenshire:** We are very clear that we believe we can make the biggest difference in the region, which is why we have committed £2.3 billion of aid and focused on resettlement schemes from the region. Peace and stability in Syria and the extended area are therefore absolutely pivotal. We recognise the needs of children in Europe, which is why we have already acted and why we are taking further action through the steps we are now outlining.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): The poorest areas in this country, whose services are already overburdened, take a grotesquely disproportionately high number of asylum seekers, while rich areas, including the constituencies of the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Home Secretary, take none. What are we going to do to improve public acceptability so that more children can be brought into places of refuge and to ensure that the system is fair? It is a question not just of money but of capacity. This great burden is being taken on by the areas that are poorest and least able to cope with large increases in the number of asylum seekers.

**James Brokenshire:** The hon. Gentleman needs to recognise the significant pressures that counties such as Kent and others have been experiencing in dealing with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. He makes a broader point about asylum dispersal. We have around 100 councils that fall within the dispersal zones and are in conversation with 20-plus about extending the numbers. I hope, however, that he will recognise the new provisions in the Immigration Bill for a statutory underpinning of a dispersal mechanism for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to ensure a more even sharing of the requirements across the whole UK.

**Kelly Tolhurst** (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I, too, thank the Minister for his comments and his hard work over many months—not just in recent times. I am glad

we are focusing on putting the right resources in place on the ground, but will he assure me that areas and counties such as Kent and Medway, which have experienced pressures over the last 12 months, will not be pressured to take further young people, given their existing burden?

**James Brokenshire:** I am very aware, from my discussions with the leader of the council and other hon. Members, of the pressures that Kent has experienced over many months. I can assure my hon. Friend that the new mechanisms and statutory underpinning of a national dispersal arrangement for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children will address those pressures and ensure that Kent and other councils experiencing such pressures are not overburdened, as they have been.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I commend the excellent work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) in leading the campaign on this issue and welcome the Government's new approach, but may I ask the Minister, who has talked about transparency, why he has refused to answer my right hon. Friend's parliamentary questions and the freedom of information request? In particular, we want to know the number of applications being made so that we can judge how quickly the Government are acting.

**James Brokenshire:** I have already provided the House with information this morning about children who have arrived in the UK and those applications accepted as "take charge" requests, and I will reflect further on what data can be provided, but clearly we are reliant on the French Government in relation to assessment. One key issue is the identification of children in the camps in Calais and Dunkirk. We are engaged in that work with the French Government in order to help achieve that.

**Mr David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I commend the Minister for his significant and long-standing commitment—it did not just start with the consideration of the Dubs amendment—to work for the best interests of lone children. Can he confirm that the lead he is taking in relation to additional expertise in Calais and the imminent dispatch of 75 experts to Greece is resulting in family reunions being expedited and that that will continue in the coming weeks? On transparency, can the results be published alongside the quarterly statistics?

**James Brokenshire:** As I have just indicated, I will consider further what information can be provided so that people can assess how the Government are progressing. When I was in Athens on Friday, I discussed directly how the experts we wanted to be deployed in the coming weeks could be used effectively and could bring a focus on issues of vulnerability, exploitation and support for vulnerable children.

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): The Minister says that we cannot get 300 children here in time for the start of the school term because he needs to consult local authorities, but that is why, a calendar month ago in the House, following my conversations with leaders on Merseyside, I asked him whether he had spoken to local authority leaders about educational needs for

children coming here. He said then that he had, so will he confirm that consultation with local authorities started at least a month ago?

**James Brokenshire:** If the hon. Lady looks at the legislation—the amendment was approved last night—she will find that it imposes a legal duty on the Government to carry out that consultation on the basis of the revised arrangements on resettlement from Europe that we have accepted. We need to look closely at that. It extends from the work on child resettlement from the region. There are pressures on fostering, children's centres, mental health and other facilities. We want to get this right, but there should be no imputation that we are delaying in doing so.

**Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** I have been contacted by constituents about this issue, as have many other Members. Some have said that they would be prepared to provide a placement for one of the refugees being resettled in this country. What work will be done to take up some of those offers? If they are not suitable for this programme, will the Minister consider whether they might be suitable for wider fostering placements, given the need for them?

**James Brokenshire:** I thank my hon. Friend and others for indicating the support from their communities. My hon. Friend may be interested to know that we continue to work closely on this. The Under-Secretary of State for Refugees, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) and the Home Secretary are looking closely at the community sponsorship mechanism that might provide new means for recognising children and others fleeing persecution who might be able to come to this country. I hope to be able to update the House on this shortly.

**Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op) rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I have just been reminded by the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) that today is the 76th anniversary of Winston Churchill becoming Prime Minister. I note in passing, despite the absence—the relatively rare absence—of the hon. Member in question from the Chamber, that today is also the 76th birthday of the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). [*Interruption.*] Recover your composure, Mr Doughty.

**Stephen Doughty:** I was taken aback by your encyclopaedic knowledge, Mr Speaker.

Citizens Cymru in Cardiff and the Vale has been very clear about the need to take urgent action on this issue. It wants to know from the Minister whether we are talking about a ballpark figure of 300? I understand that he will not give us a specific number, but is this the sort of figure involved, which Citizens Cymru and the Archbishop of Canterbury have asked for? The Minister has talked about the best interests of the child and I agree with him absolutely on that, but does he agree, given the conditions that we have heard some of these children are in, that seven months is unlikely to be in the best interests of the child?

**James Brokenshire:** I have already responded and made it clear that we will make progress during the course of the year. That does not mean that we are waiting seven months to do so. I underline that very clear message once again. I appreciate the desire for clarification on numbers and expectations, but I underline again that we need to do so in consultation with local authorities. That is what the Bill says; that is what we will do.

**Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con):** I very much support the pragmatic and responsible position outlined by the Minister on unaccompanied children, but does it not assert a worrying incapacity, particularly on the part of France and its structures, for maintaining the safety and security of vulnerable children?

**James Brokenshire:** The main point at issue is the children who have family here in the UK and how we can work speedily with the French Government to ensure that they are reunited with their family members here. We have been engaged in that work, but we have also supported the French Government on improving the conditions in and around the camps in northern France. We will continue to support them in their endeavours.

**Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab):** I want to push the Minister a bit more on the resources that will be required—not just for the speedy identification, processing and resettlement, but for the support that the children will need in the communities that they finally make their home. Many will almost certainly need educational support, but they might also need mental health and counselling support, too. What resources will the Minister make available for the child refugees?

**James Brokenshire:** That is precisely why we need further consultation with local government—to identify the pressures that will need to be satisfied. It is also why I have highlighted the different issues involved in these children rejoining a family, so that they can receive the support, love and care that they need from an established family group. As I have said, we need to look at this very carefully in the light of the best interests of the child.

**Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con):** I believe strongly that Ministers have been right all the way through to say that we should not incentivise or encourage perilous sea journeys. It is clear that other countries in the region should be doing more, so what pressure are Ministers putting on those countries to do that—not least to stop criminal gangs and traffickers being able to paint this an opportunity?

**James Brokenshire:** As my hon. Friend may know, we have established an organised immigration crime taskforce to strengthen our own knowledge, intelligence and action against the smugglers and people traffickers, working with Europol and at a European Union level to retain focus on confronting the smuggling networks. That is allowing us to work with other European countries to take firm action not just close to our shores, but further afield.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will the Minister guarantee that children whose families are already in the United Kingdom will be cleared in time for them to start school in September? Will he also agree to publish a timetable showing when unaccompanied children in Europe can come here?

**James Brokenshire:** As I have said, we want to make rapid progress. We are already taking children with family connections to the United Kingdom from France, and we want to find ways of improving the process further so that, when cases are identified, we can take charge and ensure that those children come to the UK quickly. There are vulnerable children in Italy and Greece, which is precisely why we are opening a dialogue with those countries. We want to understand their systems properly, and join up with them effectively so that we can identify such children and act to enable them to come to this country.

**Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): The Minister has spoken about the extra 75 staff who will help with child refugee resettlement. What will be the role of those staff, what will be the timescale for their deployment to help identify vulnerable children, and how will this move help to speed up the process?

**James Brokenshire:** Some of the 75 experts whom we have offered to the European Asylum Support Office to contribute to its endeavours in connection with the EU-Turkey deal will help with processing. Others will be translators. We have also offered medical support, as well as officers who will be able to identify vulnerability issues. I had conversations with EASO about this when I was in Athens on Friday. We have identified the people concerned, and we want them to be deployed quickly—within, I hope, a matter of weeks.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** We now come to the statement on key stage 2 tests. Before I call the Minister for Schools, I should inform the House that the Speaker had granted an urgent question to the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), but the hon. Gentleman has withdrawn it in the light of the Government's offer to make a statement on the matter.

## Key Stage 2 Tests

11.17 am

**The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb):** With permission, I will make a statement about key stage 2 tests.

Last night the Department for Education was made aware of an issue involving the key stage 2 English grammar, punctuation and spelling test, which was mistakenly uploaded on to a secure website by Pearson. Pearson is the external marking supplier contracted by the Department to mark the tests.

At this stage, we know that the test was mistakenly uploaded at about 5 o'clock yesterday evening. It was uploaded on to a secure site, which was not accessible to anyone without approval from Pearson. Pearson was informed that the test was on its site by markers during the course of the evening, and removed the material from the site at 9.1 pm. The Department was separately alerted to the situation at about 9.30 pm by the media, and contacted Pearson immediately to establish the facts. Pearson's records show that during the short period when the materials were live, 93 markers—all with the appropriate clearance—accessed the material.

It is worth emphasising that the only people with access to the site are contracted markers, all of whom are under a contractual obligation not to share sensitive information. I should also point out that it is standard and appropriate practice for key individuals to be given prior access to assessment material in order to ensure that the delivery of tests and marking of papers can occur in a smooth and timely way. Some 23 senior markers had access to the material from 1 April, and 153 team leaders had access to the material from 11 April.

Clearly, in this system, it is essential that people in positions of trust can be relied on to act appropriately. Unfortunately, in this case, it appears that one person could not, and leaked the key stage 2 English grammar, punctuation and spelling test to a journalist. I have spoken to Rod Bristow, the president of Pearson UK, this morning to ask for a full explanation of how this mistake occurred. He has accepted full responsibility for the error and has committed to investigating the matter quickly and fully.

Specifically, I have asked Rod Bristow to look at two issues. First, how did the material come to be uploaded on to the secure site in error? This was clearly a mistake which should not have been possible. Secondly, I have asked that all records be examined and all information interrogated so that the culprit who leaked this sensitive information can be identified. I am satisfied that Pearson understands the seriousness of the issue and the need to take action quickly to provide clear and unequivocal answers to these two questions. Once I have this information, I will consider what action it may be appropriate to take. I will explore the full range of options available to the Department, including looking at contractual and other routes to seek redress.

I would like to reiterate that we have no evidence to suggest that any sensitive information entered the public domain before children started taking the test today, and the tests are going ahead as planned. My officials were monitoring social media and other platforms through the night and found no sign of materials being made

available. The journalist in question took the decision not to publish the test papers and I am grateful to him for that. Although this is a serious breach—and I am determined to get to the bottom of how the error occurred—it is clear that the actions of almost every marker involved have been correct and proper, and that the integrity of the tests has not been compromised. Teachers and schools should have confidence in the content of the tests and in the processes underpinning the administration of the tests in schools and the subsequent marking.

I would like to make a few comments about the wider context of primary assessment. I acknowledge that there have been errors in the administration of tests this year. While it is important that we address those errors, they should not detract from the central importance of testing in the life of a school. Tests are an appropriate and essential way for us to understand how well schools are doing, and where more support needs to be targeted so that every child is given the best possible opportunity to succeed throughout their time in school and to get the best preparation for adult life.

We have taken clear action to strengthen the primary curriculum, to ensure that children today are being taught the fundamentals of literacy and numeracy that are vital for their future success. There are some who say that tests are inherently wrong, that we should not test children and that we are creating a regime that is overly stressful. I disagree. Yesterday, ComRes released a poll of 750 10 and 11-year-old pupils for the BBC, in which 62% of pupils responded that they either “don’t mind” or “enjoy” taking the tests. That is far more than those who said that they “don’t like” or “hate” taking the tests. Altogether, more of the polled pupils reported that they “enjoy” taking the tests than “hate” them.

Testing is a vital part of teaching: it is the most accurate way, bar none, that a teacher, school or parent can know whether a pupil has or has not understood vital subject content. What is more, the process of taking a test actually improves pupil knowledge and understanding. As such, testing should be a routine and normalised part of school life. When the time for national curriculum assessments comes around, pupils should be entirely accustomed to the process.

I would like to finish by reiterating that the key stage 2 English grammar, punctuation and spelling test remains valid and is going ahead as planned. Teachers, schools, parents and others should have confidence in the test, and it will remain part of the primary assessment system. I commend this statement to the House.

11.24 am

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving me advance sight of his statement. The Government have taken their eye off the ball. Ministers have obsessed for months over a plan for forced academisation, a plan which was never about raising standards and which was self-evidently flawed from the start. Parents did not want or need forced academisation. They made that extremely clear and played a key role in forcing the Government into a humiliating policy U-turn last week, which was confirmed by the Secretary of State in her humiliating statement yesterday. What does matter to parents, however, is having an appropriate and supportive assessment regime for their child. They

want to know how their child is performing at school, how they can help to close any gaps in their knowledge and how they can support them to do their best.

The Government have let parents down at every step of the way. Today’s debacle is just the latest in a sorry line of chaos in primary assessment. First, with no proper consultation with parents, school leaders or teachers, the Government scrapped the assessment system of levels in schools with no regard to what would replace it, creating significant uncertainty and anxiety among the professionals delivering the primary curriculum. It created confusion for parents, with many schools simply attempting to reintroduce their own watered-down version of levels assessment that failed to adequately articulate exactly how well children were getting on. Ministers were then forced to push back the deadline for primary assessments after failing to deliver the necessary resources for teachers in time.

Following that came the embarrassment of the Government’s failure to introduce baseline assessment. By rushing ahead with the policy without properly involving professionals or parents, the Government failed to spot the fundamental flaw in the design, which was that the tests that they had developed were insufficiently comparable. As a result, they were forced to abandon their approach to baseline tests entirely. Furthermore, just three weeks ago, we learned that the key stage 1 spelling and grammar test had been accidentally published online in December 2015 as a practice paper. Answers to parliamentary questions show that it was downloaded more than 18,000 times before Ministers realised that there was an issue. As a result, the Government were forced to cancel the test, invalidating the work of many children, teachers and parents.

There has been a constant stream of chop and change in primary assessment under this Government. Since September, the Department for Education has updated or clarified on average at least one primary school assessment resource every other working day. The situation has become so ludicrous that the Department is now having to start clarifying its clarifications. Without a doubt, the confusion and chaos created in primary assessment has led to a damaging fall in confidence among parents and teachers about the reliability and validity of assessment in schools.

As 10 and 11-year-olds are sitting down to take the key stage 2 spelling and grammar test this morning, we now learn that the test has already been published online. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, to lose one test may be regarded as a mistake, but to lose both looks like carelessness. It could not be made up. It is a serious breach on top of a series of multiple failures. How on earth can parents have confidence in the assessment regime when the Department for Education has completely lost control of the tests for which it is responsible? How can we be confident that the rest of the test process is secure? Remember, the tests are not only important for individual pupils, but part of the performance data by which schools are judged. We can have no confidence in their being used for that purpose after what we have heard today.

The National Association of Head Teachers is right to say:

“We cannot see how school level results can be published or a national benchmark set on such shaky data.”

[*Nic Dakin*]

Headteachers and parents deserve a firm guarantee from the Minister today that no primary school will be forced to become an academy on the basis of these compromised tests. It is time for him to be honest with them, honest with himself and—[*Interruption.*] The reality is that parents, school leaders and teachers have lost confidence in this Government's approach to assessment and exams. It is time for the Minister to be honest with them, honest with himself and honest with us. He needs to hold up his hands, admit that he has got it wrong and stop trying to blame others for his Department's mistakes. It is time for him to engage properly with parents and teachers to establish an approach to primary assessment that has everybody's confidence and not just his. He needs to look into the eyes of all those 10 and 11-year-olds who are taking the tests today and say sorry for getting it wrong and sorry for letting them down. After all, that is what we teach children to do: admit their mistakes, apologise for them, learn from them and move on. So will he now learn his lesson and turn his attention away from the misguided obsession with structures at the expense of raising standards in schools? Will he turn his focus and his energy on what really matters to parents, and get this right?

**Mr Gibb:** I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin)—or should I say the Lady Bracknell from Scunthorpe. I have to say to him that this Government are committed to raising standards in schools. Given the way the Opposition address this issue, I sometimes wonder whether they are as committed to raising standards as we are. In 2011, we conducted a review of the primary curriculum to ensure that it was closer to the curriculums being taught in the most successful education systems in the world. The review was overseen by the national curriculum review panel, which was made up of highly experienced headteachers and teachers in this country. We introduced the phonics check to ensure that six-year-olds were learning to read properly, and as a consequence of that reform 120,000 six-year-olds are reading more effectively today. We reviewed the reading curriculum—the English curriculum—to ensure that children became fluent readers who developed a habit of reading for pleasure. We reformed the maths curriculum so that children learn how to perform long multiplication by year 5 and long division by year 6, and so that they know their multiplication tables—up to 12 by 12—by heart by the end of year 4. Under the last Labour Government, one in three pupils were leaving primary school still unable to read, write and add up properly. Our Government are determined to address those issues.

Let me address some of the issues the hon. Gentleman raised. He talked about the removal of levels, but level descriptors were only ever intended to be used for the end of key stage statutory assessments, and yet over time came to dominate all assessment and teaching practice. That had a damaging impact on teaching and failed to give parents an accurate understanding of how their children were doing at school. The removal of levels allowed classroom assessment to return to its real purpose of helping teachers evaluate pupils' knowledge and understanding of curriculum content. When we introduced the reception baseline in September last year, we said we would carry out a comparability study

to establish whether it was fit for purpose. The study is now complete, and it has shown that the three different assessments being used by schools this year are not sufficiently comparable for us to create a fair starting point from which to measure pupils' progress. We remain committed to the assessment of pupils in reception, and over the coming months we will be considering options for improving these assessment arrangements for beyond 2016-17. We will engage teachers, school leaders and parents in that work.

The hon. Gentleman brought up the spelling test. The investigation has uncovered further weaknesses in some of the Standards and Testing Agency's clearance processes. I initiated that investigation, and the STA is now taking appropriate management action with the members of staff involved. We have already reviewed and tightened up the publication clearance processes.

This is a Government who are committed to reviewing the curriculum and to raising academic standards in our schools. This was always going to be a challenging month as schools got used to the new, more demanding curriculum and the new, more demanding assessments that follow that curriculum. I am confident—the Government are confident—that this is the right thing to do to raise academic standards in our schools to prepare young people for life in modern Britain and for an increasingly competitive global economy.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Parents in Kettering, of whom I am one, want their children, when they leave primary school, to be able to write neatly and legibly, spell correctly, read confidently, be able to add up, take away, multiply and divide, know all their times tables by heart, mix well with other children, realise that they in themselves have lots of potential, and have a thirst for knowledge that they can develop in their secondary school career. To what extent are we achieving that in modern Britain?

**Mr Gibb:** My hon. Friend rightly summarises the issues that we need to address. We need to ensure that we return to a knowledge-based curriculum, and that children become fluent in arithmetic and reading before they leave primary school. I am afraid that, under the previous Labour Government, too many young people left primary school without those skills to equip them for secondary education. I am convinced that our reforms will deliver the objectives that my hon. Friend set out. [*Interruption.*] The evidence is that 120,000 more six-year-olds are reading more effectively today than they were in 2012, and that 1.4 million more pupils are being taught in good and outstanding schools today than they were in 2010.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Having listened to the Minister today and heard the statement about the U-turn on academies recently, it seems to me that the Department for Education should now be put in special measures. When the Minister cannot even get the basics right in education, what confidence can we have that the Department will get the big issues right?

**Mr Gibb:** As the hon. Lady will know, this process of testing 600,000 pupils is complex. We use contractors, and, on this occasion, an error was made in uploading

that material on to a secure website. We took action swiftly when we discovered that error, as we did when the spelling test was put online three weeks ago. It is how a Government react to these issues that determines their competence, and we acted swiftly on both occasions. This whole approach to testing our six and seven-year-olds and our 10 and 11-year-olds does require an element of trust in those people engaged in the process. We must test and develop the test. A huge number of professionals see the content of these tests many weeks before they go live, and we have to trust those professionals to do their job properly and with integrity. On this occasion, one such professional decided not to act with integrity. I hope that the hon. Lady will take the same view that we do about professionals who act in that inappropriate way.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that testing forms an important and crucial part of our education system. If proof were needed that testing is important, one need look no further than the text of the statement that has been circulated in the Chamber today. It says:

“Although this is a serious breach—”.

Unfortunately, the word “breach” is spelled incorrectly.

**Mr Gibb:** Yes, well, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing out that error, and I will make sure that it is corrected for *Hansard*.

**Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough) (Lab): I speak as a former key stage 2 marker, and I support efficient, effective testing of children, but I do not think that the Government understand what testing is for. The Minister’s statement said that it was for the accountability of schools, but it seems to me that what testing should be about is measuring and developing a child’s learning. That is why we should not put so much emphasis on a national test that is about school accountability and leads to this kind of appalling behaviour from one teacher. We should focus on ensuring that children understand what they are learning and that we get appropriate tests for individual children.

**Mr Gibb:** I do not disagree with the right hon. Lady. It is important that children are tested frequently, which helps with memory and practice. Schools use informal formative testing as part of the learning process. There is also another purpose of testing, as summative testing for public accountability and to hold schools to account. That is why the key stage 2 assessments, or SATs, were introduced nearly 30 years ago: to hold schools to account. In doing so, we can target school improvement resources on those schools that are not delivering the quality of education that we want for our young people. We need to be able to do that. Children have only one chance at an education and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is committed to ensuring that we have educational excellence everywhere, in every part of the country. To be able to identify those areas and schools that need the extra support, we need external assessment of children as they leave primary school.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): As a parent who has a child who will do key stage 1 this year and another doing key stage 2, I find it absolutely

outrageous that an individual has put my child’s chances at risk with this leak. Does the Minister agree that it would be better for the Opposition to bear that point in mind rather than playing politics with children’s testing?

**Mr Gibb:** I agree with my hon. Friend. As I said, the whole system depends on the integrity of professionals. We need our senior markers to have access to this material weeks before it goes live. We need our test developers to have access to individual questions months before the tests go live. We test these tests with a large number of pupils before we are sure that they have the right degree of demand. A range of people have access to this material long before it goes live in the classroom. If people do not have that professional integrity, there will be problems. We will be investigating to identify the individual and to ensure that Pearson’s processes are tightened up so that this cannot happen again.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister needs to move to the bottom of the class, because he must try harder. This is not the first time that tests have been compromised in this academic year; it is the second time on his watch. Will he sincerely apologise to parents, teachers and those pupils who have taken the test today? Will he also assure them and us that every measure that he needs to take will be taken so that this will not happen on a third occasion?

**Mr Gibb:** I did apologise for the problem with the key stage 1 spelling test when that material was inadvertently put online. This issue has not damaged the integrity of the grammar, punctuation and spelling test being taken by 600,000 10 and 11-year-olds today. It was put on to a secure website, protected by password and available only to markers, and 93 of those markers examined the material. We have looked on the websites and at social media—officials were doing this work through the night—to see whether there was any compromising of the test. There is no such evidence.

The Standards and Testing Agency is confident that the test has integrity and it will go ahead. This is a complex process of administering these tests for 600,000 pupils every year. This year was always going to be a challenging year, as it is the first to assess the new and more demanding national curriculum that came into force in September 2014 and that schools have had since July 2013. There is therefore an element of controversy to it. We do not apologise for that controversy, because we believe as a Government in raising academic standards in schools. That is what we came into office to achieve.

We are a Government that will achieve and are achieving those high academic standards, but there are some—I assume that there are no such people on the Opposition Benches—who do not necessarily agree with us that it is important to raise academic standards. Somebody decided that their own opinions were more important than their professional integrity, and decided to breach the trust they had been given and the confidentiality contract into which they had entered, and leaked one of those tests to the media.

**William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): I begin by wishing the thousands of children undertaking their SATs this week the very best of luck. I am sure they are

[William Wragg]

taking place in classrooms far calmer than our Chamber this morning. If there has indeed been a deliberate leaking of the SATs material, that is very serious. What is my hon. Friend doing to ensure the continued viability of this year's key stage 2 SATs?

**Mr Gibb:** Following the problem with the key stage 1 spelling test, we asked the Standards and Testing Agency to go through all the material with a fine-toothed comb to ensure that there were no further problems at either key stage 1 or key stage 2. We have been assured by the chief executive of the Standards and Testing Agency that those tests are safe and secure. Also, I spoke to Rod Bristow, the president of Pearson UK, this morning, and he assures me that Pearson UK is making sure that its processes are secure and tight so that such breaches cannot occur in the future.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Last Wednesday the Prime Minister was not able to tell the House his definition of a modal verb or what the past progressive tense is, or to distinguish a subordinating conjunctive from a co-ordinating conjunctive. I want to give the Minister a second chance. In the sentence "My baby was born in the hospital where my father works", are the words "where my father works" a preposition phrase, a relative clause, a main clause or a noun phrase?

**Mr Gibb:** That is a very clever-clever question, but I have learned through bitter experience not to respond to such provocation.

**Amanda Solloway** (Derby North) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it is essential to measure the progress of both the child and the school to identify the gap and how best to fill it?

**Mr Gibb:** My hon. Friend is right. It is important to measure progress, as well as absolute attainment. One reason why some people regard the assessment this year as challenging is that there are questions in it that previously were not included in the standard test. They were called level 6 tests and were taken separately. We now include those challenging tests within this test so that schools can get credit for the progress of children who start their school with high levels of prior attainment.

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Secretary of State appeared before the Education Committee on 27 April and told me that the new testing regime for key stage 1 and key stage 2 had not been handled badly. I, and parents and teachers throughout the country, strongly disagree. Does the Minister accept that his Department's actions are making the working lives of teachers more stressful and more difficult, and explain how he thinks that will help to solve the already very worrying teacher recruitment crisis?

**Mr Gibb:** Whenever I have a platform, I talk about how important it is to go into teaching. I say that it is a very important profession. There are more teachers—450,000—in the profession today than there have been in history. There are 13,000 more teachers today than there were in 2010, and 14,000 returners came into the teaching profession last year, which is more than

the 11,000 who came in a few years before that. Of course, we want more professionals to come into teaching as the pupil population increases. That is why we have very effective advertising campaigns and why we are spending £1.3 billion on generous bursaries to attract the best graduates into teaching.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): I, too, wish all the children doing their exams good luck. I know what that is like, having had three children who went through a state primary school. Tests are an imperative part of school life because we as parents want to know how to plan for our children's education, and we want the schools to help us see where the gaps are and how our children are doing. Businesses in Taunton Deane would like our children to have better maths qualifications and better writing skills. Under Labour for all those years, education standards sank. Does the Minister agree that our driving force is better education to raise standards, and that tests are an imperative part of that?

**Mr Gibb:** Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have been declining in the programme for international student assessment tables internationally. We have to continually improve our education system, because other countries are not standing still. They are continually improving their education systems, and unless we do the same, we will fall behind. That is why we reviewed the primary curriculum, why we increased the demands and rigour of mathematics and English, and why we are focusing so much on getting every child to become a fluent reader, who not only masters the mechanics early in their education but becomes a regular reader, reading books for pleasure and developing a lifelong love of reading. We have reformed the secondary curriculum, and we have reformed GCSEs so that they are more on a par with the qualifications in the best education jurisdictions in the world. We have also reformed A-levels, responding to the concerns of employers and universities about the standard of undergraduates and employees.

**John Pugh** (Southport) (LD): Returning to the tests, the Minister cannot do them, the Department cannot organise them and schools cannot understand them. Does the Minister agree with the headmaster of a major primary school in my area, Adrian Antell, who wrote to him saying,

"The primary assessment system in our schools is nothing short of shambolic... Yet again, the professional judgements of experienced educational professionals is ignored by politicians trying to make a short term political gain"?

**Mr Gibb:** No, the tests were developed by educational professionals—a huge number of such professionals were involved. A large number of professional educators, headteachers and experienced teachers were involved in the review of the curriculum. The tests assess the ability of schools to deliver the new curriculum. That curriculum is more demanding, and we do not resile from that; it was a deliberate decision to raise academic standards in our primary schools and secondary schools as we respond to an increasingly demanding world and to the concerns of employers, universities and others.

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): The Government made a big song and dance about testing, which they cannot now deliver. This weekend I was in the Wirral

talking to school governors about how to cope with forced academisation, but the Government had already U-turned. The next time the Minister comes to the Dispatch Box with a grand plan to improve education, why should teachers, parents and pupils in the Wirral believe what he has to say?

**Mr Gibb:** The hon. Lady simply overstates her case. Our plan for reforming the education system was put in place in 2010. We have reviewed the curriculum. That was overseen by a national curriculum review panel of experienced teachers and headteachers. The new curriculum was advised on by a panel of curriculum experts. It was consulted on widely between 2012 and 2013, informally and then formally. It was published in final draft in July 2013, giving schools over a year to prepare for the first teaching of it in September 2014. This has been a carefully planned review and reform of the curriculum. It has been as swift as it can be, because children need the best education possible, as quickly as possible. This is an important reform. This was always going to be a difficult month, as children were assessed for the first time on the new curriculum. However, schools have had a significant amount of material since July 2013, and they are ready—all our surveys have shown that they are confident about teaching the new curriculum.

**Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I hope the Minister will agree that stability is key to a child thriving at primary school. As has been said, however, the Department for Education has changed documents and resources almost every other day recently, and that has been compounded by the disgraceful leak of the tests. Government Members are rewriting history—something the UK Statistics Authority told them to stop doing—because the Labour Government improved standards from 1997 to 2010. I will give the Minister another chance to apologise to teachers, parents and pupils, and to allow teachers to get on with teaching and children to thrive. Apologise!

**Mr Gibb:** Again, I think the hon. Lady overstates her case. The primary curriculum was published in final form in July 2013, sample questions were available as early as March 2014, and there were later sample questions in 2015. In reference to her point about changes being made to materials on-site, the Standards and Testing

Agency has responded to telephone queries from teachers about certain aspects of the curriculum and the sample materials. To help teachers, it revised some of that material so that it responded to those concerns. There were other, very minor changes—for example, when, in response to representations from the NAHT, I changed the date on which the STA collected the teacher assessment materials. That decision was taken in response to the concerns expressed. There were real reasons why we wanted the date to be earlier to ensure fairness between the schools that were moderated by the local authority and those that were not. Of course, that required all the documents online to have a date change. The hon. Lady can make a song and dance about these changes, but they were all done for professional reasons by the very experienced professionals of the Standards and Testing Agency, and they were the right thing to do.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Labour Members are most concerned about the fact that this is the second case in a matter of weeks of major pupil testing errors, and that suggests quite strongly that the Government have taken their eye off the ball. How has their preoccupation with enforced academisation affected their ability to monitor their contractors?

**Mr Gibb:** We monitor contractors very carefully. The Standards and Testing Agency monitors these issues. This error was made by an individual who put the marking scheme and the test papers for one of the tests—the key stage 2 spelling, punctuation and grammar test—on to a secure site 24 hours before they should have done. As soon as one of the markers alerted them to that fact, they took it down. Ninety-three people had seen that material on-site, but all those 93 people were subject to a confidentiality agreement with Pearson, so this is not some widespread breach. We checked to see whether the individual who leaked this to a journalist had succeeded in spreading the test further. We saw no evidence overnight, through social media or other platforms, that some of that material leaked. The Standards and Testing Agency believes that the test has not been compromised, and we are continuing with it. These are very important assessments and this is a very complex operation. I believe that parents, teachers and the public can have confidence in the tests that have been set this week.

## Points of Order

11.57 am

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to raise a very serious point of order with the Chair. We know from reports in the press that HS2 Ltd is apparently again facing difficulties on costs, which are being reviewed by no less a person than the Cabinet Secretary, and on issues of connectivity, which has ever been thus since the project was first announced. A serious matter has arisen that I believe is an attempt by the civil servants who are paid for by the taxpayer and who run HS2 Ltd through their agents—very highly paid lawyers, Eversheds—to gag Members of this House. I do not know whether the Chair is aware of this, but the locus standi of no fewer than four Ministers, three Back Benchers and, I believe, even the Speaker has been challenged.

In other words, HS2 Ltd is trying to prevent Members of this House from speaking out for their constituents and bringing information to the other place—to the House of Lords Committee, which will now be deliberating on the scheme. The question that arises is, “What is it afraid of? Why shouldn’t Members of Parliament be able to speak directly about their constituencies and their constituents and help to try to improve this legislation as it is going through?” Quite frankly, I regard this as an interference with the freedom of speech of Members of this House, and with our ability and right to represent the people who send us here. I ask the Chair and the House authorities to look into this issue, because I believe that on so many counts, HS2 Ltd has been trying to cover up what is happening, or even to gag those who want to speak against the project or improve the project and make greater gains for their constituencies.

It is ironic that Eversheds quoted in its locus standi challenge the 24th edition of “*Erskine May*”, pages 949 to 950, in support of the proposition that we should be gagged. The section on

“Members and Officers of the House disqualified as agents” states:

“No officer or clerk in the service of either House is allowed to transact private business before the House for his emolument or advantage, either directly or indirectly.”

The previous sentence states:

“Members may not be agents, though they can deposit petitions on behalf of parties”.

I hope that there is no implication from Eversheds that any of the Members of Parliament who have made representations on behalf of their constituents on HS2 are

“in receipt of emolument or advantage, either directly or indirectly”, but we know that Eversheds certainly is.

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill)**: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I just make it clear that the rules on locus standi are very clear and we are following them to the letter?

**Mrs Gillan**: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is not a matter of the letter of the law, but the fact that it is wrong to prevent Ministers, Members of Parliament and even the Speaker from informing a Committee of the other House about a project that has been through this House in its first stage.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel)**: On advice, this is a matter that is with the House of Lords at the moment, and therefore the locus standi is a matter for the House of Lords. I suggest that because the right hon. Lady is referring to a matter of privilege, she should write to the Speaker to ask him to have a look at this. I hope that she is happy with that. He will certainly have a look in *Hansard* at her full explanation in her point of order.

## Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act 1847 (Amendment)

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

12.2 pm

**Craig Mackinlay** (South Thanet) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend section 33 of the Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act 1847 to allow local authorities to proscribe, in certain circumstances, the transport of live animals for slaughter abroad via facilities that local authorities control and operate; and for connected purposes.

I introduce this ten-minute rule Bill for a number of reasons. I do not count myself an outright animal rights activist, but I do count myself as a common-sense activist. That said, there are many reasons why we should all have concerns about any act of animal transportation that imposes stress and unnecessary suffering, when the most logical answer is local slaughter and refrigerated transport of carcasses to their destination. The Bill is designed not to change the law on the transportation of live animals for breeding or other aspects of animal husbandry, but merely to allow local authorities discretion to decide, in the spirit of localism, whether facilities that they own should be used to transport animals for slaughter abroad. In short, the Bill would make due amendment to section 33 of the Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act 1847 to allow local authority-controlled ports to proscribe, at their discretion, the transport of animals for slaughter abroad.

The primary reason for my interest in the matter is local to my constituency of South Thanet, where we have the active port of Ramsgate. It is on a long-term lease from the Crown Estate, and all port operations are controlled and invoiced by the local authority, Thanet District Council. Following pressure from a shipper, the council acquiesced to legal threats and demands that the port be made available for small vessel roll-on, roll-off operations of just a few lorries carrying livestock. The first such shipment happened on 18 May 2011. Not surprisingly, the transportation attracted a huge amount of local opposition and active campaigning by Kent-wide animal rights activists. The police cost of marshalling such shipments is estimated to be £18,000 per shipment. That is massively more—perhaps by a factor of 10—than the likely profit arising to the shipper.

The regular shipments continued, with local opposition, until what can only be described as a truly appalling event on 12 September 2012. A lorry was loaded with 548 sheep over three tiers, and the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency staff who were on site discovered that it had been poorly loaded and was overstocked. One sheep had a broken leg, others were lame and some had trapped limbs. An order was given to unload the sheep, and a witness of the scene that followed commented that

“all hell let loose with nearly 20 people made up of RSPCA, AHVLA”—

the veterinary association—

“Police and port staff, some with a camera in hand and a paint sprayer in the other chasing over 500 sheep around and apparently trying to find lame ones. In fact it was the chasing on the unsuitable surface that was causing the lameness. During the chase six lambs went into the water resulting in four being rescued by the RSPCA and two being found dead”.

Some 13 hours later, after the arrival of Kent trading standards and news crews, a further 37 sheep were identified as lame and were euthanised on site. That followed a second unloading, after sheep were again found to have trapped limbs. It was described by the local press as simply a “massacre”.

The following day, Thanet District Council unilaterally decided to suspend any further live animal shipments through Ramsgate. This decision was supported by the wider council across all the political parties locally, and of course by local residents. However, legal fears were brought to bear, and following a grant of interim relief in the High Court, shipments resumed a little over a month later, on 19 October 2012.

The shippers then entered the legal fray over a protracted period, which resulted in a High Court judgment on 27 February 2014. During a four-day hearing in December 2013, Thanet District Council relied heavily on section 40 of the Harbours Act 1964, which offers some discretion in relation to port use. Unfortunately, the judgment went against Thanet District Council primarily because of section 33 of the Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act, which states that ports

“shall be open to all persons for the shipping and unshipping of goods”.

I am seeking to change that provision through this Bill. The adverse judgment has left local taxpayers—the authority is not a large one—with a compensation bill and costs in excess of £4 million, and it has resulted in the resumption of a trade that nobody wants through a port that is unsuitable. Local residents are appalled that their port is now being used for a trade that they find unnecessary and that many find distinctly abhorrent.

This is the nub of my ten-minute rule Bill: in the true spirit of localism, a long overdue amendment to the 1847 Act would give local authorities a greater degree of certainty that they will not face this type of legal action in future and provide them with an opportunity to object to the use of their municipally operated facilities for such transactions. If only life were that simple, I could bring in a Bill to amend the 1847 Act and if this House agreed to it—if only this House was sovereign and able to do so—that would be the end of the matter. Unfortunately, there is the big boot of the EU to consider, given the protection of free trade and the free movement of goods provided by article 35 of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union. Such protection has been further added to over the years by various European Court judgments, notably *Francovich* in 1991, and by the *Factortame* case in the Lords in 2001.

In summary, I am seeking the House’s leave to advance this Bill to its next stage, and, on the assumption that this Parliament is sovereign and can do so, to secure an alteration of domestic law to proscribe such trade in the circumstances that clearly apply to the port of Ramsgate and to Thanet District Council, which controls it. The conclusion of the High Court judgment was rather instructive and quite alarming: in the judge’s words,

“the law does not exist only to protect the interests of the popular.”

I would say that this is entirely the foundation of our democracy. The argument about the intervention of EU law in this area is not one for me to make today; it is an argument for another day—possibly 23 June. On that basis, I commend the Bill to the House.

12.9 pm

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): I rise to oppose the motion, which was proposed so ably by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay). I thank him for raising a matter of concern for millions of our fellow citizens. At the time of the events to which he referred, I am sure that I was not alone in receiving communications from constituents, asking that we stop this trade. He is responding to those calls for action, but I want to deal with the elephant in the room—in fact, the two elephants in the room, one of which he touched on briefly.

The first elephant in the room is to do with our proceedings. As we are in the last few sitting days of this Session, even if the motion is passed today there will be no time to consider the Bill further during this Session. Along with the dozens of others that are listed on the Order Paper, it will fall when Parliament prorogues in the next day or two. As the House will be aware, the Procedure Committee, of which I am a member, has put forward proposals to change our procedures to make them more readily understandable to those outside the House.

There is therefore an interesting contrast between the two elephants. It is within our power to do something about the first one. It is in our hands to improve matters, so we can remove the first elephant from the room. The second elephant is the effect on our law of European law, which was touched on briefly by my hon. Friend in moving the ten-minute rule motion. It means that no matter how much we would like to change the sad state of affairs in which we find ourselves, we are powerless to do anything about it.

In the time available today, it is not possible to deal with every single detail of the matter, but I hope that in trying to prove my case to the satisfaction of the House, it will suffice if I quote briefly from the judgment of Mr Justice Birss in the case that arose out of the facts set out by my hon. Friend, the short title of which was *Barco de Vapor v. Thanet District Council*. It is a comprehensive judgment that runs to 192 paragraphs. I will quote from just three of those paragraphs.

Paragraph 8 states:

“The claimants’ case in outline is that the ban amounted to a restriction on the exporting of goods within the European Union in breach of Article 35 TFEU and cannot be justified under Article 36 TFEU or otherwise. One reason it cannot be justified is because the relevant legislation is Regulation EC 1/2005. The claimants contend that the ban is contrary to the Regulation and that since the Regulation exhaustively harmonises the law in the relevant area, the ban cannot be justified under Art 36.”

I should explain for the benefit of those who are not familiar with the acronym TFEU that it refers to the treaty on the functioning of the European Union, which is one of the basic treaties of the European Union that we are subject to.

Let me jump to the very end of the judgment, where the judge delivers his final verdict on the case. At the end of the penultimate 191st paragraph, he says:

“In my judgment TDC are liable to pay damages to compensate the claimants for the losses caused by the breach of Art 35 TFEU.”

There is no mention of the Act that my hon. Friend seeks to amend today.

Finally, let me quote from the final paragraph. My hon. Friend referred briefly to one part of it, but did not read the whole paragraph, which is very instructive indeed. Paragraph 192 reads as follows:

“The animal export trade is not popular. It involves activities which are highly distasteful to many people. However the law does not exist only to protect the interests of the popular. I have found that Thanet District Council did not have the authority to impose the ban which prevented the claimants from using Ramsgate port to export livestock. The ban was an unjustifiable breach of Art 35 of the TFEU. It was a disproportionate decision reached in haste without separate legal advice and breached a fundamental element of the rules governing free trade in the EU. In my judgment the council is liable to pay damages to the claimants.”

There we have it: the final judgment was nothing to do with the 1847 Act—let’s not kid ourselves. It all came down to article 35.

Our constituents will often hear that one of the reasons why those of us who believe that the United Kingdom would be better off if we left the European Union is that our membership means a loss of sovereignty. Unsurprisingly, many people are not all that clear about what that actually means. Is it some sort of technical or theoretical issue that does not really matter? This case brings the whole issue of sovereignty to life. In short, the loss of sovereignty means the loss of power—the loss of power of this House to do anything about certain things. It means that the power of our constituents has been given away; the power that they have entrusted to us to enact legislation on their behalf has been lost.

I believe that we must be open and honest with the country about these matters. There is no point in continuing the pretence that this House has any power to stop these exports by merely amending domestic legislation. Unless we leave the European Union and regain our sovereignty—that is to say, regain the power to control our own affairs—we are simply wasting our time. We are giving the public the false impression that we are able to do something about this matter, when we cannot.

In view of the fact that there is no prospect of the Bill making further progress, I do not wish to divide the House, but I trust that by the time my hon. Friend brings the matter before the House again, voters across the country will have taken the opportunity afforded to them on 23 June to take back control over this matter.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That Craig Mackinlay, Sir Roger Gale, Martin Vickers, Kelly Tolhurst, Mrs Flick Drummond, Caroline Lucas, Peter Aldous, Mr Steve Baker and Dr Tania Mathias present the Bill.

Craig Mackinlay accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 May, and to be printed (Bill 176).*

## Backbench Business

### Universal Credit (Children)

12.18 pm

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that, while some aspects of the universal credit system are likely better to support families with children, some groups of children and families are particularly likely to lose out, and many may struggle with elements of the new approaches to payment and administration; further notes that there has been no revised impact assessment to take account of significant cuts to the work allowance; and calls on the Government to re-assess the effect of its policy on universal credit in light of those cuts and to ensure that the number of children in poverty, and particularly those in working families, falls as a result of the introduction of the new universal credit system.

I am extremely grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the opportunity to debate this subject. Once universal credit is in place, it is estimated that about half of all the children in the UK will be in households that are entitled to it at any given time, so it will have a huge impact on children and one that it is important for us to scrutinise.

I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) and the Minister for Employment in their places. I have always enjoyed debating these matters with the Minister, but I often wish she felt as willing to disagree with her right hon. and hon. Friends on her ministerial brief as she is free to disagree with the Prime Minister about Europe. However, I fear I may be disappointed when we come to the end of the debate. I hope that the debate can shed some light on the impact of universal credit on child poverty around the UK.

The Opposition have always recognised that there are significant potential benefits from universal credit: simplifying the system, merging six different benefits into one and, in particular, making it much easier for people to work out the effect on their financial position if they were to move into work—that is difficult at the moment but under universal credit should be simpler. The former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who of course resigned from the Government after the Budget fiasco on disability benefits, is entitled to a good deal of credit for coming up with the original idea and driving it through while he was in the Government.

Unfortunately, however, the right hon. Gentleman is not entitled to very much credit for the way that he implemented universal credit—the Department got itself into a terrible mess, and the Cabinet Office had to step in to sort out a looming IT disaster. The result is that universal credit is now running extremely late. On the original timetable, set out in 2010, transition from the old benefits system to universal credit would now be almost finished, and the whole thing would be complete by next year. In fact, implementation of universal credit is really only just beginning. According to the most recent figures, from March, 225,000 people are receiving universal credit, of whom almost 88,000 are in work.

The initial plan was hopelessly unrealistic, as was pointed out by the Opposition at the time. Unfortunately the Government ignored those warnings. We were told at one stage that 1 million people would be claiming

universal credit by April 2014; two years later, we still have not reached a quarter of that number. Things are a little unclear, but it now looks as though the current plan has transition complete by 2022, which is five years later than originally announced.

**Christina Rees** (Neath) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend think it right and fair that, as a result of the piecemeal roll-out of universal credit, along with the cuts to work allowances, some families could be more than £3,000 a year worse off than they would be if they were in exactly the same financial circumstances but lived in an area where tax credits were still available?

**Stephen Timms**: No, I do not think that that is fair. There is now a large and growing group of people who are significantly worse off than they would have been because they have the misfortune of being in an area where universal credit is paid instead of tax credits. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to that.

When the universal credit project started in 2011, we were told that it would be completed in six years. Today, five years later, we are being told that it will be completed in another six years, by 2022. Five years into this initiative, its expected completion has been delayed by five years. We are no nearer the end now than we were told we were five years ago.

**Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman was generous in his support of the principle of the scheme. Surely he must accept that it is better to get it right. A steady, phased implementation is the right way to ensure that the benefits to which he referred are properly implemented across the country.

**Stephen Timms**: Of course that is right. There should have been a sensible timetable and plan from the start. It was pointed out to Ministers that the original plan was unrealistic, but unfortunately they took no notice of that.

It is not just the timetable that has changed, however, but the substance. What is being implemented is now significantly different from what it was originally going to be. A report published last week by the Resolution Foundation has made that very clear; I will refer to that report a number of times in my speech, but at this point I will quote one observation from its executive summary, which says that

“the latest series of cuts—announced at last year’s Summer Budget—risk leaving UC as little more than a vehicle for rationalising benefit administration and cutting costs to the Exchequer.”

That is at the heart of this debate. Universal credit is now set to be a pale shadow of what Ministers initially announced. The losers, both from the cuts made to the original proposals and from flaws in the original design that have never satisfactorily been addressed, will above all be the nation’s children.

The Resolution Foundation has explained the impact of the £3 billion cut announced last summer:

“As initially designed, UC gave broad parity with the current tax credit system...Now, UC will...be less generous than the tax credit system for working families.”

[Stephen Timms]

That is what gives rise to the anomaly and unfairness to which my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) drew our attention.

**Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend as shocked as I was to hear that a recent report from the Children's Society has shown that disabled children will get considerably less money under universal credit, and many will receive only around half of what they currently get under tax credits?

**Stephen Timms:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is a shocking aspect of what has always been proposed with universal credit—the support for disabled children is being drastically reduced. I hope we will have time to discuss that.

Will the Minister publish an updated version of the impact report for universal credit that was published alongside the 2011 Welfare Reform Bill, which introduced it? I will come back to that, because what is now being introduced is certainly not what the previous Secretary of State had in mind when he launched the universal credit initiative six years ago.

Throughout the last Parliament, Ministers repeatedly said that they were committed to eliminating child poverty, and they cited the introduction of universal credit as key to helping to achieve that. The 2011 impact assessment, which I hope the Minister will update, said that universal credit would reduce child poverty by 300,000. A written answer in January 2013 gave the lower figure of 150,000, half the initial figure of 300,000. We have not had an update since the really big cuts to universal credit announced last summer. That is what I am hoping the Minister will give us.

All of us will recall the furore when the Chancellor announced swingeing tax credit cuts last summer. I pay tribute to those Government Members who, unlike the Chancellor, grasped what those cuts would mean to many hard-working families struggling to make ends meet, such as the family of an ambulance driver earning £20,000 a year, who stood to lose a full £2,000 from the cuts. Thankfully, the Chancellor was forced to abandon those plans. But the equivalent cuts to universal credit—at that time, claimed by hardly anyone in work—went ahead, so the Chancellor's cuts to tax credits will, over time, be implemented by stealth. Working families on universal credit rather than tax credits saw a big income cut last month, as my hon. Friend the Member for Neath has already pointed out.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making a strong point about the value of the cuts and the wider impact of the changes. Does he agree that there is a significant challenge with the move from weekly or fortnightly payments to monthly payments? With a week's processing time for claims, and payments in arrears, that could leave five weeks before people receive claims under universal credit. We are told that there is an advance payment system but Citizens Advice has said that six in 10 clients coming to a citizens advice bureau about universal credit have not been told about it. We could see many people out of pocket and really struggling to get by, through no fault of their own. That can have a huge impact on children.

**Stephen Timms:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point, and Citizens Advice points out that this is the biggest practical problem that arises where universal credit has already been introduced. The assumption with universal credit is that people have a monthly pay cheque that will see them through the first month, and that they will receive universal credit at the end of that. However, Citizens Advice suggests that more than half of those claiming are paid weekly, not monthly, and therefore do not have a month's pay cheque to keep them going for those five weeks. That is causing serious problems.

Will the Minister update the House on what the Government now believe the effect of universal credit will be on child poverty? Given the drastic cuts that we have seen, I believe that implementing universal credit will increase child poverty, rather than decrease it as we were told it would, and as—I have no doubt—was the intention of the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in introducing this radical change.

Some information on that question has been provided by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in its February report, "Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality in the UK: 2015–16 to 2020–21", which shows relative poverty rates from 1997–98 to 2020–21. It points out that in 1997–98 relative child poverty—which was inherited by the incoming Labour Government—stood at 27%. By 2010–11 when that Government were replaced, that figure was down to between 17% and 18%. The statutory target enshrined in the Child Poverty Act 2010—which I took through the House with all-party support—was 10% by 2020, but after 2010 the level of child poverty flatlined for a number of years, and it is now starting to rise. Under the IFS projection, by 2020 it will be virtually back up to the catastrophic level inherited by the Blair Government in 1997. As the IFS states in its report "the projected increases over the next few years simply reverse the large falls seen under Labour."

It is interesting to contrast that with what the IFS says about pensioner poverty. Like child poverty, pensioner poverty in 1997 was at a high level—around 27%—but the policies of the Labour Government reduced that to around 17%, and that level remained fairly stable throughout the previous Parliament from 2010 to 2015. The future trajectory for pensioner poverty suggests that it will not rise and will carry on at around 17%. By contrast, child poverty will rocket back up to the levels of 1997. Under the IFS projection, the rate of child poverty in families with more than three children will be more than 30% by 2020.

The huge cuts announced to universal credit will come about by reducing the income of working families with children—a lot of families will be much worse off not only compared with what they would have received under the tax credit system, but in comparison with what they would have received if the original universal credit proposals had gone ahead. The Child Poverty Action Group highlights problems for lone parents and states that

"lone parents will be hit particularly hard, and stand to lose... around £554 per year if renting, or over £2,600 per year if not... The children of single parents are already at twice the risk of living in poverty as those in couple families, and this will exacerbate their disadvantage".

Cuts to universal credit will drastically reduce the income of working families, and just as big a worry is that incentives for unemployed parents to get into work

will be much weaker under current proposals for universal credit than originally intended. That was spelt out by the Resolution Foundation in its report, which states:

“These cuts don’t just affect incomes, they also undermine the scheme’s incentives structure... Returns to entering work are much lower than anticipated under the earlier design of UC.”

It warns that parents—particularly lone parents—will find the incentives to work more hours very weak, and many will reduce their hours for a very small income drop.

**Christina Rees:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that guidance from the DWP that instructs people to work an extra 200 hours a year for no extra money, to make up the thousands of pounds a year that families are set to lose as a result of cuts to universal credit, is unacceptable?

**Stephen Timms:** Yes, the suggestion that people can make up those losses simply by working more hours is unrealistic in many circumstances. The Resolution Foundation also points out:

“For second earners in couples the situation may be worse still, with increasing numbers potentially deciding not to enter work at all.”

The whole point of universal credit was supposed to give people incentives to be in employment—indeed, yesterday the Secretary of State reiterated that point at questions to the DWP. The problem is that as currently proposed, those incentives will not be in place when universal credit is rolled out.

Let me draw the Minister’s attention to an article that was published last month and written by Deven Ghelani, who was one of the original architects of universal credit at the Centre for Social Justice. He describes the cuts to universal credit work allowances that were introduced on 11 April as

“undermining the original intent of Universal Credit—to make work pay... The Government should maintain support for work incentives within Universal Credit... these cuts to work allowances will not help to make work pay for low earners.”

That is a deep problem with what is now proposed.

The Minister will argue that calculations of child poverty—the reduction in child poverty of 300,000 that was announced by the Government in the original impact assessment for the legislation, and the subsequent written answer estimate of 150,000—do not allow for the dynamic effects of universal credit and of encouraging people into jobs. In his article, Deven Ghelani addresses exactly that point and states:

“Lower work allowances will limit the dynamic effect of Universal Credit and... will make it harder for households to make up their shortfall by working additional hours.”

That point was also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Neath.

**Stephen Doughty:** I am sure that my right hon. Friend has had the experience of meeting many constituents who have to make agonising decisions when making up shortfalls in their income, particularly when it comes to children, whether for basics such as food and school clothes, or modest birthday presents. Sometimes that will force people down the route of getting into further debt, which further compounds their situation. We have seen the horrors of payday loan companies, and others, and many families will find themselves in difficult situations, particularly during that transition period, and they may end up getting further into debt.

**Stephen Timms:** My hon. Friend is right, and Citizens Advice made exactly that point about the change to support for disabled children that my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) referred to. A large proportion of those affected say that they will have to cut back on food, and are likely to get into debt as a result of the cuts.

Deven Ghelani refers to

“the challenges that arise from weakening work incentives within this Government’s flagship welfare reform.”

The Minister will understand why that is a problem, given what the Government have been telling us for years about what universal credit was going to do.

The IFS’s projections for dramatically rising levels of child poverty over the next few years are not only about universal credit; other factors also have an impact. As far as I can see, however, the projections are consistent not with universal credit reducing child poverty—we were originally told it would reduce child poverty—but with universal credit increasing child poverty. It is low-income families and children who will bear the brunt of the cuts, while older and better off people will not be affected at all. I press the Minister to tell us the Government’s current estimate of the effect of the implementation of universal credit on the child poverty figures.

That is the big picture impact of universal credit, but there are a number of other aspects of its design that I want to touch on. I will try to do so very briefly. The first aspect is the eligibility of universal credit claimants to free school meals. At the moment, entitlement to so-called “passported benefits” is dependent on receiving means-tested, out-of-work benefits. That simple test is no longer available in universal credit, because the benefit does not indicate whether the claimant is working or not—indeed, that is one of the advantages of universal credit. The Government therefore have to devise a new eligibility test.

There has been discussion about how, instead of free school meals, claimants could be given cash which could be tapered away with the rest of their universal credit payment. The problem, however, is that we know much of the cash would not be spent on school meals but on something else. There is a real danger of the school meal system collapsing. The Government have rightly rejected that option. We could envisage an electronic system, where claimants are given credits that could be used only to buy school meals. Those, too, could be tapered, but currently there is no IT system in place to do that. The Welfare Reform and Work Bill Committee asked about this during pre-legislative scrutiny in 2011. The Secretary of State at the time told us we would have an answer before the Bill gained Royal Assent in summer 2011. Five years later, we still have not had an answer. Ministers often tell us it is a matter for the Department for Education. The problem is this: the way this question is answered is crucial to whether universal credit will achieve its goal.

It has been hinted that free school meals eligibility will depend on a family’s income being below a particular threshold. The huge problem with that is that it would introduce an enormous new cliff edge into the benefit system, which is exactly the kind of perverse incentive that universal credit is intended to remove. In fact, it would be far worse than any of the perverse incentives

[Stephen Timms]

currently in the system. If one's income is just below the threshold—whatever it may be—the last thing you would want is any kind of pay rise or hours increase that would cause you to lose, overnight, the benefit of free school meals for your children. With three children, well over £1,000 a year could be lost.

What is the answer? I recognise that this is a genuinely difficult issue. I do not criticise Ministers for the fact that it is difficult, but I do criticise Ministers for the fact that five years later we still do not have an answer. Increasingly, it seems to me that the viable solution, albeit quite a costly one, will be to extend the current temporary solution that free school meals should be made available to everyone who claims universal credit whether they are in work or not. I ask the Minister when it is likely that we will get a decision on this issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles drew attention to the severity of the proposed cuts to the incomes of disabled children through universal credit. The tax credit support of about £60 a week will be cut to £29 a week. I think all of us can see that for an estimated 100,000 families with disabled children that will be a dramatic reduction in their income. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) drew attention to the problems with the long delay between someone making a claim for universal credit and receiving the money. The assumption that people will have a month's pay cheque in the bank to keep them going in the meantime is proving to be unfounded. The Trussell Trust published its annual statistics last month, which show another increase in food bank demand in the past year. It notes:

“In some areas food banks report increased referrals due to delays and arrears in Universal Credit payments.”

Will the Minister look again at the administrative arrangements for universal credit, as it seems the current arrangements will be a serious problem for many families with children?

The final point I want to raise is that at the moment local authorities pay housing benefit. They can see which claimants will be hit by cuts to benefits of various kinds and provide additional help and tailored support. That is what we have seen in practice. Under universal credit, however, the payment will be made by the DWP. Local authorities will no longer have the data about people's circumstances. Will the Department provide that data, which it will have instead of local authorities, to local authorities so they will be in a position to continue to provide the kind of tailored support we have seen in the past couple of years?

My fear is that the implementation of universal credit may well have a deeply damaging impact on Britain's children. In particular, I would like the Minister to give us an update on the Department's estimates, published in 2011 and updated in 2013, for the impact of universal credit on the number of children living in poverty.

12.46 pm

**Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): I echo the words of the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). The Backbench Business Committee has, properly, allowed this debate and he has introduced it very wisely indeed.

In my mind, there is a difficulty with the motion as it currently stands on the Order Paper: it seeks to look at universal credit in isolation. That is a problem, because what we need to consider is the entire package of measures the Government have introduced with regard to changes to benefits and very significant movements forward in seeking to tackle child poverty. We need to look at all of those measures in the round and as a whole, and not focus solely on universal credit. The package of measures we need to be thinking about are the increases in the personal tax allowance, the introduction of the national living wage and better childcare provision, which goes to the heart of what this debate seeks to address.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman talks about needing to take these issues in the round. Does he accept that in February this year the IFS predicted that, taking all issues in the round including planned tax and benefit reforms, child poverty will increase from 15.1% in 2015-16 to 18.3% by the end of this Parliament?

**Peter Heaton-Jones**: I am glad the hon. Gentleman mentions the IFS, because it also said that

“universal credit should make the system easier to understand, ease transitions into and out of work, and largely get rid of the most extreme disincentives to work or to earn more created by the current system.”

The IFS seems to quite like the introduction of universal credit, which has to be looked at in the round. The Government are introducing a whole package of measures. I listed some of them. The growing economy and rising employment also help.

The other issue that is not taken into account when we consider universal credit is what is sometimes referred to as the dynamic impact—a horrible bit of jargon—of universal credit. This seeks to take into account changes in individual behaviours in response to the introduction of universal credit. It is quite difficult to analyse but it means improved opportunities for people to move from welfare into work, which changes people's behaviours. This is a vital point. Even though it is in its early stages of introduction, as pointed out already, there is significant evidence that universal credit is doing well and succeeding at ensuring that more people move off welfare and into work. The latest figures show that for every 100 people who found work under the old jobseeker's allowance system, about 113 universal credit claimants move into a job. What matters, however, is not just the fact of moving into a job but the quality of the job and the pay, and people are actively looking to increase their hours and their earnings as well.

**Jeremy Quin**: Does my hon. Friend, like me, welcome the emphasis on in-work progression? The story does not end when someone happily gets into a role. It matters also that they are encouraged through Jobcentre Plus to improve their hours and their standing in the firm and get paid more over time.

**Peter Heaton-Jones**: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That is important, and the latest figures show that 86% of claimants on universal credit are actively looking to increase their hours, which compares to 38% under JSA, which is a significant difference. People are actively looking to increase their earnings as well,

which goes to the heart of his point. Some 77% of those on universal credit are actively looking to increase their earnings, compared to 51% on JSA. That is a really important part of the universal credit package.

**Mark Durkan** (Foyle) (SDLP): Is the hon. Gentleman really trying to tell us that the dynamic impact will compensate for the loss of income that families, particularly those with disabled children, will suffer under the universal credit changes?

**Peter Heaton-Jones:** The hon. Gentleman leads me on to talk about children in particular—the essence of the issue the motion seeks to address—so let us talk about what the Government are doing to reduce child poverty. The latest households below average income statistics show that child poverty in the UK remains at its lowest level since the mid-1980s—the lowest for 30 years. The number of workless households has fallen by about 750,000 since 2010 and—this is the crucial point that goes to the heart of it—there are nearly 500,000 fewer children living in workless households.

The Government, therefore, have a good and sound record on reducing child poverty and targeting the welfare system very carefully at those who need it the most. That is the key to what universal credit seeks to do. The hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) mentioned young children. The Government have invested £2.5 billion in the troubled families initiative and the same amount again in the pupil premium, which provides extra funding for the most disadvantaged children in school. And here is a measure we do not hear much about from the Labour party: income inequality is down under this Government.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) *indicated dissent*.

**Peter Heaton-Jones:** That is what the statistics show. It is important to remember that the Government are having some success.

I want to touch on the Government's announcement of the introduction of the new and significantly strengthened approach to the life chances of Britain's most disadvantaged children. I sat last autumn through 17 sittings of the Bill Committee for the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, along with the Minister and other hon. Members I can see today on both sides of the House. For those who were not there, this was a very important part of what the Committee discussed. The Act seeks to ensure that the life chances of the most disadvantaged children are front and centre in all the welfare reforms we seek to introduce. That will be central to our one nation approach over the next five years. Ministers are committed—I have heard them say it several times—to this much more effective measure focused on the real causes of poverty.

I repeat, however, that we need to look at this as a whole. I am not saying that this debate is not worthwhile, but I question the wording of the motion and the fact that it merely isolates universal credit. We need to look in the round at all the measures and welfare reforms that the Government have introduced and which amount to a significant and beneficial package of reforms.

**Stephen Timms** *rose—*

**Peter Heaton-Jones:** If the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I am coming to a conclusion.

I understand the concerns that the right hon. Gentleman has raised and which the motion seeks to address, but having sat through the Bill Committee, I think that universal credit will bring longer-term benefits. It needs to be seen as part of a package of measures. I am not for one minute saying it is not important that we look at how children are being affected by these measures, but I know that the Minister is addressing the matter and that the Government have put the effect on children at the heart of their full package of welfare reforms. We want to ensure that those effects are beneficial. I believe that they will be and that the Government are moving in the right direction.

12.55 pm

**Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for his eloquent introduction to the debate and the Backbench Business Committee for bringing it to the main Chamber.

This debate is of particular concern in my constituency, where there is a high proportion of people claiming welfare benefits. As of April 2015, there were 14,500 people on tax credits, and it is estimated that, by 2020-21, 19,000 people will be on universal credit. According to figures from Child Poverty Action Group, reductions in work allowance under universal credit, introduced in April 2016, will result in a working single parent in rental accommodation losing up to £554 per year and in a working single parent who owns their home losing up to £2,000 per year. In both cases, this is more than double the loss suffered by working couples. The majority of these single parents are women. Once again, this is a cut that comes at the expense of women, who account for 86% of cuts to benefits and tax savings. This figure has increased, not decreased, as a result of the Chancellor's latest Budget.

A single parent already working full time on the national living wage will have to work an extra 46 days each year—more than two additional working months—to make up what they have lost. While the Government may paint these reductions in income as an incentive to work, for single parents already in full-time work, extra hours are not realistic. Support for childcare might have increased from 70% to 85%, but this will not compensate families for the losses they will suffer as a result of the changes in universal credit. End Child Poverty estimates that 42% of children in my constituency live in relative poverty, which makes it the constituency with the sixth-highest level of child poverty. The four-year freeze on support for children under universal credit is expected to reduce the value of key children's benefits by 12% by the end of the decade, when creeping inflation will also have added to the cost of living.

In 2011, the Government forecast that universal credit would lift up to 350,000 children out of poverty. In 2013, this figure was amended to 150,000 and the Government today refuse to give a figure. There remain significant gaps between the Government's aim of making work pay through the new universal credit regime and the reality of families facing huge cuts to their income. I would like to ask the Minister two questions. First, will the Government review the impact of work allowance

[Kate Osamor]

reductions on working families, particularly working single families? Secondly, will they agree to review annually the decision to freeze most key children's benefits for four years?

As I have stated, the impact of changing tax credits to universal credits will affect families in my constituency. I am here representing them and trying to get their voices heard in the Chamber, so I ask that the Government take very seriously the effect the changes will have on families and women.

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does she agree that we should be particularly concerned about the plight of the self-employed—an increasingly large group of income-insecure people? Does she share my concern that about 800,000 self-employed people are likely to lose £1,000 a year as a result of the cuts to universal credit?

**Kate Osamor**: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. There are many lone workers and people who have their own businesses in my constituency, and they have come to see me in my office to say that they are very concerned because they need to use benefits to top up their salaries. This is an issue that I hope the Government will take into account.

I conclude by asking the Minister to review the impact that work allowance reductions are having on working families, particularly single families. Secondly, will the Government agree to review annually the decision to freeze most key children's benefits for four years?

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con) *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel)**: Were you here at the beginning of the debate, Mr Graham?

**Richard Graham**: Not right from the beginning, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel)**: Okay, I call Richard Graham.

1.1 pm

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): I am very grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Today's debate comes at an interesting time. The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) introduced it with his usual reasonableness on an issue of concern to everybody here. There are two or three points that I would like to highlight in a brief contribution. The first is the biggest strategic challenge for the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, which is where the balance of the strategy that Labour Members are trying to pursue will lead the country. I offer two thoughts. The first is that Labour Members have still not told us what reforms to welfare benefits they would make to reduce the budget deficit that we and all our constituents still face. At a time when the country is spending more on the interest of our debt than on the education of our children, it has to be wrong to ignore this part of the equation.

I think I am right in saying that Labour opposed every one of the welfare reforms pushed through by the coalition Government in the last Parliament, which amounted to some £20 billion of reductions in expenditure, and indeed have opposed everything in this Parliament as well. This comes at the same time as consistently opposing in this Parliament measures that the Government have taken to improve conditions for businesses that generate, directly and indirectly, 75% of all the tax that pays for the services, the welfare and the pensions that we all know are so important to our constituents.

**Ms Buck** *rose*—

**Richard Graham**: I give way to my colleague on the Select Committee.

**Ms Buck**: Does the hon. Gentleman believe that giving a tax cut to the richest people in society and introducing the married person's tax allowance are a better use of public money than investment in universal credit?

**Richard Graham**: I have two points in response to that. First, when it comes to generating more tax, I subscribe to the philosophy of the former Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, who said:

"It matters not whether the cat is white or black so long as it catches mice."

On this occasion, when we lowered the top tax rate from 50% to 45%, the additional tax revenue was £8 billion. My question to the hon. Lady and her colleagues is this, "Would you rather have an extra £8 billion of tax revenue to spend on our vital services, or enjoy the ideological thrill of raising the top tax rate and collecting less tax revenue with less to spend on services?" I know what I would go for; I am not sure about her.

**Ms Buck** *indicated dissent*.

**Richard Graham**: The hon. Lady is shaking her head, which suggests to me that my colleague on the Select Committee on Work and Pensions is still from the school of thought that prefers to raise taxes and get less tax revenue. I would have thought that the period of Reaganomics and Thatcheromics had made it very clear that we incentivise businesses to grow, to generate more revenue and to employ more people by creating a business-friendly environment rather than the opposite. It is something that the hon. Lady and her party will have to work out.

The hon. Lady's second question was on the married person's tax allowance. All the evidence from research done over a period of years shows that we have happier families and less dysfunctional behaviour when we have closer families, and marriage plays a key part in that. I recognise that not all Members subscribe to the importance of marriage as a contributing factor to a happy society, but we should probably leave that debate for another day.

My second main point relates to what the right hon. Member for East Ham said about universal credit, in particular the part of the motion that states that "many may struggle with elements of the new approaches to payment and administration".

There is a philosophical issue here, too. Originally, the current Minister for Welfare Reform, Lord Freud, acted as an adviser to the last Labour Government, and he recommended many solutions to the problem of tax credits, which he has now implemented in government with our party. I once asked him what the difference was between the work he had done for the previous Labour Government and our own Government. He said that the difference was simply that we would implement it.

The former Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer and Member for Edinburgh South West, now Lord Darling, said in this House that Labour had not implemented universal credit simply because it was “too difficult”. His party has always struggled with the fact that we are implementing something that it had decided was too difficult. Labour Members have not been able to work out whether to oppose it all in principle, which would be odd, given that they had looked at it, or whether to attack it in detail on the basis that it is too complicated to do. As universal credit continues to move forward on its journey across the country, affecting a growing number of people, I suspect that that challenge is going to be more and more difficult, and those on the Labour Front Bench are going to have to reconcile these problems.

The assumption behind what the right hon. Member for East Ham said today is that universal credit is basically all too complicated, with the twist that it now cannot be understood by those who are going on to it. I do not know how many Members have actually been to their Jobcentre Plus and spoken to people working there about the implementation of universal credit, as well as to their customers, namely our constituents who are receiving it. I suspect that those who have done so, as I have, will find that people working in Jobcentre Plus find universal credit to be a huge step forward. More than one officer working there described it to me as a quiet revolution, while those receiving it find it much easier to understand than the plethora of often contradictory benefit systems that our country built up over a long period of time.

I fundamentally disagree with the right hon. Member for East Ham—reluctantly, because I agree with him on several things—on the notion that universal credit cannot be understood by those either receiving it or responsible for administering it. He claimed that there were “long delays” to universal credit claims, and that the Trussell Trust had said once again, having said it several times before, that the increase in demand for food banks was largely down to the delays in benefits. Because I had heard that argument for quite a long time, last year I set up with my local citizens advice bureau a service agreement that obliged it to refer to me any instance of any of my constituents who are waiting longer to receive benefits due to them than the accepted norm set by the DWP. That covered any situation. In the last six months, how many people had been referred to my office for unnecessary delays to their benefits? One—one single constituent. It could be argued that there is not a complete correlation between people referred to the food bank by the CAB and those who go to the food bank. That could be true. A number of organisations in the city of Gloucester, including my own office, refer people to our food bank. None the less, the CAB is probably—I do not have the precise statistics—the biggest single organisation handling the welfare difficulties of my constituents. It is, I think, telling that over the last six months there has been only one case of unnecessary delays in the receipt of benefits.

**Stephen Timms:** The hon. Gentleman has got slightly the wrong end of the stick in relation to what I was saying. The problem with universal credit is that the five-week delay is built into the design of the benefit. That is not a fault; it is how it is supposed to work. The assumption is that someone who has last month’s pay cheque in the bank can cope for a month. That is the problem that the Trussell Trust is starting to identify, and Citizens Advice is saying that, in practice, it is proving to be a very serious problem for many claimants of the new benefit.

**Richard Graham:** I do not think that I have grasped the wrong end of the stick, but I may have grasped a different part of the stick, and I think it is important for all parts of the stick to be considered in this context. I will, however, respond directly to the point that the right hon. Gentleman has made.

I have sought permission from the Department for Work and Pensions and my local Jobcentre Plus to install a DWP adviser in the George Whitefield Centre—appropriately, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, named after the founder of Methodism—where there is both a food bank and a health service for the homeless. I hope that, should I be fortunate enough to receive approval from the Department and the Jobcentre Plus, the adviser, with access to a computer, will be able to see precisely where the problems are, and I hope that if, as the right hon. Gentleman suggests, the inbuilt delay is a real issue, that fact will be revealed. I put it to him gently, however, that there are a number of alternative scenarios, one of which is—to put it bluntly—that when people go to a food bank and are asked why they have done so, it is very easy for them to say, “I have had problems getting my benefits.” I hope that one of the advantages of the presence of a DWP adviser will be the ability to establish the extent to which that claim is correct, or possibly slightly exaggerated. The reality of life, I think, is that people get into financial difficulties—through no particular fault of their own—in a series of different ways, and I think that that is an aspect of the Trussell Trust feedback that has not been explored in enough detail so far.

**Neil Gray:** It is not just the Trussell Trust that is reporting circumstances in which people find themselves requiring emergency food aid from food banks. In February last year, the Poverty Alliance in Scotland reported that delays in benefits and cuts in social security support were the direct responsible contributing factor in those circumstances. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will reflect on the fact that that is being said not just by one organisation, but by many.

**Richard Graham:** I sort of thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I do not think that he should rely on statements made by particular charities that tend to generalise. I encourage him to look into the position in his own constituency in detail, so that he can establish what the issues are.

At some point, the hon. Gentleman will also have to face the same strategic issue to which I referred the right hon. Member for East Ham and his party. If the position of the hon. Gentleman’s party is that all welfare expenditure is sacrosanct from now until the end of all days, he and his party will have to think about where they will find

[Richard Graham]

the revenue to fund that, and how they will do so without building up excessive debt on which interest has to be paid, which reduces the amount of money that is available to be spent on services.

If the hon. Gentleman studies—as our Select Committee has—the ratio between our country’s budget expenditure on welfare and that of some of the largest comparable nations in Europe, such as France and Germany, he will see that we spend more on welfare than they do. That is the challenge there for him and his party. He shakes his head, but reality will have to intervene one day, as my colleague Ruth Davidson in Scotland has pointed out several times.

Other Members wish to speak. Let me end by addressing one particular aspect of child poverty. There is a philosophical divide between different parties in the House on this issue, but an important part of the motion tabled by the right hon. Member for East Ham is the request for the Government

“to ensure that the number of children in poverty...falls as a result of the introduction of the new universal credit system.”

Evidence suggests that the highest poverty exit rate is strongly linked to the children of families who have gone into work, and have moved from part-time to full-time employment. I believe I am right in saying that 75% is the figure that enables the number of children referred to in the motion to be reduced. I think that that tells us that any welfare system which encourages people to work longer hours, obtain promotion and advance themselves in different jobs will have a hugely beneficial impact on the number of children in poverty, and I have no doubt that the steps taken by the Government to improve the chances of those receiving universal credit of moving up the ladder in the workforce will have a positive effect on the number of children in relative poverty.

I have made four points. First, there was the philosophical point about the strategy of welfare relative to tax revenue. Secondly, there was the point about the value of universal credit to our own constituents. Thirdly, there was my gentle challenge to some of the assumptions of the Trussell Trust about why people are going to food banks, and the role of DWP advisers in shedding more light on that issue. Finally, I drew attention to the relationship between getting into the workplace and moving on, and relative child poverty. On the basis of those points, I cannot support the motion.

1.16 pm

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you very much for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I appreciate the flexibility that you have shown this afternoon.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and the Backbench Business Committee on securing this debate. The right hon. Gentleman made some powerful points in his measured, brilliant and very well-researched speech.

The new Secretary of State has been keen to push the line that his Department needs to look at people, not just at statistics. I completely agree, but where is the evidence that that is happening? Where is the compassion being brought to social security policy? In the context of this debate, the Secretary of State will no doubt wish to be reminded of a quotation from Dr Seuss:

“A person’s a person, no matter how small!”

He needs to start thinking about the impact that his Department’s policies are having on children. Now, while he is relatively new to the job, we can call them inherited policies, but as he begins his tenure by marching to the defence of everything that went before him, those policies will become his own, and he will be responsible for what unfolds. He has an opportunity to make his mark on the Department and to embark on a genuine departure from what went before—as was touted when he was appointed—and that needs to start with the cuts in universal credit. As the shadow Secretary of State rightly said yesterday, if he does not make those cuts, how will he be any different from his predecessor? Perhaps the Minister could relay that, and other issues raised in the debate, to the absent Secretary of State.

The cuts that are being deferred from tax credits and lumped on to universal credit will have a very real impact on the quality of children’s lives and their long-term life chances. The cut in the work allowance—slashing the only work incentive in universal credit—will hit families and lone parents the hardest. Lone parents without housing costs will experience the largest reduction in their work allowance, from £8,800 last year to £4,764 this year—a cut of £4,000, according to the House of Commons Library. These are working families. The children of single parents are already twice as likely to risk living in poverty as those in couple families, and, according to the Child Poverty Action Group, cuts in work allowances will only exacerbate that disadvantage.

Last week the Resolution Foundation published a devastating report for the Government, which stated that under universal credit, half a million working families would be significantly worse off, even given the changes in tax allowances and the increase in the minimum wage for over-25s. According to analysis published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in February this year, absolute child poverty is projected to increase from 15.1% in 2015-16 to 18.3% by the end of this Parliament in 2020.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Families who care for disabled children and are prevented from working for that reason are set to be particularly badly affected by the Government’s changes. Contact a Family estimates that those families will be at least £1,600 a year worse off. Does my hon. Friend agree that this change directly discriminates against such families, and that the Government should go back to the drawing board?

**Neil Gray:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and later in my speech I will touch on what is being done in Scotland to address some of those issues.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that the projected increase in child poverty is driven entirely by a sharp rise in poverty among families with three or more children, which is itself the result of planned tax and benefit reforms. Those figures are UK-wide. My constituency already has a shocking child poverty rate of 21.7%. If the rise in child poverty projected by the IFS is universally applied, Airdrie and Shotts will have a quarter, rather than a fifth, of its children living in poverty by the end of this Parliament because of this Government’s tax and social security changes. Surely it is time for the Secretary of State to see these statistics and the children

behind them. One child in every four in my constituency will be in poverty if he accepts the tax and benefit changes that he has inherited.

The Child Poverty Action Group agrees that to lift families out of poverty and disadvantage, the relationship between universal credit and work must be right. It is calling for: the restoration of work allowances, particularly for single parents; a second earner allowance for couples, to support second earners to get into work without facing an immediate withdrawal of universal credit; and investment in high-quality employment support that recognises people's individual circumstances, so that universal credit can meet its aspiration to promote in-work progression through the provision of high-quality advice, rather than through the threat of sanctions. Those proposals certainly provide food for thought.

Universal credit was supposed to involve the streamlining of a complicated system to improve work incentives, tackle poverty and reduce the scope for error and fraud. Instead, we have massive delays, huge overspend on implementation, and fundamental changes and cuts to awards that will drive more children and families into poverty. This is not what was intended, but because of this Government's obsession with austerity at any cost, it is the reality. Universal credit has been watered down and completely undermined, especially by cutting the work allowance to ribbons.

Under the latest Scotland Bill, the newly re-elected Scottish National party Government will have power over 15% of our social security spending. *[Interruption.]* I hear some chuntering from across the Chamber. Although 15% will be determined in Scotland, the vast majority of social security issues will still be determined here in Westminster, which is why it is so important that we on these Benches challenge this Government whenever we can. I would prefer it if my colleagues up the road had control over all social security decisions, but the SNP is determined to use the powers that it will get to transform the service that people receive. One area of change will come when we scrap the rule that results in the removal of income for families of disabled children if their child is in hospital for 84 days. We will also increase carer's allowance to the same level as jobseeker's allowance, giving carers an extra £600 a year. We will put dignity and respect at the heart of the new Scottish social security agency, supported by a £200 million investment. We will also scrap the bedroom tax.

One of the key elements of today's motion is the call for a proper impact assessment to take account of the significant cuts to the work allowance. My call to the new Secretary of State is to reassess what has gone before him, to assess the impact these cuts will have on children up and down these isles, and to set his own path of supporting people into work rather than threatening them with poverty.

1.23 pm

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): When the Government announced their plans to introduce universal credit, their rationale was to lift people out of poverty and help them into work. It was billed as a mechanism to end cycles of poverty and to help parents give their children the best start in life. In 2011, the Government forecast that universal credit would lift 350,000 children out of poverty. In 2013, this was

downgraded to 150,000 children. Today, the Government cannot say exactly how many children will be helped by the process. Will they tell us how many families they are actually helping through the universal credit system?

Based on estimates from the Children's Society and the Child Poverty Action Group, it seems that the downward trend has continued to the point at which the number of children who will be helped out of poverty will be heavily outweighed by those who have been made poorer. That is deeply concerning. As an MP, I often hear from constituents who are struggling under this Government's programme of austerity. I want their voices to be heard today, and I want the Minister to seriously consider the unintended—I am sure—negative impact that universal credit is having on many children and families.

Among the most damaging parts of this welfare reform are the eligibility criteria. From April 2017, only two children per family will be eligible for the child elements of universal credit. The child elements are intended to allow families to meet their children's basic needs. How dare this Government discriminate against a third or fourth child? No matter how many children a family chooses to have, the Government should not discriminate against any child.

**Neil Gray:** Alongside the rape clause, which my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has raised repeatedly, this is one of the most disgraceful aspects of these provisions. People plan a family based on the circumstances in which they find themselves at the time. Let us take the example of two working parents. What would happen if, further down the line, having had three children, they were unable to work? The two child policy is an absolute disgrace.

**Angela Crawley:** I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. This Government have absolutely no right or reason to dictate to families how many children they ought to have, or to place a monetary value on a child's life or someone's livelihood.

This Government have scrapped the first child premium, worth £545 a year. That is the equivalent of the family element in tax credits, which was designed to help families with the extra cost of their first child. Obviously, this Government do not prioritise the need to give every child the best possible start in life. The Scottish Government and the First Minister have ensured that every new-born child in Scotland will receive a box that will allow the family to deliver the best possible care, health and support for their child. In what initially appears to be a benefit to low-income families, support for childcare has been increased from 70% to 80% of the cost. However, this policy will not compensate for the far greater losses families will see as a result of other changes to the benefits system.

That brings me to my final point, which relates to disabled claimants. Disabled individuals are often the worst off as a result of benefit reforms, and they are certainly the worst-off group as a result of universal credit. They have been wholly ignored in the process. At present, families with a disabled child can claim £60 per week through the disability element of child tax credits. Under universal credit, £29 per week of support will be claimed under disability additions, but according to the Government's own estimates, this means that

[Angela Crawley]

100,000 disabled children stand to lose more than half their entitlement. How can the Government look at those figures and honestly justify their actions? Disabled lone parents with young carers stand to lose £58 per week as a result of the loss of the severe disability premium under universal credit. Again, this Government have failed to take those individuals into consideration. Lone parents and those under 25 are likely to lose up to £15 per week as a result of reductions in standard allowances for those groups under universal credit.

The Government must commit to fairer arrangements, especially for those most at risk. While they continue to balance the books on the backs of the poor, many more children will continue to grow up in poverty. While they continue to allow tax avoiders and big business to benefit, those who work hard to put food on the table for their loved ones will continue to lose out. When will this Government learn? The fact is that one child growing up in poverty is one too many.

1.28 pm

**Dr Eilidh Whiteford** (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): We have had an unexpectedly concise, but nevertheless interesting, debate this afternoon. I echo the remarks of others who have paid tribute to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for securing the debate and giving us this opportunity to highlight the impacts that the universal credit scheme will have on children. Right at the heart of this matter are the recent cuts to the work allowance—implemented just last month—which are set to drive up child poverty quite considerably in the months and years ahead.

Back in January, when the Government performed their U-turn on tax credits, it was clear that the relief would be only temporary for many families. As we have heard today, the transition to universal credit will mean that 3 million working families will no longer be eligible for the support that they would have had under the tax credits system. A further 1.2 million working families will still receive support, but will be worse off. Therefore, according to the Resolution Foundation, 4.2 million families will be on average more than £40 a week worse off, even taking into account increases in the minimum wage and tax allowances.

When universal credit was first introduced, we were told that it would simplify and streamline our benefits system, that it would introduce greater flexibility for those in seasonal jobs or with fluctuating earnings and, crucially, that it would remove the financial disincentives to work created by the previous system. However, that is not what is happening in reality. The introduction of universal credit has simply been an excuse to cut family incomes, taking £3 billion a year out of the pockets of low-paid parents. As the Resolution Foundation report puts it, the latest cuts to universal credit risk leaving it “little more than a vehicle for rationalising benefit administration and cutting costs to the Exchequer.”

That is a truly damning indictment.

The bottom line is that cutting the work allowance under universal credit has destroyed the very aspect that reduced work disincentives—the thing that made it a distinctive policy. The most potentially valuable aspect of universal credit has been butchered, and we are now

left with a system that will reduce the incomes of more than 4 million low-income families. People are already working hard to support their families and are struggling to make ends meet. The change is set to send child poverty skyrocketing over the next few years. Far from creating work incentives, the reality is that cuts to the work allowance mean that parents in low-paid jobs face staggering levels of marginal taxation if they take on extra hours. There is no way around the fact that that reduces the incentive to take on extra work. If someone is going to be only 35p in the pound better off per hour, the extra earnings might not even cover their transport costs, much less their childcare.

Working single parents will be particularly badly affected by the changes, because they are being hit with dramatic income cuts. There is also a big disparity between those who live in rented accommodation and those who are owner-occupiers or otherwise not paying housing costs. In rented accommodation, a working couple with children will lose £234 a year, and a working single parent will lose £554 a year. The reductions in income are even starker for those not in rented accommodation. A working couple with children will lose more than £1,000 per year, but working single parents are set to lose a massive £2,628 a year on average.

**Angela Crawley:** A single parent already working full time on the national living wage—otherwise known as a modern increase on the minimum wage—of £7.20 an hour will have to work an additional 46 days a year, equating to two additional months. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is unacceptable?

**Dr Whiteford:** It is not only unacceptable, but completely unrealistic. When the measures were first debated, the Government tried to argue that families affected by the losses could simply work a few extra hours to cover the shortfall. Notwithstanding the availability of extra hours being entirely dependent on the employer's circumstances—there might not be many extra hours going around in many workplaces at the moment—the Child Poverty Action Group pointed out, as did my hon. Friend just now, that a single parent working full time on the minimum wage would essentially have to work an extra day a week just to make up the shortfall. It is already hard for single parents to manage full-time work and family responsibilities, and I just cannot believe that it is good for them or their children for them to be taking on an extra day a week. Something has to give. People's health will collapse. People's children and family life will suffer. It is not the right thing to do.

The effect on families affected by disability will be disproportionate. At Work and Pensions questions yesterday, I mentioned the impact that the introduction of universal credit will have on disabled children. Some time ago, the Children's Society and Citizens Advice published “Holes in the safety net”, a report which warned that the introduction of universal credit would mean dramatic cuts in support for some disabled children. Some 100,000 disabled children in the UK are likely to be affected and will see their support halved to just £29 a week. As we have heard today, families with a disabled child are twice as likely to be low-income families living in poverty. We know that. We also know that those who live with a significant disability face extra living costs, but it is sometimes too easy to gloss

over the realities of day-to-day life for such children, their parents, and their brothers and sisters. Disability affects the whole family.

Some time ago, I worked for Carers Scotland and will never forget my conversations with parents of disabled children about their experiences, many of which were positive, but nevertheless also often enormously challenging, both financially and emotionally. I remember one working mother describing how she had had to give up a full-time professional career and work part time in a lower-paid job, simply because she could not find a nursery willing and able to take on the complex needs of her little boy. I remember another mother talking about realising that she would have to become a full-time stay-at-home parent after her second child was born with quite significant physical disabilities. She and her husband had recently bought a three-bedroom house to accommodate an expanding family, but they had to sell up and downsize, because that was all that they could afford on one income. At the very moment when they needed more space to accommodate growing toddlers and a wheelchair and to enable their elder child to sleep through the night without being woken up by a disabled sibling who needed care during the night, they were instead struggling to make ends meet. Families such as those, for whom £30 a week makes an enormous tangible difference to their quality of life, are being put on the front line.

On the other side of the coin are the cuts under universal credit to the severe disability premium paid to disabled adults, affecting some 25,000 children who live with a severely disabled parent. The level of support will be £58 a week less for such families. Even those in the ESA support group—those who have absolutely no prospect of being fit for work—will be entitled to £28 a week less than under the current system. That will inevitably have an impact on the children in those households, most of whom do not get any extra support at the moment, and it will make life even harder for young people who in some cases are already taking on age-inappropriate levels of domestic responsibility. The Government talk a lot about improving life chances, which we have heard again and again today, but slashing support for disabled children and the children of severely disabled adults who have no prospect of work will only harm those children's already diminished life chances.

I asked the Government yesterday if their intention really was for low-income families and disabled children to bear the brunt of their cuts agenda. We have heard lots of suggestions today, such as those put forward by CPAG, the Children's Society, the Resolution Foundation and others, for how the failing universal credit project could be redeemed, not least the need for a credible and up-to-date assessment of the overall impact on child poverty. Instead of trying to defend the indefensible, the Government have an opportunity to go back to the drawing board on universal credit and restore its original policy intent of supporting low-income working families. If they fail to take that opportunity, they will be confirming their reputation as the sort of people who think it is okay to make disabled children and hard-working parents in low-paid jobs pay for the tax breaks being enjoyed by the wealthiest in our society.

1.38 pm

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to hold this debate in the main Chamber. I pay tribute to

my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), whose erudite and considered opening speech was a great contribution to the debate. The hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) talked about the broader context, and I will be only too pleased to do the same in a moment. My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) spoke powerfully about the plight of lone working parents, who are particularly affected by cuts to the work allowance. I certainly agreed with the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who is no longer in his place, on the idea of ensuring that we visit Jobcentre Plus offices to see universal credit in action, something which I did recently with my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham, but it is equally important to be in contact with local citizens advice bureaux and to visit food banks to see what is happening on the ground.

We heard a useful contribution from the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who pointed out very well the new approach promised by the new Secretary of State of looking at people, not statistics. I look forward to the Minister telling us how she has changed her approach under her new boss, as I am sure everybody does. We also heard useful contributions from the hon. Members for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford); my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees); the hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin); my hon. Friends the Members for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) and for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty); the hon. Members for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier); and my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck).

This debate comes at a key time—a key moment of test for the new Secretary of State—because the outlook is bleak. The Institute for Fiscal Studies expects absolute child poverty to increase from 15.1% in 2015-16 to 18.3% in 2020-21. The Resolution Foundation believes that 200,000 more children, predominantly from working households, will fall into poverty this year. Gingerbread powerfully makes the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton made about cuts to the work allowance hitting single parents particularly hard. There is a set of damning statistics on this, which the Children's Society has set out. A working single parent can lose up to £2,628 a year. What was the Government's response to that? What did they say could be done about that? They told the Social Security Advisory Committee that parents could work three to four additional hours a week on the national living wage.

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that to expect hard-working families to work an extra 200 hours a year just to make up for the cruel cuts in universal credit is an outright insult?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. The hon. Member for North Devon wanted the broader context to be taken into account, so let us take into account the national living wage as well. A single parent who is already working full time on the national living wage of £7.20 an hour will have to work 46 extra days a year, which is more than two additional working months. How on earth can that be put forward as a reasonable proposition by anybody? It obviously is not reasonable.

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

The Government were warned about the problems they face today as a result of cuts to universal credit. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission report released just before Christmas, on 17 December, said that the “immediate priority” had to be ensuring that the cuts to the work allowance planned for this April did not go ahead, but the Government simply did not listen. The problem that they are getting to is that their approach is starting to deny the very purposes that universal credit was set up for. The Resolution Foundation states:

“But it is also much changed as a result of the increasingly tight financial restraints placed on it over recent years. These have involved more than just a reduction in the money available under UC, they have also altered the very structure of the policy—changing the composition of winners and losers and fundamentally damaging its ability to deliver against its purported aims.”

Perhaps that explains why the Government are so terrified of publishing an up-to-date impact assessment. Perhaps it explains why they are so terrified of telling us the figures as to what they expect will happen to child poverty over this Parliament.

**Christina Rees:** Does my hon. Friend agree that we also urgently need an analysis of the gender impact of the Government’s policy since 2010, because the design of universal credit, like that of other Government policies, does seem to have a disproportionate impact on women?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that, and we all know that the brunt of the cuts has fallen on women. That is precisely what the Government should be taking into account and they should carry out such an analysis. It is not as though it would be that difficult for the Government to come up with these figures. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) chairs the all-party group on health in all policies, whose excellent report, produced in February, made it absolutely clear that there is a danger of the progress on tackling child poverty made by the last Labour Government going into reverse as a result of what this Government are doing.

This is not, however, just about the Government’s lack of compassion on these things; it is also about their complete lack of competence. We should not forget how universal credit has been implemented. On 1 November 2011, the former Secretary of State told us in a press release that there would be no fewer than 1 million people claiming universal credit “by April 2014”, but by November 2015 the actual figure was 155,568, which, by my reckoning, is less than a fifth of the target he had set himself in 2011. The day on which the roll-out is to be completed seems to be forever going back. When I was younger, my great aunt and uncle used to own a pub, in which there was a brass plaque just above the bar saying, “Free beer tomorrow”. The problem being that every time people went in it still said, “Free beer tomorrow”. I am afraid that that is where we are getting to with universal credit: six years later, we are still waiting for it to be implemented.

This is not just about the speed of the implementation; it is also about the risks that the Government have identified. Let us also not forget the universal credit risk register, whose disclosure the Government, again, fought

tooth and nail against. They were forced to disclose it; they love spending legal fees on defending the indefensible. It identified 65 open risks to the programme, including that of skilled staff resources not being in the right place at the risk time. The list of incompetence does not end there. The former Secretary of State made clear—this was the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham about people being broadly the same on universal credit as on tax credits—the following when answering departmental questions:

“Here is the key: I have already said that those who are on universal credit at the moment will be supported by their advisers through the flexible support fund, to ensure that their status does not change.” —[*Official Report*, 7 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 707.]

The idea being of course that the discretionary flexible support fund can make up the difference. I have with me the letter that the Department is sending out on this issue. I do not know whether the Minister has seen this, as the rumours are that since she declared for British exit she does not get to see all the documents in her Department—I am happy to show it to her if she has not. It sets out what the new amount of money is, but there is not one mention of the flexible support fund.

When we are talking about incompetence, it is almost as though some Department for Work and Pensions Ministers have been in competition with each other. We will have to give the top award to the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), although I feel bad in doing so because he is only a part-timer in the Department. However, his answer on mitigating the effect of cuts was as follows:

“let us not forget, the fact that every time we fill up our tank with petrol there is a saving...because of the freezing of the fuel duty.”—[*Official Report*, 6 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 342.]

If the answer in 2016 from the Tories to those who lose out is, “Go and fill up your car”, it shows how out of touch they are. I picked him out for the top spot in the incompetence league, but in recent months the Minister for Employment has become used to missing out on the top spot. [*Interruption.*] I will certainly carry on.

The problem is that naked politics is interfering with universal credit. Do not take my word for it; take the word of the former Secretary of State who, when interviewed on the Andrew Marr show on 20 March, said that

“it looks like we see benefits as a pot of money to cut because they don’t vote for us”.

Let us never forget that, because what it says to children in poverty is that we are only interested in their parents if they voted for us or are likely to vote for us at the next election.

What else did the former Secretary of State say about what was happening to the Government’s social security changes? He said this:

“There has been too much emphasis on money saving exercises and not enough awareness from the Treasury, in particular, that the government’s vision of a new welfare-to-work system could not repeatedly be salami-sliced.”

We heard even worse from him, including his damning criticism of the Treasury:

“I am unable to watch passively while certain policies are enacted in order to meet the fiscal self-imposed restraints that I believe are more and more perceived as distinctly political rather than in the national economic interest.”

Any arguments made today by the hon. Member for Gloucester that these cuts are about a reduction in our deficit were blown apart by what was said by the former Secretary of State. What he was saying is that it is all about the politics and career of the Chancellor.

**Mark Durkan:** Does the hon. Gentleman also remember that the former Secretary of State made it very clear that the Treasury was imposing the cuts through the welfare cap, which, unfortunately, was supported by both sides of the House in the last Parliament? Now, however, that cap has become the search engine for cut after cut, and, given that even he was expressing criticism of it, it does need to be addressed.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** Yes, it does need to be addressed. As ever, the hon. Gentleman makes a distinctly useful contribution to these matters.

There is no greater moral and economic purpose that we could have in this place than eradicating child poverty. In 1999, the Labour Government promised to do that by 2020. To do it and to achieve it is to ensure that every single child has the ability to unlock their potential regardless of their background.

The European Union—dare I say it—has pledged to take at least 20 million out of poverty and social exclusion by 2020. I very much fear that the Minister for Employment wants not only to leave the European Union, but to pursue policies that will plunge more people into poverty by 2020 than would be the case if we were inside the European Union. The levels of child poverty today are a damning indictment of this Government. They bring shame on this country. The Government must act urgently, and I commend this motion to the House.

1.52 pm

**The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel):** I welcome the debate and congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on both securing it and making an incredibly thoughtful contribution. I want to put my tributes to him on the record, especially as I have spent time with him in Committee. He mentioned the early stages in the development of universal credit and the first Welfare Reform Act 2012. I was also on that Bill Committee and know that he made some notable contributions to the discussions on universal credit and on the changes that the Government were undertaking at the time.

I also want to thank Members from all parts of the House—my hon. Friends the Members for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham), and the hon. Members for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford)—for contributing to this important discussion. I will come on to the points that they made a little later.

Before I move on to the details of universal credit, it is probably worth setting out the Government's commitment to—yes—universal credit and also to what has been at the heart of universal credit and our welfare reform changes. Universal credit has been revolutionising the welfare system by focusing on making work pay, and I will go into detail on the points that have been made about incentivising work.

For the first time, we are helping people not only into work, but to have personalised support while they are in work. We are seeking to transform individuals' outcomes when it comes to employment support. We want to ensure that they are supported in work and have sustainable employment outcomes as well. That has been very much at the heart of our welfare reforms. When we discuss universal credit in the broader sense, it is important to recognise that it has been instituted and developed so that it is easier to start work and to earn more, and that is because of the personalised support that it offers. Under the old system, there was little or no support when someone started work.

Universal credit provides for a Jobcentre Plus work coach. As Members have said, work coaches are focused on providing support and in-work progression. Universal credit mirrors the world of work. Like most jobs, universal credit is paid in a single monthly amount. It aims to make work pay. It stays with the claimant after they move into work. On top of that, universal credit is part of a package of reforms that runs alongside the introduction of the national living wage.

There were comments about the delivery of universal credit. What we have seen is that the national roll-out is now complete and that the digital service for all claimants will start to roll out nationally from May. Once completed in June 2018, it will no longer be possible to make newer claims from legacy benefits. We have been very focused on the agile delivery of universal credit. Just yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State re-emphasised the fact that we would rather have an agile delivery of universal credit than a big bang approach, which more often than not jeopardises the delivery of our benefit system. *[Interruption.]* Does the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) have something to contribute, or is he just chuntering for the sake of it? *[Interruption.]* It is a well-developed system, and I am sure he is shaking his head in acknowledgement. The fact is that universal credit is in every jobcentre. The vast majority of claimants are now receiving support that, obviously, did not exist under the legacy system.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** Can the Minister define agile delivery, and will she tell us how universal credit will take into account the 65 open risks that have been identified in the universal credit programme?

**Priti Patel:** The hon. Gentleman is talking about the risk register that was published many years ago. Let me explain agile delivery. This is a system that is adapting. It has adapted following feedback from work coaches. The delivery is the test of the system. All Front-Bench Members will be familiar with this, as we have been very public about it. We have taken the insights from the delivery so that we are supporting people. The reality is that universal credit is out there and is supporting people in work, and we are seeing positive benefits as well.

I am very conscious that a number of points have been made about child poverty, which, of course, was subject to much debate in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. For the first time, the Government have a statutory obligation to report annually on worklessness and educational attainment, because they are two factors that have the biggest impact on child poverty and children's life chances. Previous debates on poverty have

[Priti Patel]

focused purely on the symptoms of poverty, rather than on the root causes. We now believe that, through our commitment to ending child poverty and improve life chances, our two measures will ensure that there is real action in the areas that will make the biggest difference to poor children, both now and in the future.

We have also committed to publishing a life chances strategy, and it will set out a comprehensive plan to fight disadvantage and extend opportunity. It will include a wider set of non-statutory measures on the root causes of child poverty, including family breakdown, problem debt and drug and alcohol addiction.

When the strategy is published, I will be working not just with my colleagues on the Conservative Benches, but with all Members of the House, as this is such an important issue. The hon. Member for Edmonton talked about it, and I am alarmed to hear how high her constituency is ranked in terms of child poverty. We will need to develop the right ways to tackle these deep-rooted social problems and work collectively to transform children's lives so that ultimately they too can reach their full potential. It is important that all Members work constructively towards that aim.

**Stephen Timms:** What is the Government's current estimate of the impact on the number of children growing up in poverty of the implementation of universal credit?

**Priti Patel:** I do not have information or data to hand on the current estimate, but the Government previously published figures on UC and child poverty. As other Members have commented on this, I will be very happy to write to them and to the right hon. Gentleman to update them on those numbers.

**Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab):** Does the Minister think that that figure will be more or less than the 200,000 additional children going into absolute poverty cited by the Resolution Foundation?

**Priti Patel:** As the hon. Gentleman has just heard me say, when we publish our life chances strategy and focus on tackling the root causes of child poverty—we are committed to eradicating child poverty, as well—we will be driving those numbers down.

**John Glen (Salisbury) (Con):** Will my right hon. Friend ensure that when this life chances strategy is published, significant thought will be given to its integration with the lessons learned from the troubled families programme to ensure that the range of interventions across multiple Departments are integrated to give the best chance of success?

**Priti Patel:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. Of course, the point about the life chances strategy is that it will be a cross-government strategy. The focus will be integration and support. The troubled families programme has been very successful in transforming families and turning their circumstances around, supporting work and the right kind of outcomes. We are incredibly focused on and conscious of the need to integrate. Once the strategy is published, all hon. Members will see that completely.

The point about universal credit, of course, is that it removes barriers that prevent people from finding work and increasing their hours and earnings. Universal credit provides the right support to incentivise work and, in particular, removes some of the barriers that were in place, including the restrictions on hours worked, such as the 16-hour rule.

Not just in this debate but in others and in various Committees of this House, we have been very clear that universal credit claimants receive not only support from their work coaches but additional support for childcare costs. Our in-work progression trials have begun to test how work coaches can continue to provide tailored support to in-work claimants so that they can progress and, importantly, increase their earning capacity.

**Dr Eilidh Whiteford:** I know that the issue of in-work claimants is still at a fairly embryonic stage, but 40% of the DWP's own staff are likely to be affected by that in-work conditionality approach. I know that various hon. Members have asked the DWP for answers on whether it will offer those staff the extra hours they need to avoid being sanctioned and having their tax credits and universal credit cut. Will the Minister comment on that now?

**Priti Patel:** We have been very clear that universal credit is there to secure employment opportunities and in-work progression for everyone who is on it. I come back to the wider support universal credit provides for families, which has been touched on. Parents on universal credit can claim back 85% of their childcare costs when they move into work, compared with 70% under legacy benefits. This is a significant change and means that a working family with two children can now receive up to £13,000 a year in childcare support under universal credit.

Interestingly enough, prior to the recent elections in Scotland, I met the Scottish Minister responsible for childcare to consider the development and uptake of the childcare policy in Scotland, which mirrors many of the programmes that we have in England. Affordable childcare is crucial for working families and I look forward to working with the new Government in Scotland to ensure that we can provide all possible relevant support.

Support for disabled children was also mentioned. We should all be clear—I recall debating these points in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill Committee—that there is clear recognition of the extra costs associated with disabilities. Universal credit will provide support for families with disabled children. Of course, the point about the disabled child addition is that it provides extra support for low-income families with a disabled child. We know that caring responsibilities are enormous for parents with disabled children, and we also know that those parents are less able to take up work. They therefore need greater support, and that is obviously what we are focused on.

**Mark Durkan:** The Minister refers again to additions and to giving extra support to children with disabilities. Of course, it is not extra or additional to what they would receive now; it is actually a reduction. Will she properly address the terms of the motion and not the fantasy world that she is trying to serve up?

**Priti Patel:** Let me be clear about this: the Government have been absolutely clear about protecting and supporting the vulnerable and about the support we provide for families with disabled children.

I also want to address some of the points raised about the Resolution Foundation report. It fails to take into account that the highest barriers to entering work for second earners in the current system are virtually eliminated under universal credit through, for example, increased childcare, the fact that there are no restrictions on the number of hours worked and the fact that there are work allowances for those households with children. The report also calls for a more radical focus on boosting claimants' earnings and, of course, that is exactly what universal credit does. For the first time ever, people are getting personalised support so that they can progress in work and earn more. Universal credit ensures that people are better off for every extra hour they work. Our research shows that 86% of people on universal credit were actively looking to increase their hours, compared with just 38% of people on jobseeker's allowance, and 77% of people on universal credit were actively looking to increase their earnings, compared with just 51% of people on JSA. That focuses on the type of support that universal credit gives through the personalised work coaches and the additional support that that provides.

I hope that I have made clear the case for universal credit. It is supporting people in work and transforming people's lives. We already have evidence of that from the indications that I have given. I want to reiterate and emphasise that when it comes to dealing with challenging issues such as child poverty, the Government will be publishing our life chances strategy shortly. I look forward to working with all right hon. and hon. Members to tackle these fundamental issues, which are being supported by the implementation of universal credit.

2.8 pm

**Stephen Timms:** I reiterate my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee and I thank everyone who has contributed, both in speeches and interventions, to what has been a concise debate, as the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) called it, but a valuable one.

I would like to make a couple of points in conclusion. I appreciated the Minister's telling us that everything was now going to be fine with the universal credit IT system because it is going to be—or because it is—agile. She will remember, as I do, that in the 2011 Bill Committee we were told that that system was agile and that everything was going to be fine—because the Department had discovered “agile”. A couple of years into that system, the Government realised that it was running into the sand so they started up a new system and told us, “Don't worry, this one is agile.” We will certainly look forward to seeing how that works out.

I am grateful to everybody who has pressed the Minister for an update on the impact of universal credit on the number of children growing up in poverty, including the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), colleagues on the Labour Benches and my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) on the Front Bench. I am disappointed that the Minister was not able to give us a figure, but I am grateful to her for committing to write to us to set out the Government's current estimate.

My worry is that universal credit has been so watered down and cut that it will no longer get anywhere near the objectives that the Government set for it. We will return to the subject, but the specific estimate that the Minister has committed to providing will be a helpful piece of information for us to continue to assess the impact of universal credit on children.

*Question put.*

*There being no voices for either the Ayes or the Noes, Mr Deputy Speaker declared the Question negatived.*

## PETITION

### Withdrawal of the Housing and Planning Bill

2.10 pm

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I have the pleasure of presenting the petition of 360 UK residents, overwhelmingly from the Carshalton and Wallington constituency, calling for the withdrawal of the Housing and Planning Bill. I thank Councillors Manuel Abellan, Jean Crossby, Jayne McCoy and Joyce Melican, and the leader of Sutton council, Councillor Ruth Dombey, for helping to promote this petition, and all my constituents who signed it.

The Housing and Planning Bill not only fails to address the critical shortage of housing, but, worse than that, could lead to a drop in the number of affordable homes. The Bill will do nothing for millions who want to get on the housing ladder, and for those who cannot do so it will damage the prospects of finding an affordable, decent home for rent.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to withdraw their proposed plans for housing set out in the Housing and Planning Bill.

*Following is the full text of the petition:*

*[The petition of the residents of the UK,*

*Declares that there are severe flaws in the Housing and Planning Bill; further that these flaws unfairly discriminate against people within certain sectors of the housing market; and further that they could lead to a drop in the availability of social housing.*

*The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to withdraw their proposed plans for housing set out in the Housing and Planning Bill.*

*And the petitioners remain, etc.]*

[P001693]

## HMRC Office Closure (Walsall)

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Stephen Barclay.)*

2.12 pm

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): I should tell the House that I do not intend taking the full time available, so Members will be spared that.

I thank the Financial Secretary for coming to the House to respond to the debate. I was alarmed and disappointed that I had to apply for this debate and was granted it so soon after the debate on HMRC closures on 29 April in this Chamber. The Minister will know there has been a worrying unilateral change on the part of HMRC, which has decided to close the Walsall office on 20 June 2016. That has been brought forward, much to the shock of people who work there.

This debate is about public servants and those who have worked in the public interest, and how we treat them. If we want society to thrive, we need a balance between the public sector and the private sector. The public sector provides the framework of a good society, doing the things that it is harder for the private sector to do and that the private sector says it wants Government to do. The debate last week showed how important it was for tax to be collected. All that revenue should go into public services, the NHS, education, skills and infrastructure, among other things.

In the previous debate I referred to the tax gap—the difference between the tax owed and the tax collected. The Minister referred to it too in his summing up. In a survey undertaken in 2014, Richard Murphy said that the tax gap stood at almost £119 billion from tax evasion. That figure has not been challenged, and that is the scale of the amount of tax that needs to come back into the public purse. We need to collect that in order to pay for everything the Government have invested in public services.

Today I hope to persuade the Minister of the case for retaining the office and dealing urgently with the issues of HMRC staff in Walsall. What happened to the Walsall office at Pattinson House offends British values and natural justice. Under “Building our Future” it was announced in November 2015 that the office was to close by March 2017. Then on 4 May HMRC decided that all personal tax staff were to be compulsorily moved to Birmingham some six weeks later, on 20 June 2016. A collective grievance had been brought against the office, and many staff fear that this announcement may be a reprisal for the collective grievance and a petition. I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) in the Chamber. He and I were in the town centre that day and we saw how the public responded to the petition: some 500 signatures were collected in about an hour and a half, supporting the retention of the office. I do not believe I have had a response to the petition from the Department or from the Select Committee.

The grounds for the collective grievance were that HMRC failed to follow Cabinet Office redundancy protocols, including moving the administrative assistants into redundancy procedures unnecessarily; HMRC denied trade union representation in one-to-one discussions with staff about whether they could practically travel to Birmingham; HMRC failed to carry out an equality

impact assessment for the closure; HMRC refused to offer staff the opportunity to move to sites other than Birmingham, despite alternative sites being more accessible for some staff; HMRC ignored evidence of increased journey times for Walsall staff, in favour of an unproven use of a variant of Google maps to estimate journey times; and HMRC refused to subject the closure plans to parliamentary scrutiny or to accept accountability for them. HMRC eventually responded to the grievance, but only to claim that it failed to meet the Department’s test of a legitimate grievance. HMRC refused to investigate the grievance under the Department’s procedures.

It cannot be right that the guidelines have not been followed and that the closure has been brought forward to June. The Minister has said in written answers and to the House that HMRC had given a commitment to staff that they would have a one-to-one meeting with their manager to discuss their options at least one year ahead of their office closure. That clearly has not happened in the case of Walsall. He also said that changing locations was not cutting staff, but the staff in Walsall have been given no choice and some are being made redundant. The Minister has also said that it is an operational matter, but who is the executive of HMRC accountable to? When the Minister said that the Government had asked HMRC to reduce costs, that is a policy matter, not an operational matter. The Minister said that the change would make it quicker and easier for taxpayers to report and pay their taxes online. Does that include those who have offshore accounts?

There are still appeals outstanding. Those who are out of scope for a move do not know what will happen to them. There are still concerns about travel support. The Public and Commercial Services Union has not been consulted. It was just told that a resource planning project had been announced. Now staff have been given six weeks to reorganise their lives and their caring responsibilities, when they were expecting that period to be almost a year.

I want to touch on the impact on Walsall. Walsall South has consistently higher levels of unemployment claimants than the rest of the region and the UK—4.4% of constituents claimed unemployment benefits, compared with a UK-wide figure of 2.5%. An assessment by Coventry City Council suggested that with the loss of quality jobs, almost £1.5 billion would be taken out of the local economy—a figure that I have cited before. Walsall South cannot afford to lose such a sum.

**Mr David Winnick** (Walsall North) (Lab): I am pleased that my hon. Friend is putting the case so well. Does she agree that if HMRC’s decision goes ahead, it will have a negative effect on the borough as a whole? It is undesirable. A public body such as HMRC should not act in an arbitrary manner, as my hon. Friend has explained. Would it not be useful for the Minister, when he replies, to try to persuade HMRC to change its decision?

**Valerie Vaz:** I agree. The Government seem to do some things well—impose contracts on junior doctors, summarily change employees’ contracts, and dismiss them with no consultation and no negotiation.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): You would think that the Government would be a model for industrial relations, bearing in mind the fact that we

pass the legislation in this place; instead, they are becoming the worst employer. More importantly, has my hon. Friend had cases where the public have faced long delays? I had cases like that over Christmas, and I have raised them here many times. At the end of the day, this is about the impact on the public as well as the staff.

**Valerie Vaz:** I absolutely agree. When unions and the Government are working together, and when unions and employers are working together, there can be a situation where something like the steel industry does not just collapse and we can move forward. We cannot move forward on anything unless we have negotiation and consultation, and that was clearly lacking in this case.

The sad thing about this case is that the majority of the employees are women. The vast majority have worked in the Walsall office for 15 years, and some have worked there for over 30 years. Their average age is 50—yet again, we have women of a certain age being discriminated against, and those with long service and knowledge being ignored. This will have a huge impact on their lives.

Where are the consultation, discussion and negotiation that are the bedrock of a civilised society? Will the Minister look at why some redeployment appeals are still outstanding? It is not clear how many people fall within the requirements regarding reasonable daily travel to Birmingham. What is the position of those who are out of scope? Could staff be offered redeployment in a nearer office, such as Wolverhampton? Could the three administrative assistants be offered promotion? Could long-serving staff be offered enhanced early retirement?

It is in everyone's interests to have a modern, fit-for-purpose office and up-to-date facilities—the Minister, I and everyone else agree on that. However, I would ask him not to close the office. Given the length of experience there, new work can be taken on. That would save money on rent and relocation.

The staff at Pattison House have given all these years to their country, and there is an accountability issue in terms of HMRC as a non-ministerial Government body. If HMRC is accountable to Parliament, the Minister should be able to look at the reasonable suggestions I have made. He may say that this is an operational matter, but that means that he is powerless in the face of an important department, and HMRC is not then accountable to Parliament. That would make a mockery of the Prime Minister's anti-corruption summit, which will be held on Thursday, because HMRC should be focusing its efforts on closing the tax gap, not closing offices. There will be no one in HMRC offices with local knowledge who can assist the public to pay their taxes without the help of accountancy or legal trickery.

I hope the Minister will respond positively for the sake of the staff and their families. We owe that to them for their years of public service.

2.22 pm

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke):** May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) on securing the debate? I welcome the opportunity to discuss HMRC's proposals and, I hope, to address some of the points she raised.

Before doing so, it is worth recapping briefly on what we are trying to achieve with HMRC. The organisation provides an essential service to people in the United Kingdom, not only helping hard-working families with the benefits they need, but making sure that the taxes that fund our vital public services get paid. We want to help HMRC do that better. We want it to be faster and more efficient. We want it to cost less but to deliver more for taxpayers and tax credit recipients. We want it to focus on our top priority: tackling tax evasion and avoidance.

We have already done a lot to move in that direction. Since 2010, we have driven down the tax gap—the difference between what HMRC should theoretically bring in and what it actually collects—to just over 6%, which is one of the lowest rates in the world. That progress is important; without it, we would not have collected £14.5 billion in extra tax. The hon. Lady quoted Richard Murphy's £119 billion estimate of the tax gap. She said that, as far as she is aware, that figure has not been challenged, but it has been challenged repeatedly, and it is not a number we accept by any means. None the less, it is important that we reduce the tax gap.

We have also committed to investing £1.3 billion in HMRC to make sure it can offer the digital services people expect in the 21st century, and we have committed millions more to improve customer services.

By the end of this Parliament, therefore, customers will start to see real improvements, whether that is reduced call waiting times, finding it quicker and easier to pay taxes online, or being able to use HMRC's special phone line for businesses. Furthermore, 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.

However, we want to go further. We want to save £100 million a year by 2025, by transforming the estate the HMRC works through and by creating a smaller but more highly skilled organisation. When HMRC was formed in 2005, it had 570 offices spread all over the country. That could hardly be termed efficient, and even now, in 2016, HMRC has around 170 offices, ranging in size from 5,700 people to fewer than 10. In the case of the Walsall office, at Pattison House, for example, there are 56 employees.

Back in November, therefore, HMRC announced its intention to finish the job of making itself more efficient. Over the next 10 years, the department will bring its employees together in large, modern offices in 13 main locations serving every region and nation in the UK. Those offices will be equipped with the digital infrastructure and training facilities they need to work effectively. Not only will these new offices encourage people to work more closely together, but they will provide more opportunities for them to develop their careers.

HMRC is fully aware that its most valuable asset is its people, and I commend the hon. Lady for her interest in the arrangements we are making for the around 56 employees of HMRC in Walsall for when the office is closed. I would like to reassure hon. Members that we are committed to making sure that the people in Walsall—indeed in every HMRC office—are supported through the changes and informed every step of the way.

First, I should remind the House that this is about changing the locations, not cutting staff. Although the Walsall office, in Pattison House, will be closed in 2016-17, HMRC hopes that everyone who is able to will

[Mr David Gauke]

transfer to an office in central Birmingham and then to a regional centre in Birmingham that will be home to over 3,000 staff.

In February, HMRC made sure that everyone in Walsall had the chance to discuss, on a one-to-one basis, how this will affect them. In particular, that meant checking whether they will be within a reasonable daily commute of the new office and finding out what support they may need to make the move. That could, for example, include an extra contribution towards travel. It is worth pointing out that someone who lives within a reasonable daily commute of another office could get support for up to three years with any additional transport costs. Those outside the reasonable daily travel requirements could receive support with their fares for up to five years. There is therefore support for individuals, which can be considered on a one-to-one basis. However, we remain confident that most people will be able to travel to the new office in central Birmingham.

HMRC will also be asking its Walsall staff to change their area of expertise. As the hon. Lady will be aware, many of them currently specialise in personal tax. As part of HMRC's restructure, it will be asking them to put their skills to good use in new roles in debt management. To help them make that change, HMRC will be running a full programme of induction and learning.

To address the hon. Lady's point about why the process has been accelerated, jobs are now available in Birmingham in debt management. The desire is for those jobs to be filled as quickly as possible, and HMRC believes that the staff in Walsall are well placed to perform these roles. That is the reason this has been offered.

**Valerie Vaz:** First, if the Minister disputes the figure of £119 billion of tax avoidance, will he drop me a letter to say how he calculates that so that I can put it to the source? Secondly, this has not been communicated to the staff in Walsall, who were not told that they have been given other jobs; all they were told was that the office would close. The Minister has not dealt with why the process was accelerated.

**Mr Gauke:** These debt management roles are available in Birmingham, and it makes sense for people currently working in Walsall who are capable of moving to Birmingham to fill them at the earliest opportunity. That is why this has been done. As I say, it was announced in November that Walsall was going to close in the course of the year 2016-17. As these roles in debt management are available, it makes sense to move quickly to fill them.

I am happy to write to the hon. Lady about the tax gap. HMRC publishes its own estimate of the tax gap that is based on considerable work and makes use of highly skilled statisticians. The National Audit Office has described it as "credible", if I remember correctly. Mr Murphy's estimates are well known to be controversial—let us put it that way—so this will not come as a surprise to him. He is very well aware that HMRC's estimate of the tax gap is very different from his. I will set out in my letter some of the reasons why

HMRC believes that Mr Murphy's estimate is not credible. I have debated this issue on a number of occasions, so it would be more than a pleasure to set it out once again.

**Mr Winnick:** As my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) emphasised, the staff feel strongly that the closure has been dealt with in an arbitrary manner. They are clearly not satisfied, despite what the Minister is saying about full consultation. As I said earlier, this is having a negative effect on the borough as a whole.

**Mr Gauke:** I note the hon. Gentleman's points. This was announced in November last year. PCS was present for the announcement and has been engaged throughout this period. I do not accept that HMRC has acted in an arbitrary way. There has been consultation and a series of one-to-one meetings.

Let me pick up on a point raised by the hon. Member for Walsall South about the administrative assistants in cases where there are no suitable roles within debt management. A personal tax team within HMRC is working with those individuals to see whether they are suitable for promotion to a higher grade and, if so, whether they could be offered posts within debt management.

It is necessary, in the view of HMRC—a view that the Government support—to move towards fewer offices where there is an ability to concentrate staff and to have greater flexibility as to the work that they undertake. It will also ensure that there is greater availability of career opportunities within the regional centres. That is the direction that HMRC is going in—we support that—and it does require staff to be moved from some of the smaller offices to the regional centres, in this case to Birmingham.

**Valerie Vaz:** This is the first time I have heard the term "debt management" in this regard. As a previously practising lawyer, I know what that means. In effect, these staff have been deskilled. They are going from personal taxation into debt management, which is just chasing debts.

**Mr Gauke:** No, I do not accept the description of debt management as a deskilled role. Debt management often involves making judgments on whether, for example, a business should enter into a time-to-pay arrangement, which is a highly skilled and sensitive role. HMRC's assessment is that the teams in Walsall are well placed to be retrained to perform this role within debt management. Debt management is not an unskilled role within HMRC.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** Would the staff transferred to Birmingham be on the same pay grades, or would there be differences? What would happen to somebody who was put into a lower grade and did not want to go into it?

**Mr Gauke:** As far as I am aware, there is no suggestion that people will be put into a lower grade as a consequence of these changes. In a couple of cases, HMRC is looking at whether the move will involve a promotion for those members of staff, but there is no suggestion that anyone would have a reduction in pay. As I outlined earlier, this has to be worked out on a one-to-one basis. Staff may

find that they are getting a contribution for up to three years for their additional travel costs as a consequence of a move.

**Valerie Vaz** *rose*—

**Mr Gauke:** I will give way to the hon. Lady one last time.

**Valerie Vaz:** How many jobs have become available in Birmingham?

**Mr Gauke:** I think a significant number of jobs are available. The question is how many of the Walsall staff are in a position to move to Birmingham. There is no suggestion of those who are capable of moving to Birmingham entering into redundancy. Jobs are available for Walsall staff. As I say, the jobs in debt management should not be demeaned, criticised, or suggested to be of a particularly low-skilled nature.

We are determined to keep moving forward in helping HMRC do its crucial job more and more effectively. That is why we are supporting these changes, which put the interests of taxpayers at the heart of what HMRC does. HMRC is working closely with all the staff who will play their part in this important reform, and it is determined to continue to do so throughout the process. I hope that hon. Members will join me in commending the work that HMRC does. Although I may not have persuaded the hon. Member for Walsall South, I wish to reassure her that HMRC will continue to work with staff based in Walsall. These changes will help to move HMRC forward to become a more effective, efficient and successful organisation.

*Question put and agreed to.*

2.38 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Tuesday 10 May 2016

[MR GARY STREETER *in the Chair*]

## Commonwealth War Graves Commission

1.30 pm

**Mr Keith Simpson** (Broadland) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter, and to see the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr Evennett) in his place, replacing my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who is away on maternity leave.

The aim of this short debate is to draw to the attention of colleagues and the public the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Apart from the maintenance of war cemeteries and memorials of two world wars, the commission is crucial to all the commemorative ceremonies for the first world war. I should declare an interest at the outset: I am one of two parliamentary commissioners represented on the commission. The other is the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who is in the Chamber and hopes to catch your eye, Mr Streeter.

In many respects, we are enclosed by history. Today, for example, at this very moment 76 years ago, the Labour party, meeting in conference, was deciding whether or not to support Winston Churchill as the leader of a coalition Government. One can imagine the atmosphere among parliamentary colleagues on 10 May 1940, with Nazi armies invading the low countries and France. We are here to look at another anniversary. Almost 99 years ago, on 21 May 1917, the Imperial War Graves Commission, as it was called then, received its royal charter, which established its remit and gave it sole responsibility for graves and memorials to the then dead of the imperial British forces in the first world war.

Nothing was preordained about the establishment of what became the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Its creation was largely the work of a formidable, motivated man called Fabian Ware—a man who had been working with Lord Milner in South Africa, who was an intellectual, who became editor of *The Morning Post* and who had a wide range of friends and contacts in the British establishment. In 1914, too old to serve, Ware commanded an ambulance unit in France and became aware of the sheer numbers of casualties, on a scale that Britain had never faced before. The British armed forces lost approximately 3,500 men at the battle of Waterloo—one of our biggest losses. We had suffered about 80,000 casualties by Christmas 1914.

Ware was concerned about what was going to happen to the dead, and he persuaded the general headquarters of the British armed forces in 1915 to establish the Graves Registration Commission, which he was to run. He made certain that the dead were buried or commemorated as near as possible to the battlefields

where they fell and, most significantly, not repatriated. There was enormous pressure, particularly from the parents or families of reasonably wealthy people, to bring—where they could be found—the bodies of their sons, husbands or cousins back home. That was going to be impossible on such a scale. He was only too aware that many of the dead, when they could be found, had no means of identity whatsoever.

During the course of the first world war, and in the establishment of the royal charter, Ware negotiated with allied and enemy countries for land where the dead were to be buried. Most significantly of all, he established that there was going to be no distinction by rank. Crudely speaking, pre-Victorian army officers got individual burials; other ranks were dumped in a great big pit. The only distinction was going to be by religion—Christian, Jewish or Islamic. That would be marked on the headstone. Of course, those of the Islamic faith would have their own cemeteries carefully laid out.

There was a lot of opposition to that, mainly from the families, and there were heated debates here in Parliament at the end of the first world war. Ware outmanoeuvred them all. In the establishment of what we all know now as the cemeteries and memorials that are so distinguishable for the British and Commonwealth experience, he used a whole series of distinguished experts: Edward Lutyens; Herbert Baker; Reginald Blomfield; Rudyard Kipling, who had lost a son, Jack, and was deeply traumatised, and who established much of the terminology of the commemoration; and Gertrude Jekyll, who advised on the landscaping and the gardens.

The final thing I will say about Ware is that he placed a great deal of emphasis on the fact that it was the Imperial—we would now say Commonwealth—War Graves Commission. It was not just about the British; it was about the Australians, the New Zealanders, the Canadians, the South Africans and, above all, the Indians, who made the biggest commitment to our cause in two world wars. I am part of the commission, and our work today is supported by member Governments of Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and, above all, the United Kingdom. Each of those countries contributes a sum in proportion to the number of graves it has. The United Kingdom contributes 78%, which comes from the budget of the Ministry of Defence. The annual budget is approximately £70 million, which works out at roughly £40 per commemoration per annum.

I pay tribute to the dedication and commitment of the commission's approximately 1,300 staff—most of them gardeners and masons, and most of them locally employed—who care for this vast range of memorials and gardens. Many of them are the second or third generation who have worked for the commission. Many of them continued to maintain those sites under the most appalling difficulties in the second world war, and more recently in war zones. I will come to that in a minute.

The work of the commission is vast. We commemorate 1.7 million individuals and maintain their graves and memorials at more than 23,000 locations in 154 countries across the globe. That is a vast scale. We also have to pay tribute to the host countries. Some, such as Belgium and France, willingly gave land. Others are the inheritors of the old British and French empires. We have to imagine, at times, how we would feel if we had vast cemeteries within our constituencies of Egyptian, Iraqi

[Mr Keith Simpson]

or Nigerian graves from a war that had been fought over our territory. There is an important sensitivity here.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): My right hon. Friend rightly references the symbolism and sensitivity of some of those cemeteries. There is also the extraordinary Commonwealth war graves cemetery in Gaza, which I think I am right in saying has been tended by the same Palestinian family since it was put up, now presumably almost 80 years ago. It contains Christian, Muslim, Jewish and even Hindu memorials. It occupies a large amount of land in a tiny place that is very short of space. During Operation Cast Lead, an Israeli tank broke through the walls and damaged some grave stones. Eventually, construction materials were allowed back there, and the first thing they were used for was the reparation of those grave stones. It is a great testament to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which he serves so well.

**Mr Simpson:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, which leads on to the fact that, even as we speak, the commission is working in Iraq—it used to be able to work in Syria—rebuilding cemeteries that have been destroyed by either war or ISIL/Daesh extremists, who see them merely as symbols of Christian occupation.

Indeed—if I may use what the Army used to call a visual aid—I have two photographs taken in Beirut. The first, from the 1980s, is of the cemetery almost completely destroyed; the second is of the cemetery lovingly rebuilt to the previous standard. We should remember, as I am sure all colleagues do, that at the end of the day we are dealing with individuals, either with a known grave or with their names on a giant memorial like those at Ypres or Thiepval. The memorials are for the families and also, now, for people who merely have an interest—I know that many colleagues are fascinated by the people behind the names.

We should also remember—in the words of Michael Caine, not a lot of people know this—that more than 300,000 Commonwealth servicemen and women who died in the two world wars are commemorated here in the United Kingdom. Their 170,000 graves are to be found at over 13,000 locations. In addition, some 130,000 missing Navy, Merchant Navy and Air Force casualties are commemorated on the great memorials at Chatham, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Tower Hill and Runnymede. A forgotten element is that nearly 30,000 men and women of the Merchant Navy, unsung heroes and heroines, were killed. Most naval people, of course, have no known grave.

**Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): May I commend the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission at Shorncliffe military cemetery just outside Folkestone? It contains the graves of 550 servicemen. Of those, 471 are from the first world war and 300 are the graves of Canadian servicemen. The Canadians' sacrifice is commemorated by the people of Folkestone on Canada day every year.

**Mr Simpson:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The old military historian in me makes me think that the Canadians are the least boastful of the British empire and Commonwealth contributors to the two

world wars. We tend to forget that one in four members of Bomber Command were Canadians and that most British Army battalions in Normandy had Canadian officers and NCOs on loan because we were so short of experienced people.

Here the commission is trying to do a lot of education through local communities and schools. Many of the 130,000 people who are remembered in the United Kingdom are not in major cemeteries. Sometimes they are at the end of a municipal cemetery, but many are in the cemeteries of largely Church of England graveyards. For example, my county, Norfolk, has 471 graves from two world wars and my market town of Reepham has three graves, two from 1918 of Reepham-born soldiers, who probably died from Spanish influenza, and one from 1941 of an RAF volunteer reserve sergeant from Great Yarmouth.

I commend the commission, which, over the last five or six years, has established a really superb website, which is idiot-proof. I am an analogue man, as my son frequently reminds me, but I can use it. People can look there for individuals and locations, and it is possible for colleagues who are interested to trace people who may be buried in their constituencies.

The commission is supported by the United Kingdom Government. I pay tribute to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. We have to work closely with the Department to help to deliver on many of the anniversaries—for example, the Jutland anniversary at the end of this month and that of the battle of the Somme at the enormous memorial at Thiepval at the beginning of July. The commission provides equal support to our Commonwealth friends in Australia and New Zealand who served at Gallipoli, our Canadian friends who served at Vimy ridge and our Indian friends who served on the western front.

The commission goes out of its way to provide a high-level service all year round. Because people are impressed by the quality of that service, maintaining it is very arduous. People expect to go to a cemetery and to see the lawns beautifully tended with all the horticulture laid out. There is a massive programme to replace some 12,000 individual gravestones a year as they are degraded by wind, weather, sand and sometimes military action.

We will shortly remember two big battles. One is Jutland at the end of this month. The memorials to Jutland are on land, although the overwhelming majority of seamen who died went down with their ships. Some were injured and brought to the United Kingdom but died in hospital. There is the memorial at Thiepval for the battle of the Somme. The ceremonies on 1 July are but the entrée—the battle lasted another three to four months. It is symbolic because that was the day people think the British Army suffered its greatest losses: some 19,000 men were killed in action and another nearly 40,000 wounded. In fact, we suffered worse casualties on 21 March 1918 when the Germans broke through, but that has been lost as part of our memory.

When people go to look at the Somme cemeteries, as many colleagues have, they know it is not just about the individuals who are buried there; it is about the reflection of British and empire society at the time. People look at the regimental cap badges and the memorials to the Canadians, the Australians and the New Zealanders. The overwhelming number of soldiers who served on the Somme were volunteers, either pre-war regulars or

Territorials. A number, not all, were in pals battalions. They were recruited from factories and businesses in Sheffield, Exeter, Glasgow and Liverpool and wore those parochial British badges with great honour. It is important that the commission delivers the best quality of remembrance at the commemorations, recognising that its cemeteries and memorials are usually the centrepiece for the commemorations that follow.

The commission is doing a lot of continuous work dealing with what we call the memories of forgotten soldiers, particularly and rightly, the role of the Indian armed forces in two world wars. A pilot project, “India Remembers”, is important not only in its own right but because we are only too well aware that young people under 18 may not know what happened. I remember the first world war, not that I was there; my two grandfathers talked to me about it. However, if you are 18, it is as far away as the wars of the roses. We must recognise that many children from the Indian subcontinent whose parents now live in the United Kingdom are detached from the contribution of the Indian armed forces in two world wars, not least because those forces were seen as much as a weapon of repression as armed forces defending democracy. A lot of work is rightly going into recognising that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission does not take a view on the interpretation of history. It tries to present the facts and the opportunities for others to look at.

Behind every headstone and name on a memorial is a person. I was lucky enough, in the early 1970s, to be able to go on visits with first world war veterans and then, in the late '70s, '80s and '90s, with second world war veterans. When I was working with the British Army, it used battlefield tours—or, as they were known, bottlefield tours—as a teaching method. One that I have never forgotten was to Normandy in 1995-96, when we took a whole series of middle-ranking young, thrusting Army officers on a battlefield study of the breakout from Normandy. We had two veterans with us. Major Bill Close, MC, was a pre-war private soldier, commissioned on the field of battle, who participated in Operation Goodwood, the attempt to break out through the German lines at Caen. At the time of the visit, he was aged about 88. Also with us was Oberstleutnant Freiherr Hans von Luck, who had been commanding a Panzer Grenadier regiment and trying to kill Bill Close outside Caen.

The most moving aspect was when we took those two old gentlemen, first, to the British Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery. Bill Close stood in front of the graves of his tank crew, who had been brewed up—11 tanks were brewed up under him in the course of the second world war—and we could see that he was looking not at gravestones, but at men's faces. Half an hour later, we went to the German cemetery, where Hans von Luck stood in front of the grave of his adjutant, whose wedding he had been to in Paris; he was recalled to arms when the allies attacked. Once again, he was looking at that.

I therefore commend the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Frequently, its staff are the worker bees. I know that they are appreciated by hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens, but I thought it right and proper that we should draw attention to the work of the commission at this time of anniversaries.

1.51 pm

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my position as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group.

I join the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) in praising the work of the employees of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, but I also want to touch on some current issues. As the right hon. Gentleman said, the commission cares for the graves of 1.7 million casualties of the first and second world wars in cemeteries and memorials at more than 23,000 locations in more than 150 countries; two of them are in my constituency of Glasgow South West. It employs just over 1,300 staff worldwide, and approximately 250 of those are on UK-based contracts. I understand that negotiations are ongoing with the Ministry of Defence to include non-war-related graves in the work of the commission.

The staff of the commission take pride in attending to the war graves. It is not just a job, but a way of life—a vocation. Many are from families who have worked for the commission for generations, and many spend their whole working lives in the service of the commission. Jobs at the commission range from gardeners, maintenance people and stonemasons to administrators, supervisors, managers, archivists and historians. It is not uncommon for staff to progress through a variety of those roles in the course of their career, retraining and adapting as necessary to the needs of the job. There is often a large element of foreign travel; indeed, the work often entails working and living abroad for years and even decades. That requires staff to uproot families and learn new languages in order to adjust. That can also have a financial impact if spouses are unable to pursue careers as a result.

Salaries at the commission have been very modest. That was recognised in the recent global grading and pay review, which found a need to uprate salaries. Although that is welcome, it nevertheless reflects the fact that salaries over the years have not been commensurate with the job. However, despite some of the sacrifices, staff at the commission remain committed to delivering a high level of service. Most recently, the first world war commemorations, as touched on by the right hon. Member for Broadland, have required staff to work over and above their normal commitments. However, that commitment has, in the view of many staff, not been rewarded.

Long-serving staff have seen the closure of the final salary pension scheme in April 2016 and a dramatic reduction in their pensions as a result. Trade unions are in the midst of pay negotiations with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and argue that staff should get an enhanced pay offer to take into account the special circumstance that staff have been put in this year. The Public and Commercial Services Union requested that the CEO of the commission meet Ministers to make that case, and the union offered to lend assistance by attending the meeting. That offer and suggestion has been dismissed by the commission.

Considering the considerable loyalty and commitment of staff, the downgrading of their pensions and the extra pension contributions that they will be paying this year, it had been hoped that they would receive a decent

[Chris Stephens]

pay offer as some form of compensation. Instead, it seems that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is relying on, and exploiting, the good will of staff.

To recognise the special nature of the job, the loyalty of staff and the financial sacrifices that staff have made over the years, the commission had a final salary pension scheme, ensuring financial security in retirement for staff who had spent their lives in dedicated service to the commission. The terms of the scheme were good, with a low employee contribution, a spouse's pension, a death in service benefit and lump sums based on final salary; it was a 40/60ths scheme. That reflected the fact that the pension had traditionally been one of the most important conditions of service, recognising years of dedication and loyalty.

The effects on the staff of the decision to close the final salary scheme should not be underestimated. Long-serving staff have put up with great sacrifice and disturbance to their family lives, such as having to move to foreign countries. Spouses and partners have often been unable to have careers as a result. The pension that staff accrue should recognise that.

Approximately 60% of those affected by the changes are 50 years old or over and likely to retire in the next 10 years. Staff within a few years of retirement now have little time to adjust their financial planning for retirement, as the alternative group pension plan will not deliver anything like the benefits of the final salary scheme. The closure of that scheme will cause significant detriment to the future pensions of UK-based staff and will cause considerable unrest among employees at a time when all employees are working hard to further enhance the reputation of the commission with the work on the 1914-18 centenary commemorations. That approach of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission seems to have been mirrored in recent pay talks, in which it has been unwilling to stand up for its staff and request additional funding from the Ministry of Defence.

My view, like that of the right hon. Member for Broadland, who spoke very eloquently about the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, is that its employees do tremendous work. I hope that today the commission will reflect on the views of the staff and address the issues of pay and pensions.

1.57 pm

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) on securing the debate. I declare an interest as one of the two parliamentary commissioners for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Holding that post is a great honour. The right hon. Gentleman has described not only the detailed work that this organisation does, but the high esteem in which it is held by the public. It is clear that today the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is a national institution that people recognise, not only for its high standards but for the dedicated work that it does in commemorating the 1.7 million individuals who lost their lives in the two world wars.

That was not always the case. Like many British institutions, this organisation came into being almost by accident, as the right hon. Gentleman said, thanks to

the determination and, I think, ferocity of Fabian Ware. This work was not being done at the time. It was clear at the beginning of the first world war that the War Office, as it was in those days, had not thought about what it would do with the casualties that would be left on battlefields across the world. It was only because of Ware's dedication and the fact that he took it into his own hands to record the sites of the graves that the process began, in that the Government then decided that they needed a grave registration commission to take care of those graves and note where they were. Ware was an incredible individual who was determined to ensure not only that people had a lasting resting place but that the families could visit those graves in future years. Clearly, his contacts with the then Prince of Wales helped to secure the commission's royal charter in 1917. It did not stop there.

Today, the proposal for a Commonwealth War Graves Commission—in those days, it was the Imperial War Graves Commission—would be straightforward. However, I draw hon. Members' attention to the debate in the House on 4 May 1920, when an order was laid to agree the funding for the new Imperial War Graves Commission. Remarkably, it was actually opposed by some hon. Members, including the Conservative Member for Holborn, Sir James Remnant, who moved an amendment to reduce the amount by £5 to ensure that the debate took place.

There were two issues. One issue, as the right hon. Member for Broadland mentioned, was the great debate about whether the remains of the dead should be brought home. Sir James Remnant said:

“The dead are certainly not the property of the State or of any particular regiment; the dead belong to their own relations, and anything that savours of interfering with that right is bound to create opposition among the inhabitants certainly of our own Empire.”

At the same time, some local newspapers said that the state was nationalising death.

The other great debate was whether the relatives should be allowed to put their own memorials up in the Commonwealth cemeteries. Sir James Remnant's argument was that families should be allowed, if they wished, to put their own memorials up, rather than having one imposed by the state. He said that

“the relations of the dead should have the right, within properly defined limits, as to size, taste, design, expense, and even of material to be used, to erect what headstones they like as representative of the personality of the individual, and as a personal tribute of affection to their own dead.”—[*Official Report*, 4 May 1920; Vol. 128, c. 1930.]

That would have led to quite some controversy.

In the same debate, Herbert Asquith, who lost his son Raymond in 1916, said:

“These men, be they officers or rank and file, who fell, died with the same courage and the same devotion and for the same cause, and they should have their names and their services perpetuated by the same memorial.”—[*Official Report*, 4 May 1920; Vol. 128, c. 1947.]

That goes to the root cause of a very clever idea that Ware came up with: that no one should get a bigger or different memorial because they were of higher rank or their family were able to pay.

The best example of that in this country must be Hollybrook memorial in Southampton, which is a memorial to those who have no known grave or were lost at sea. It

includes the 823 members of the South African Native Labour Corps, who were lost when the SS *Mendi* sank just off the Isle of Wight following a collision with a steam packet ship. Alongside those names is the name of Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, who was lost at Scapa Flow in 1916. The memorial, which I visited a few years ago, includes that long list of 823 names alongside that of Lord Kitchener. That sums up the commission's approach that there is no special treatment for rank.

I have the great honour of being on the commission, and it is something of a tradition in my constituency to be a commissioner. One of my predecessors was Jack Lawson, the Member of Parliament for Chester-le-Street—now in my constituency—from 1919 to 1949. He was on the original Imperial War Graves Commission. Like a lot of people who were involved in the early work of the commission, he was directly affected by the great war as his younger brother, William, was killed in 1916 and was buried at the Chester Farm cemetery in Belgium.

The work of the commission is complex, with a variety of sites in about 23,000 locations across 150 countries. Everyone sees and is rightly proud of the cemeteries in Belgium and northern France, but the standard everywhere in the world is the same, whether it is France, Belgium, Gaza or Egypt. A few years ago, I had the privilege of going to the jungles of Papua New Guinea, where there is a beautiful cemetery, and others are located in Sri Lanka. Ensuring that standards are maintained is incredibly difficult but they are, and that is down to the dedication of those who work for the commission. They ensure not only that standards are maintained, but that the ethos of the commission, which was laid down in its early charter, is maintained for future generations.

When I was a Minister in the Ministry of Defence, I was honoured to be involved in the delivery of the newest commission cemetery at Fromelles in France, which opened in 2010. That showed that the work of the commission never really stops because we are still discovering casualties around the world. I pay tribute to the men and women who work for the Ministry of Defence in the casualty recognition department. They go to great lengths to ensure that, where possible, we can identify casualties. That is not always possible, but the commission says that it is important that the names of as many casualties as possible are recorded in perpetuity.

Everyone knows the fantastic cemeteries of northern France, but many people do not realise that half the commission's sites are in the UK. The commission is trying to ensure that they get recognition so that people know that they are in local communities and local cemeteries and that, whether they are commission headstones or private memorials, they are maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

I urge hon. Members to visit some of the sites. The commission has a programme to put up green signs so that people know where the sites are located. The next phase, which will happen next year, is to get volunteers to help people with identification and to assist them when they visit. The work goes on. People should visit their local cemeteries and take school groups. The commission does important work not only on the first world war, but on the second world war. School groups are showing a great interest and the commission is rightly

putting a great emphasis on education and awareness. I urge everybody to visit the commission's excellent website if they want to know more about its work.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) has previously raised the issues he mentioned today. I chair the remunerations committee of the commission, and I have said that he can meet the head of personnel and others at the commission to discuss those issues. Decisions on pensions issues are difficult. Similar decisions have had to be taken by trade unions, including the Public and Commercial Services Union. I, along with the other commissioners, recognise the valuable work that all our staff do—not just in this country, but internationally.

The centenary of the commission is in 2017. It will be important not just to look back on the work that has taken place over the past century, but to look forward to ensure that we maintain the graves and memorials. We must ensure that the legacy and memory of the individuals who died in defence of the freedoms that we take for granted in this country are not lost for future generations.

2.9 pm

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) on securing this debate. I hope that my short contribution will go some way to meeting his objective of recognising the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's valuable contribution to upholding the memory of those who died in the service of their country during the two world wars and other conflicts.

Appropriately commemorating those who died in service, the majority of whom were younger than most parliamentarians, is the least that we can do, and I pay tribute to the commission's staff, who work so tirelessly in maintaining the cemeteries and memorials. The scale of their work, as everyone knows, is enormous, with memorials situated in more than 23,000 locations in 154 countries, commemorating more than 1.7 million members of the Commonwealth forces who died. It is testament to the expertise and professionalism of the staff that those memorials are kept in such good condition.

More than 1,275 sites are maintained by Commonwealth War Graves Commission staff in Scotland alone, and there are eight such cemeteries in my constituency of West Dunbartonshire to mark those from my community who died during conflict. The local community has a strong and deep link to those cemeteries and memorials, and it regularly pays tribute to the members who lost their lives, and to their families, either through official engagements or through personal moments of reflection.

The sheer numbers of those killed during the conflicts brings home the horrifying fact that every family would have been affected by loss and that every community would have lost generations. Such loss not only has a psychological impact; the physical loss of so many young people led to the decimation of local communities. Ensuring that the memorials are properly maintained not only is a mark of respect to the fallen but provides a lasting historical legacy for generations to come. It is only through providing future generations with a connection to the past and to the impact of war that we can hope that they will never experience the trauma of war.

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

When discussing the impact of war and how we can learn from the past, it is also fundamentally important to remember the civilians who lost their lives, as well as the service personnel who died on active duty. In this Parliament I was recently given the honour of marking the 75th anniversary of the Clydebank blitz and of commemorating the 528 people who lost their lives over two nights. It was the first time that the Clydebank blitz had been acknowledged in this place, and through such events future generations are given a more rounded education of where we have come from and where we are going.

We must always look to link the past with the present. I hope that this debate will go some way to raising awareness of the remit and dedication of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to provide a long-lasting legacy for the fallen. With that in mind, I welcome the commission's work and its attempts to engage with local communities, thus ensuring that schools and community groups across these islands physically visit the memorials. Although that is important, I am impressed by the commission's efforts to engage beyond the physical memorials by using new technology and applications on its website to educate children and to keep up with the new generation.

I pay tribute once more to the staff of the commission for their invaluable work. They are the guardians of the past, for which we should be eternally grateful.

2.13 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) on his graphic and detailed presentation of the case, which we appreciate. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is as relevant now as it was when it was founded, which is testimony to the hard work and determination of those involved.

Neither a soldier nor a politician, the commission's founder, Sir Fabian Ware, was, at 45, too old to fight, but he became the commander of a mobile unit of that fabulous organisation, the British Red Cross. Saddened by the sheer number of casualties, he felt driven to find a way to ensure that the final resting places of the dead would not be lost forever. His vision chimed with the times and has continued to this day. Under his dynamic leadership, his unit began recording and caring for all the graves it could find, and by 1915 its work was officially recognised by the War Office and incorporated into the British Army as the Graves Registration Commission. That work continues today, and Sir Fabian Ware's vision is now a reality. The initial aim of ensuring that the final resting places of the dead would not be lost forever has been successful.

As others have said, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission does a staggering amount of work, and it has some 23,000 memorials and cemeteries in 154 countries, making it a truly global organisation. In my constituency of Strangford, we have between 60 and 70 graves that are looked after by the commission. I went around the graves with one of the commission's officers to see its work. A young British Army soldier who died in the 1916 uprising is buried in Greyabbey, and another young soldier from the first world war, Pritchards, was

lying in an unattended grave. The commission will look after graves, but it needs the permission of the families. We need to ensure that Ware's vision can continue to be fulfilled and that war graves are maintained and looked after from Strangford to South Georgia. From the Menin Gate and the Thiepval memorial to the India Gate in Delhi and the Helles memorial in Turkey, the commission tends some of the most iconic architectural structures in the world. From tiny cemeteries containing just a handful of graves to the Tyne Cot cemetery in Belgium, where there are 11,000 burials, the commission ensures that the memory of all those who perished is preserved with the utmost respect.

The commission cares for the cemeteries as a whole, so conservation and reconstruction can, and often does, involve teams from different disciplines. It is not just a matter of tending graves; it is much, much more than that—horticulture, headstone carving and manufacture, and the architectural maintenance teams. They are people with skills, love, affection and commitment to their job. The cemeteries are the sum of their individual parts, and teamwork at all levels helps to maintain their overall appearance.

Even the most durable materials require maintenance, especially when they are used in constructions that are nearly 100 years old. Climate change, pollution and vandalism all take their toll. The background information mentions deliberate vandalism in places such as Libya, Iraq and Beirut, and the commission has made it its business to reinstate those graveyards, as the right hon. Member for Broadland said. Structural renovation projects can involve anything from reroofing buildings to drainage systems. Headstones, memorials and sculptures are kept in good order by a regular cycle of maintenance—a lot of good work is done. To ensure that the quality of materials and the craftsmanship remain a priority, the commission employs specialist masons and runs its own workshops, in which many of the replacement headstones are made.

Barry Edwards, the commission's architect, was asked to construct a brand-new cemetery at Fromelles to take the remains of 250 Australian and British servicemen who lost their lives at the battle of Fromelles in July 1916. It is amazing to think that, a century on, the commission is still making a difference in the proper remembrance of those who lost their lives in the first world war.

With gardeners and horticultural experts working in 154 countries, the commission has an enviable track record of innovation and expertise. More than half of the 1,750 acres of ground under the commission's control is given over to fine horticulture, making maintenance a year-round task for its 900 gardeners. That might mean bringing seeds from Nepal to use in Gurkha cemeteries, or bringing maples from Canada for Dieppe. Even in horticulture, the commission goes the extra mile to ensure that each nation's war dead are remembered properly.

Today, the work continues to the highest standard with the restoration of the Thiepval memorial. I have seen the memorial and remember it well. It is a fitting tribute to the fallen of the Somme. I could not conclude my speech without mentioning the Somme, which means so much to Ulster men and women because of their ancestors' sacrifice. It is always good to remember that the 36th (Ulster) Division fought alongside the 10th and

16th (Irish) Divisions, when it was the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The battle of the Somme resonates. Many streets and many Orange lodges across the Province are named after the battle. The banner of my lodge depicts the battle of the Somme too. This year, the battle's centenary will be commemorated across Northern Ireland, and people from all community backgrounds in the Province have connections to the battle. As a Unionist of Ulster, I find it hard to think of something more deeply embedded in our psyche as a people than the Somme, which is seen by many as the people's blood sacrifice in the pursuit of our self-determination.

The final stage of repointing on the Thiepval memorial has been done, and pointing work has started on the natural stone. The new coping stones and stone garlands are being repointed with a specific mortar that is close to the colour of the stone. The memorial is now equipped with a new distribution board for all the new electrical installation, and work continues on the top roof. It has been waterproofed to ensure that it is watertight.

On 15 March, the new flags flew again on top of the memorial. To mark the occasion, Lieutenant Colonel Kian Murphy, representing both France and the UK, rendered the military salute. The next step is placing the British and French crowns on top of the flag poles and cleaning the memorial from top to bottom. It will not be long before we see the final result. We commend the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for all that it has done for its workers and staff, and for commemorating battles of many years ago, particularly the battle of the Somme.

2.20 pm

**Steven Paterson** (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) for securing this important debate. If his mission was to mark the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and to educate, he has certainly done his job as far as I am concerned. I have learned a great deal already.

It is almost 100 years since the commission was established, as we have discussed, in 1917 as the Imperial War Graves Commission. The work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is as important now as it ever was. Preserving with such expertise and attention to detail the memory of the 1.7 million people who died during two world wars is a huge task, and we could not wish for a more effective organisation to take on the role.

The founding principles of the commission in 1917 are also as valuable today as they were then. They are fourfold:

“Each of the dead should be commemorated by name on the headstone or memorial; headstones and memorials should be permanent; headstones should be uniform; there should be no distinction made on account of military or civil rank, race or creed”.

It is a testament to the foresight of those who set up the commission in the first place, as many right hon. and hon. Members have discussed, that those principles are enduring and relevant today.

Should the remains of military personnel be found that are not from either of the two world wars, responsibility for arranging a military funeral lies with the Ministry of

Defence. However, personnel remains from the first or second world war are the responsibility of the commission. Further to funeral and burial proceedings, the commission maintains graves and memorials in about 23,000 locations in 154 countries around the globe, which demonstrates the enormous scale of the work that the organisation undertakes.

In Scotland alone, the commission cares for around 1,300 individual sites, ranging from local authority-run sites to churchyards of all religious denominations and to military cemeteries owned by the commission. The commission also plays a part in formulating policy relevant to its role: for example, it was represented recently in the Scottish Government's evidence-gathering sessions for the Burial and Cremation (Scotland) Bill. The commission offered an extremely valuable perspective, based on its experience and expertise, during the passage of the Bill.

Scotland, alongside many other nations throughout Europe and around the globe, suffered a devastating loss of life during the first and second world wars. It is worth reflecting that before the establishment of the commission, there was no organised effort to maintain the graves of war dead, at least in this country, and certainly not those of ordinary servicemen, as has been noted. The work done by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission ensures, quite rightly, that all service personnel killed in the first and second world wars are commemorated appropriately, irrespective of rank, title or social standing.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we owe the Commonwealth War Graves Commission a debt of gratitude not only for honouring the dead but for helping to maintain a poignant reminder of the appalling cost of war?

**Steven Paterson:** I agree. I am coming on to comments reflecting exactly that point, so I am grateful for that intervention.

As a permanent tribute to the fallen men and women who served their country and community and who paid the ultimate price in doing so, it is important that we maintain our war memorials and graves appropriately. The condition in which they are kept should always reflect the respect and dignity that they deserve. Just two years ago, we began commemorating the centenary of the outbreak of the first world war. The then Scottish First Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), announced Scottish Government funding for war memorial restoration across Scotland. More than £100,000 was granted to 10 separate memorials, including one in my constituency—the war memorial in the city centre—which was given £30,000 for reparation work. Prior to the allocation of those funds, the cenotaph was in need of considerable remedial work, which I am pleased to say was completed thanks to that funding.

Last year, as the newly elected Member of Parliament for Stirling, I took part in a Remembrance Day service and a wreath-laying ceremony at that same cenotaph. War memorials such as the one in my constituency, as well as individual graves, are hugely instrumental in educating future generations about the sacrifices that previous generations made to secure the freedoms that we take for granted. It is important that we commend the excellent work of the Commonwealth War Graves

[Steven Paterson]

Commission and highlight the need to ensure the appropriate upkeep of cenotaphs across the country, not to celebrate conflicts but to remember the casualties and the sacrifices made. A check of the Commonwealth War Grave Commission's website informs me that in my constituency, there are more than 240 war graves, each commemorating an individual from the Stirling area who fell in one of the two world wars. One of the larger cemeteries in my constituency, Ballengeich, is the final resting place of 58 such individuals.

Although I have made much mention of my constituency, it is important to recognise the valuable work carried out in this area across the whole UK and globally. Six member Governments form the Commonwealth War Graves Commission: Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom. We should commend the fact that the UK has consistently committed the largest proportion of funding to allow the commission to undertake its valuable work. All other member Governments also make a financial contribution directly to the commission, and non-member Commonwealth nations often contribute to the cause by maintaining war graves in their own nations, as many Members have noted. Such international co-operation demonstrates the rightly determined support for the cause of commemorating our war dead. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate.

2.26 pm

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I commend the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) for securing this important debate and for his interesting opening speech. It is timely, given that so many of us are focusing on the events of a century ago and on the immense sacrifices made by so many around the world in the two great wars of the last century, among other conflicts that have secured the freedoms that we take so much for granted today. It has been interesting to hear about the personal links that remain. Like the right hon. Gentleman, I have a grandfather, Ed Oswald, who made a contribution in the Royal Navy during the second world war. Such circumstances make this matter very personal for many of us.

We in the Scottish National party believe firmly that the Government should continue their support for the commission so it can continue to meet its important obligations and objectives. We fully support and commend the commission's work. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) said, it is only right that people who died while serving in our armed forces are commemorated properly, and that there is a lasting historical legacy as well as a memorial for the generations coming after. The work of the commission is also important in highlighting to those who choose to serve today that we recognise and understand the dangers inherent in the job that they sign up to do.

Scotland, the UK and nations around the world suffered devastating losses of life in the world wars. I spent many hours as an undergraduate studying those particular wars, but no matter how dispassionately and academically one tried to look at what happened, it was and remains impossible to be anything other than devastated by those young lives lost and wasted by the thousand

upon thousand. The only thing that we can do now is remember those who were lost and learn the lessons from the conflicts in which they perished. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission plays a vital role in allowing us to do so.

I was interested to read on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website—I echo hon. Members' comments about its excellence—significant reference to the Scottish national war memorial. Although the memorial is not owned by the commission, it is clear that there are strong links and a unity of purpose between those organisations that the names of each person killed in each specific locality during the first world war should be remembered forever.

I was fortunate to visit the Scottish national war memorial recently and see the care taken to remember each individual person and commemorate their life. People are named individually, and it is a peaceful, beautiful and fitting memorial. On the way out, there is a statue titled "Reveille" commemorating the end of war and symbolically looking forward to a new peaceful dawn. I was struck by that beautiful representation of the importance of looking forward peacefully as a means of remembering the fallen. I have a picture of it in my office. It sends a powerful message of remembrance.

I join the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) in commending the dedication of the founder of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Fabian Ware. A century has passed since the commission's inception. Clearly, the 1,300 staff of the commission have cared tirelessly for the cemeteries and memorials of those who died in the two world wars. It bears repeating that the commission is working in a staggering 23,000 locations, in no fewer than 154 countries, to commemorate all those men and women of the Commonwealth forces who died. The scale of that work really is immense and the work involved in managing it must be recognised.

As the right hon. Member for Broadland noted, under its royal charter obligations, the commission is responsible not only for the care and commemoration of the graves and memorials of the members of the Commonwealth armed forces who died, but for the protection of their remains in perpetuity, where their final resting place is known. The commission commemorates those with no known grave on stand-alone memorials, such as screen walls erected in burial grounds and elsewhere. Casualties interred in common graves may not always have a headstone marking the grave, but in that case they will be commemorated appropriately, away from the burial location.

The commission continues to develop and progress its work in remembering those who have fallen, with appeals still going out today using the latest social media and web technology, as opposed to the very immediate personal appeals made at the time. I know that, because the commission office, which is not far from my own constituency, at Gartmore parish church, is still looking for the relatives of soldiers who perished a century ago, including Private James Cameron of the King's Own Scottish Borderers, who died in June 1917, and Private James Graham of the Gordon Highlanders, who died in June 1918. That kind of dedication to remembering those who lost their lives is clear; it is what the commission is all about.

It is heartening that the commission is embracing technology. It is using apps and its excellent website very effectively to engage with schools and community

groups to encourage them to visit the memorials, so as to bring this particular aspect of history much closer to people individually.

We have heard that legislation allows the commission to ensure that war graves and memorials are protected as far as possible. The commission clearly spends significant time inspecting and maintaining war graves via its own maintenance teams. It is a huge undertaking. There are over 100,000 war memorials in the UK. The commission currently cares for approximately 21,000 graves and memorials in more than 1,200 sites across Scotland, whether they are local cemeteries, churchyards, dedicated military cemeteries, or single graves in burial grounds.

I would be surprised if anyone here has not seen graves cared for by the commission. I remember as a child visiting Shanwell cemetery in Carnoustie and looking at the beautifully kept Commonwealth war graves. In my travels around my constituency, I see that there are Commonwealth war graves in cemeteries in Barrhead, Eaglesham and Newton Mearns, marking the sacrifice of young men and young women—and there are graves of young women, among those of the young men, who were also cut down in their prime.

Last year, it was an honour to attend many memorial services around East Renfrewshire. As well as attending the opening of an outstanding community-funded war memorial at Neilston, I was privileged to march with the Jewish veterans in Newton Mearns and to meet a veteran in Barrhead, of whom I have spoken in this House before, and who cycled to Clydebank from Barrhead during the blitz to put out the fires there. That is the kind of sacrifice that people were prepared to make and that we should commemorate.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) noted, the commission's current Living Memory initiative, to encourage people to visit the sites in their local areas and learn more about the stories of those who are buried there, will undoubtedly lead to greater knowledge and understanding of those who died and the circumstances of their deaths. These graves and memorials can help people to connect with those who were involved in past conflicts, as well as giving us a local connection, a real human connection with history, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling said, a desire to learn very important lessons from the past.

The commission also tends a number of architectural structures, from the imposing India Gate in Delhi to tiny cemeteries containing just a handful of graves. It does that work around the globe, ensuring that the sacrifices of the very brave servicemen and women from countries all around the world are noted and remembered. I was very pleased to see a feature on the commission website highlighting service personnel from Canada, South Africa and India, among other countries. I am very pleased to hear of the ongoing work of the commission in relation to Indian families who may have connections to our service personnel in the past.

From the trenches of the western front to the deserts of Mesopotamia, over 1.1 million Indian soldiers served in the first world war. By November 1918, over 60,000 men from the subcontinent—who were diverse in culture, language and faith—had given their lives. In death, these men were treated according to their respective religions. As the right hon. Member for Broadland indicated, while Muslim soldiers were buried and their graves marked by headstones, the remains of Sikh and

Hindu soldiers were cremated, with their ashes being scattered and their names engraved on cremation memorials around the globe.

In Eritrea, nearly 1,000 Commonwealth war dead from the second world war are buried or commemorated. The hon. Member for North Durham spoke of the astonishing range of locations all over the world. As we have heard, the member Governments that make up the commission reflect that kind of geographical diversity and the truly global nature of the conflicts that the commission commemorates. Those Governments contribute proportionately to the commission.

Clearly, there are ongoing discussions about whether to transfer the responsibility for the maintenance of war graves of military personnel who have been buried in the UK since 1948 from the commission to the Ministry of Defence. The key point is that these graves must be maintained and looked after properly, and that there is a clear responsibility for doing so. It is important that the Government continue their support of the commission and that discussions are facilitated in order that these obligations and objectives can be met.

Like the right hon. Member for Broadland, we on the Scottish National party Benches pay tribute to the very hard work undertaken by the commission's staff in the UK and across the globe, who maintain the commission's reputation for providing such a high standard of maintenance. He also made valuable points about the contribution of so many countries, where so many of these graves lie, and I agree with that.

**Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair):** Order. The hon. Lady has had her 10 minutes.

2.36 pm

**Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Streeter.

It is vital that we remember, and that is what today's debate is all about; indeed, it is what the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is all about. I thank the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) for securing this debate. This has been a very informative debate, with contributions from across the House about the importance of the commission's work. That work is not only about maintaining the graves that we have heard so much about today, but about the way that the commission is taking history into the 21st century, by using web technology to help us look through our past and consider our own history, and of course so that we can take that knowledge and pass it on to the next generation. It is vital that we remember, and in particular that we remember the lives that were given for our freedom.

Of course, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission does phenomenal work. This year, we are remembering the losses in Jutland and, as we have already heard, the losses in the battle of the Somme in July 1916. The commission's work continues day in and day out, and we must acknowledge it.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate and, of course, very grateful for the work of the commissioners, including that of my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). The contributions this afternoon have really reflected the importance of the commission's work.

[*Rachael Maskell*]

Maintaining and upgrading 23,000 cemeteries and memorials across 154 countries is no mean feat. That work includes replacing around 20,000 graves a year. Of course, there is also the important work of building on 100 years of record-keeping. It is important that we recognise the outstanding work that the commission does, and of course quality is at the forefront of all that work.

That work can only be achieved because of the total dedication of the 1,300 people who work across the world for the commission. Many of them work here in the UK but others are employed to provide vital skills and services right across the globe. Of course, the commission's work is dedicated to the memory of the 1,700,000 men and—as we have heard today—women from across the Commonwealth who were killed. The commission's staff work so hard to maintain the highest standards, but above that to maintain the memory and dignity of each young life that was lost—and it was predominantly young lives that were lost. The staff keep alive the memory of those who were lost, gathering more information and historical knowledge over time, to share that collective memory and collective story that speak of a Europe that was once divided against itself. They ensure that that is never forgotten.

Although we often recall less peaceful times at formal ceremonies at the memorials and cemeteries, it is the individual care that the staff show to the families and friends of the lost that causes them to stand out. They enable people to move on but also to cherish their memories. When people walk into one of the commission's many cemeteries—as I have on a number of occasions—scan the thousands of pristine graves and start to read the names, ages and ranks of those who fell, they are taken on a journey of sacrifice: the sacrifice of parents and families, of their children and of the many young who gave their lives. It is a reminder to us, and to all who hold power—not least in this place—that our responsibility to their legacy is to find political solutions, no matter how difficult that is, to the challenges we face in our globe today.

The commission does not just keep history alive, it presents the past in such a way that we will never forget. As the commission reaches 100 years next year, we must mark its excellent work, as the right hon. Member for Broadland reminded us. But the commission is not just an organisation; it is the sum of its many parts. By that I mean the dedicated staff, many of whom have spent all their working lives there—indeed, for some of those I met, generations of their families had worked in the organisation—and make the commission what it is. Nevertheless, they look to us to provide them with the support they need when their terms and conditions and pay need to be addressed, and it would be remiss of me not to raise that today.

I have met the trade unions—the Public and Commercial Services Union, Unite and Prospect—and I must declare an interest as secretary of the Unite group here in Parliament and as a former national official of that union. I have also met the commission's staff and have listened closely to the issues they have raised, and I know that they want their voice to be heard in this place this afternoon.

We believe that deals can be brokered, to give the workforce greater morale. We know that there have been difficult discussions about pensions and that pension schemes have been challenged, but the staff have outstanding questions about what happened and it is only right that we look to find solutions to the challenges that they have identified.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** May I make the offer to my hon. Friend that I have already made to the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), that if she wants to meet the commission's management to talk about personnel, I can certainly facilitate that?

**Rachael Maskell:** I thank my hon. Friend for that offer and I will certainly follow it up with him.

Commission staff have outstanding questions about their pensions, but that takes us on to the issues that are pertinent—particularly this week—regarding their pay. Over time, the staff have accepted lower rates of pay and less favourable terms and conditions—that came out in the Towers Watson global grading and pay review—and we have heard about the inconveniences to family life, whether that is taking children out of their schools or spouses not being able to have a career because of moves. The value of the jobs was also recognised in the review—for instance, the learning of a foreign language, not superficially but in a way that means being able to negotiate deals, employ staff and manage contracts. The staff's dedication, and the quality and standard of their work, means that they should be remunerated at an appropriate rate. That is what the review says. Public sector workers are seeing a 1% increase in their pay but the commission is offering half that to its staff. We should seriously look at what the deals mean for the staff and ensure, as we enter this time when staff are working over and above what is expected of them so that the public can remember and commemorate 100 years since the battles of the first world war, that the staff's battles today are well recognised and that staff are remunerated appropriately.

Labour wants a clear win-win solution and we believe that one can be found. I therefore urge the commissioners present and the Minister to find such a solution. We must remember that the staff are public servants and want to give the best they can, and the respect we show them will, therefore, be reflected in the excellence of their work.

As we move towards its 100th year next year, it is vital to ensure that the commission's work and its vision for the future—building on Fabian Ware's initial vision—is strong, including the commitment not only of its staff but of the public, in the way that it celebrates what has been achieved, and also to ensure that it continues to remember the ultimate price paid by the 1,700,000 people whose graves it cares for day in, day out, around the globe.

2.46 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) on securing this important debate to highlight the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and on his excellent and informative speech.

It is opportune to have such a debate when this year we are commemorating several important battles of the first world war, including those of the Somme and Jutland. I am grateful for all the contributions this afternoon, but I particularly acknowledge the speech of the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and his service as a war graves commissioner.

I agree with all who have spoken that the CWGC does excellent work in ensuring that the 1.7 million people who died in the two world wars will never be forgotten. For 99 years it has worked around the world to commemorate those who gave their lives, by ensuring that their bodies are at rest in cemeteries and that those with no known grave are remembered on memorials. The CWGC cares for cemeteries and memorials at 23,000 locations in 154 countries across the globe. The CWGC's important work in ensuring that individuals who gave their lives are always remembered throughout the Commonwealth, and in Europe and across the world, is to be commended.

The CWGC is one of the Government's key partners in our first world war centenary commemorations. This year we are working with it on our two national events, to mark the centenaries of Jutland and the Somme. The battle of Jutland was the largest naval battle of the war. The CWGC commemorates more than 6,000 Royal Navy sailors who lost their lives in that battle, be that in war graves across the UK and Scandinavia or at memorials with the names of thousands of sailors whose bodies were never recovered.

My grandfather, Clyde Turner, served on HMS Malaya during the battle, so I have a strong association with the commemoration. He occasionally spoke about his experiences as a stoker and subsequently as a chief petty officer. He was a career naval man, and a real influence on me in my early years. He died in 1966, and I still hold his memory dear. I am pleased, therefore, to be the Minister for the first world war centenary at this time and I look forward to attending the commemorative events in Orkney on 31 May and meeting other descendants of those who served at Jutland.

To mark the centenary of the battle of Jutland, a number of events are taking place at CWGC sites. These include the event at Queensferry cemetery in West Lothian on 28 May, and national events on 31 May at St Magnus cathedral and Lyness Royal Naval cemetery. There are also Royal Navy events at the Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth naval memorials, and other events at Esbjerg new cemetery in Denmark, Fredrikstad military cemetery in Norway and Kviberg cemetery in Sweden.

On 1 July, we will commemorate the bloodiest battle of the first world war: the battle of the Somme. Fought between July and November 1916, the battle affected millions of people across the Commonwealth. Some 150,000 Commonwealth servicemen lie buried in 250 military and 150 civilian cemeteries on the Somme, and there are six memorials to the missing that commemorate by name more than 100,000 whose graves are not known. I recently went to France and visited the Somme battlefields and the many cemeteries—all beautifully maintained and cared for by the CWGC. I put on record my appreciation for the work done, and I thank those who gave me a tremendous guided tour of the battlefields. I found the trip very moving.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I apologise for not being here for the start of the debate. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) on bringing it forward. Does the Minister agree that one of the biggest tributes that we pay to our fallen is the sheer quality of the work that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission does, as evidenced by its workshop in Arras? Its metalwork, stonemasonry and carpentry are second to none. Does he share my hope that, in 100 years' time, that level of workmanship will have endured?

**Mr Evennett:** I totally agree. We commend the work that has been done and its quality. While my hon. Friend is here, I would like to say—I am glad to see him in his place—that I am grateful for the excellent work he has done and continues to do as the Prime Minister's special representative for the centenary commemoration of the first world war.

On 30 June—the anniversary of the eve of the battle—a service will take place at Westminster Abbey, to be attended by Her Majesty the Queen. That will be followed by an all-night vigil around the tomb of the unknown warrior. On 30 June there will also be a military vigil in France at the Thiepval memorial to the missing. Vigils will also take place in Scotland at the Scottish national war memorial in Edinburgh castle, in Wales at the national war memorial in Cardiff, and in Northern Ireland at Clondeboye and Helen's Tower in County Down.

On 1 July—the centenary of the first day of the battle of the Somme—a national commemorative service will be held at the Thiepval memorial. The service will reflect the story of the whole battle, capturing the scale and reach of the conflict and the impact it had on all the lives of all communities throughout the UK and France and other Commonwealth countries. It will be attended by around 10,000 guests, including members of the royal family, heads of state, senior politicians, representatives from all the nations involved and some 8,000 members of the public.

Manchester will be the centre of national commemorations in the UK. There will be a wreath-laying ceremony at the city's Cenotaph, a parade through the city featuring military bands and representatives of the battalions who were present at the Somme and a commemorative service at Manchester cathedral. There will also be cultural and educational events at the city's Heaton Park. There will be a two-day experience field which more than 1,300 school children will visit to learn about life at the Somme and on the home front. CWGC is supporting the event and helping people to reconnect with their past. There will be a free concert in the evening featuring a national children's choir, film, dance and the Halle orchestra performing the works of George Butterworth, a young English composer most famous for "The Banks of Green Willow" and who died on the Somme. I am delighted that more than 13,000 people have already signed up to attend the concert, but some free tickets are still available.

We are encouraging communities across the UK to hold acts of remembrance on 30 June and 1 July in a way that feels appropriate. On 5 April, together with the Royal British Legion, we launched online guides providing information about holding commemorative events. An online map was also made available for event organisers

[Mr Evennett]

to publish details of their commemorations. I am pleased that nearly 30 events have already been listed, ranging from a vigil at Holbeck cemetery near Leeds to school groups visiting High Wycombe cemetery in Buckinghamshire to learn about those who fought at the Somme and are buried in the cemetery. Many of these events will take place at CWGC sites. I urge and advise communities planning to commemorate this important centenary to add their details to the map on the Government website.

We remember that the battle lasted 141 days, up to 18 November. There will be a daily service of remembrance at the Thiepval memorial hosted by the Royal British Legion and the CWGC throughout the 141 days. A range of events will also take place at CWGC cemeteries across the region throughout the period. Regimental associations, communities and descendants can therefore participate on a day particularly significant to them, and they should check the CWGC website, which contains the relevant information.

I also mention the recently launched CWGC Living Memory campaign. More than 300,000 Commonwealth servicemen and women who died in the two world wars are commemorated in the UK. In fact, one is never more than 3 miles from a war grave anywhere in the country. Many graves lie in local cemeteries, and CWGC has launched the campaign, which calls on communities to rediscover their local site and remember the lives of those within the graves. The project encourages people, whether young or old, to discover and learn about war graves and their heritage. It is particularly important that the young learn through education about the sacrifices and events of the first world war.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Broadland mentioned those who are buried in British churchyards. In my constituency, Private William White was buried in the churchyard of St Paulinus in Crayford. He was wounded at Ypres. He came back. He was a Crayford man. Sadly, he died at home from his injuries. That is an example of how we should commemorate in local communities individuals who served. It is a wonderful project that the CWGC wants people to get involved with. I encourage everyone to locate war graves near them and to learn about those who lost their lives.

I again thank all those who contributed today, in particular because it is an important commemoration and an important time to give thanks for the work of

the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. In particular, I thank my right hon. Friend for securing the debate and for all his work, which benefits from his knowledge and experience as a historian. As a Commonwealth war graves commissioner and a member of the DCMS first world war advisory group, his knowledge and advice have been and remain invaluable. I conclude by paying tribute to all those who lost their lives in or were affected by the two world wars. I also pay tribute to the dedicated staff who do such a fantastic job at the CWGC. As we heard, many of them are gardeners, stonemasons, administrators and the rest. Together, they ensure that those who died will never be forgotten.

2.57 pm

**Mr Keith Simpson:** I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for the way he wound up this debate. Like him, I thank all colleagues who participated. I merely remind colleagues that I brought this debate forward to put front and centre the role and work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in providing so much of the backdrop and front of stage for many of the commemorations of the first world war.

I also secured the debate to emphasise that it is the Commonwealth War Graves Commission—the Commonwealth countries that are members have a view and make a contribution; it is not an outpost of the Ministry of Defence. We have a budget, and like all budgets it is under enormous stress and strain. There is an understandable reluctance among all the contributing countries to make a bigger contribution. Two colleagues expressed concerns about staff pay and conditions, and I hope the invitation from the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) will be taken up. He has done so much hard work in this area.

I am very grateful to all who participated in this debate. I am sure that the staff of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission will thank them for their tribute, not least because colleagues from all the nations of the United Kingdom have contributed. In their different ways, they want to commemorate their communities and their communities' roles in both world wars. I think it has been a fitting tribute.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

## Housing in Newcastle

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

2.59 pm

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered housing in Newcastle.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to have secured this short debate on a subject that is so critical to my constituents.

I am sure that everyone present is an avid reader of my website, [chionwurahmp.com](http://chionwurahmp.com), and so will know that I publish pie charts that summarise the issues that constituents come to me with. At the moment, March's pie charts are up, showing that I dealt with 36 housing issues that month—just behind the 37 benefits issues. Since I was first elected six years ago, housing has consistently been in the top three issues in Newcastle upon Tyne Central, and often No. 1, which is why I have secured several debates on housing and related issues, including on empty properties in 2012 and on local authority funding settlements and holdbacks in 2013.

Earlier this year, I held a ward summit in Blakelaw in my constituency that was attended by local councillors, residents groups and other organisations. The minutes are on my website, and show that, again, housing was the No. 1 issue. Late last year, I held another ward summit, in Benwell and Scotswood, where housing was also the No. 1 issue. Just last week, I held an informal surgery with the Sisters Study Circle group at the Tawheed mosque in Elswick, and housing was of great concern to them.

Why, I was asked, is it now next to impossible to get a council house in Newcastle? I tried to explain that there are 6,000 households on the waiting list, of which 4,000 are actively bidding for properties, but only 185 properties become available each month. I also explained that much of the council housing stock has been sold off and that, really, it was now available only to those with the greatest need. "Why did the Government not build more houses?", they asked me. "Did they not realise the impact bad housing has on health, crime and education? How can young people focus on studying or getting a job if they haven't got a decent roof over their head? How can parents give children the support they need if they are worrying where they are going to be living next week?"

After some time, I grew tired of trying to explain the Government's logic while at the same time thinking, "I myself don't understand." My job is not to justify the Government but to hold them to account. I am sure the Minister agrees that my constituents are right to be concerned about the lack of housing in Newcastle. I applied for this debate to find out from him exactly how he believes Newcastle City Council can overcome the barriers preventing it from building more houses to improve the lives of the thousands of people in my constituency who need a decent home.

Last year, the Government presided over the building of just 9,590 homes for social rent, compared with the 33,180 delivered in Labour's last year in office. Last year's was the lowest level of affordable homes built for more than two decades. Having knocked on a great

many doors over the last few weeks—indeed, over the last few years—I know that they bear testament to the last Labour Government's investment in our housing stock. Labour could, and should, have built even more homes, but the decent homes programme—visible in new doors, windows, kitchens, bathrooms and the very fabric of so many homes in Newcastle—effectively renewed the existing stock so that it could last for another generation.

That programme contrasts with this Government's record of cutting investment and of building just one new social home for every eight sold off through right to buy—a Government whose use of the term "affordable rent" is not recognisable to most people; who thought up the unfair bedroom tax, which has affected half a million households; and who have overseen a 22% rise in private rents in Newcastle since 2011, when incomes have barely risen at all.

Newcastle is a growing city. It is estimated that by 2021 there will be 16,200 more people living in our great city, and the Government have a duty to ensure that local authorities have the means—both the funding and the powers—to provide the homes that local people need. Newcastle needs 16,400 new homes between now and March 2030: around 1,000 new homes per year, not including student accommodation for those studying at our world-class universities. Residents quite rightly do not want to lose any of our fantastic greenfield assets in and around Newcastle, so much of the land available for building these homes for Newcastle is brownfield, with high clean-up costs.

Providing the homes required in such circumstances is already a huge challenge for the council, given the ideologically and politically driven extent of the cuts to central Government funding, yet the Government seem insistent on piling on further pressure and putting further barriers in the way. The 1% cut in social housing rent over the next four years will leave a hole of £593 million in the council's 30-year financial model—that is £0.6 billion. That investment was earmarked for building the homes that the city needs and for investing in the city's stock. Although a 1% cut in social rent may seem a good thing for social tenants, it is the council that pays for it, not the Government. It will take money away from the capital investment needed for repairs, improvements and, critically, new homes.

If the Government were so concerned about saving social tenants' money, they would abolish the grotesque bedroom tax. By the way, the Government are actually the greatest beneficiary of this rent cut, because the housing payment bill for the Department for Work and Pensions will fall considerably. It is the Government who will benefit from this cut, not social tenants.

It is not hard to see that when housing authorities' incomes are cut, they will have less to invest—more than half a billion less, in the case of Newcastle City Council. Trampling over locally elected and accountable councils' planned infrastructure investment in such a way deserves its own debate. But there is more: that hole in the city's investment plan will be widened even further by the Government's forced sale of higher-value housing to pay for the new right to buy. Building a new home in Newcastle costs a minimum of £120,000, but the result of the much criticised Housing and Planning Bill will be the selling off of homes at an average price of £80,000—so,

[Chi Onwurah]

£80,000 in income versus £120,000 to build them. Even if all the income were reinvested, at best we would replace only two thirds of all homes sold.

I hope the Minister is aware of the analysis published by Shelter last month, which showed that Newcastle will need to sell more than 400 homes every year to raise the £52 million annual contribution to the Government's policy. That £52 million contribution must be paid for by selling off homes. That is 100 more homes than are built each year now, before the Government's housing Bill bites, with its inevitable knock-on effect on investment.

My constituents who are on the lowest incomes already find it much more difficult to buy homes, even at the lower end of the market, than they would in other parts of the country. The council has done some brilliant work in recent years: delivering much needed specialist house building; building more affordable homes; returning vacant private sector properties to the market, which is very important; and working to reduce homelessness. But it is under attack from a Government who seem determined to dismantle our social housing stock from Whitehall. I simply cannot see how the council is supposed to meet the needs of local people, given the straitjacket that the Minister is putting them into. Those I have spoken to in Newcastle believe, as I do, that Government locally and nationally have a duty to provide homes for people. I want to see a healthy mix of tenures. [Interruption.] Perhaps the Minister is looking on his mobile phone to see how that can be achieved.

The actions of the Government and the housing Bill will throw up more barriers to building homes that, frankly, seem designed to destroy social housing altogether. Will the Minister tell us what role he sees for councils in building and providing homes, and how much discretion they should have in fulfilling that role? What modelling has his Government done on the effect of the 1% cut in social rents on investment in Newcastle and across the country, and will he publish that modelling? Does he not agree that decisions on rent should be with the local authority, and that if central Government want to cut rent—a laudable aim—they should provide the money to pay for it, rather than punish future generations? What modelling has he done on the forced sale of council homes to fund his right to buy policy? Does he agree with the analysis that Shelter has done on this and, if not, will he publish his own sums?

On the subject of the right to buy policy for housing associations, I wrote to the Minister last year about constituents of mine who are unable to sell their properties because the freehold is owned by the St Mary Magdalene & Holy Jesus Trust, which refuses to extend the leases. In his response, he said that my constituents should write to the advisory body LEASE, which they did, to no avail. There are three different housing Acts that affect three different types of properties and the rights they enjoy. The Minister said he would consider this further as part of the Housing and Planning Bill. Has he any hope, or indeed any clarity, to offer my constituents on that issue?

What would the Minister say to my constituents who cannot get a council home and cannot afford the rising rents in Newcastle? Does he think that his housing Bill will enable Newcastle City Council to build enough homes in the next 30 years and can he explain how? If it

will not, how does he expect the private sector to fill the gap at affordable prices for different types of tenure? Finally, will he take a leaf out of the book of the new Labour Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, and commit to ensuring affordable housing in Newcastle?

3.15 pm

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) on securing the debate.

I do not recognise the Shelter figures. I have said openly that they are out-of-date figures based on a false premise, so the Government have secured data from local authorities to make sure we are working on up-to-date figures. Some 16 million pieces of data form that information. The hon. Lady might want to look back at the Housing and Planning Bill and what is actually in it. There have been discussions over the past couple of weeks, including in the House yesterday and in the Lords, and she will see that quite a lot of things will be coming through in statutory instruments during the summer. However, we have garnered 16 million pieces of data to make sure we have the correct information.

**Chi Onwurah:** Are the 16 million pieces of data that will form the basis of housing policy publicly available?

**Brandon Lewis:** While we are doing policy formation, they are not, but they will be in the public domain in future.

The hon. Lady mentioned the issues that Newcastle has in building houses; I think Newcastle should build houses. I visited recently and saw some of the excellent work being done up there with housing associations and private developers in Newcastle, but local authorities have a part to play in building different tenures of housing that are appropriate for their local areas. I would encourage them to make use of the £3.4 billion worth of funding that is available within local authorities for that specific purpose, before we even touch on the almost £23 billion worth of reserves that local authorities have got, which they could choose to use. Indeed, Newcastle has got £161 million before we even get on to the housing revenue account borrowing, which is £3.4 billion that they can use.

**Chi Onwurah:** I want to press the Minister on the figures that he is using. Is he saying that the £161 million of reserves is available to be spent as Newcastle wishes?

**Brandon Lewis:** The hon. Lady will have to ask Newcastle City Council. It is its money and its reserves. She might want to have a chat with the leader in Newcastle about how he chooses to use his reserves. Also, before we even reach the housing revenue account, local government has £3.4 billion that it can use. Indeed, we created more headroom 18 months or two years ago for local authorities, but there is more than that as well. We want to ensure there is good quality affordable housing for everybody. We are determined to increase home ownership: 86% of our population want to own their own home. We are also making sure that we deliver an increase in the housing supply.

The hon. Lady will hopefully take note of the fact that there was a 25% increase in housing supply last year alone, coming from the lowest level of house building that this country has seen since the 1920s, a situation we inherited from the now shadow Housing Minister, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who oversaw just 88,000 homes being built. We are now up to 181,000 new properties created last year. In Labour's time in government, for every 170 homes sold under right to buy, only one got built. Under the reinvigorated scheme that this Government have introduced, it is one for one, and under the extended scheme that we are now rolling out to the housing associations, it will also be one for one. Thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), in London it will be two for one.

In Newcastle, a third of all homes built since 2010 have been affordable, reflecting more than £22 million worth of Government investment. I am pleased to see the progress—I have seen some of it for myself—in public and private partnerships, which have built some 1,800 homes. That is just one part of the progress we have made since 2010. By 2010—this is an important fact—the stock of affordable homes had fallen by 420,000. We had quite a big housing deficit to deal with, which we inherited from Labour, with 1.8 million families on the social housing waiting list. Five years later we were the first Government since the 1980s to finish their term with more affordable homes than when they started. We delivered 193,000 affordable homes in England between 2011 and 2015, exceeding our target by 23,000, and on our watch councils built more homes in five years than in the previous 13.

We are now investing a further £8 billion to deliver 400,000 affordable housing starts, including 100,000 homes for affordable rent. That is the largest affordable house building programme by any Government since the 1970s. As I have said, we respect the fact that 86% of the population want to own their own home; that is why our affordable housing programme will also support home ownership, and will include a commitment to build 200,000 starter homes. Younger first-time buyers will be able to buy their first home with a 20% discount. That means that in Newcastle upon Tyne the average starter home would cost no more than £120,000. When that is linked to a 5% deposit, we are starting to see affordability—of a kind that has not been present for the best part of a decade—coming back. We are still seeking expressions of interest from local authorities who want to use the £1.2 billion of funding that the Prime Minister announced in January to deliver starter homes.

Others in the hon. Lady's constituency might be interested in shared ownership, with a deposit as low as £1,500—part of £4.1 billion of funding that we have opened up as a route into home ownership, delivering homes for 135,000 people. Our prospectus inviting bids for that funding outside London was published just a few weeks ago, and I encourage all local authorities to look at the bidding for that. Some 600 households in Newcastle have benefited from Help to Buy, and we

have extended the scheme so more can follow. We are clear that social tenants should also have the opportunity to achieve their ambition and realise their aspiration of home ownership. That is why we have said we will extend the right to buy to those 1.3 million tenants, so that they have the same opportunities. Housing associations have also committed themselves to providing an additional home for every property sold. That is in addition to the reinvigorated right to buy scheme. The maximum discount was increased in 2012 and, as I have said, for the first time ever a requirement was introduced to build a new affordable home for every additional sale, nationally.

I am pleased to say that 574 homes have been sold through right to buy in Newcastle since 2010, but I want to be clear that we are not just supporting potential home owners. We are reducing the cost of social renting, as the hon. Lady outlined. The cost of social rent has roughly doubled in the past five years; it has been moving up faster than private rents. The 1% reduction will benefit tenants and if it benefits the wider public by reducing the deficit that we were left by Labour, that is a good thing as well. Almost £400 million will deliver 8,000 new specialist affordable homes for the most vulnerable in society as well.

In the private rented sector, which the hon. Lady touched on, we will continue to boost supply, which is the best way of driving up quality, choice and affordability for tenants. That includes our £1 billion Build to Rent fund, and the £3.5 billion guarantee scheme to finance those thousands of extra homes built specifically for private rent. Tenants in the private rented sector will also be better protected thanks to changes we are implementing through the Housing and Planning Bill to target rogue landlords, including banning orders for the most prolific and serious offenders, civil penalties of up to £30,000 for certain breaches, and a fit and proper person test for landlords letting out licensed properties. That is the biggest package ever seen in the sector.

The Government were elected to give everyone the best chance of living a fulfilling and good life. That will be achieved only by improving the housing market in every part of the country. Newcastle is no exception, as I am sure the hon. Lady will agree. That is why the Housing and Planning Bill is so important. It will drive up housing supply, and I hope that later today the House of Lords will recognise that the Government have an electoral mandate to deliver starter homes and the extension of the right to buy; I hope that they will stop blocking the will of the elected House, and that the Labour party will stop blocking the will of the public, expressed through the electoral mandate, and the protocols and will of the House of Commons, which show some of the biggest majorities of this Parliament. That is our mandate and we are determined to repay the trust of the British people who elected us on that manifesto, by building more homes that people can afford, making it easier for communities to build the homes they need and, above all, supporting the aspirations of people who work hard and want to buy a home of their own.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## Tenant Farming

3.30 pm

**Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): I beg to move,  
That this House has considered tenant farming.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful for the opportunity to lead this debate.

As hon. Members know, tenant farming is an agricultural system in which a landowner contributes land and perhaps some capital and management, and the tenant contributes labour and the remaining capital and management. It is an important part of the agricultural industry. In my county of East Sussex, it is estimated that there are more than 35,000 hectares of tenanted land. One in three farms throughout the country are tenanted, and between 20,000 and 25,000 farmers are wholly or mostly reliant on tenanted land.

Two organisations fight the corner of tenant farmers—the Tenant Farmers Association, whose national chairman, Stephen Wyrill, is in the Public Gallery, and the National Farmers Union. I thank both for their assistance in preparing for this debate. The Government are also proud to fight the corner of tenant farmers. They have a proud record of putting in place policies to help the farming community. I want to note two in particular: first, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's announcement that farmers will be able to average their income over two to five years for tax purposes, which is very welcome and helps rural businesses to survive in difficult seasons; and, secondly, the recent decision by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to agree to move forward on recommendations to draw up a mental health strategy for the farming industry in Britain. Farmers can face immense strain, as they have to contend with the difficulties of business and climate, and they often work very long hours in isolation. It is right that proactive measures are put in place to ensure their mental wellbeing as they cope with those pressures. I congratulate the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) on his leadership on that issue.

There is always more to do, and that is the case with tenant farming in particular. Over the past couple of years, one theme that has emerged consistently in my discussions with tenant farmers across Wealden and the organisations that represent them is the length and security of tenancies. The Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995 introduced farm business tenancies to the industry. The measure marked perhaps the most comprehensive deregulation of the agricultural let sector in its long history. Farm business tenancies are extremely widespread, although there is scepticism in the industry about whether they have helped or hindered. High rents, limited security, stretching repairing obligations, which are key to keeping businesses thriving, and other liabilities are commonplace and do little to limit the stress and instability that naturally come with farming.

The majority of tenancies run for fewer than five years, and independent surveys report that the average is less than four years. That does not give tenant farmers the security they wish for.

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that agricultural landlords should develop lasting relationships with tenant farmers through long-term flexible tenancy agreements in areas such as North Cornwall and Wealden?

**Nusrat Ghani:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will come on to that point later. Flexible tenancies and good relationships between landlords and tenants are absolutely key.

The big problem for tenant farmers is that the negotiation of tenancies is key, but they have little leverage over it. Farming is a long-term process that needs capital investment, patience, good soil management and the ability to balance the profitable years against the bad. Most recently, that problem has affected farmers in the dairy industry.

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): One of the big issues obstructing young entrants into the market is the longer tenancy agreements. Does my hon. Friend agree that shorter agreements allow new entrants—particularly those under 40—into market?

**Nusrat Ghani:** My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. Tenancies need to be flexible but, if a tenant farmer wants to explore their industry and their business, they need the opportunity to extend their tenancy. Farmers can struggle if their tenancies are short; those things are not facilitated by short-term tenancies. I referred to the Government's welcome move to extend tax averaging from two to five years, but it is odd that that example of good Government policy is undermined by and inconsistent with tenancy terms, which are, on average, shorter than the period allowed for averaging farm profits. Similarly, many tenants cannot even begin to think of the Government's 10-year countryside stewardship scheme. What is the point when they cannot guarantee being there for the length of the scheme?

At the moment, landlords can offer short terms for high rents at little risk to themselves, but they leave the tenant in endless uncertainty and hold back investment and long-term sustainable land use. Such tenancies can be particularly difficult for livestock tenant farmers, who see limited returns. I spent a morning with my constituent Elizabeth Buchanan of Black Ven Farm in Nutley, testing for tuberculosis—I assure hon. Members there is no TB on her farm—and she said to me:

“It encourages short-termism of the worst sort.”

I tried to get other quotations from tenant farmers in my constituency, but they were concerned that raising them in the Chamber might reflect badly on their landlords. That is an issue as well.

Some have argued that legislation to impose long-term security on tenancies is the answer. As a free-market Conservative, I do not wish to see that kind of imposition, but we should not be afraid of providing incentives for longer-term tenancies. Landowners get 100% agricultural property relief from inheritance tax if the person who owned the land farmed it themselves, or if it was used by someone else on a short-term grazing licence, or if it was let on a tenancy that began on or after 1 September 1995—after the introduction of the farm business tenancy. For all other landowners, the level of relief is set at 50%.

What if we restricted the 100% relief to landlords who let their land for five years or more, or perhaps even 10 years or more? There are obviously disadvantages for landlords in doing that, despite the advantages for the tenants, so we could offer them something in return. For example, we could give landlords who are willing to let for a longer term the ability to declare their income as trading income for tax purposes and easier mechanisms

for ending tenancies if there is a breach of contract. Other alternatives include reforming stamp duty land tax, which currently disincentivises landlords from offering long-term tenancies, to end the discrimination against such tenancies.

The Conservative party, which I and the Minister are proud to be members of, often talks about its long-term economic plan. Will the Minister tell us what discussions he has had with tenant farming representatives and the Treasury on the possibility of making the changes I have suggested? How will those issues be dealt with in his Department's upcoming 25-year food and farming plan? Let us make the long-term economic plan a reality in the farming industry and incentivise long-term tenancies to promote investment and economic security.

I am delighted to be a parliamentary representative for the Conservative rural affairs group, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). I recently spoke to Richard Haddock, who has just departed as chairman of the group. He said that we must work harder

“for the working farmer, not the landlords, because the landlords have the asset of the land and can borrow against it. If a tenant farmer wants to diversify, he does the work and takes the risk, but the landlord still takes the cut.”

The farmer increases the value of the landlord's asset, but is often cheated out of many of the rewards that are owed to him.

A couple of weeks ago, the Prince's Countryside Fund released new research showing that half of UK farmers no longer make a living from farming alone. They have to diversify to make their businesses sustainable, but diversification is a risk. Why would they take that risk if they do not know how long they are going to stay on their land and are at risk of eviction once their tenancy lease is up—especially if the landlord takes a cut from the diversification enterprise?

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): In my constituency, like my hon. Friend's, many farmers are making huge strides in diversifying their incomes, whether through farm shops or holiday lettings. Does she agree that the short-term nature of some tenancy agreements inhibits such planning and diversification? Should the Government provide incentives for longer-term diversification in farms?

**Nusrat Ghani:** Absolutely. My hon. Friend is reading my mind—I hope to go on to that. For tenant farmers to diversify, which they have to in order to keep their business thriving, they need some assurances that they can reap the rewards of their investment in the land they take care of.

Will the Minister outline what steps the Government are taking to ensure that farmers have an incentive to diversify, so that they and the rural economy can benefit from new initiatives and enterprise? Also, how is he communicating the 25-year food and farming plan to local authorities, so that they may support tenant farmers and local businesses to survive?

In Sussex, in particular, the problem many tenant farmers face is that there is simply not enough land available to them. They want to expand, invest and diversify, but they cannot. Often, that is because they are out-competed by developers, who simply have more financial leverage with landlords. Understandably, those

landlords are looking for the most profitable way in which their land can be sold. The most profitable way for the landlord, however, does not necessarily mean the most profitable way for the rural economy. Will the Minister describe the action the Government are taking to ensure an increase or, at least, to prevent a decrease in the availability of land to tenant farmers?

President Eisenhower of the United States once said:

“Farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil, and you're a thousand miles from the corn field.”

He was right, of course—it is easy for us consumers to take those who are striving in green fields for granted, and to expect a steady supply of meat, vegetables and dairy products at respectable prices. The food security of our country lies on their shoulders, and the role of farmers in Sussex and elsewhere in keeping food on our table in an unstable world is vital.

In January, my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) led an important debate on food security in this Westminster Hall Chamber. He highlighted how, as the world's population grows and with increasing unrest and conflict, as well as what may be considered fractured relationships between Russia, China and the United States, the ability of some regions to produce food that can be turned into affordable imports for us in Britain is not guaranteed. He also made the valuable point that every tonne we import is a tonne less that is available to other nations, which might not have the ability to produce as we can. So we must empower our farmers to produce, and not limit their capacity by withholding land, saddling them with excessive regulation or disincentivising them from diversifying and investing.

Views on the European Union within the farming community are mixed, but in my opinion the EU does itself no favours when it issues regulations about crop rotation and the size of a hedge to recipients of the basic payment scheme. Such regulations all cost time, money and effort, and do not help British farmers—already adhering to high standards—to achieve a competitive edge, especially when the basic payment scheme payments are delayed, as they have been. Furthermore, landlords are known to take advantage of the basic payment scheme: if they know what the farmer is receiving, they can put their rent up accordingly, meaning a higher charge for the farmer before they even start producing.

Today, I have focused on tenancy security, but tenant farmers face many challenges—tax issues and incentives, tenancy succession, encouraging new entrants with loan schemes, and the arbitration process are all causes for concern. Time does not allow me to speak about those concerns in any great depth, but they and the interests of tenant farmers should be heard. I am grateful for the opportunity to have contributed in a small way, and I hope that other Members will do the same now and in future.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** The debate is due to finish at 4.30 pm. The recommended time limits for the Front Benchers' speeches are five minutes each for the Scottish National party and Her Majesty's Opposition, and 10 minutes for the Minister. Two Members are standing and have caught my eye, the first of whom is Jim Shannon.

3.43 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate.

I spoke to the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) last night and asked what the thrust of her opinion and thoughts would be, which she clearly outlined for me. I have prepared some notes on farming—tenant farmers in particular—and on some of the experiences I have had in Northern Ireland.

I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers Union—we are the sister body, or maybe the brother body, of the National Farmers Union. I also own a small farm in Northern Ireland. We are probably a nation of fairly small farms; most of us can remember being brought up on a farm with an average size of about 60 or 70 acres. A family was reared on it and everyone did well, but they could not do that today—it would be quite impossible—because farms are now probably, on average, closer to 200 acres.

That is just an example; I now want to make some comments and to congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this issue forward for consideration in Westminster Hall. The reason why the debate is important has been outlined very well by the hon. Lady. I am pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), in his place, and I look forward to his contribution and that of the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). As the Minister knows, I hold him in high esteem, and not only because he is an outer in the EU campaign. I hold him in high esteem no matter what, because he was always there for us on fisheries issues. I remember that very well and thank him very much.

The Tenant Farmers Association is concerned that those who develop Government agricultural policy unconsciously, or unintentionally, assume that all farmers are owner-occupiers and are therefore able to make their own decisions about how to respond to Government schemes and initiatives. The reality is very different. For those farming as tenants, decisions have to be made within a more complex set of circumstances. The hon. Member for Wealden, and some of those intervening on her, outlined that; other speakers will do likewise. How a tenant farmer responds to policy will have much to do with the impact of tenancy legislation, the framework of the tenancy agreement in place and the ongoing relationship with the owner of the land being farmed. The relationship that tenant farmers have with the owner is critical. Such factors need to be taken into consideration when the Government are drafting farming policy.

Under the previous Government, there were clear examples of policy developments in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs where those landlord-tenant considerations were obviously not taken into account by those responsible for drawing up the policies. Some of the concerns have already been outlined. Those policies include the development of the agri-environment schemes, such as the higher level stewardship scheme and the uplands entry level scheme; the requirements for fixed equipment within the new nitrate vulnerable zone regulations, which cause nightmares for us all, especially around the edge of Strangford lough in Northern Ireland; rural development grants for farm diversification, which the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel

Huddleston) referred to in his intervention; and the move to flat-rate payments under the single payment scheme.

Tenant farmers are a large and too often unaccounted-for sector of the farming community. That is why this debate is so important in highlighting and focusing attention on a sector of the agri-food industry that needs help and assistance. I very much look forward to the Minister's response. This is a welcome opportunity to raise awareness of tenant farmers among all Members in this House, not just those in government.

I want to make some comments about Northern Ireland, which is of real relevance to this debate as it is one part of the United Kingdom where large estates and the traditional type of landlords were largely done away with—I am trying to get the right words: sometimes when I say that, people ask, “Has there been a revolution?” There has not been a revolution, but those landlords were done away with by legislative means. The process was cumulative, starting in the 1870s and the 1880s with rights, first, to compensation for improvement and, secondly, to security of tenure, the key security of tenure measure being an Irish Land Act, the Land Law (Ireland) Act 1881.

About 40% of the land in Northern Ireland is let out on 11-month lets. In our system in Northern Ireland, owner-occupiers rent to other owner-occupiers, which is quite successful. There is the potential for incoming grazers or growers to achieve tenant rights, but in reality that does not happen very often. It is simply not in the culture anymore, because things have changed—owners know to look out for that, agents are wise to it and on the whole nobody tries to outwit them.

Interestingly, we would never hear anyone taking land in Northern Ireland being referred to as a “tenant”—the word is never used and would be inappropriate. It is not a word that is in the rural culture anymore—maybe that is what we need to be thinking about in the future—and perhaps it came to be regarded as derogatory at some point, due to the historic context of tenant farming in Northern Ireland. Some farmers in Northern Ireland almost looked across to tenant farmers in England or Scotland. They did not accept their lot as tenants and are suspicious of those who did not push for the same rights at the same time—rightly or wrongly. The children of current farmers or landowners would look at things differently. There would be a period of transition, when difficulties remain, simply because interpersonal relationships were soured in many areas—that is the case with the tenant farmer and with the person who owns the land—and that would be damaging. However, there might be occasions when the opposite happened.

In Northern Ireland, the tenants who bought out their farms in the 1920s were quite happy—I use this example as a person who is in favour of foxhunting—to continue to allow foxhunting over their land, because that was a social thing and members of the community relied on it for work. Their children did not have the same ties and in some cases quickly ended the practice. If we were to see the same raft of changes here on the mainland, there would be a transitional period—perhaps not to the same extent, but there would none the less be a move in that direction. Some people would look to quickly deal with any potential for conflict; others would use the opportunity to assert their new status in ways that they were never able to before.

I will conclude with this comment. The other big difference in Northern Ireland was that the entire landlord class was reduced in a very short time. There was not anything cynical or murderous in people's minds, but the Land Act enabled them to buy their land and they took that opportunity. Owing to the historic context, some people obviously remained, because they had at least some in-hand farming, forestry or other land assets. Lessons have been learned. The Land Act gave farmers in Northern Ireland a chance to buy their land and to farm and work it, as they have done.

I ask the Minister to take those points on board. I support the hon. Member for Wealden. I will be the one—there may be others here—to stand up for tenant farmers and ensure that they get their rights, as they should.

3.51 pm

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): I draw hon. Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which indicates that I am both a landowner and a farmer. I held the shadow rural affairs brief in Wales for four years and now represent my wonderful constituency of Eddisbury, which has a high proportion of dairy farms.

The important word that my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) mentioned was "flexibility". I am sure that she will remember the days of the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986, when tenancies were inheritable from generation to generation. As someone who was involved with an Agricultural Holdings Act tenancy and saw the lack of investment—the second-generation farmer in that case was not farming the land at all; in fact, he had full-time employment elsewhere—I am sure that my hon. Friend would not want to see the abuses of the system that occurred under such tenancies.

It was for that reason that flexibility in farm business tenancies was introduced. That flexibility led to an additional 100,000 acres of land coming up for rent. That is important; in fact, from my experience in the last five years, the biggest constraint on tenants has been rent levels. That has been the biggest pressure on the system, not the length of tenancies. In fact, a very short tenancy can offer flexibility to someone who wants to expand for the short term or to a landowner or neighbouring farmer who has spare capacity because of either disease or a change of farming method. Such tenancies allow people to offer land to a neighbour on a short-term basis and give the system important flexibility.

In my experience, many landlords, if they are asked by tenant farmers, will actually sign the indemnities that allow those tenants to claim under the higher level stewardship scheme, on the basis that they will be reimbursed. It then becomes the landlord's risk, but if they have a good relationship with the tenant, they are likely to do that. My hon. Friend's speech did not recognise that there is a difference between good landlords and bad ones. A farmer who is interested in their land, who wants flexibility and who wants to encourage people to come forward will want a good relationship with their tenant. That is the best way of producing a good outcome for both the tenant and the landlord.

That is the very flexibility in operation in the farm business tenancies system. For example, a farmer may die, his widow may not have short-term arrangements in place and the children may have to return to take on

the farm. The flexibility in the farm business tenancies system allows that approach; it is not there in the kind of long-term tenancies that my hon. Friend proposes.

**Nusrat Ghani:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right: people tend to come to us as Members of Parliament with problems rather than to say that things are going well. I have some fantastic landlords in my constituency, but I held a number of meetings at which tenant farmers said they felt they did not have the right support to negotiate longer-term tenancies; they felt uncomfortable about raising that. I am here today because they do not have the time, capacity or energy to lobby that the big farmers would.

**Antoinette Sandbach:** I would advise those tenants to speak to the Tenant Farmers Association, which is effective at representing its tenant farmers, as well as to the NFU and other organisations, who also provide effective representation.

I plead the cause of young farmers in particular. It is a big risk for a landowner to take an unproved tenant under 40, who may not have had their foot on the ladder before, on to their farm for a 10-year tenancy of the type that my hon. Friend argued for, but it is vital to encourage younger entrants to come forward. They have bright ideas and they want to progress, but that is a risk. The danger of the course of action that she proposes, with longer-term tenancies, is that innovation and support is stifled because the risk is too great. A 10-year commitment is also a great risk for the tenant, who will have that liability for 10 years.

My hon. Friend is in effect arguing for better representation in negotiations rather than reducing flexibility in the system. I say to the Minister that for tenant farmers in my constituency the real pressure in the system comes from the level of rents and, in particular, what has happened to dairy prices. I certainly saw livestock farmers priced out of the market when milk prices were high because high levels of rent were being asked for relatively small parcels of land, which prevented some getting on to the ladder in the livestock sector. I experienced that in north Wales and there are also high levels of rent in Eddisbury. That, rather than flexibility, is the real issue.

Diversification has risks associated with it, but again a good landlord will want to encourage a positive relationship with their tenant and the tenant will want to have a positive relationship with their landlord. When that works, there can be some really good, productive, experimental diversification programmes.

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that when there is a positive, constructive relationship between the landlord and tenant, that can work in the long term? My father-in-law has been a tenant farmer with the Duchy of Cornwall for more than 50 years, which has worked well for both parties.

**Antoinette Sandbach:** I certainly do agree. We should focus our attention on providing support and encouraging those constructive relationships to go forward rather than on legislating to alter the lengths of tenancies. Quality and support are the two issues, and a good relationship will almost inevitably lead to an extension of tenancy agreements when that suits both parties.

[Antoinette Sandbach]

If we constrict the amount of time to a minimum term of 10 years, with relief available only at that time, what happens to someone who wants to renew for another five years? Is that done from the baseline of the tenancy? What happens if someone wants to bring in a partner to farm with them? Does that count as a new tenancy? In my submission, the current system is flexible. It has wrinkles, and I do not pretend that there are not problems, but I urge caution before this place passes more legislation on farm business tenancies.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** We now come to the Front-Bench speeches, after which Nusrat Ghani will have two or three minutes to wind up the debate.

3.59 pm

**Calum Kerr** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for the opportunity to participate in this debate. May I congratulate the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) on securing it? I thought she made an excellent speech on the issues at play here. It is always welcome in a Westminster Hall debate, as in any debate, when constructive ideas and suggestions are put forward. This forum seems to lend itself better to that than the main Chamber, and that is something we should all consider.

The critical nature of the length and security of tenancies is emphasised by the fact that most tenancies are shorter than the Government period for averaging out profits. That speaks volumes about the need for action. The idea of bringing a long-term plan to farming made me smile. Hopefully it is a lot better than the long-term economic plan, which is clearly a work in progress. I congratulate the hon. Lady on kicking off the debate with lots of ideas, and I have no doubt the Minister was scribbling furiously.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is always a champion for Northern Ireland. I have not yet known him to get through a speech without mentioning a union. Quite often it is in my direction, but in this case it was the European Union. I congratulate him on being, as ever, a champion of Northern Ireland and giving us that important perspective as we consider what we should do.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) emphasised the importance of flexibility, and I agree. It is not necessarily a case of one size fitting all. Whatever we do, we should always consider that protection and support are needed for landlords as well as tenants. Rents are an important issue. I fear she is slightly more laissez-faire in her approach to that than I am, and certainly more than the Scottish Government are. I would like to see a lot more action from the Government.

Tenant farming plays a vital role across the UK, but in Scotland it is of particular importance. It accounts for 1.3 million hectares, amounting to more than 18% of our land mass. However, the sector has been declining for decades and has almost halved to just 24% of farmland since 1982. The new Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 is an attempt to breathe life into tenantry and to ensure that it thrives. It is also a critical component of the Scottish Government's drive for a fairer, more equal and more socially just Scotland. According to the

Scottish Tenant Farmers Association—they are not here today, but it is rather a longer journey for them—the new Act is

“the most significant reform to tenancy legislation since tenant farmers were granted security of tenure in 1948.”

A central part of the Act is ensuring fairness between tenants and landlords. The creation of a tenant farming commissioner will help with that process and, we believe, improve relations. There will also be a much fairer and more transparent system of rent reviews; improvements in end-of-tenancy compensation; a broadening of the class of relative entitled to succeed to a tenancy; and the creation of an exit route for 1991 tenants to assign their tenancies to new entrants or other farmers if the landlord does not want to buy them out. Assignations are a central feature of the Act, which seeks to protect them while accepting that it is an ongoing process that needs to be subject to regular review.

By taking those evolutionary and common-sense steps, the legislation will bring real and meaningful land reform, which will restore confidence to the sector, address many of the issues faced by tenant farmers and bring vibrancy and certainty. At the same time, and contrary to the claims of some, it should not deter landlords from providing new tenancies and will not materially disadvantage them.

Tenant farming and land reform will always be works in progress, but the Act is a highly positive step forward in Scotland. It will hopefully encourage investment in the sector, address long-standing concerns, build confidence and make our legislation fit for the 21st century. Tenant farmers deserve certainty, security and fairness. That needs to be embedded in legislation, and that is what we are doing in Scotland. Hopefully lessons can be learned for the rest of the UK too.

4.4 pm

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) for her strong introduction to the debate. I also thank colleagues who have intervened and made contributions. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke powerfully on tenant farmers in Ulster, and the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) emphasised the difficulty of high levels of rent for farmers, particularly in the north-west.

Tenant farmers are often the ties that bind together agriculture in the UK. They deserve peace of mind and security so that they can make their living in a fair and environmentally sustainable way. It is vital that the Government take a long, hard look at the relationship between landlord and tenant. With their upcoming 25-year plan, they could either usher in a new era for tenant farming or leave too many high and dry.

I appreciate the strong views of the Tenant Farmers Association and its campaign. It is rightly defending its members from abuse from landowners and from uncertain futures. I equally note the Country Land and Business Association's position that some of the ideas suggested to protect tenant farmers may lead to reduced land stock. That is why the Government's food and farming plan is so important. They must gather the evidence needed and bring in the right measures to make the tenant-landlord relationship a positive one.

The Farming Minister has said that longer tenancies for farming businesses are important to provide security, investment and growth. Will he tell us what the 25-year plan will do to help tenant farmers and landlords? For instance, county council farm estates are an increasingly painful issue for tenant farmers which the Government need to address. Herefordshire Council has become the latest to sell off its estates—land that provided a good entry point for young farmers. Unfortunately, the council has committed to selling that land, evicting 42 tenants in the process. The Landworkers' Alliance said in April that 219 farms had been sold by councils since 2010. As the Farming Minister described those sales as a tragedy, will he detail what long-term steps the Government are taking to support and protect those vital estates and their tenants?

Another area the Government need to protect is the environment and the role of the tenant farmer as a steward. Farmers incentivised to invest will work on better land and choose long-term health over short-term gain. That is why I was pleased to see a statutory instrument passed recently that widened compensation for tenant farmers for soil improvements. If we recognise that good stewardship is bolstered by secure tenancy, why has DEFRA separated its plans for the environment from its food and farming strategy? Will the Minister assure us that those plans will be closely integrated in what the Department hopes to achieve?

One such mechanism for the good care of land is the much trumpeted countryside stewardship scheme, yet last year's effort was branded "not fit for purpose", with farmers complaining about large amounts of bureaucracy and an IT system that failed to deliver. Only 2,314 applications were made, but 8,000 had been expected. The Government say they have made efforts to make the scheme more attractive and workable this year, but those measures will count for nothing if there is not a vastly improved take-up. Will the Minister give us an early indication of expected take-up for the scheme and whether it will match last year's target?

Tenant farmers need peace of mind and land tenure that helps them build their business. They need county councils that work with the TFA and the NFU to develop an estates strategy that helps young farmers get a head start. Finally, they need a Government who deliver on their promise of a countryside stewardship programme that works.

4.8 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) on securing this important debate. It is an issue that I have followed closely as Farming Minister over the past two and a half years. She is absolutely right: tenant farmers have a vital role to play in our countryside. Roughly one third of farms and one third of the land we have is tenanted. Farm tenancies are a vital route for new entrants coming into the industry. They help existing businesses expand and take on new land, and they are essential because the prohibitively high capital cost of land is a real bar and obstacle to new people entering the industry.

Every industry needs new talent, fresh thinking and new ways of doing things. Farming is no exception. In our 25-year food and farming plan, we will consider

how to encourage alternative models of doing business in farming so that we do not think just about landowners, owner-occupiers and tenant farmers, but look at ways of expanding some of the contract farming models that have been very successful. Perhaps farmers could progress to share farming models where they have a stake in a business and earn in the business before taking on their own tenancy and perhaps even buying land at the end.

I come back to the crucial farm business tenancies. It is important to remember why they were introduced. The deregulatory measure was taken in 1995 because there was real concern that, as my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) said, not enough land was coming to the market and that was restrictive and acting as a barrier. The burdens and obligations in the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986 prevented land from coming to the market but, generally speaking, the Agricultural Tenancy Act 1995 was judged a success. Between 1996 and 2003, 35,000 acres a year came on to the market. That has stabilised since and things have not changed as much, but it was undoubtedly successful in deregulating and bringing more land to the market, creating more opportunities.

However, I am aware that the Tenants Farmers Association and others have expressed concerns about the average length of some tenancies. Currently, they are around three and a half years. A couple of years ago they were around three years and have gone up slightly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden pointed out, the challenge of having such short-term tenancies is clear. If someone has tenure of the land for only three years, they do not have the incentive to invest in that land.

I worked in the farming industry for 10 years and grew up on a farm. I know that if someone takes on a piece of land that has not been farmed adequately or properly for a period of years, it can take four or five years to turn it around and get the land back to its full potential by investing and putting on farmyard manure, and adding fertilisers, sand or lime to bring the soil to its full productive potential. That takes time and if someone is there for only three and a half years it can fuel short-termism, which is not good for the quality of our soils. We should be concerned about soil in agriculture because it is at the heart of everything we do and we must protect it.

We are interested in finding ways to incentivise longer term tenancies without losing the benefits of flexibility in farm business tenancies. I have had numerous discussions with agricultural lawyers and land agents, and with representatives from the Tenant Farmers Association and the Country Land and Business Association. The last two do not always see eye to eye on this issue, frankly. I recently met representatives from a selection of county farms around the country. I share the concern expressed by the shadow Minister about the potential loss of some county farms. About a month ago, we had an interesting session with representatives to discuss how to refresh that model in a way that recognises some of the pressures on local authorities.

The Government have no fixed view on the need for change to legislation or otherwise. Many of the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden are for the Treasury and she might want to have conversations with Treasury Ministers. The area is complex and I am mindful of the points raised by my hon. Friend the

[George Eustice]

Member for Eddisbury that we must be careful when making changes that we do not create unintended consequences. Having caveated what I am going to say with those crucial points, I want to explain the context and texture of my discussions with some of the leading experts in the field and some of the ideas that we could consider.

The first thing to recognise is that although the average length of a farm business tenancy is three and a half years, there is a big division between bare land, which people rent for a short-term crop—perhaps potatoes—for a couple of years and a farm that has a farmstead, a yard and a house where people live. The average length of a tenancy of a farm with a farmstead is more than eight years, which is much closer to the 10 years that the Tenant Farmers Association is calling for.

The other thing to bear in mind is that short-term lets are important for some business models. Even in my part of the world—Cornwall—businesses often specialise in particular areas. Some may specialise in brassica crops—cauliflowers and cabbages—which can be grown on the land for only two to three years before a new rotation must come in. Often, a potato grower will follow for a period and a daffodil grower will follow that. Finally, when the land has been hammered for a few years of intensive cropping, a cattle farmer comes in and puts it into grazing for the best part of a decade. That model can work and can suit some farm enterprises.

I have had discussions with the Tenant Farmers Association about agricultural property relief. I subsequently had discussions with Treasury officials about the TFA's proposal and I helped to facilitate a meeting between George Dunn, its chief executive, and Treasury officials to discuss his ideas further. The officials told me they will consider these ideas and feed back their thoughts to me. I am still awaiting that feedback. They have obviously been busy with the Budget recently, but I look forward to having their feedback about whether it is a good thing or not because it is a policy area for them. There is a danger that such a measure could restrict the market and that less land could come to the market for the agribusinesses that value flexibility.

A second matter raised was stamp duty land tax. Tenant farmers and landowners agree that they would like changes. Again, this is an issue for the Treasury, but the challenge is that the longer the term of the tenancy, the higher its value and the more likely it is to trip over the threshold for SDLT.

I have received proposals about considering the law on rules of forfeiture of farm business tenancies. At the moment, if there is a breach of a covenant, the only option open to the landlord is to go for full forfeiture, which is quite a high hurdle to clear in a court. That makes landlords nervous about longer-term tenancies and makes them more likely to go for a shorter term tenancy because there is less risk. One suggestion is that we may be able to borrow some of the other remedies and tenancies in the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986 and have options and measures that fall short of full forfeiture—for example, an enforcement notice to get a covenant in a tenancy abided by.

I have received some suggestions about borrowing elements of commercial property tenancies with a right to renew, which would stop short of longer term tenancies

but might create some sort of soft presumption that someone who has been a good tenant for a three-year term should have priority to renew that tenancy—a right to renew rather than being held to ransom for a higher rent. Again, that is an interesting idea that I am keen to consider, although I have heard mixed opinions about how significant a change that would be and whether it would have much impact.

Going into more detail in these areas, I have had representations to repeal section 31 of the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995. Under the Law of Property Act 1925, there has been a statutory right for a landowner to create a tenancy on their land. They did not have to have the permission of any moneylender who had a charge over that land to do so because it was deemed important that land was kept in productive capacity and that the interests of banks and moneylenders should not be placed ahead of food production for the country. Some deft lobbying by the British Bankers Association in 1995 resulted in a change to the flagship Law of Property Act 1925, which undermined landowners' ability to put a tenancy on their land to the extent that to create a tenancy they now need prior permission from someone with a charge on that asset if that is in the mortgage deed.

The shadow Minister referred to county farms. There has been concern about those, particularly in Herefordshire, which prompted me to set up some discussions. The Agriculture Act 1970 gives DEFRA a role to work with local authorities to help them to refine their plans and I am considering that. We cannot block them from selling those assets—they have a statutory right to do that—but we have a role to play in working with them on any plans for reorganisation of their county farms. That is why I am keen to have discussions with them about how we can try to refresh the model and make it a real option for new entrants to the industry.

I want to give my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden a chance to come back on some of these issues, but on contract farming, there are some interesting models out there that enable new entrants, who perhaps do not have a huge amount of capital behind them, to get access and set up a new business. I will give just one example of the kind of thing that we are looking at in our food and farming plan. Tulip, which is a very large pig producer that accounts for about 20% of all pig production in this country, runs a system called franchise farming, whereby it owns the units and gives access to its animal genetics. It takes care of all the marketing and gives people access to its science and veterinary expertise. But on each unit it has a franchise farmer, who basically runs the unit for a fee, for a contract per pig completed, with all sorts of performance-related pay. That is a great way to give young people who want to farm, but have no capital behind them, the first stepping stone into the industry. It is also a model that can lead to better knowledge transfer and access to technology.

My final point, therefore, is that as we think about the future of farming in this country, we perhaps need to move beyond the traditional notion of tenancies and land ownership and look at some of those other, more creative models, which may actually have far more promise for new people trying to get into the industry.

4.21 pm

**Nusrat Ghani:** I thank the Farming Minister for his response. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) for talking about diversification. Farmers do much more than till the soil on their land, and they have to diversify their businesses. I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I do not think that a debate could take place in this Chamber without his support or intervention, and his passion was a delight to hear. To my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), I say that I am not proposing that we legislate for longer-term tenancies. What I want us to do—I think that the Minister alluded to this—is to incentivise landlords to offer longer-term tenancies, and make it easier for tenant farmers to try to negotiate those better deals. Quite often we talk about the importance of food security, but we do not offer support for the farmers who are providing that.

I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. I now need to move on and speak to the Treasury, but my local tenant farmers will be reassured by some of his comments today. I would also like to place it on the record that I have been a Member of Parliament for

about 11 months and every time I have approached the Farming Minister, he has made himself available. We have had two very large meetings with the Conservative Rural Affairs Group, and he is due to meet members of the East Sussex farming business community, who will no doubt pick up all the points that he has not covered in this debate. I hope that they will challenge him and push him even further.

My final point is that I come from a delightful constituency, with a huge number of landlords and tenants farming, but I feel that there is some nervousness about raising the concerns of tenant farmers who are not new entrants into the market. They are not young people; they have been farming for quite a while and they struggle to move their business from site to site. I would like to work with the Minister on ensuring that we can provide them with as much help as possible.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered tenant farming.

4.23 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statement

*Tuesday 10 May 2016*

## **ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS**

### **Oral Answer to Parliamentary Question: Clarification**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart):** I made a written statement on 2 March (HCWS569) to correct an answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall

(Scott Mann) during oral questions to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on Thursday, 4 February (*Official Report*, col.1061). That statement corrected my previous reply so that it referred to an ‘enforcement undertaking’, rather than an ‘enforcement order’.

I wish to clarify that the enforcement undertaking was entered into voluntarily by E & JW Glendinning Ltd and the Environment Agency and was not ordered by the court. The Environment Agency discontinued the prosecution as a result of the enforcement undertaking. The enforcement undertaking does not relate to the “major pollution incident” to which my hon. Friend referred.

[HCWS715]



# Petition

Tuesday 10 May 2016

## OBSERVATIONS

### BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

#### Post office closures in Long Lawford and Bulkington

*The petition of residents of the UK,*

Declares that the post office facilities in Long Lawford and Bulkington, run by the Post Office and the Co-operative Society, should not be closed; further that the closures would result in redundancies of current post office staff; and further that local petitions on this matter have been signed by 1551 individuals.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage the Post Office and the Co-operative Society to reconsider the planned closure of post offices in Long Lawford and Bulkington.

And the petitioners remain, etc—[Presented by Mark Pawsey, *Official Report*, 13 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 473].

[P001683]

*Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman):*

The Government understand the importance of Post Office services to local communities and the concerns over any disruption to those services.

The Post Office operates as an independent business and the Government do not interfere in day to day operational responsibilities of the company, which includes decisions on the provision and location of individual post offices.

The Post Office recognises how important its services are to local communities and is committed to maintaining these services wherever possible. Unplanned closures can occur as a result of a situation beyond the control of the Post Office and where this happens, the Post Office works quickly to try to restore services to the community, where possible.

The Post Office has advised the Government that both of these branches are in a temporary closure position resulting from the resignation of their previous postmasters and the withdrawal of the premises for use. The Post Office is currently in the process of carrying out a local public consultation on reopening Bulkington post office at alternative premises nearby. The Government understand that, while no solution has yet been found for Long Lawford, the Post Office's field teams continue to work hard with the local community to identify alternative provision.



# ORAL ANSWERS

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# PETITION

Tuesday 10 May 2016

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